

Introduction

How Did Vasco da Gama Spark My Interest in Creativity?

It's ironic that even as children are taught the accomplishments of the world's most innovative minds, their own creativity is being squelched.

—Jessica Olien (2013)

My fifth-grade grandson Paul was ready with his report on Vasco da Gama. He'd made a costume. He'd created props. He'd written a first-person autobiography to deliver. He was ready to dramatize a dull subject and make it fun for his classmates—and for himself.

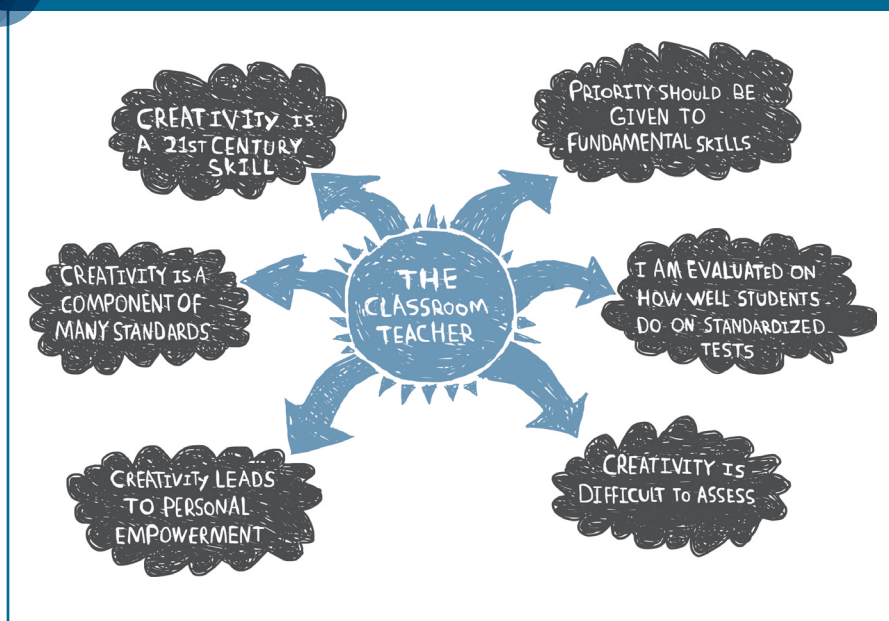
Then his teacher announced that she did not allow props, costumes, or narrative reporting. Such devices would be “unfair to the rest of the class.”

While this story originally angered me as both a grandparent and lifelong educator, it also spurred me into asking why Paul's teacher, an otherwise excellent educator as far as I could tell from other stories Paul told me of her classroom, chose to nip a creative approach to a history report in the bud. Why do some educators not only fail to encourage creativity in their students, but also seemingly discourage it?

The more I've studied the question, the more sympathetic I've become to educators and their often confusing and contradictory charges related to helping develop creativity in their students (see Figure 0.1).

Many of today's most successful people are creative. And creativity is growing in importance. Sir Ken Robinson has been excoriating educators (in a very charismatic way) for a rather long time about this. In his popular 2006 TED Talk, he observes, “creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status” (Robinson, 2006).

Figure O.1



Do we in education simply pay a lot of lip service to encouraging creativity in kids, or do we actually believe all children can or should be creative individuals? We accept creativity in elective art classes. We throw in a “fun” writing assignment among the three-paragraph expository essays. We applaud when an athlete concocts and executes a clever play. But too often, we in education are compelled to discourage originality through stay-within-the-line rules, one-right-answer tests, must-be-followed templates, technology use that gives the illusion of creativity, and praise for conformity in thought and action in our discipline programs. We may feel compelled to do this because our society has decided to judge school and teacher effectiveness solely on the basis of test scores, but we are doing it nonetheless.

In hopes of changing our educational views of creativity, I’ve been studying, observing, conversing, and thinking about the relationship of education and people who color outside the lines. Many educators have been offering me insightful feedback to my blog posts, articles, and workshops on creativity in education. In other words, I’ve been learning all I can about creativity and then trying to figure out how educators can apply this knowledge in practical ways in all classrooms—how we can start teaching outside the lines as well.

I am far from the end of my journey of exploration into what makes people divergent thinkers, innovators, and creators—and how we as

educators can help our students become more creative throughout their lives. But shall we travel together for a while, exploring some interesting questions?

Dangerous Delusions

Too many educators suffer from some common beliefs about creativity that are detrimental to children. Delusions are usually deep seated—and are not closely examined since they are held by such a large number of individuals. But let's get these myths out on the table anyway.

Delusion 1. Creative work does not belong in basic subjects like math, science, social studies, English, or “core” skill sets like information and technology literacy. Educators too often pigeon-hole creativity into arts classes—fine arts, fiction writing, music, theater, and dance. Of course creativity is an important part of these disciplines.

