

# Expanding Minds: developing creative thinking in young learners

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## Introduction

Creative thinking skills are essential for success in learning and success in life. Creative thinking involves a range of skills that can be promoted across the curriculum. There is potential for creative thinking in all fields of human activity, and in all lessons. This article offers strategies that can be adapted to enrich teaching in a range of subject areas. It aims show ways to develop children's capacity for original ideas and creative achievement.

## Benefits of creativity

Promoting creative thinking is a powerful way of engaging children with their learning. Children who are encouraged to think creatively show increased levels of motivation and self esteem. Creativity prepares them with the flexible skills they will need to face an uncertain future. Employers want people who are adaptable, innovative, can solve problems and communicate well with others. Developing the capacity to be creative can enrich their lives and help them to contribute to a better society.

## What is creativity?

Creativity is not just about the arts, or particular types of individual. We all have the capacity for creative thinking – for generating and extending ideas, suggesting hypotheses, applying imagination and looking for alternative innovative outcomes in any activity. Creativity means generating outcomes that are original and of value. Originality may be in relation to one's previous experience, to a group or it may be uniquely original. Creative thinking is also about judgement – our ability to judge the value of ideas and outputs.

## What hinders creativity?

Creative children need creative teachers, but there are many blocks to creativity. One block may be defensive teaching. There is little chance for creativity where pupils work for long periods of time with low demand and little active input, or where outcomes are controlled and prescribed, or complex topics taught in superficial ways. Creativity thrives where there is time to explore, experiment and play with ideas. Children need the right conditions for creativity to flourish.

## What classroom activities promote creativity?

Creative thinking is shown when children generate ideas, show imagination and originality, and can judge the value of what they have done. What promotes creativity is a questioning classroom, where teachers and pupils value diversity, ask unusual and challenging questions; make new connections; represent ideas in different ways – visually, physically and verbally; try fresh approaches and solutions

to problems; and critically evaluate new ideas and actions.

Here are some classroom activities to encourage creativity with words, objects and pictures.

### 1. The 'Connect' game

Creativity begins with generating ideas, speculating and creating new associations. As a warm-up or focusing activity play 'Connect'. Ask a student to suggest a word. You say a word that is related to that word e.g. if the word is 'football' you might say 'goal'. The next child then says a word connected with the previous word e.g. 'goal', 'net' and so on. Players take turns. They are allowed thinking time, but can be challenged by any other player to explain the connection between their word and the previous word.

(For a harder version of this game see 'Random Words' in Fisher, R. Games for Thinking)

### 2. Mystery objects

Creativity involves developing ideas through suggesting hypotheses ('What if ...?') and applying imagination. This activity encourages children to develop ideas that are original and have a purpose, which is to improve or add value to something. It encourages children to ask themselves the creative question: 'How can this be improved?'

Show a box that contains an unfamiliar or interesting 'mystery object' (or a picture of an object). Without showing or saying what it is, describe the object's appearance (or ask a child to). Ask children to try to visualize what is described, to hypothesise what it might be and then ask questions to try to identify the object. The child who identifies the object must also describe it. Show the object and ask children to reflect on the description given and their ability to visualize it. Discuss what it was made for, and its possible uses. Ask for suggestions of how it might be improved. Encourage creative suggestions.

Here are some questions for stimulating creative ideas about any topic, grouped under the mnemonic CREATE:

**C**ombine: *Can you add something else to it? Can you combine purposes, ideas?*

**R**earrange: *Can parts of it be moved or changed?*

**E**liminate: *What could you remove or replace – in part or whole? Can it be simplified?*

**A**dapt: *Can it be adapted? What else is this like? What ideas does it suggest?*

**T**ry another use: *Can it be put to other uses – or given a new use if you changed one part?*

**E**xtend: *What could be added - words, pictures, symbols, functions, decoration, logos?*

Children could select or be given one object to study with a partner

1. They think up as many uses as they can for the object.
2. Their ideas are listed and shared with a larger group.
3. They think of ways to change and improve the design or function of one object (using the CREATE questions above)
4. The group assesses what they think is the most original idea.
5. They draw this new object and prepare a presentation to describe or 'sell' it to others.

