

Crafting Moments of Inspiration in the Classroom

by Terri Hebert



In the end, the most significant skills that a leader can possess are the ability to think creatively and inspire creativity in others.

—Tayloe Harding 2010, 53

As an amateur photographer, I seek surprises amid the mundane. For example, instead of simply photographing a spider's web, I wait until just after it rains and then find the spider's web filled with glistening droplets of water

that serve as tiny prisms of light. The mundane suddenly is transformed into something truly amazing. Moments captured through the lens of a camera are crafted first in the mind and later on the page. The same is true of crafting learning experiences.

Educators must maintain a sense of wonder and awe—even as they fend off the subtle, yet intensely profound momentum toward standardization. Staying inspired is difficult with so many requirements placed on teachers and students that there is barely time to

simply achieve the minimum. However, going beyond the minimum is the expectation of one standard—INTASC 4—which urges teachers to seek out, understand, and implement a wide variety of instructional strategies that provide

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encouragement to students as they develop an ability to think critically, to solve problems, and to perform specific skills (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium 1992). Therefore, with a mere adjustment of the lens to allow for a broader perspective of today's learning experiences, the environment is ready for a creative focus on specific strategies designed to craft moments of inspiration.

A Creative State of Mind

Creativity is birthed out of a sense of curiosity. According to Dewey (2005, 228), "Curiosity is not an accidental isolated possession; it is a necessary consequence of the fact that an experience is a moving, changing thing, involving all kinds of connections with other things. Curiosity is but the tendency to make these connections perceptible." Dewey (2005, 228) further suggested, "It is the business of educators to supply an environment so that this reaching out of an experience may be fruitfully rewarded and kept continuously active." The teacher, then, must take advantage of those moments that elicit curiosity within a child's imagination and extend them—inviting each student into a uniquely individual creative state of mind.

According to Donnelly (2004), the term *creativity* is defined as reconfiguring or moving about objects or thoughts in a generative, innovative, expressive, and imaginative manner. When reflecting on the meaning of the word, educators should consider whether they believe that all individuals carry the capacity to create with innovation, expression, and imagination. If this trait is assumed, then can educators also assume that the ability found within each person is important—even essential—and must be given opportunities for application in all walks of life?

Gordon MacKenzie, a Hallmark Cards employee for more than 30 years, has worked to revive creativity in elementary classrooms. In his book

Orbiting the Giant Hairball (1998), MacKenzie related to teachers his conversations with students. In his attempt to adjust a misconception, he traveled from classroom to classroom, school building to school building, posing to students the same question: "How many artists are there in the room?"

Years earlier, Pablo Picasso suggested this answer: "All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up" (Lewis 1995–2009). What MacKenzie discovered about today's students was something quite different.

In the first grade, every single student raised his or her hand with all the gusto that could be mustered. In the second grade, about half of the students raised their hands. In the third grade, about 10 out of 30 responded. By the time MacKenzie reached the sixth grade classes, he encountered a positive reply from only one or two students who responded pensively.

Often unbeknownst to the faculty and staff on-site, schools like those MacKenzie (1998, 23) visited seem to be in the business of "suppression of creative genius." MacKenzie (1998, 23–24) stated, "From cradle to grave, the pressure is on [to] be normal." However, in an effort to fight this tendency toward normalcy or commonality, educators must purposefully design moments of creativity for their students to embrace their own curiosities.

Sir Ken Robinson, visionary leader within the British government's advisory committee on creative and cultural education and author of several books related to the pursuit of passion and creativity, appeared on TEDTalks in 2006. During his video segment, the topic focused on whether or not schools kill creativity. Robinson (2006) provided examples of now-famous individuals who, as young children, struggled in traditional school settings. He suggested that education must be *transformed* instead of merely *reformed*. In a later book,

Robinson (2009) suggested three specific areas that must undergo this type of transformation: curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. In an effort to clearly define each component of change, he defined curriculum as the hierarchy of subjects; assessment as it relates to standardized tests; and pedagogy as the most powerful tool teachers have to improve education.

