

Creativity in Information Literacy Teaching: Part Two – Applying Creativity to Teaching

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The overall aim of this two-part article is to help readers incorporate creativity in their information literacy teaching. Part One unpacked the creative process and aimed to demystify creativity, in order to make it accessible as a concept and process. The reader will recall that creativity involves asking questions, identifying problems, and thinking broadly and differently about how to connect elements while working toward solutions and results. Part Two explores how librarians can apply this knowledge in adopting a creative approach to teaching information literacy and adding creative techniques to their repertoires. To do so, we must cultivate certain practices and habits that facilitate creative thinking and development in order to be ready for the challenges we face in our teaching.

What is (and is not) Creativity in Teaching

What does creativity look like in the context of teaching and learning? “In its simplest form, creative teaching can be defined as the act of teaching in a new and useful way” (Keller-Mathers, 2009, p. 197). Unfortunately, certain prevalent and influential notions can undermine creative teaching. For example, beware of what Edward de Bono calls “crazitivity,” which he characterizes as “...solely driven by desire to be different” (1997). Being new, different, or entertaining, without clear purpose isn’t creative if it doesn’t address a need and produce something of discernible value. Similarly, avoid the temptation in teaching simply to “plug in” an interesting technique or activity you’ve read about or borrowed from someone else; consider first specific problems you want to address, and only create or adapt with definite purpose and direction. An example of this is the current trend of equating creativity or innovation in teaching with the use of new information technology or social media (Mishra, 2012). To be sure, many creative teaching practices can involve such technology; however, you should not begin with a presumption that technological solutions will be the best or the only valuable one.

Applying the Creative Process to Teaching Information Literacy

How might the creative process work in information literacy teaching? Recall that creativity follows a recursive process that includes phases of: 1) preparation, 2) incubation, 3) insight/illumination, and 4) verification (Wallas, 1926). Using this as a foundation, we can build upon it and utilize new research that has more detail. A great example of this is Keith Sawyer’s *Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity* (2013). Its 8-step process is a practical guide to understanding, developing, and applying one’s creativity, grounded in the scholarship of creativity. Sawyer expands on the creative process, and includes aspects of creativity that were not always addressed as a part of the process itself. For example, he begins with the question-finding aspects and guides the reader through eight developmental steps.

1) Ask: Find the Right Question

This involves finding and exploring a problem, seeing it in a different way, and transferring it into a concrete question. You might try several questions, and several versions of them (some narrower, some broader) before identifying the best one.

- Focus first on identifying a specific problem or question before thinking about a specific kind of solution.
- Be open and question things you may take for granted. Question assumptions about what you do and why.

2) Learn: Prepare Your Mind

Here you acquire knowledge that you eventually apply to the identified problems and questions. This is synonymous, in part, with the *preparation* stage of the four-part creativity model.

- Know stuff. Be an expert. Master your primary domain through education, experience, and professional training.
- Take stock, such as an inventory of your knowledge base.
- Don’t ignore other domains in which you have knowledge and experience, such as business, the arts, or hobbies.

3) Look: Be Aware

This is about awareness, observation, and gaining new experience. It involves gathering information in many different ways, seeing new things, and seeing familiar things in new ways.

- Look with fresh eyes or from different perspectives.
- Seek out and be open to new experiences in order to build up a bank of knowledge and information.

4) Play: Free Your Mind

This involves what Sawyer and other creativity experts refer to as “play.” It facilitates the part of the process that the four-step model calls, *incubation*. In this step, you put aside the conscious work on your problem and allow your subconscious mind to work without inhibitions.

- Allow yourself a “creative pause.” Let your mind wander. Relax. Take a break from your task and allow time and space for it to simmer, while you engage in other activities.
- Visualize your problem in a completely different, fanciful setting. Or imagine it in a “box” with a new set of rules.

5) Think: Generate Ideas

This is not about coming up with one big, important idea; the key here is to generate *a lot* of ideas, many of which may not be very good. This is where you especially engage in the *lateral* and *divergent* thinking I mentioned in Part One of this article. More ideas increase the likelihood of quality ideas.

- Work with multiple ideas and projects at the same time.
- Practice idea generation by thinking differently about that

which is familiar or that you take for granted. Aim for surprising ideas.