Children can be invited to assess the value of their own and others' ideas. Questions might include:

- Were any good improvements suggested? Which were the best?
- Did they find it more creative to work on their own, with a partner or a group? Why?
- Is it important to try to improve things? What should be improved? Why?

### 3. Drawing games

Creativity involves expanding existing knowledge. This is done through building on existing ideas or thinking of new ideas. Creative thinking will involve both visual and verbal thinking, children thinking by themselves and with others.

#### Squiggles

Play a drawing game such as 'Squiggles'. Make a squiggle shape on the board (a squiggle is a small mark such as a curve or wavy line). Show how this can be added to make a complete drawing of something. Draw identical squiggles on two halves of the board and invite two children to make them starting points for their own quick drawings. Discuss the creative aspects of each drawing. Children work in pairs at the activity, then display pairs of drawings. Other children must guess what each completed drawing shows.

#### What might the shape be?

Draw a simple shape on the board and ask the children what it might possibly be. Collect their ideas and add some of your own. Ask what might be added to the shape to make it something else – what could we do to change or add to it? Invite children to sketch their own picture of something new by adding to the given shape. Discuss their range of ideas.

#### Circle stories

1. Give children a worksheet of circle shapes. Ask them to draw as many different things as they can by adding details to each circle e.g. face, sun, watch, cobweb etc. Give a strict time limit.
2. In pairs ask children to compare their collection of circle drawings.
3. Children choose and cut out six of their circle drawings. They think of as many connections as they can between each drawing e.g. 'The face is smiling because the watch says it is lunchtime and at this time the spider is weaving a web ...'
4. The children individually, in pairs or small groups create a story incorporating in it as many of the subjects of their circle drawings as possible.

5. They draft these stories, adding details to make them as interesting as possible, using the circle drawings as illustrations.
6. The stories are presented and discussed.

(See Fisher R. *Games for Thinking* for more drawing games to encourage creativity).

### Teaching strategies to support creative thinking across the curriculum

Any lesson can develop creative thinking if it involves pupils generating and extending ideas, suggesting hypotheses, applying imagination and finding new or innovative outcomes. Try to include opportunities for creativity in the lessons you teach. Look for evidence of pupils':

- using imagination
- generating questions, ideas and outcomes
- experimenting with alternatives
- being original
- expanding on what they know or say
- exercising their judgement

The following are some strategies can be applied to a wide range of curriculum areas:

#### Use imagination

Think of new ideas, speculate on what might be possible and apply imagination to improve outcomes.

Question cues:

- *What might happen if ... (if not)?*
- *Can you imagine ...*
- *Suggest an improvement on ...*

#### Generate more ideas

Generate many responses, encourage thinking of alternatives and the asking of questions.

Question cues:

- *How many kinds of ... can you think of?*
- *List all ... that could be used for ...?*
- *What questions could you could ask?*

#### Experiment with alternatives

Be willing to change one's initial ideas, see things another way, experiment with alternative approaches.

Question cues:

- *How else might you ...?*
- *Think of five ways of/questions to ask about/ reasons for ....*
- *List ten things you could do with ... (a shape, picture, object, photo, story etc.)*

#### Be original

Think of novel ideas, unique solutions, and design original plans

Question cues:

- *Design a game for ...*
- *Invent a way to ...*
- *Think of a way to improve ... (an object, game, story, plan etc.)*

## Expand on what you do and know

Elaborate on what you know, build on a given situation, make it more interesting.

Question cues:

- *What might we add ...* (e.g. to a word, phrase, sentence, story, picture, design)
- *What might we change ...* (e.g. to make it different, more interesting)
- *What is another way to ...* (eg solve problem, investigate a mystery)

## Exercise your judgement

Assess what we have thought/done, evaluate the process and judge the outcome.

Question cues:

- *What criteria should we use to judge whether ...?*
- *What is good/could be improved/is interesting about ....*
- *What could/should you/we do next ...?*

Creativity cannot be left to chance, it must be valued, encouraged and expected - and seen as essential to all teaching and learning. So get creative – and enjoy it!

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