The Creativity Transformation

Inside (Click to Go!)

- The Creativity Transformation: Part 1, p. 2
- How to Teach Proofing Skills, p. 3
- How to Make Videos Active Learning, p. 3
- Reenactment is Out-of-Time, Visceral Learning, p. 3
- Critical Thinking, Writing and Cut-Outs, p. 4
- Are You an Easy ‘A’?, p. 5
- The Trade-Show Tactic, p. 6
- Out-Of-Class Help: What Students Want, p. 7
- Essential Relationships: Learning Outside the Box, p. 8
The Creativity Transformation: Part 1

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You are playing a crucial role in the future of this country and even world development. Why? Almost every aspect of our lives today is built upon a global scaffold of innovative ideas generated by generations of imaginative, creative, problem-solving people.

Today, while our attention is focused by politicians and the news media on the war on terrorism, the United States seems headed for a potentially severe, long-term socioeconomic problem: educating enough creative individuals to keep economic progress going at a rate that can continue to improve the standard of living for all.

The baby boomers who went to college in droves in the 1960s and believed steadfastly in the value of improvement, innovation, and change have fueled spectacular economic and technologic growth. But they are getting ready to exit the workforce.

Unfortunately, this phase of a major demographic cycle is occurring as the pool of creative talent choosing to immigrate to America is beginning to rapidly dry up under new, more restrictive immigration policies.

According to a March 2, 2004 news release from the Council of Graduate Schools, “Total international applications in the responding graduate schools for Fall 2004 declined 32% from Fall 2003.” (This news bulletin is available in Adobe Acrobat, PDF format at: <www.cgsnet.org/pdf/CGS_PR_IntlSurvey.pdf>.)

Does the worker shortage only pertain to high-tech industries? Definitely not. Take a few moments to scan the Web with, for example, a Google search for “worker shortage” references; you will find that industries from technology to health to housing are being affected.

For example, in an April 23 story (“Construction Industry Braces for Long-term Labor Shortage”) the Sacramento Business Journal reported that “the [housing] industry employed 6.7 million workers in 2001 and an additional 1.5 million are needed by 2010 just to sustain productivity” (retrieved from <www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/stories/2004/04/26/focus7.html>).

In the high-tech arena, the United States is now losing some of its best and the brightest researchers to other countries, according to Richard Flora in his article “America’s Looming Creativity Crisis” in Harvard Business Review.

Therefore, a real threat to long-term homeland security and attaining a more livable, creative society and economy is mediocrity in education. By mediocrity, I mean a failure to go beyond content mastery, beyond critical thinking, to developing the skills necessary for the creative application of knowledge to new issues and problems that will constantly present themselves in an increasingly complex world. With graduates joining the workforce today likely to have a dozen different jobs and multiple separate careers during their lifetime, yesterday’s educational goals don’t suffice.

Therefore I’ve prepared a series of articles on the topic of teaching for creativity outcomes that are crucial for today’s students who must cope with the complex demands of their professional and personal lives in the early and middle twenty-first century.

The job of teaching for such an outcome is not easy, and going down this road demands desire, openness, enthusiasm, persistence, experimentation, evaluation, and a commitment to continued professional growth. When traveling such a difficult road you need support and encouragement. Teaching For Success is the place to find both. It’s designed to provide the cognitive nutrients necessary to sustain unceasing growth for both part- and full-time faculty. Its program of critical-success-factor skill development, 80-20 thinking, PIE-R® instructional design model, and practical QuickTips and SuperIdeas from colleagues is an amalgam of world-class success principles distilled to their essence to help you reach your instructional goals.

In this series over the next several issues, I’ll discuss ways to increase your effectiveness and maintain your teaching skills at the highest levels needed to nurture and transform students into creative individuals. It’s not an easy instructional path, but it’s an important one.

Clarity of Purpose

I place definiteness of purpose in the number-one position among the requirements for good teaching, because all else flows from purpose. It’s the core concept that remains uppermost in your hierarchy of teaching values and drives your instructional decisions. It should be the reason that you consciously choose to do more of one thing and less of another in your class.

Do you know exactly what you are trying to achieve in each and every class meeting or online session this term? Are you sticking unerringly to this purpose throughout the term? What is your purpose? Can you articulate it concisely to a colleague, student, or administrator? Might your purpose be to cover the chapter, prepare students for the next test, or change in your students as they absorb, own, and apply the subject you teach?