- Structure your thinking and idea generation, using the many formal and informal techniques for generating ideas.

6) Fuse: Combine Ideas

The first five steps create an environment for the generation of ideas. This step takes those forward, mixing them together, trying different combinations in unexpected ways, and ultimately *fusing* the ideas together.

- Experiment and play with new combinations (of ideas, concepts, objects), especially unrelated things. Look for and expect surprises.
- Make associations between things that don't naturally go together. Engage in *analogical thinking*.
- Don't just mash up ideas—also include people. Interact with people with whom you might not normally interact.

7) Choose: Make Ideas Even Better

As you generate ideas, you defer judgment. Eventually, however, you must evaluate your ideas critically (perhaps by holding a competition), and continue to examine and improve them.

- Define what it means to be a great idea within the context you are working.
- Apply appropriate criteria to evaluate your many ideas.
- Don't be afraid to kill the bad ideas—you have plenty of others and can generate more.

8) Make: Get Your Ideas Into the World

Once you have generated, chosen, and improved your ideas, you must externalize them. Ultimately, you want to be a “maker,” and to build on what you make.

- When you recognize great ideas, get them out into the world quickly, even if they are not in finished form. Talk about them early and put them down on paper.
- Look for ways to make your ideas concrete.
- Keep at it—continue the process.

An Example of Creative Practice in IL Instruction

So how can we take this creative process and thinking and use it to address an identified problem or challenge in teaching? I will illustrate by using an example from my own library instruction practice.

Reflecting on it now, I was propelled to be creative by nagging challenges in my teaching. One persistent problem was that, no matter how (seemingly) prepared or informed I was before an instruction session, I frequently experienced “disconnects” in the classroom. For instance, there was usually particular content the students were expected to learn from librarians during instruction sessions. This expectation came from both the library (what we “knew” they needed) and from the faculty members (what faculty “wanted”). Quite often, however, during presentations and classroom activities, it be-

came obvious that we were misinformed, students hadn't adequately prepared, or that the faculty thought there were more pressing needs.

So how could I improve this frustrating situation? By getting creative and applying many of the 8-steps. First, I had to “Find the Right Question.” I realized I had initially misidentified the question as one of “how to prepare to present instruction material better,” rather than asking “how to be prepared to address student and faculty needs, including ones I did not anticipate, and adapt and respond to classroom dynamics in my teaching.” It took a lot of thinking, and different kind of thinking, before I finally redefined the question.

In terms of the “Prepare Your Mind” step of creativity, I drew first from my background in librarianship and information literacy, ostensibly my primary domain, studying relevant LIS literature and trying techniques suggested by colleagues. That focused on suggested assignments, examples of active learning, and teacher presentation skills; however, none addressed the real issues adequately. Fortunately, I also had knowledge of other disciplines and had interests outside of work. My background in both anthropology and education grounded me in constructivism and other theories so revisiting this material helped me question my focus on “how to teach,” and led me to refocus on how learners learn and teachers create environments conducive to learning. Meanwhile, outside of the library, I had been performing regularly in improv theater, which provided me with additional ways to learn about how see, analyze, and manage collaboration and group processes.

In the “Be Aware” step, it was challenging to break out of the familiar and sometimes narrow view of my work. As an anthropologist, I had learned to see the world through the eyes of others and understand their experience on their terms. So I asked myself and students informally, “What do the students think about this? Why do they look at things this way or act that way?” I also began to apply the lens of my new experiences in improvisational theater to my teaching.

As I reflect on this example, it is difficult to separate the fourth, fifth, and sixth steps, “Free Your Mind,” “Generate Ideas,” and “Combine Ideas.” The incubation of ideas about instructional challenges likely increased during “creative pauses” between periods of heavy instruction and also during conferences I attended. Creative activities away from work allowed me to play and exercise my imagination in other contexts. Improvisational theater also provided analogies that helped me understand teaching, as well as providing practical techniques. I began to make valuable connections, as I used a framework of improvisation to practice various techniques and structures that facilitated teaching and learning.

