Fostering Creativity for Leadership and Leading Change

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Creativity is about more than imagining or making something that has not previously existed. Although most of us perceive creativity actualized as creation, creativity is really a much broader concept—it is that force in each of us that begins with a yearning to answer an unanswered (or ill-answered) question by imagining more than one correct new answer. Being comprehensively creative then concludes when an answer is realized. Often this concluded answer has to do with changing something that was true before we thought and acted creatively, in order to make a new or additional truth. In such cases, being creative is most fundamentally about advancing change in or about something. This paper examines the differences between imagining, thinking, and acting creatively and about how each is related to leadership and change.

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Creativity, Change, and Leadership

Often this answer has to do with changing something that was true before we thought and acted creatively to make a new or additional truth. In such cases, being creative is fundamentally about advancing change in or about something. This something is often a status quo, although it can sometimes be a reality that never before existed and, indeed, can be manifest as a creation.

Whether or not a need for change inspires our creative thinking, I believe that creativity and change are inexplicably linked, because a shared aspect of humanity that motivates change and inspires creativity is imagination. Although the actualizations of a developed imagination are manifold in our lives and may at first seem to provide no similar application between creativity and change that is any more relevant to a conversation about creativity than other uses of imagination, I contend that when we contemplate change, we employ our imagination similar to how we approach a need or desire to be creative. It is through a significant act of leadership that we execute a creative act.

Leaders are people who ignite change—and by change, I do not mean the typical “something new” definition, but, instead, something that propels existing goals and actions to realization. Experts on effecting change claim that groups of people who desire change must coalesce around a common vision of how something should look after change, even if the details of the change are not fixed or universally understood and accepted. Leaders catalyze this coalescence of common vision. They do so by approaching, in a creative way, the tasks that require reevaluation. A full approach to this reevaluation means both thinking and acting creatively.

Thinking, Acting, and Leading Creatively

Although I have previously alluded to this difference, it is now necessary to draw a distinction between thinking and acting creatively. Thinking creatively is about imagining answers to an unanswered question and testing them intellectually. Acting, or behaving, creatively is about realizing an imagined answer in the real world. These two different processes are both creative and necessary for a full realization.
of creativity. Thinking creatively always requires a person to exercise his or her imagination. Acting or behaving creatively can require this too. But behaving creatively is about more than inciting imagination: it is also about the execution of wisdom, experience, courage, and other leadership qualities that may be necessary if the creative act stalls along its way or does not yield an expected result.

Like creativity, effecting change also requires beginning with a yearning to answer that unanswered question by imagining a variety of possible solutions. Not all questions or problems have more than one answer, and not all require much thought to arrive at the one correct answer, when one exists. In the pursuit of change, however, it is helpful to approach obstacles with a diverse set of possibilities for removing them. This approach is especially helpful when, as previously said, the details of how something will appear after it has been changed are unknown and obstacles are encountered along the way. In short, imagining change requires creative thought and leading change requires creative behavior.

The greatest leaders are leaders who are excellent creative thinkers, developed either naturally or through a history of focused work, or both. Many seem to have needed to work hard at behaving creatively. These leaders have mitigated the risk that comes with imagining a solution to an extraordinary or untested dilemma and then have determined that action is better than inaction. They are good at using creative thought or complexes of thoughts and feelings to imagine and decide how some question should be answered. But it is not always easy for them to figure out how best to implement that answer—how to advance creative thought into creative action. Many great leaders struggle with behaving creatively, even if they are gifted at thinking creatively. This is perhaps because leaders can control how their imagination dreams and nurtures a creative thought, but they often cannot control the environment in which a creative act comes to fruition from a creative thought.

Creative leaders believe that the best answers to questions may come from other people too. I have stressed the necessity that great leaders be good creative thinkers, but great creative leaders both inspire and depend on others to think and behave creatively as well. The results of most creative action and change emerge from a diverse collection of individuals thinking and acting creatively.

**EDUCATING CREATIVE THOUGHT**

Why is it necessary for us to stimulate creative thought and action in our students that helps them realize their potential capacity for leadership through creativity? And how can we as teachers meet this challenge?

Providing tools to our students to help them think and act creatively is essential for the advancement of a civil society. We teachers today, our mentors, and our mentors’ mentors have most often done this informally or have hoped and expected that our students would learn the skills of thinking and acting creatively on their own after we taught them the facts of professional and civic life. But a focused effort to help tomorrow’s leaders learn not just facts, but also the skills to advance society by, for example, producing more sustainably productive, healthy, and safe neighborhoods and communities, must be a greater part of our daily endeavor as twenty-first-century educators. This effort is necessary because the nature of human civilization today is changing more quickly than our educational methodologies—more and more, we prepare students who must function fully in a world where understandings and expectations morph more quickly than the student’s ability to comprehend them, much less to react and adapt to them. Our civilization’s public health, economic stability, and sustained peace most often break down in those places where creatively thinking and behaving leaders are not functioning or have not emerged. Education must help prepare leaders who can imagine and lead change. Never has the demand that we teach how to fish rather than what to do with a fish been more important.

