

# IF YOU TEACH, YOU ARE CREATIVE: SOME WAYS TO RAMP IT UP.

BY JOHN HONEYWILL

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The following thoughts about creativity are, in the main, ones from my own perspective and experience. They are things that I have thought about and observed for many years in my teaching and painting practice.

Most people do not believe that they are creative. They tend to believe that it is a gift belonging to the realm of the arts: artists, writers, musicians and actors. However, creativity is something that people can possess and, in many cases, already do. Teaching is a profession that relies on creativity, though teachers probably don't recognise it as something that they practise on a weekly basis.

In addition to this, there are the many misconceptions as to what creativity is. Creativity is often mixed in with 'originality' and 'imagination'.

From my perspective, **imagination** is the ability to visualize imagery in your mind - to conjure images that reflect your thoughts or feelings. This imagery is something that may then inspire a visual artist, a writer, a scientist and so on.

**Originality** is about coming up with something that is quite unique. Of the three, this is the most difficult one to attain.

**Creativity** is about solving a problem that is new to you, however small or large. Obviously creativity, originality and imagination can be intertwined but it is not necessary. When they do combine, we tend to witness something very special.

Creativity can occur in much of what we do – when we cook, build things, work out strategies for the classroom, plan a unit of teaching. The underlying framework is seeing things with a fresh perspective. This may come from facing an unexpected problem. A couple of years back, an evening task on the Year 11 Leadership Camp would involve each House group making a fashion outfit out of newspapers and sticky-tape in about twenty minutes. In the short time period, the girls worked with enthusiasm and imagination, producing some stunning, sophisticated pieces. It was solving the problem at hand, working with the materials so that they were transformed from newspaper into convincing fashion pieces. The girls had been creative in their designing, in their transforming of materials and through their making abilities. The combination of collaborating ideas, the urgency of the task and, importantly, the fun of 'making', switched off any inhibitions and allowed a form of creativity with which we, as adults, often lose touch.

In having a conversation with our School Chaplain, Chris O'Gorman, about creativity, Chris expressed that she did not feel that she was creative. Surprised at what she had said, I expressed the opinion that I couldn't possibly

come up with the number of deeply considered messages of faith and human behaviour that she does weekly. Chris reluctantly agreed and, in our conversation, remembered a conversation she had with Simon Gomersall (the Chaplain prior to Chris) when discussing with him the challenge of coming up with ideas for a homily.

Simon said, "Live with your eyes open."

Simon's reply was a perceptive clue to making your daily life a creative one. The more attuned you are to what is happening around you, the more perceptive you will be in solving problems you face in a creative manner. In a recent series of BBC lectures (the 2013 Reith Lectures) on the nature of contemporary art, British contemporary artist Grayson Perry related a story about how he had done a workshop with children about artists and art. At the end of the session, he asked the children what they thought an artist is and one young girl replied, "Someone who notices things." This is a great answer and one that reflects Simon's "live with your eyes open" message to Chris.

So what are some simple things that we can do to be more creative?

The first point that I would make is that if you want to develop your creativity in a real and sustained manner, **identify the area or areas** in which you wish to become more creative. Once you start being more creative in that area, it will have a flow-on effect to other things that you do.

Twyla Tharp, in her very accessible and practical book *The Creative Habit*, which I highly recommend if you wish to explore this area more, speaks of the importance of **ritual** in developing a creative life. I know in my painting practice that there are certain things that I do before and after painting that are integral to the whole process, that create a transition of going from one mind space to another. They are things that I do which have no logical impact on the paintings themselves; however, they do have an impact on entering and exiting the space that I need to be in to paint. I cannot recommend highly enough the impact that practising a particular habit, or habits, each day, can have, whether it is something directly related to what you might wish to do creatively, or the simple day-to-day habits that keep your mind at some level of clarity.

You will have experienced in your teaching that the more you delve into something, the more 'equipped' you are to design new units, and come up with good ideas for teaching strategies. The more time that you spend in that thought space, the more intimately you will know it and, therefore, the more subtle you will be in finding solutions and gathering ideas. If I were asked to give a homily at Assembly, I would feel

completely daunted and decline the invitation. Yet because Chris O'Gorman is always in that space, she needs to come up with reflections on belief and living each week. She continually thinks in those terms; she is on alert, consciously and sub-consciously, for ideas, perspectives and insights to share with us at Assembly. She knows that intellectual and emotional space intuitively and therefore can be continually creative in it. The same would apply for your own areas of expertise - and the more you move in that 'thought space', the more attuned you will become in solving problems and creating new solutions. Combined with this is being open to things, living 'with your eyes open'.

This brings me to another essential ingredient in solving problems creatively: using the intuitive or the subconscious to solve problems. Students are often very sceptical when this is first presented to them as a strategy for solving problems as they feel it sounds like 'waffle'. It is something that most people have experienced but possibly have not used in a conscious manner as a tool. Do your research, thinking, scratching around among ideas (I call it 'composting my brain') and then sit back and relax, do other things: your subconscious will mix it all around and, after a day or three or six, a solution will, more times than not, be presented to you. We've all heard examples of the way that ideas come to people in the shower or when they are about to go to sleep. Writers, artists and musicians are full of famous stories of how ideas or songs have come to them when they away from their work space, relaxing or having dinner. Some of my most effective teaching ideas have come when I have been doing a mindless activity such as mowing and, without any exaggeration, solutions to teaching problems will come at least on a weekly basis (if not daily) when I do my few laps of the pool each day (this is one of my essential 'habits'). The more you can trust this process and relax enough to allow the subconscious work, the more that you will be able to use it actively in what you do on a daily basis. Just make sure that you keep the compost up.

Finally is the idea of 'play'. Early childhood teachers often use 'play' in their classes as an avenue for learning. We use play, experimenting, enjoyable approaches to encourage the discovery of ideas, images and approaches that the students hadn't considered. This playfulness 'turns off' linear, rational thinking and allows for surprises to occur. As Art teachers, we use a variety of strategies with the girls to stop them from over-thinking and to help them discover ideas and images more intuitively. It can be more difficult to do on your own but you can develop this area with colleagues. Be silly, have fun in your brainstorming, mix ideas together that seem at first random, turn your thinking upside down – it can be surprisingly powerful!

A good source of brain prompting can be found in Brian Eno's 'Oblique Strategies' - do yourself a favour and Google them! A hero of mine for over thirty years, he has always been a help to me to stimulate a different way of thinking.

We all work in a profession which relies on us being creative each day, and I do feel it is something that you should recognise this as something that you already do as a significant part of your teaching process. And in looking at how you are creative already, you might be able to see ways in which you can incorporate creativity into your teaching in a more inclusive manner.

Have fun.

## **References**

Tharp, Twyla 2008, *The Creative Habit*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Perry, Grayson 2013, Playing to the Public Gallery, *The Reith Lectures*, November 2013, BBC, podcast, accessed 25 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/reith>.