For the seventh step, “Make Ideas Even Better,” my criteria to evaluate and improve upon the idea related to the original problem and question I identified. Were my sessions more interactive? Was I better able to respond to questions and unanticipated needs? Were students more engaged? Did professors give more positive feedback? And, of course, did it solve the problem adequately? By those standards, it was successful; however, the solution raised some questions and potential chal-

in which Bean discusses “design models” for e-learning. Design models are like flexible templates for e-learning; they give the designer a basic framework for thinking about how she wants to deliver content without dictating content. Learning needs and outcomes determine what design model is appropriate, so it’s important to determine outcomes first. For example, if I want students to know that interlibrary loan exists, and some basics of how to use the service, I don’t need an immersive, branching module where patrons explore multiple paths and scenarios. Instead, a short, infomercial-style video will meet the intended outcomes much better. Another design model which I would like to try is the “guided story,” which uses the experiences of a character to add context to the learning (p. 72). I also liked the “investigate and decide” model, which gives the learner a goal, a series of decisions to reach the goal, and supporting material to make informed choices (p. 80). I could see this model being an effective framework for teaching source evaluation or citations. It was useful for me to refine my thinking about what output fits which instructional context, and begin creating my own e-learning models.

The principles of good instructional design don’t just apply in the corporate context for which Bean writes. Librarians might find that they share many of the same concerns Bean outlines: catching and holding the learner’s attention amidst a sea of distractions, helping the learner perform their job, or do a task more effectively, and making e-learning that sticks. While the subject of a librarian’s e-learning module will be very different, many of the tools, theories and guidelines in the book can help librarians design intentionally. Librarians who have a heavy e-learning workload, or who design modules for

others might find Bean’s design models useful as a starting point, as they can be adapted to fit various contexts. Librarians can also learn from what the corporate world does well, such as creating cohesive branding across lessons in order to create greater name recognition among students who may be unfamiliar with the library.

The Accidental Instructional Designer will be of most interest to those new to online instructional design, or who are acclimating themselves to the modern e-learning landscape. Though some content also applies to face-to-face settings, it will be most relevant for librarians working with online learning. It’s a short and easy read (fewer than 200 pages), so those who are interested should read the entire book. For those with less time, Chapter 1 and Chapter 10 focus most heavily on the corporate sector, and can be easily skipped. My only caveat is that Bean does not discuss accessibility for e-learning, an important topic that forms a large part of my instructional technology responsibilities. However, the book is not a complete guide to designing online instruction, so those who are new to the topic may want to use the book as a jumping-off point to explore the field further, and can invest any amount of time following-up on Bean’s resources and suggested reading.

References

- Brecher, D., & Klipfel, K. M. (2014). Education training for instruction librarians: A shared perspective. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 8(1), 43-49.
- Hall, R. A. (2013). Beyond the job ad: Employers and library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(1), 24-38.

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lenges. I still needed to know if students were meeting learning outcomes and taking away something of substance—were they “getting it?” I refined my improvisational approach by including more visible goals and concepts at the outset of the sessions, adding brief in-class feedback and assessment techniques, and providing a structure for final student-led summary. During sessions, I more intentionally drew upon effective “ready-mades,” such as activities, techniques, and handouts. All of this gave me solid information that my new approach to teaching was making a difference in what students were learning, in addition to the fact I felt better about my teaching and preparation.

Finally, for Step 8, “Get Your Ideas Into the World,” I have shared my ideas about using an improv-based approach to teaching with colleagues inside and outside the library, and in conference presentations and workshops, along with journal articles and interviews. In fact, you are participating in Step 8 right now by reading this article!

And remember: this process wasn’t “creative” because it involved improv; creativity is a whole process. It can involve not just so-called creative arts (like improv) but also technology, education anthropology, etc, along with all the other tasks and ways of thinking described earlier. Anyone can be creative in their teaching.

Conclusion

Good teachers are creative teachers. Creative teaching is not simply a matter of “having fun” in class or bringing in the latest game, gadget, or social media. It is about seeing and thinking differently. It is about identifying problems, making connections, and improvising to improve teaching. Most importantly, it’s about student learning. And one final note: Sometimes, your creativity, including in teaching, may be met with suspicion or derision by colleagues or others entrenched in more conventional thinking and practice, or who assume they have things figured out already. Have confidence and be willing to take the risk; it will be worth it to you and your students.

References

- For references, see here http://bit.ly/413_Stam