

# Being creative: things I find useful

## Andrew Wright

### Why is creativity important?

Creativity is a fundamental means of survival as well as a bringer of joy.

Some teachers and students can only really harness all their brain power if they are invited to be creative.

### My definition of creativity

Making something new or a new version of something. 'Something' might be how you respond to a situation in class or how you manage to do many things at the same time or when you see the funny side of something and tell someone else. Of course, it is also when you devise activities and make materials.

Everybody is creative but the concept is often used to divide people into those that are creative and those that are not. This is plain wrong.

Education must cultivate not stifle the creativity which lies within all of us.

### Aim of this article

In this short article, I will concentrate on what I find helps me to be more creative and will hope that it might be of some interest and even of use to other colleagues. Inspiration will not figure in any of the ideas below. I can't, sensibly, tell myself, Be inspired! There are more practical ideas available.

### Making new connections

I suppose, making new connections is what creativity is!

Wandering and wondering without clear goals is more important than linear thinking if you want to make new connections and to discover new things.

There are times when I do not want to be clear about what I want except to be open to experiencing something that I have not experienced before.

Sometimes right/wrong assumptions and 'proper' ways of doing things prevent you from seeing things freshly.

Some examples of making new connections in classroom activities are:

- Brainstorm associations as an individual or as a class and do not introduce the idea of right and wrong as you do so. You can always put things through the right wrong sieve later.
- Imaginative descriptions based on finding a large variety of connections between two pictures chosen at random.
- Chain association in which one student says a word and the next student says a word which he or she associates with the first word.

- Opposites and reversals. Describe many aspects of an everyday object eg a book. Then agree on the opposite of each aspect (it has pages/it has no pages) Then conceive of a new object inspired by these reversals.

### Being silly

'Don't be silly!' is a phrase normally used by people in authority who are irritated by behaviour which is inconvenient to them. However, a willingness to 'be silly' is a key characteristic of creative people. What is silly for one generation is often normal in the next.

I find so many things in my daily life which require me to be sensible and to do the expected thing but actually I would benefit by being silly much more often.

Some examples of 'being silly' in classroom activities are:

- Instead of teaching and practicing prepositions related to 'book on the table' choose silly examples, 'cow on the table', etc. Either by imagination or represented by sketches...done by the students not by you.
- Take a traditional sentence pattern table and make as many silly combinations as you can.
- Retelling a story with silly changes...Little Red Riding Hood who is so greedy that she ate the cakes intended for Grandma before she ever arrived.
- Comparing and contrasting things, for example, a pencil and an elephant
- Why have you got a monkey in your bag? An opportunity for silly answers.
- Questions about a statement. The moon is made of green cheese. Does it smell? What sort of green? etc. (*Five Minute Activities* page 65)

### Redefining

Cezanne said, 'Go back to nature.' Constable said, 'I try to forget that I have even seen a picture before.'

Push assumptions to one side. Take a fresh look. Carefully examine the situation. A fresh description might lead to a fresh answer.

Some examples of activities related to redefining ideas and materials development are:

- Thinking about 'learning' instead of thinking about 'teaching'. 'Classroom' can be 'room'. 'Teacher' can be 'helper'. 'Student' can be 'person'. 'Teacher training' can be 'teacher development'. What effect do these changes have on the way we perceive our work?

- Writing my books: When I wrote Spell binders (OUP) I first of all thought of how useful it would be if my little story books could be easily dramatised and what do the children need in order to dramatise the story well. Having defined the needs in detail it seemed obvious how to design the pages. For example, knowing that children often do not put enough expression into the drama I have used faces with expressions on them instead of the names of the speakers. (Spellbinders, Oxford University Press) In this way the children are guided how to say their lines with feeling.
- Dictation: My favourite example of the potential of redefining a concept is manifested in the book, Dictation by Paul Davis and Mario Rinvulcri and published by Cambridge University Press. The authors defined dictation as students receiving a text and writing it down. They then challenged the assumptions about what that means in practice:

Who chooses the text? Could be the teacher or the student.

The text? Could be single words or discreet sentences or longer texts.

Who communicates the text: the teacher or another student?

How is the text communicated: spoken or written, spoken and written, in short sections or as a continuously spoken text, loudly or muttered?

How do the students write it down: as it is delivered or do they place it in a different sequence or location? Do they write all of it or a selection?

Based on this redefining of the traditional activity of dictation they came up with 120 communicative activities for their brilliant book.

## Particularising

One of the hallmarks of creative work is the feeling that it is both universal and highly particular at the same time. It is a little bit like the previous idea but not quite.

An example of particularising in classroom activities is:

- From the early stages encourage the students to create characters, places and situations in stories which are highly specific. For example, for beginners ask: Is the frog, little, very little or very, very little? For more advanced students: Is she slim or thin? How does she sit when she is in the café with her friends?

## Not getting too precious

When I was at art school I wanted to do my best and felt that each picture I was working on was going to be special. And I felt I had no excuse for not making it into a masterpiece. This made me feel so nervous and so self-critical that I could hardly get myself to paint at all in case I didn't produce a masterpiece.