Your entire teaching approach depends on having absolute clarity of purpose. When you know and believe strongly in your purpose, you can teach from the inside out. You transform yourself from a PowerPoint slide changer to an instructional force, an educational leader, one who achieves outcomes that are consistent with an ultimate purpose, the beliefs of their inner being, and the needs of the country.
How to Teach Proofreading Skills

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When I teach proofreading skills, two distinct kinds of students emerge. The first group is the “Over-users.” These students learn the rules for comma use, for example, and go crazy; suddenly, commas appear everywhere. The second group is the “Oh, yeah” group. They study a rule; practice it in class; then, promptly forget to use it. When you point out their error, they respond with, “Oh yeah, I remember that now.”

To motivate these two groups to learn to proofread, I use a Two E’s approach: start Easy and Encourage often along the way.

To start easy, begin with a short paragraph. Retype it to include five underlined errors. Then list the errors at the bottom of the page, and ask students to match the error to the underlined word. Next, increase the task complexity by removing the list of errors. Now, replace the list with some hints. For example announce, “In this paragraph are three comma-use mistakes and two agreement errors.”

Eventually, you will want to have a paragraph with no hints and no underlined words. To encourage students, I give them their own piece of writing from earlier in the semester to proofread to illustrate their progress and show the value of proofreading. The ultimate goal, of course, is to get students to proofread their own work before they hand it in. Teaching students to proofread takes effort, but it’s well worth it.

How to Make Videos Active Learning

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College students are adult learners, and they are motivated to learn when a variety of teaching methods are used, especially those that keep them thoughtfully active.

A three-hour lecture-presentation session may include class discussion, case studies, a guest speaker, CD-ROM clips, question-and-answer activities, and videotapes. I may discuss a new concept and follow it with a case study or video. Students sometimes complain that videos make them sleepy and they have trouble paying attention because of the darkened room, so I prepare questions for the students to answer on paper while they are viewing the video.

The number of questions is based on the length of the video, and I make sure to have a variety of questions covering important information throughout the film. Following the video, we discuss the answers as a class, and I assign points for completing the assignment. This assignment helps students extract the important information from the film. Furthermore, they use it as a study aid for exams. It also keeps them focused on the content of the video.

I have received positive comments from students when I use this format. Students actively participate in their learning, and rather than trying to take notes as they view the film, they have a study guide highlighting the important information.

Reenactment Is Out-of-Time, Visceral Learning

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Students in my Early American History class are encouraged to attend the annual reenactment of the War of 1812 Battle of Mississinewa (held each fall near Jalapa, Indiana) to gain visceral knowledge of the feeling and flavor of that age.

A wide variety of learning experiences awaits students; there are battle reenactments, foods to taste, duels to witness, and other contests to savor. Opportunities also exist for students to speak with the actors. These actors accurately portray life in 1812, so students become immersed in the era’s politics and daily life.

Students return from this experience saying they know and appreciate so much more about this time period than they would have if they had only been only exposed to book learning. Many say they will return again the following year.

Attendance at the reenactment is built in as part of the grading points for the course. Alternate activities are provided for students who cannot attend. Points are allotted if the student returns with the event ticket stub; they also do a write-up of their experiences.

This period of history is hard to appreciate today, so students must also examine a primary-source document. They may do this in one of two ways: students may bring in a document or artifact dating from the Civil War or earlier, or they may research a primary-source document on the Internet. In either case, a two-page paper and class presentation is required.
Critical Thinking, Writing and Cut-Outs

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With a continuing emphasis on writing across the curriculum comes many challenges to create meaningful writing assignments. An over-reliance on textbook-generated writing assignments is not only not appealing to students, they have often become numb to the prescriptive nature of these questions or prompts. How many questions like these does it take to stultify original thought?—Do you agree with the idea presented in the chapter? Why or why not?—probably not many!

My solution is cut-out sheets. Cut-out sheets, in essence, are a collection of words and phrases that you cut out of magazines and randomly paste on a sheet of paper. The words should center on a main idea, unit of study, or particular text that can range from the French Revolution to Great Expectations to the environment.

The idea is simple: collect words and phrases related to any topic or area of study that will motivate students to write insightful and interpretive responses. Furthermore, you can keep these word montages on file to use with future classes or share them with other instructors.