In an effort to effectively plan lessons that incorporate these moments of curiosity and creativity, teachers often conduct icebreaker activities. These can prepare students mentally and socially for what is to come and break down potential barriers that may supersede the learning experience. Sample icebreakers and other activities teachers may consider trying with their students are described here. Many more, however, may be found in resource books and on the Internet.

Oodles of Doodles

One technique that encourages creativity and self expression is simply to cover the tabletops or desks with paper, and then invite the students to use the paper as they wish. Some take notes on it; others jot down their questions as they come to mind; and still others doodle as they listen to the lecture or class discussion. Teachers who have used this technique have noted improvements such as a much calmer atmosphere in the classroom, higher levels of engagement, and better concentration, listening skills, and confidence (Woolridge 2008).

Trinket Box

A second strategy, affectionately called the Trinket Box, involves a small box housing a variety of objects (e.g., rubber band, nut and bolt, golf ball, straw doll hat, dice). The aim of the Trinket Box is to stimulate discussion based on reflection. The box is passed around either at the beginning or conclusion of the lesson. As each student retrieves one item, the teacher poses a question for

that student to ponder. The questions are as varied as the lessons. For example, a teacher may ask a question that helps answer the internal question: "What correlation can be made between the item that is being held and the lesson just completed?" Wait time is provided, allowing each individual an opportunity to formulate ideas. All are then invited to share their thoughts. Making a connection between abstract objects, such as those found in the Trinket Box, and the lesson helps students acquire critical information.

This particular strategy can be adjusted to whatever items the teacher has available. Even varying the size of the objects, such as sports items (e.g., balls, nets, cones, whistles), or including photographs instead of tangible objects, are options for the activity. Each time items are replaced, the responses are apt to change. Switching items provides students with another opportunity to think "outside of the box"—and the teacher gains another chance to investigate their depth of knowledge.

Top Ten Items

Many educators encounter the workshop-type experience during professional development opportunities. Often embedded within this style of learning are icebreaker activities. In group settings, these allow all participants to chat, laugh, and engage prior to learning experiences. Icebreakers serve many purposes, such as facilitating introductions, assessing prior knowledge, and energizing learners. This style works for professional development and might be just as effective within a classroom setting.

One icebreaker, called the Top Ten Items, has a middle school focus. Prior to beginning the activity, students are seated in groups of five. They are asked to remove two random items from their backpacks. Each group's items are placed in a pile and then sorted based on

directions from the teacher. In the first sorting activity, the teacher asks each group to rank the ten items in terms of importance (using their own middle school students' criteria)—one being the most important and ten being the least important. All groups then report out in the form of a visual graph of their preferences.

In the next activity, students are asked to consider the same ten objects and rearrange them to represent their importance to a middle school student's parents or guardians. A second graph is created. Comparisons are then made between the two graphs, eliciting discussion among the students.

A third part of this activity, which is optional, invites students to step into the future, some 20 years later, as parents themselves. They are asked to attempt to rank the same ten items from this futuristic role while also considering their children's point of view. The three perspectives—middle school student, parent, and futuristic parent—allow each participant to see the value of various perspectives. This exercise also challenges them to be creative in the ranking of items, attempting to foresee what may or may not be necessary to students down the road.

Staging the Writing

When students are asked to get out their writing materials, teachers often hear a universal sigh from the group. However, this writing activity may instead yield nods of approval as each student progresses through the creative process.

Prior to the actual assignment, the teacher interjects a short oral reading excerpted from an adjective-rich book appropriate to the specific grade level. In the example described here, the teacher chooses a passage from *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt 1975, 24–25) to jump-start the students' writing. Stu-

dents are asked to close their eyes and listen while the teacher reads:

For the wood was full of light, entirely different from the light she was used to. It was green and amber and alive, quivering in splotches on the padded ground, fanning into sturdy stripes between the tree trunks. There were little flowers she did not recognize, white and palest blue; and endless, tangled vines; and here and there a fallen log, half rotted but soft with patches of sweet green-velvet moss. . . . She wandered for a long time, looking at everything, listening to everything, proud to forget the tight, pruned world outside, humming a little now, trying to remember the pattern of the melody she had heard the night before.

