

Integrating and Sustaining Creativity in the Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract: This essay examines the significance of integrating creativity in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom by exploring the beneficial effects that nurturing creativity has on students. Based on theories and research on creativity and the learning experience, it proposes that students have an opportunity to enhance their personal and academic skills if teachers properly integrate creative activities into the classroom. Creative opportunities need to be encouraged and integrated regularly within the ELA classroom, as it is important to students' overall success in achieving higher-order levels of thinking. However, for students to both engage in creative activities and also believe in their creative abilities, their teachers must actively foster their belief in their own abilities and offer them opportunities to be creative.

Introduction

Creativity is the air that breathes life into any great classroom. It energizes students in such a way that the learning environment is enhanced through an excitement to engage with the material and their peers. However, many English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms don't regularly incorporate creative activities into their learning activities, thus limiting student growth and their development of higher-order thinking skills. As a result, students miss the unique opportunity to explore different viewpoints, explore unconventional styles of writing, and participate in multiple styles of learning. It is the obligation of teachers to strive for their students to not only know "the facts," but more importantly, for them to discover hidden meanings and truths in classrooms that promote exploration through creativity. By understanding what creativity is and why it is important in the classroom, as well as how teachers can integrate and sustain creative strategies within the classroom, teachers will be better equipped to foster a more successful learning environment, and even to better prepare their students to meet the standards of our increasingly outcome-focused educational system.

What is Creativity?

Across the educational world, there is no single, universal definition of creativity. This poses a problem for teachers, because how can they integrate and sustain creativity in their classrooms if they do not fully understand what creativity is? According to Lucas, Claxon and Spencer (2013), "If creativity is to be taken more seriously by educators and educational policy-makers then we need to be clearer about what it is" (p. 6). An increased understanding of creativity is the starting point to increase creativity consciousness, to demystify creativity, and to increase creative ideas and products (Davis, 1991).

A number of theorists have developed working definitions throughout the last 20 years to ensure clarity and credibility. For example, Richards (2013) defines creativity as, “having a number of different dimensions,” including:

- 1) the ability to solve problems in original and valuable ways that are relevant to goals;
- 2) seeing new meanings and relationships in things and making connections;
- 3) having original and imaginative thoughts and ideas about something; and
- 4) using the imagination and past experience to create new learning possibilities. between letters and sounds” (p. 3)

Furthermore, other theorists and researchers have created working definitions of creativity that include the following elements. In these definitions, creativity is:

- 1) Complex and multi-faceted, occurring in all domains of life (Treffinger, Young, Selby, & Shepardson, 2002);
- 2) learnable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996);
- 3) central to what it is to be successful today (Sternberg, 1996); and
- 4) strongly influenced by context and by social factors (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

While creativity is interpreted in multiple ways, and has several facets, all of the researchers cited above agree that creativity is profoundly influential and important. They argue that nurturing their creativity prepares students for many and varied possibilities in life. In particular, creative activities allow students to see and consider different perspectives that they might not have considered before. They offer students opportunities to analyze complex situations and choices either individually or collaboratively. And they give students opportunities to freely experience a journey of self-exploration which can help them shape their own identities. In fact, I see this final task as the central goal of fostering creativity in the classroom, which I define as challenging students to transcend traditional rules and patterns in pursuit of new, individually meaningful interpretation. If we wish to help our students make their way in a world that will offer them this challenge on a daily basis, it must be a priority for the educational system to help our students develop creative approaches which they can use to engage with that world.

Why is Creativity Important?

Creativity is important because it sparks the minds of students to find their purpose and passions in life. It evokes higher cognitive-thinking skills that elicits a broad spectrum of perspectives and develops a platform for more integrated learning. In fact, the most recent version of Bloom’s Taxonomy states that producing new and original work, or “creating,” is itself the highest cognitive process. As teachers, it is our job to incorporate all levels of critical thinking throughout our instruction so that students are able to develop higher-level thinking skills.