As an alternative to a steady diet of teacher-generated question-and-answer assignments, cut-outs offer a refreshing change. The visual presentation appeals to students, and they react favorably to an assignment with so many options.

Cut-outs produce the following benefits:

- Students think and write critically.
- Learners naturally progress from concrete to more abstract interpretations.
- They have a choice of cognitive levels.
- Possibilities for divergent thought are increased.
- Students see language and words as having meaningful connections.
- Cut-out sheets are easily constructed for any topic or area of study.
- They stimulate students to produce diverse and insightful writing.

Here are several adaptations for variety:

- Have students bring in several cut-out sheets for a homework assignment.
- Use several cut-outs as a test section.
- Collect single cut-outs related to a lesson or topic and distribute one to each student as a journal prompt.
- Have collaborative groups of students create cut-out journals with a particular focus (a single character, a specific event, a singular concept, etc.).

Design a cut-out sheet as a precursor to a textbook assignment.
Adapt a cut-out sheet to function as a review before a test.
Display cut-outs that have elicited interesting or contradictory responses.
Create a file of general topic cut-outs on 3 x 5 cards to use as writing prompts.

Below is a sample cut-out sheet related to Lord of the Flies.
Are You an Easy 'A'? Technology Is Watching

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Your students study hard, take good notes and have a success-centered mindset. Many deservedly earn the grade of A. But what about the others? They finish the course and knock off the bubble-sheet evaluation form, probably in less than a minute.

By the time a course ends, their opinions are more than clear; they have solid impressions of you as both a person and an instructor. MIT publishes a Course Evaluation Guide that features student comments from professor evaluations; in 1991, one student wrote, “He teaches like Speedy Gonzalez on a caffeine high.” Judgment becomes a requirement at most colleges and universities, but what do student ratings mean?

Style or Substance?

Many colleges and universities are now enveloped in great controversy between students and staff, as they make student evaluations available online. Some universities ban these sites altogether, in any function or format. The pros and cons are multifaceted, involving issues that range from constitutional privacy rights to big business. They are inherently volatile, and in a campus setting, ripe for public debate. For example, allowing students to complete surveys online and in the privacy of their dorm room may be beneficial for getting more honest ratings, but posting college-wide results online for student perusal is another ball of wax. The results of a 1997 Cornell University study tell their own tale so well. In the experiment, one instructor taught the same course twice. The only difference was staged excitement in the second classroom. Exam outcomes were the same in both groups, but the students in the more exciting atmosphere rated that they learned more, by 25 percent. End analysis found these results to be “more style than substance” related.

Keeping Them Happy

Keeping students happy is one of the most powerful forces on any campus. It is widely reported by the U.S. Department of Education that in American colleges and universities since the year 2000, a whopping 80 percent of final grades are A’s and B’s, up from about 60 percent in the 1960’s.

The number of C’s on transcripts continues to fall. Reasons for the statistical shift are as varied as the issues involved. Cases are made from the historical effects of the war in Vietnam to generalized student and professor laziness!

Of course, budgetary concerns are always in play. Departments have to work harder to make their courses and programs more attractive to students in order to keep both enrollment and budgets up. Let’s face it, published professor evaluations influence registration.

Although the majority of students see the end-of-semester professor evaluations more as tedious institutional paperwork, administrators take them very seriously, and professors should, too. Results are used to determine pay increases, rate teaching methods, and assess a course’s effectiveness. All of these components help administrators and peers decide if you should be tenured or promoted.

Online Resources

The three most popular Web sites for students to locate and compare professor feedback are: pickaprof.com (a for-profit affair), ratemyprofessors.com, and rateaprof.com. All of these sites give students a chance to rate their teachers on the basis of difficulty, helpfulness, and physical appearance, as well as allowing for personal commentary. John Swapceinki’s “pickaprof” site has purportedly logged more than 120,000 student surveys from 2,500 colleges and universities in North America in the last five years. The good news is that approximately 60 percent of them were reported as favorable!

Of course, the results of any traditional college or university’s own surveys would be optimal for all involved, but students obviously view these commercial sites as transparent.

Students become judge and jury when it comes to professor evaluations. It is up to you as the course facilitator to be familiar with the current trends, and to update yourself via the latest online resources. Presenting the end-of-course survey in a serious and professional manner, telling students exactly what you expect of them, should be a high priority.