At the conclusion of the oral reading, the teacher encourages students to share the descriptive words and phrases that resonated with them, and these are written on the whiteboard. Discussion follows regarding why the author chose to craft those particular words and phrases, and how students might use the same techniques in their own writing.

In an attempt to continue the flow of the students' creative juices within the writing assignment, each learner retrieves the necessary materials (e.g., pen/pencil and paper), and the teacher gives instructions before the class goes outside. Each writer will locate a place near the school building and within the boundaries established by the teacher where he or she will sit and write for a period of ten minutes. During this time, students will capture on paper all sights, sounds, feelings, and smells. Other than including a description of the school building, as seen from their unique perspective, there are no requirements for the writing. One stu-

dent may tell of the sunshine hitting the brass nameplate located on the school's arch; another may explain the sounds coming from the nearby cafeteria; and yet another may describe the bricks of the school wall. The teacher monitors the learners' behavior as they quickly write their descriptions.

At the conclusion of the ten minutes, the teacher blows a whistle and waits for all to line up before reentering the building. Once inside, each student has an opportunity to share with the larger group his or her writing. Jump-starting a writing lesson in this manner allows each student to develop listening skills as well as enlarge descriptive vocabulary—both necessary for reaching new levels of creativity and maturity.

A Picture Is Worth a **Thousand Words**

Science and social studies classrooms are rich in visual imagery; yet, many of these images are from the textbook or videos provided to the student by the teacher. What levels of creativity might be reached if students were instead given a camera? How might moments of inspiration be created if the learners were involved in capturing their own images?

In the scientific settings of the classroom or lab, digital images now are being created using inexpensive equipment obtained through grant funding. With a digital camera and photo-editing software, students are finding themselves capable of creating movies (either individually or in small groups) that tell the stories of science (e.g., a butterfly's life cycle, plate tectonics, or examples of force and motion). Instead of merely reading about these processes, students are asked to use the content as they identify local images that fortify and gel the information learned. Once the visualization is complete, each producer shares his or her work by placing it on a

teacher-generated Web page. This allows others to benefit from the learning experience and is convenient for sharing feedback from a larger group.

In a social studies classroom, units are enhanced by allowing students to create travel brochures or "scrapbooks" in much the same way as just described. The end result is this: students are engaged on a higher level than if they were merely seeing the predetermined images found within a textbook or included in a video or DVD. Creativity is encouraged and fueled by incorporating technological components such as Windows® Movie Maker®, YouTube™, and Blogger, which keep students connected with the content.

Conclusion

According to the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), "the best employers the world over will be looking for the most competent, most creative, and most innovative people on the face of the earth" (Ghysels 2009, 21). NCEE also pointed to a time when creativity in the workforce will be rewarded, making it quite difficult for students who have lost touch with their creative nature to succeed.

Carson (2009) suggested, "Whether you are a poet, a teacher, an entrepreneur, a linebacker, a parent, or a mid-level corporate manager, you will not thrive going forward . . . unless you are optimistic, creative, and flexible." Hargreaves and Shirley (2008, 141) also projected such forward movement in the global economy: "Creativity and innovation [especially] in an age of insecurity [and] environmental awareness enrich our spirit and develop our responsibility toward others—these are the learning priorities of a sustainable knowledge society."

Moments of creativity and inspiration within today's classroom must be harnessed by all—teachers and students. Some will come spontaneously and others must be developed and purposefully interjected into the learning experience. Nevertheless, opportunities will come and, in so doing, will invite each individual on a journey of exploration, trial and error, and reflection.

Think beyond the traditional boundaries. Take off the shackles of the status quo and strive to grow into a teacher of greatness! Look for those moments, as a photographer might, and peer through the lens of creativity. Strive to find inspiration in every moment of the day—in the classroom, the hallway, the playground, the backyard. It is there just waiting for someone's keen eye to perceive it. Be that keen eye! ■

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