

Creativity for Teachers

Introduction

Quick. Without looking, can you name the third and fourth National Standards of Music Education?

Answer:

4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.

More importantly, are you spending any time teaching them?

Before the Common Core movement came “crashing down on us” commanding an exhaustive redesign of our curriculum and new high-stakes standardized testing, perhaps the more promising and innovative “buzz” was a recommendation to adopt 21st Century learning skill initiatives. Companies, businesses, and governments – the employers of the vast majority of the future work force – did not want their employees to settle for an education based on a “regurgitation of facts and figures,” but to demonstrate mastery of the work-related skills of communications and collaboration, and the thinking skills of critical thinking, problem solving, and *creativity*. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) group, in order for the United States to be able to “compete in a global society,” a refocus is essential on learning the skills of personal innovation. Advocating for 21st century readiness of every student, P21 emphasizes education in the best practices of creativity, originality, divergent thinking, flexibility and adaptability, communication, personal initiative and self-direction, and leadership and responsibility, among other themes including collaboration, global awareness, financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy, health and wellness awareness, and technology.

For a little perspective in our field, one of my favorite technology gurus, Jim Frankel (previously Managing Director of SoundTree, now Head of Digital Education for Music Sales Group and Director of MusicFirst) often opened up his workshop sessions with his favorite “guiding questions” for music education including:

- What is your personal mission? Why?
- What is the role of music in a child’s education?
- Are we creating performers, theorists, teachers... or lifelong music lovers?

Admittedly, most of my own career in school orchestras/strings, and choirs, along with a brief touch of elementary band, general music, and music theory, centered on the instructional targets and assessments in performance, musical knowledge, and music appreciation. As a string teacher, the majority of my time was spent on teaching technique, expressivity and interpretation, ensemble-playing, reading and listening skills, and practice habits. I seldom sponsored *intentional* activities in learning improvisation or composing new music. **How about you?**

Here are a few target questions for exploration in this series on creativity for teachers.

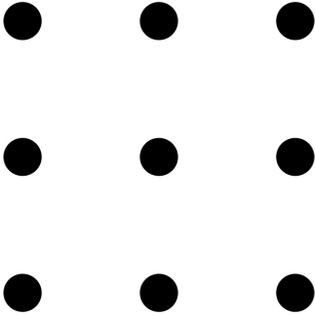
- What is creativity?
- How creative are you?
- Why is teaching creativity important?
- How do we teach creativity?
- How can we teach more creatively?



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How Creative Are You?

Take this quick test, and try to think “outside the box.” This puzzle, first introduced to many of us at our initial PMEA state “leadership workshop” (early summer conference) by Michael Kumer, instructs you to link all nine dots using four or fewer straight lines without lifting the pen, and without tracing the same line more than once. Can you solve this using four lines? For advanced *visionaries*, how about completing it with only three lines? Believe it or not, a super-creative person may be able to find a way to solve this problem with ONE line! (Answers at the end of this article.)



Creativity Tests and Personality Traits

Numerous measurements have been proposed to evaluate a person’s creativity potential. Check out two of my favorite websites: Todd Anderson’s 99U Twitter feed “Five Classic Creative Challenges” at <http://99u.com/articles/7160/test-your-creativity-5-classic-creative-challenges>, and Dr. Curtis Bonk (Indiana University) at http://www.indiana.edu/~bobweb/r546/modules/creativity/creativity_tests.html.

On the “Best of Bonk” (latter) website, these tests are categorized into brain hemispherical dominance assessment, divergent thinking, convergent thinking, artistic evaluations, and personal creativity inventories.

All, including the Mind Tools’ questionnaire at <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/creativity-quiz.htm>, illustrate a model for the “highly creative” personality. **How many of these terms describe YOU?**

- Willingness to take risks
- Perseverance, drive, commitment to task
- Curiosity
- Openness, open-mindedness
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Broad interests
- Valuing originality
- Intuition, being perceptive
- Embracing the need to find solutions to problems
- Being internally occupied, withdrawn, needing privacy
- Awareness of own creativeness
- Sense of humor
- Being attracted by complexity and novelty
- Enjoying art and being artistic



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Thumbnail “Why” and “How” of Creative Thinking

Now, in preparation for the next part of this series, *you* have a homework assignment. (This from a retired teacher who no longer has to grade any schoolwork!) See if you can get your hands on the publication *A Whack on the Side of the Head – How You Can Be More Creative* by Roger von Oech (Warner Books 1998), or at least review websites about his theories such as the following:

- His own website <http://www.creativethink.com>
- Cathy Bernatt’s book review <http://www.creating.bz/our-reading-circle/whack.html>
- Extract of the “mental block” section of his book: <http://www.commandthestage.com/stuff/01-24-09%20D18%20TLC%20Spring%20Training/WhackonHead.pdf>

Mr. von Oech’s offers his premise for why all of us should take time to seriously foster creativity, challenge the rules and old ways of thinking, and even risk failure and looking foolish:

“I can think of two good reasons. The first is change. When things change and new information comes into existence, it’s no longer possible to solve current problems with yesterday’s solutions. Over and over again, people are finding out that what worked two years ago won’t work today. This gives them a choice. They can either bemoan the fact that things aren’t as easy as they used to be, or they can use their creative abilities to find new answers, new solutions, and new ideas.

“A second reason for generating ideas is that it’s a lot of fun.”

To add to your self-evaluation, how many of von Oech’s “ten mental blocks” that he says are “hazardous to your thinking” may be currently limiting your creativity?

1. The right answer.
2. That’s not logical.
3. Follow the rules.
4. Be practical.
5. Play is frivolous.
6. That’s not my area.
7. Don’t be foolish.
8. Avoid ambiguity.
9. To err is wrong.
10. I’m not creative.

I can heartily endorse von Oech’s other creative thinking classics, *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants* and *Expect the Unexpected*. Also, take a look at his *Creative Whack Pack for the iPhone*, and *the X-Ball*.

Coming Soon – Words of Wisdom from Sir Ken, Daniel Pink, and Other Experts on Creativity

While you are at it, if you have not viewed one of Sir Ken Robinson’s TedTalk videos on YouTube about the “Creativity Crisis” in education, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY> or http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_how_to_escape_education_s_death_valley.html. Enjoy!



Answers to 9 Dot Puzzle

