



So, You Want to Be More Creative...

3 Principles for Becoming a More Creative Person

by Benjamin Williams

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Perhaps you would like to be a member of an innovative organizational culture, or dream to be an artist. Perhaps you wish to excel at school, or simply wish live a more creative life. At the same time, you may be unsure of what it takes to be creative. Your confusion may be from a number of sources:

1. The word "creativity" in popular culture has, at best, an ambiguous definition
2. No one, not even any psychologist, knows exactly what happens in our minds when we are creative
3. Furthermore, some people just seem to be more creative than others, just because of who they are

From this, you may assume that there is not really anything that you can do to meet your creative goals; but you would be wrong. With the aid of three straightforward principles, you can become the creative person you always hoped you could be.

What is "creativity"?

Creativity has over 60 definitions in contemporary psychological literature (Taylor 1988). Here are but a few:

- "the ability to realize a piece of work that is first to a significant extent new, original and unique and second shows a high degree of success in its field" (Pfeiffer 1979)
- "the process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on; identifying the difficulty; searching for solutions, making guesses, or formulating hypotheses and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results" (Torrance 1967)
- "the process or activity of deliberately concretizing insight" (Götz 1981)

These generally coalesce around the most popular definition of creativity as "original and useful." (Runco 2007)

It is no wonder that there is ambiguity! Over 60 definitions? None of which agree? What exactly is the *pot of gold* at the end of this *rainbow*? Creativity is not

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a new concept, nor should it be treated as one. Where did this all start? What did the word first mean? A look at etymology appears to be in order.

Where did the concept of “creativity” come from?

Not the ancient Greeks—their language did not have a word corresponding to “create” or “creator.”

Not the Romans—their language had “creare” that is similar to “create”, but it really meant “make,” as did “facere.”

It was not until the Christian period that “creatio” came to mean something distinctly different from “facere.” Now, it was an act of God to “create from nothing.”

One more shift came with Baltasar Gracián (1601–1658), who wrote: “Art is the completion of nature, as if it were a *second Creator...*” (Tatarkiewicz 1980) At this time, it became recognized that man, created in God’s image, had a similar capacity to “create.”

So, what does “creativity” really mean?

Creativity is the capacity for, or state of, bringing something into being.

Creativity is “minimally... the capacity for, or state of, bringing something into being.” (Rothenberg and Hausman 1976)

Period.

The rest is merely a matter of trends and fads. Creativity never changes, only society and culture.

So, can everyone be creative?

Take another look at that definition. Do you think you can have that capacity?

- Have you ever written a poem?
- Have you ever found yourself humming in the shower?
- Have you ever come up with an idea on how to make your work easier to accomplish?

The only difference between the “creative” and “uncreative” person is the extent to which they have maximized that potential.

As people made in God’s image, yes! We all have the capacity to be creative. The only difference between the “creative” and “uncreative” person is the extent to which they have maximized that potential.

What does it take to maximize your potential?

From a cognitive viewpoint...

Creativity is NOT intelligence.

The relationship between creativity and intelligence has long been confused. Getzels and Jackson (1962) thought that these were tightly linked processes. It was not until 1965 that Wallach and Kogan proved that to be incorrect. Creativity is not, in fact, linked to intelligence.



Guilford (1950) noted a distinct difference between convergent and divergent-thinking. What is required of a question with one solution? Convergent thinking. This is what is usually tested for intelligence. What about an open-ended task? Divergent thinking. This latter process is not necessarily synonymous with creativity, but at least offers clues to what processes are used in the generation of new thoughts.

Association (Mednick 1962), analogies (Gick & Holyoak 1980; Harrington 1981; Hofstadter 1985), problem solving (Runco 2007), mindfulness and over-inclusive thinking (Langer 1989) are other cognitive processes that can be tested and are potentially useful to creativity, but is this the entire answer? If so, it would seem that there is nothing that can be done to become more creative. Perhaps a different approach would have more to offer...

What about a biological viewpoint?