Yet we value creative problem solvers as much as we appreciate those folks who are creative in a more artistic sense. We need to extend the definition of *art* to dealing with people and situations in new and effective ways. The creativity many of us admire, especially in our coworkers and employees, is simply figuring out a way of accomplishing a task in a better way. Or dealing effectively with a problem—mechanical or human. We must never narrow what constitutes a “creative” endeavor.

Why do we restrict creativity to the art room and creative writing class when it should be in every subject, unit, and activity?

Delusion 2. Creativity does not require learning or discipline.

When many of us look at an abstract painting, we may think something like, “Gee whiz, give (a) a monkey, (b) a little kid, or (c) me a can of paint and I can make a painting like that.” We'd be wrong. Even abstract artists understand balance and tone and exhibit great craftsmanship and technical skills. The most original written ideas in the world are inaccessible when locked behind faulty grammar, spelling, syntax, or organization. Digital music composition programs like GarageBand do not cure a tin ear. Some of the most creative poetry follows the strict structures of the sonnet, villanelle, or haiku.

Too many students think that sufficient creativity will overcome a lack of skill or need for discipline or necessity for practice. Creativity unaccompanied by technical skills and knowledge (what this book will call *craftsmanship*), self-discipline, hard work, and practice isn't worth much.

Do we ask students to be both creative and disciplined? Should we set some parameters to creative activities?

Delusion 3. Creativity is just “icing on the cake” and we do not need to assess whether students can demonstrate it.

“What gets measured, gets done” is a truism from the business world. If we ask students to demonstrate creativity or innovation, we need some tools to determine whether they have done so successfully. If we identify creativity as a true 21st century skill, is it fair to hold students to account for mastering it when we can’t describe what it looks like, provide models, or be able to accurately determine whether it’s been demonstrated?

How can we design and use assessments that address originality, effectiveness, and craftsmanship—the three key components of creativity?

Delusion 4. Only academically “gifted” children are creative. Sir Ken Robinson (2009) reminds educators that we should not be asking “if” a child is intelligent, but instead be asking “how” a child is intelligent. Let’s riff on that statement by adding that we should not be asking “if” a child is creative, but “how” a child is creative.

Do we as educators need to honor multiple types of creativity, much as we now honor Gardner’s multiple “intelligences?”

Delusion 5. Technology use automatically demands creativity.

Anyone who has ever seen a slideshow with only large blocks of dry text and no graphic elements knows the fallacy of this assumption. A word-processed essay might be more legible, but not necessarily more novel, exciting, or moving. Many computer programs take no talent, thought, or originality to create products that look professional, giving the illusion of creativity. Even sophisticated 3-D printers, important players in the “maker” movement, are little more than expensive copy machines unless their use calls for originality.

What new opportunities does technology give students to demonstrate creativity? Do we run the risk of technology actually discouraging innovation and divergent thinking?

Delusion 6. Everyone wants creative students. Creative people have a long history of making others nervous or upset. From Elvis’s gyrations, Monet’s abstractions, Steve Jobs’s technologies, to Gandhi’s satyagraha—innovation is often met with resistance. Our students (and teachers) who are truly creative just might rattle our preconceptions and our sense of taste. Genuinely new products take some getting used to. Creativity often changes the nature of relationships, including the relationships between student and educator.

Do we recognize that creativity can upset the status quo and many educators, parents, and politicians want the status quo to stay, well, the status quo?

Delusion 7. Educators themselves do not need to display creativity.

Students learn more from our examples than from our words. It's difficult to ask others to be creative when we don't exhibit creativity ourselves. If our own lessons are dull and uninspired, if our classrooms, libraries, and hallways are drab and lifeless, if we do not vocally support the creative efforts of other teachers, and if we don't try new approaches to teaching and learning, students will know us for the hypocrites we are.

Do we as educators need to be better risk takers, try new methods of instruction, even be subversive in order to help our students become more creative?

Albert Einstein is reported to have said, "Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them." Given the state of our world, we desperately need higher levels of problem solving, ones that give creativity full reign. If we are going to help our kids color outside the lines, we will need to start teaching outside them as well.

A Note About Terms

Creativity

Divergent thinking

Entrepreneurship

Imagination

Ingenuity

Innovation

Invention

Originality

Out-of-the-box thinking

I will be using these terms more-or-less interchangeably throughout this book.



Up for Discussion

1. Is it reasonable to hold classroom teachers accountable for developing creative thinking and problem solving in their students? Can creativity be taught?
2. On balance, which is more important: cultural literacy, basic skills, or creativity?
3. What common misperceptions do you see among educators related to creativity?