

The Quest for Creativity in Schools

By Beth Holland on February 1, 2018 1:42 PM



Few terms in education are as ill-defined as **creativity**. A 2010 report on the study of creativity and innovation in education within European Union (EU) member countries (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka, & Punie, 2010), found that while educators touted *creativity* as a transversal and cross-curricular skill, they struggled to implement new practices, assessments, and technologies to support its development. The authors determined that five factors impacted the potential for educators to help students develop creativity:

1. A clear definition of *creativity*, as applied to curriculum, does not exist.
2. The institutionalization of grades and an exam-based culture prevents forms of assessment that would encourage creativity.
3. Teacher education and professional learning programs rarely provide an adequate foundation for the development of classroom practices that foster student creativity.
4. Digital technologies could serve as an enabler of creativity, but many teachers feel that they neither possess the sufficient capacity nor access to take advantage of these tools.
5. School leaders need to foster a culture that supports creativity in the classroom.

Discussions about the need for student creativity have dominated education conversations since at least the turn of the century. The [Partnership for 21st Century Skills](#) lists *creativity* as one of the critical skills that students should develop alongside critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Educational thought leader, Michael Fullan, promotes *creativity* as a critical global competency. The [2016 Future of Jobs report](#) from the World Economic Forum listed *creativity* as the third most important skill to possess by 2020; and their 2018 report, [Towards a Reskilling Revolution](#), argues that success in the future requires "nothing less than a societal mindset shift for people to become *creative*, curious, agile lifelong learners, comfortable with continuous change" (p. 18).

From this documentation, it appears as though consensus around the need for creativity may exist. However, education as a sector has not yet defined what it might look like in practice -- despite an influx of technologies and devices that purportedly foster creativity. While digital tools may offer a means for expressing creativity, and do present opportunities to design a more creative culture, **creativity** needs to be viewed as a system of change involving cognition, neuroscience, and culture (Cachia et al., 2010).

In their EU report, Cachia et al. (2010) define creativity from a cognitive perspective, describing it as the process of balancing originality and value as well as the skill to make new connections and generate new ideas. On the other hand, according to the field of neuroscience, creativity results from combining convergent and divergent thinking (Gregory, Hardiman, Yarmolinskaya, Rinne, & Limb, 2013). Unfortunately, schools have valued and assessed the former rather than the latter. Within a traditional system, students seek out and produce a single "right" answer. Creativity, however, results from divergent thinking -- taking the domain of knowledge acquired through convergent thinking and then applying it in diverse ways. This formula for creativity, though, brings us back to the challenge of encouraging schools to develop creative culture. To inspire, or "unleash" creativity (Kraft, 2005), requires a social environment that encourages risk taking, time, autonomy, and developmental feedback (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010).

Professor Mitch Resnick from the MIT Media Lab argues that everything we need to know about fostering creativity can be learned from studying kindergarten. Historically, students in kindergarten spend their time iterating through a cycle of imagining, creating, playing, and sharing (Resnick, 2007). Through this cycle, they are encouraged to imagine new concepts, create a physical manifestation, play with their ideas, share their learning with their peers, and then begin again. As young children spiral through this process, they develop as creative thinkers and problem solvers (Resnick, 2007).

Today, apps, devices, and the internet have created unlimited possibilities for imagining, creating, playing, and sharing. If creativity is viewed as a system of change, and not something that should be confined to a single course or project, then we might start to envision an entirely new model for school.

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