Remind students that an opinion and instruction survey is their chance to make a positive difference, both in their own education and within the college as a whole. Now, think about your classroom persona; do you choose instructional quality over the quantity of A’s you award?

Even the students of dreaded organic chemistry or calculus classes reward great professors with top evaluations, yet they traditionally score the lowest number of A’s at most universities. Remember, when your students evaluate you, technology is watching.
The Trade-Show Tactic: A Creative Instructional Design

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How about this for creative thinking? In an introductory marketing course a student brings in a new-design bedsheet with one side silk and the other flannel. The idea?—now a couple can communicate their desires by flipping the sheet. In addition, that student provides demographics, costs, and a marketing plan for this new product.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could aid the expression of your students’ creativity while they learn key concepts? We’ve developed a practical solution that avoids the old stand-up-and-show-your-PowerPoint student presentation, and the sheer boredom experienced by the other students forced to participate as the audience.

The Project Dilemma

In an introductory marketing class, students are exposed to a wide variety of marketing concepts. The final project therefore needs to be comprehensive and exciting. For some students, this is their only exposure to marketing; for others it sets the tone for their major. In addition, the students need a way to demonstrate competency to themselves and their instructor.

However, the instructional design team was faced with a few problems trying to meet the above criteria: a class of 24 to 30 students giving individual presentations requires many minutes of class time, and team presentations do not ensure that all students have the same level of competency, especially at the introductory level. The final night of class should pull everything together. In marketing, creativity is valued and writing a paper does not encourage creativity.

A New Approach

The design team (an instructional designer, content expert, and course developer) decided to try a trade-show approach. The trade show runs the last night of class. The students use their creativity and their newfound marketing concepts from class to create a new product or redesign an existing product. The students then present that design at the trade show in the last class to the instructor and their fellow classmates.

They also provide the instructor with a marketing plan that covers the key concepts from the class as applied to their product.

Throughout the class, students are given assignments that address the concepts being discussed in class and are given a chance to present appropriate sections of their papers related to their product to the instructor, who reviews and provides feedback. In this way, the instructor has a good sense of how well the students are learning and applying the key concepts and learns what will be in the final papers.

Learning about Investors

During the class, half the students set up their trade-show displays and the other half are given “dollars” to spend at the show. The students spend the “dollars” on their favorite display. After the instructor has visited all the displays and graded them on their presentation and ideas (and collected the plans), the class takes a break while the students tear down their displays and the other half set theirs up. The process is repeated. The instructor tallies up the “dollars” spent on each display, and the student with the most dollars gets a few extra points on their final score.

Students Like the Idea

So far, the response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. They get excited about their product and enjoy the participation with the dollars. They like the idea of walking around and hearing about all the products. The students enjoy creating the marketing display and developing the plan.

One student likened it to an awesome 7th grade science fair. For the instructors, this project allows them to directly observe the students learning the concepts. In addition, most of the final grading is done in the classroom with the marketing plans reviewed after class.

The Trade Show idea fits very well with the concepts of marketing and provides the student with some real-time rewards. But the best part is that, so far, no student has fallen asleep watching these presentations!
Out-Of-Class Help: What Do Students Want?

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The time spent in a classroom is essential learning time, or it should be. After all, it is important for learners to take notes from lectures, engage in discussions, and interact with peers. All of these activities constitute a worthwhile learning experience, particularly when compared to skipping class.

But what about the time students spend outside of class? When instructors aren’t there to clarify something, or when a student has a concern about an assignment or their grade, the students expect that the instructor will be available on a one-on-one basis.

However, most students realize instructors cannot maintain endless vigilance in an office, waiting for a confused student to wander in. Instructors have responsibilities for other research projects, an extra job, or work at home. So there must be a delicate balance achieved between providing enough time for students to get the help they need and for instructors to have a life.

First, let me mention that as a student, I can appreciate the fact that my instructors don’t always have the time to see me, for many reasons. But by the same token, I don’t always have the time to get the help I need.

No Substitute for Accessibility

For instance, a professor I know set her office hours to a one-and-a-half hour block of time, two days a week. If a student wasn’t able to meet with her at those times, they were unfortunately left in the dark. For a class that met three days a week, she only scheduled three hours a week. Needless to say, many of us felt shortchanged. It seemed to us as though our professor didn’t care enough to make time for her students.

