


We need creative teaching to teach creativity

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Whether or not creativity can be taught is still a contested question, though it really shouldn't be. The evidence is well and truly in on this question. The idea that creativity cannot be taught is based on two misunderstandings: a misunderstanding of what creativity is and a misunderstanding of what teaching is.

Let's tackle creativity first.

For many of us, when we think of creativity we think it is some kind of internal personality trait or characteristic inherent to a rare type of person. Many of us also think that creativity is difficult to define. Both of these notions miss the mark.

The first notion, that creativity is an inherent personality trait, a rare characteristic in exceptional people, has its roots in the notion of creative genius that we have inherited from the Romantics. The Romantic ideal of the creative genius is epitomised in the figure of Lord Byron – brooding, eccentric, solitary, difficult. This Romantic notion leads us to believe creative types are not only rare but born rather than made: people cannot be taught to be creative, they just are or they aren't.

Over the last few decades a lot of evidence has been generated that not only disproves the idea that creativity is an inborn trait, but actually indicates the direct opposite.

What we know about creativity

This research into creativity has occurred mostly in the fields of psychology and neuroscience.

The evidence shows that creativity is a learned behaviour: it is not restricted to exceptional people and it is not even a solitary activity. Creativity, the evidence shows, is most often socially-engaged and often undertaken in group situations.

This research also demonstrates that creativity is not an ill-defined, somehow esoteric quality but a set of cognitive approaches that generate innovative ideas. Basically, creativity is just a way of thinking and acting differently to the way we are normally encouraged to think and act. American scholar R. Keith Sawyer compiled and discussed much of this evidence in his 2008 book Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation.

And yet the idea of the poet or artist born to suffer in isolation for their art continues to be a potent cultural idea.

How we learn

The second misunderstanding, the one about teaching, comes from our own experience of education. The dominant model of teaching of which we all have experience is often referred to as “direct instruction”, which is routinely teemed with learning by repetition.

In direct instruction we are basically given information or techniques that we are asked to remember or assimilate. The idea that direct instruction is the ideal model of teaching is, thankfully, on its last legs, but it is still how most of us were taught. It is therefore perfectly reasonable for us to expect that if creativity were to be taught, it would be taught using this method.

Some aspects of creativity can be taught with direct instruction, but others cannot.

Part of learning to be creative is acquiring knowledge about our field of endeavour. We can teach the history of ideas within visual art, poetry or physics and show the benefits of thinking differently in those disciplines. We can demonstrate that innovations in physics, poetry and visual art are often breaks from tradition, departures from received wisdom or belief.

Direct instruction is also valuable in showing how things are done: how paint can be applied to give texture, how atoms respond to each other when placed in proximity, how white space on a page can make a poem breathe.

Nevertheless, teaching creativity needs to go further than direct instruction; it needs to be a relational kind of teaching in which the teacher mentors, encourages and inspires the student. To teach creativity we need creative teaching, and creative teachers. We cannot expect to be more creative if those who teach us are not capable of inspiring and encouraging us.

That’s why the best teachers of creativity are also practitioners, those engaged in creative practice, whether in visual art, writing or chemistry.

Creative teachers need to be experts in their discipline and also experts in teaching creatively. Too often we assume that success in a field of endeavour qualifies someone to teach. This is not the case. Teaching is in itself a creative undertaking that requires real commitment and expertise.

Most of all, teachers of anything needs to have confidence in their students, they need to believe that their students can learn what it is that they are teaching, that their students can acquire the creativity they need and become great in their chosen fields.

As esteemed educational expert Sir Ken Robinson has noted, you can be creative at anything, creativity is simply “the process of having original ideas that have value”.

As a process, a way of thinking and acting rather than an inborn trait, creativity is something we can all learn to apply in our lives.