An example of not getting too precious in a classroom activity is:

- Instead of writing a complete short story the students can write 3 alternative first paragraphs

and ask 10 other students to read all 3 and put them in order of interest.

## Responding positively to a restricted context

The notion that artists must be free is a relatively new idea. Artists from the beginning of time have been employed by other people and have been asked to work within narrow restrictions of form, content, style, location, etc. Piero della Francesca was told which blue to use in his pictures and Mozart was told to have a new and amusing composition ready by Sunday. Furthermore, any medium you use has its restrictions. (If you have a black pencil then you can't show colour)

Restrictions of content, medium, time, length, etc. can often give a creative stimulus to the students (and indeed their teachers)

I have always felt stimulated and even liberated by restrictions.

Two examples of classroom activities which impose restriction are:

- Expanding texts starting with a single word: Go. Go to bed. Go to bed....
- Show 3 pictures, each for only a few seconds and ask the students to write for exactly 4 minutes about each to make a story.

## Working in an ambiance of creativity

*'Flowers are red, young man,*

*Green leaves are green,*

*There's no need to see flowers any other way*

*Than the way they've always been seen.'*

This is a verse from a poem posted by Malgosia Tetiurka on the YL SIG discussion list from a poem entitled, *What colour are flowers?* (Writer's name not given)

It is a big help if you can work with people who think and feel that making new things is important. They respond to your ideas and feelings much more strongly than to the accuracy or conventionality of the forms you have used. You are a key person in creating a creative ambiance. Make it clear that there are times when you love the students to take risks and to be as creative as possible and that this is far more important than accuracy at those times. It is also important to share, and encourage others to share creative work.

## Using all the arts

We learn and use our mother tongue in conjunction with so many other media and yet we learn and use a foreign language in isolation in the classroom to a much greater extent.

Use all the arts. This principle can be applied from the first day of language learning and most of the examples below are given for beginner/elementary students. Obviously, for more advanced students the full richness of orchestration can take place.

Some examples of using all the arts are:

### Vocal arts:

- 1 Say a phrase or word in different ways. 'I love you'. 'Hello'. 'Goodbye'.
- 2 Tell a story only with the word 'seven'.

### Musical arts:

- 1 Singing a song or reciting a rhyme or poem.
- 2 Play with the sound of words together, for example, words for food and building up a communal chant poem. Bread and cheese. Bread and cheese. Soup!

### Visual arts:

- 1 Draw a picture and adding a title. For example, My grandma's dog.
- 2 Make a book.

### Dramatic arts:

- 1 A puppet or mask play with minimum phrases.

### Body arts

- 1 Mime

### Poetic arts:

- 1 A poem of five lines each with the same sentence beginning. I like...I don't like...I used to like...but now I like...

### Three dimensional arts:

- 1 Matchbox with word cards in it.
- 2 Fold paper, for example, A fortune teller.

## Knowing when right and wrong are relevant

We must have clearly signalled times when right and wrong have little or no place in an activity if we are to encourage students and ourselves to be creative.

My publishers never comment on my spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar in my first draft! Furthermore, they never publish a text just because it is perfect in these respects. At the same time they do not want any errors to be found in the text. There is a time and a place for right and wrong in 'real' writing contexts but often not in school contexts. Worrying about right and wrong or conventional acceptability can kill creativity.

My son told me, at the age of eleven, 'There is something you learn at school, the less you do the less mistakes you can make.'

You can apply this to the classroom if, for example, you consider setting two pieces of homework for writing a story. You respond to the first homework in terms of your ability to understand it and whether it is well told and has a fresh quality. You ask the students to spend a second homework improving the text according to your suggestions and then going over one part of it (or the whole lot) and trying to make the text formally accurate.

## Seeing your cup as half full

Is your cup half full or half empty?

Responding positively to life around you is a great encouragement to creativity. It is deflating and/or

irritating to be faced with negativity all the time, however reasonable.

Two examples of how you can apply this to the classroom are:

- Rejoice in achievement and welcome 'failure' as a useful stimulus and guide.
- Rejoice in the advantages of a large class rather than a small class (more interesting dramatized choral work, more examples of individual responses, more experiences to draw on). If you have a class of children who are not great achievers you can rejoice more justifiably in small steps made.

## Further reading

- I am publishing a fuller version of this article on creativity in *HLT, Humanising Language Teaching*. If you want to see this fuller article please see <http://www.hltmag.com.uk>

Alternatively, see my own website: [www.teachertraining.hu](http://www.teachertraining.hu) for this longer article and for other related articles.

- For a range of short activities see: Ur P. & Wright A. (1992) *Five Minute Activities* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- For ideas for the use of stories see: Wright A. (1995) *Storytelling with Children* Oxford: Oxford University Press and Wright A. (1997) *Creating Stories with Children* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- For the wonderful example of creative activities arrived at by creativity see: Davis P. & Rinvolucri M. (1990) *Dictation* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

**Andrew Wright** is an author, illustrator, storyteller and teacher trainer. He has published 'Creating Stories with Children' with Oxford University Press, '1000 Pictures for Teachers to Copy' with Longman and his most recent publication is the third edition of 'Games for Language Learning' published by Cambridge University Press.



Andrew Wright in creative mode