Recognizing that you too have precious little out-of-class time to devote to student help, I have a suggestion: first, allow for special meeting times outside of normal office hours, for those students who can’t make the scheduled times.

Students could approach you on an individual basis and ask for a special meeting time appointment. Appointments minimize the risk of wasting office time waiting for someone to show up, while maximizing accessibility.

Quality Example

Second, office-hour meetings should be spent intelligently clarifying information, demonstrating accessibility, and showing a personal interest in your students.

This is not as easy as it sounds. For example, during an office meeting with another professor, I wished to gain a better understanding of the previous day’s lecture, but this professor seemed uncaring and rather vacant. He virtually repeated himself verbatim from the previous class’s lecture, and couldn’t seem to provide many useful insights. It seemed as if I was simply a part of his class yesterday, but today not a real person sitting in his office asking for help.

To combat a lack of authentic engagement, listen carefully to my specific concerns; feed back what you think I’m asking so the situation is clear. Instead of trying to explain the entire lecture to me again, which may only confuse me further, be a diagnostician and help me discover where the problem lies.

If my professor had listened to my questions and answered them on a personal basis, it would have greatly increased my understanding.

In the hectic, large-lecture classroom a normal rift between students and professors occurs, but during office meetings, the gap should close to become student and mentor working in harmony. If you take a mentor role seriously during one-on-one meeting interactions, this not only helps and guides me in the classroom but also reassures me that you care about my success. That’s what I want!

Become Part of the Solution…

Would you like to become part of a team of thinkers, improvisers, mavericks, innovators and people who care about improving the quality of teaching and learning? TFS seeks to apply success principles from all fields to instructional improvement. We have opportunities for authors, marketing representatives, advisory board members, and institutional liaisons. To apply, contact Jack Shrawder at 800-757-1183, or send an e-mail to t4s@thegrid.net.
Essential Relationships: Learning Outside the Classroom

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As educators, we are charged with the task of training as well as nurturing ethical responsibility for altruism in our students. But how can we achieve this? Classroom activities are important, but taking the classroom into the community is the real answer. This venue encourages a spirit of volunteerism that is particularly beneficial to the human service worker.

How can you establish the essential community relationships needed to make such a program thrive? One successful path incorporates a marketing strategy, targeting local agencies and organizations and making their needs synonymous with your learning plan.

For example, in the Introduction to Human Services class, students with little or no training as professional helpers are required to volunteer their services for a minimum of 10 hours to an organization or agency. Locating this learning opportunity encourages the student to question what his or her areas of interest are and offers the opportunity to find out what the field is really like; organizations know they can count on a college or university to be a source of help for special projects or events. Students sometimes find the area that they thought was of interest to them is not as they had expected. In exchange for providing learning experiences, the local community is receiving valuable labor at no cost. For example, in the period from December 2002 to December 2003, the Human Service program at Ivy Tech State College in Terre Haute, Indiana, donated 7,570 hours of volunteer service to the community. If these hours were calculated at $5.15 per hour (minimum wage), this program alone donated more than $38,985. Armed with these statistics, it’s a simple procedure to market the volunteer or internship program. This relationship benefits not only the specific program, but it’s also a plus to the overall image of the institution as a good neighbor.

More advanced students are required to complete two 160-hour internship placements. In most cases, it’s a simple process to establish relationships with the internship sites by reminding them of the total donation cited above and asking them why they would turn down their portion of such a generous sum!

However, it’s important for you, the instructor, to remember that the internship is a learning environment. It’s for this reason that the intern is to be supervised by an on-site professional, and that regular visits will be made to the site to ensure that the quality of the intern’s experience is above reproach.

An additional aspect is community projects. In addition to human service students, learners from other programs can be encouraged by the lure of extra-credit points to join the ranks of the volunteers.

Many community activities require little or no training for the student to be an asset; in most cases, simple labor is the order of the day.

Helping out at community functions serves several purposes. Primarily, this is great publicity for the college. All organizations of higher learning strive to be an active member of their community, and this places representatives of the college community in an accessible setting.

Next, organizations that benefit from the student labor for a community function are more welcoming of human-service students for the 10-hour volunteer service or even internship site placements.

Perhaps most important is the intrinsic reward the students receive from the experience of volunteerism. Many of the students, especially those who are outside the human service program, have never had the opportunity to volunteer.

Most of these students report being pleasantly surprised when they experience the satisfaction that comes with sharing their talents with others.