Teaching Creative Thinking and More

Have you figured out how to teach your students the most important skill of the 21st Century? Here is a new teaching-learning paradigm that goes beyond active learning.

How to Master Mentoring from the Middle

Let’s step into Professor Peabody’s Wayback Machine for a quick trip to 2010, when two important events in our lives as teachers occurred. First, our state became first in the nation to adopt the national Common Core Standards (CCS), and the General Assembly doubled down with Senate Bill 1, which, among other things, mandated that all colleges in Kentucky align their general education and teacher preparation curricula with the CCS. Second, also in 2010, IBM sent out a survey to more than a thousand CEOs of some of our country’s largest corporations asking what skills were the most important for colleges to develop in their students. As if to prove that secondary and higher education needed to respond to a changing business climate, the CEOs selected as their top choice creative thinking.

Aye, but there’s the rub. Not one of the Common Core Standards relates directly to creative thinking (even though the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning, teaching and assessing in 2001 put Creating at the top). While England, Canada, and Australia have made the teaching of creativity a hallmark of their national educational policies, here in America we were not only not mentioning it, but also not figuring out if and how it could be taught.

Should it be taught and can it? The answer is: Absolutely! Read on to learn more about our new teaching-learning paradigm.
A new approach to teaching creative thinking—and any other subject

Since The Pedagogy Channel (TPC) exists only as a glimmer in some educator’s eye, and you can’t yet download its soon-to-be most popular on-demand episode, The History of Teaching-Learning Paradigms, we’re going to provide the Wikipedia version. Those desirous of a more in-depth treatment need only see our new book, Teaching Applied Creative Thinking (2013).

In the beginning was the Sage on the Stage—a/k/a the Lecture Method—wherein a male authority divulged from a podium his “take” on a given subject to a row-and-columned classroom of students who were supposed to passively scribe the wondrous knowledge. In the late 20th century, as democratization upheaved the traditional format, the Guide on the Side—a/k/a active learning—gained power with both male and female instructors sharing authority with students who were expected to work in groups and reflect upon their work to gain the wondrous knowledge.

Both paradigms produced pronounced weaknesses. The former required nothing more than students memorize mountains of information (almost all of which they would shortly forget) to regurgitate to the sage during test times. The latter often resulted
in the almost total abdication of instructor power and knowledge and too much dependence upon alpha students to guide the lost tribes through the wilderness of group work.

**Adjusting to 21st-Century Realities**

**TECHNOLOGY:** Recent estimates peg students transfixed by a monitor (computer, hand-held device, TV) for 8.5 hours a day. Simply put, why should students listen in class to Dr. Carpenter lecture on the history of brainstorming when they can find online more information than he could possibly deliver?

**TRADITIONAL CLASSROOMS:** After pointing out our ancestors walked 12 miles a day, John Medina in Brain Rules (2008) concludes that the worst possible educational setting is today’s student-static, rows-and-columned classroom. In addition, research has shown the advantage of certain wall colors, natural light, and 72-degree temperatures.

**BRAIN RESEARCH:** Medina and others stress that students check out of lectures at the 10-minute mark. Neuroscience has also demonstrated the advantages of having both instructors and students in motion as well as the importance of both visual and multimedia approaches to aiding deep learning.

**Mentoring from the Middle—The Instructor’s Roles**

Probably the first movement away from the active learning approach came from Australian researcher Erica McWilliam. In her The Creative Workforce (2008), as well as other writings, she theorized on a “Meddler-in-the-Middle” approach that “positions the teacher and student as mutually involved in assembling and disassembling cultural products... Meddling is a repositioning of teacher and student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world” (88). However, McWilliam did not translate her theory into praxis, and her term “meddler” connotes more a gadfly than a positive authoritative force.

Building on McWilliam’s model, the Mentor-from-the-Middle paradigm focuses on a peripatetic instructor who both literally and figuratively positions him/herself in the middle of the classroom, assuming six distinct, but inter-related roles.

**FACILITATOR:** The mentor is responsible for creating the course, aligning it to proper outcomes and running all classroom sessions, managing both the big-picture learning experience as well as responding to individual student needs.

**COACH:** The mentor breaks skills into skill points, motivates students to develop the necessary knowledge, determines the roles of various students, and acts as damage controller when things go awry.

**ARTIST:** The mentor promotes risk-taking to find solutions as well as the traditional “right” answers, adapts to changing situations, shifts perspective so as to view things from other points of view (including students’), and synthesizes the ideas, processes, and products of the learning experience.

**CRITICAL REFLECTOR:** The mentor displays metacognition of class proceedings, exhibits fair-mindedness, and shows students how to properly evaluate arguments.

**MODEL:** In all that is done, the mentor acts as a model leader and learner.

**SCHOLAR:** Effective mentors not only know the discipline and its pedagogy, but constantly demonstrates the scholar researcher frame of mind both by keeping current in the field and by publishing in it and with students when possible. The goal is to get students to join the scholarly conversation.

**Mentoring from the Middle—The Six Phases**

Similar to the flipped classroom, mentoring from the middle involves at least six phases that can take more than one class period:

**INFORMATION GATHERING:** The mentor uses the web, print resources, and other forms of knowledge to develop both breadth and depth outside of and during class.

**CRYSTALLIZING:** The mentor leads students
in analyzing, assessing, and synthesizing information into powerful and guiding concepts.

**CREATING THE PROJECT:** The mentor leads the class in deciding what project/product can be accomplished employing these concepts.

**COMPLETING THE PROJECT:** The mentor helps students actively make something.

**SKILL-MAKING:** The mentor determines what additional activities are necessary to transform abstract vocabulary and concepts into deeply learned skills.

**EVALUATING THE LEARNING UNIT:** The mentor figures out whether the total project and class have achieved the desired outcomes.

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**Mentoring Specific Skills of Creative Thinking**

The mentor can aid students in thinking creatively by emphasizing nine skills:

**SHIFTING PERCEPTION:** learning to regard a person, idea, or situation from multiple angles.

**PIGGYBACKING:** learning to borrow old ideas from others in order to form new ideas.

**BRAINSTORMING:** learning how to come up with many potential solutions to a problem.

**GLIMMER-CATCHING:** learning to capture that out-of-focus idea or barely perceptible sight or sound.

**COLLABORATING:** learning to work with others.

**PLAYING:** learning to develop a total openness to the world around us and have fun with it.

**RECOGNIZING PATTERN:** learning to discern the figure in carpet by weaving together separate strands into a coherent whole.

**USING METAPHOR:** learning to use the known to help you understand the unknown.

**GOING WITH THE FLOW:** learning how to let the creative process overwhelm you and take you with it.

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**REFERENCES & RESOURCES**