However, in order to challenge and advance the skills of students, teachers must move away from the lower-level thinking skills that much of the school day focuses on, and must focus more on the higher-levels of critical thinking, particularly as students make their way up the educational ladder. Due to the pressure of state-mandated testing and the focus on meeting the education system's standards, teachers too often rely on "textbook teaching." In other words, teachers often focus on simply teaching from textbooks and worksheets, no matter what age group or class they are working with, rather than deploying other instructional methods. Yet ironically, such "textbook teaching" does less to prepare our students both to meet standards and to function in the world. No two classes are the same, and it is the responsibility of teachers to mold their classrooms into learning environments that are suitable for the students in each class in order to achieve the standards. The standards remain the same, but the conditions and strategies to achieving those standards are malleable. Therefore, "creative" or "ambitious" teaching strategies are more likely going to result in the students meeting the necessary requirements to advance.

Creativity in the ELA classroom needs to be recognized as not a distraction, but a form of higher-level thinking. Once this insight is translated from the educational research into the real world, there is room to increase student success and student learning. Specifically in regards to an ELA classroom, where knowledge and ideas are not always "black and white," creative activities offer a sense of fluidity and flexibility that should be not only welcomed but also encouraged and considered essential. Creative, open-ended activities must be central to this content area because they allow for a range of different choices for students to make, encouraging divergent thinking and opening up a wider range of reading, writing, and speaking opportunities to our students (Avila, 2015).

How Can ELA Teachers Integrate and Sustain Creativity?

In order to successfully encourage and nurture student creativity, teachers must begin by demonstrating creative behaviors and offering their students the opportunity to be creative. If it is our goal to have students participate, engage, and excel in creativity in the classroom, doing so begins with the teachers' personal actions and demeanor toward the students. According to Fasko (2001), "When students understand that their teachers 'value' creativity, then this message has a positive effect on creativity" (p. 323). Ultimately, teachers who enable and encourage creative thinking and behavior in the classroom create positive perceptions among students and their abilities to be creative in the ELA classroom.

This can be challenging, particularly at first. For example, when I introduced creative activities into a classroom that had been solely focused on textbook learning, I was in sheer disbelief when one of my students asked me if they could simply complete a worksheet instead. The rest of the class responded to this request with cheering, chanting, and agreement—the unanimous opinion of the class was that they would prefer things remain as they had been. I felt myself second-guessing, questioning the assignment, wondering to myself if it might be too difficult for them. Then again, I knew I had to at least give it a try; nothing had ever been done like this in this classroom before – Since when are worksheets considered a great

method for demonstrating knowledge in a ninth grade English classroom? Did my students just expect me to have them sit down in with a partner and let them answer insignificant questions that required little to no higher-order thinking? Of course they did; that's what they were used to prior to coming to high school. In response to my students, I answered them with a simple yet gentle "absolutely not."

Sure enough, that day was the first time that I saw my students smiling, laughing, and expressing excitement while completing an assignment. From that day on that I knew that I had to make a promise to not only these students, but also to myself as their teacher to ensure this kind of response every single day in English classroom. All I needed to do was integrate one simple ingredient into the mixture: creativity.

One example of a way to integrate creativity into ELA classrooms is through creative writing. Creative writing provides opportunities for students to explore different kinds of writing, while still incorporating critical thinking skills. It also "promotes teamwork and peer editing," and "gives students liberty of expression, interest, and purpose in the course of work" (Avila, 2015, p. 98). Writing is a requirement at every grade level of students' academic journeys, and does not need to be limited to only essay writing, argumentative writing, and analysis. Rather, it can also be used to foster artistic expression, stimulate the imagination, clarify thinking, and explore the value of writing and its range of functions.

Research shows that ELA teachers recognize the value and importance of creative writing in their classrooms, as well as the importance of allowing students some freedom to be creative in discussion. For example, Adam (2015) surveyed a group of 50 ELA teachers, asking them to rank statements regarding their opinions on creative writing in the classroom. The questions were centered around if and how creative writing can be developed in the classroom for students through various activities and approaches. The following table displays the results from this empirical study, showing that a majority of the ELA teachers either strongly agreed or agreed on all five statements about how creative writing is an essential tool to use in the English classroom. This study confirmed that teachers understand how creative writing in the ELA classroom enhances students' skills as well as helping them develop their imagination, and higher-order thinking.