Teaching a student how to imagine an answer to an unanswered or ill-answered question—that is, to think creatively—is perhaps the most efficacious way to provide him or her with the comprehension tools and skills necessary to lead societal change rather than simply react and adapt to it. Many of these tools are reflected in the models of good creative leaders mentioned. Gary A. Davis, in his seminal 1983 book on creative thought, *Creativity is Forever*, presents seventy exercises for helping students of all ages to unlock the power of their imagination to consider alternatives to the obvious when encountering a situation that requires a creative need or desire. Davis also includes dozens of habits students can develop to help them look at, listen to, and contemplate all sorts of stimuli through a new sensory lens, imagining new ways to observe and observing new ways to imagine.

Davis inspires all creative thinkers to pursue creative acts and be sensitive to and patient with the creative thoughts of others—after an instructional experience with Davis, one is left with the unmistakable premise that there is no such thing as a bad creative thought, only those that might not be as applicable as others to successful creative action. *Creativity Forever* is only one approach, but it synthesizes a great deal of meaningful research on creative thinking into a useful, almost textbook context—it is a great tool for developing students into tomorrow’s creative leaders.

If we are successful at preparing students who think creatively and use their imaginations to dream up solutions to problems, then the next task is to provide them with space to nurture and advance these creative thoughts to develop experience with making a case for their creative thoughts and building those thoughts into IDEAS—the first step to learning how to translate creative thought into creative action. We can do this by adapting courses, labs, or rehearsals, in the
case of music, to provide more time for student reflection and explanation. We can assign students tasks that require them to learn how to use language and other means of communication, as well as their preoccupations with the force of digital technology to reveal their creative thoughts to others. Traditional and emerging writing programs across the curriculum accomplish this in part. American higher education’s current enthusiasm in providing service learning and community engagement opportunities to students to teach them to envision and plan how to connect to others is one example. Secondary school districts around the nation are increasingly embracing similar civic engagement principles in the missions of their charter or magnet schools. Processes such as these transform creative thoughts into ideas.

EDUCATING CREATIVE BEHAVIOR

Once we have provided students opportunities to develop their own creative thoughts into ideas, they are on their way to becoming good creative leaders. But they must also learn the principles of behaving creatively. Manifesting thought or feeling into meaningful action is one of the most important learning experiences that students can have in secondary school and college. Educationally, teachers and professors are more engaged with this process than with any other. Transforming the ability to think creatively into the ability to act creatively requires an enormous amount of patience from all segments of an educational institution, such as faculty, administration, other students, parents, and alumni, because the school is one place where the proverbial “opportunity to fail” is paramount in the learning process.

Any time that we encourage a creative thinker with well-formulated ideas to behave creatively and bring his or her idea to fruition, it is necessary for them to witness the whole range of ramifications that such fruition invariably produces. The many stains on the floors of chemistry labs, shredded outlines for sociopolitical debates, and recordings of mediocre improvised jazz solos on high school and college campuses are evidence of the trials required for creative students to begin to act like creative leaders. If preparing good creative thinkers requires school teachers and professors to provide students with some room and time for experimenting with transforming creative thoughts into ideas, then secondary and university faculty must also devote ample time to allowing students to turn creative ideas into creative action.

In an effort to assist teachers and schools to more fully envision and implement student learning habits that yield creative thinking and behaving, I offer the following recommendations:

1. **Teacher preparation.** Teacher preparation programs should feature curricula and experiences that foster work and study environments that are infused with creative thought and action. Institutions in which a culture of creative thinking and behaving is prevalent are most likely to prepare good teachers of creativity.

2. **Evaluation.** Higher education institutions that conduct research on creative thought and behavior should bring together a variety of disciplinary resources to develop and test teaching examples that shape creative understanding and capability in students of various ages. These examples should be available for use in arts classes, as well as other classes and subjects, and should influence decisions regarding the use of examples in learning situations.

3. **Research.** Research efforts in the psychology of arts teaching should provide ongoing study and publication of the kinds of arts experiences, instruction, and study that do the most to build student creative capacity and best help students to learn to think and act creatively.

4. **Policy.** Conceptual attention leading to wise policy recommendations on creativity is essential. Attention should be concentrated on keeping the creative, creative. It should also emphasize that current interest in the study of creativity must not become the occasion for creating standardized methodologies for the teaching of creativity that do not, themselves, embody a creative model. How can policymakers and creativity experts help teachers learn creative techniques without allowing the techniques themselves to become the focus?

In the end, the most significant skills that a leader can possess are the ability to think creatively and inspire creativity in others. It is through gaining these skills that leaders learn the wisdom, gain the experience, earn the confidence, and embrace the courage that it takes to behave creatively and lead creative actions for the betterment of society. Sound educational policy reflects these principles and fosters modes of learning that make such societal benefits possible.

REFERENCES