As Adam's (2015) study suggests, discussion offers another space for creativity in the ELA classroom. An example of a way to integrate creative thinking in ELA discussions is through the use of Socratic seminars. Named after the philosopher Socrates because of his belief in open-ended inquiry and the power of asking questions and voicing a variety of opinions through discussion, Socratic seminars focus not on arriving at correct answers but on letting conversations flow among and between students with little control exerted by the teacher. For this reason such seminars evoke creativity among students as the open-ended nature of the discussion allows them the freedom to express a range of ideas without being told they are "wrong," and consequently helps them to develop a sense of identity within the classroom.

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Table 1

Teachers' beliefs about creativity.

Statements	Percentage				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Class discussion is a good method for developing topics for creative writing	64	18	16	2	0
It is important to ask students to write short stories and poems	34	46	16	4	0
Creative writing assignments are essential for teaching literature	22	60	14	4	0
Creative writing workshops allow students to write freely	36	48	14	2	0
Asking students to write freely during literature courses improves creative writing	60	34	6	0	0

Note: Adapted from Adams, 2015, p. 113

Research conducted by Copeland (2005) makes clear the benefits of Socratic circles and their connection with creative thought. According to Copeland, such seminars are effective at stimulating creative and higher-order thinking because they “help our students see that all thinking is flawed and incomplete, that all ideas can be furthered developed and better explained, and that questioning helps us explore these realities” (p. 8). For example, the scenario below shows how a teacher might introduce a Socratic seminar.

A teacher's introduction to a Socratic seminar.

*Now that we have finished the novel, *Animal Farm*, you all will be facilitating and participating in a Socratic seminar today to discuss key concepts, issues, and themes that arose while reading. As always, the first half of class is dedicated to this group of students discussing in the inner circle, and in the second half of class the groups will switch. Remember that when you are in the inner circle, it is important to recognize that this is not a debate, but rather a discussion. You all at some point may disagree with one of your classmates, but it's important to keep this a civil conversation. As you know, when you are not in the inner circle you are in the outer circle. The outer circle students are responsible for commenting on the discussion that is taking place within the inner circle. But instead of commenting on paper, you are commenting virtually through the classroom website. Outer-circle comments will be projected onto the white board at the front; that way the entire class can see what the comments say, especially the inner circle, and can use them to carry the conversation forward. Also remember to include specific examples, including quotations*

While these methods of integration may work in the short-term, creativity must become fully a part of a classroom culture that is sustained over time. Embracing and fostering divergent thinking – in reading, writing, speaking and listening – is

a way of thinking that inspires students to incorporate it both inside and outside the classroom, which broadens their perspectives and increases their learning. In turn, students will then be emboldened to do the same, and to bring their outside experiences into the classroom, thus increasing creative participation that is relevant to them. When this occurs, students then feel a sense of responsibility and engagement to the classroom material because they were the ones who brought to the conversation. The teacher's job becomes facilitating the conversation in a way that integrates the course material and constantly assessing how the classroom responds to different methods of integration. By doing so, the teacher will have developed an environment where creativity is an integral part of the students' identities, and planted the roots of a lifelong learning skill.

Conclusion

Creative opportunities need to be encouraged and integrated regularly within ELA classrooms as they are important to students' overall success in mastering higher-order thinking. According to Avila (2015), "English teachers can use their creativity to make classes much more original, and go outside the formal bonds of teaching" (p. 95). It is our responsibility as teachers to foster this creativity by being the creative spark for our students, integrating creative writing and Socratic seminars, and molding an environment where students are challenged to engage in the highest forms of critical thinking. As a result, students will develop a lifelong learning skill that will transcend traditional rules and patterns and allow them to creating new, meaningful connections, interpretations, and even identities for themselves.

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Morgan Batanian received a Masters of Education from University of Toledo and a Bachelor of Arts & Sciences in Journalism from University of Cincinnati. Her goal is to spark the minds of students to help them find their purpose in life. She teaches English at St. Ursula Academy in Toledo.