Heredity determines upper and lower limits for creative development. It's what you do with it that counts.

"Heredity probably does determine limits, both upper and lower, within which development can occur. Experience or learning may have considerable room within which to operate and produce results." (Guilford 1962)

This looks a lot like what was discovered through definitions and etymology: "We all have the capacity to be creative. The only difference between the 'creative' and 'uncreative' person is the extent to which they have maximized that potential."

Guilford continues, "The best working assumption to adopt is that education can do a great deal to promote the development of individuals in the way of preparing them to perform creativity, if not in the way of strengthening their creative abilities."

So what does education have to offer?

"Teachers can support creative talents in various ways" (Runco 2007):

Unconditional Positive Regard (Harrington et al. 1983; Rogers 1995); Modeling Creativity (Belcher 1975; Runco 1991); Valuation (Runco 2007); Encourage: Openness to Ideation (Runco and Basadur 1993; Basadur et al. 2000), Imagery Skills (Finke 1990; Houtz & Frankel 1992), Problem Finding (Wallas 1926; Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels 1971; Reiter-Palmon et al. 1997; Runco 1994), Brainstorming (Runco 2007)

Education merely "supports" creativity.

This does not really solve the problem of becoming more creative. "Support" merely implies assistance. These are not suggestions about what you can *actively* do to become more creative. What activity is it that education is supposed to "support"?

What, then, is the solution?

The way to becoming more creative would be one that:



- Ignite the engine of your natural cognitive processes
- Explores the extent to entirety of your creative capacity
- Establishes supports that will continue to maximize your potential

Principle #1: Make new experiences part of your daily life.

“Openness to Experience” is one of the five factors in the most widely studied personality model by Costa & McCrae (1999). This dimension has been found to be strongly tied to creativity. Helson (1999) labels Openness a “cardinal characteristic” for creativity.

Openness is directly reflected in some of the known cognitive processes related to creativity, such as divergent thinking. It also is a major contributing factor to many of the education techniques used to support creativity:

- Openness to Ideation
- Problem Finding
- Brainstorming

What better way to “ignite your cognitive engine” than to provide the fuel on which it can run?

These new experiences will make it more likely that you are able to make associations, analogies and solve problems. How, for example, can you make an analogy if you do not have anything with which to compare a particular experience? Let’s look at an extraordinary story:

James Watt created his ideas for the steam engine based on analogy to a tea kettle.

In 1941, George de Mestral and his Irish Pointer hunting game birds in the ancient Jura mountains of Switzerland. All day long, he had to pull off sticky cockleburs clinging to the dog’s coat and his own trousers. De Mestral marveled at the tenacity of these hitchhiking seedpods that were difficult to disentangle from animal fur or woolen cloth.

That evening, this Swiss engineer placed a burr under a microscope and was stunned to see that the exterior of the seedpod was covered with masses of tiny hooks that acted like hundreds of grasping hands. De Mestral wondered whether it would be possible to mimic nature and create a fastener for fabric. When he succeeded he gave the creation a memorable name by splicing together the first syllable of two French words: *velour* (velvet) and *crochet* (hook): **Velcro**. (Freeman & Golden 1997)

Although de Mestral was an engineer in his everyday life, he would have likely never created the concept of Velcro were it not for his experience in the Jura mountains.



Principle #2: Practice creating.

If you want to get better at playing the violin, what do you do? Practice. If you want to get better at baseball, what do you do? Practice. If you want to get better at cooking, car-repair, tying your shoe, etc., what do you do?

PRACTICE!

Famous people who failed at first:

- *Albert Einstein failed his first college entrance exam at Zurich Polytechnic.*
- *William Faulkner didn't have enough credits to graduate from high school.*
- *Henry Ford forgot to put a reverse gear in his first car.*
- *Lucille Ball of I love Lucy was once dismissed from drama school for being too quite and shy.*
- *A cartoon by Charles Shultz, creator of Peanuts, was turned down by his high school year book.*

You don't automatically become creative by looking the part; it takes work!

Creativity is no different. If you want to get better at being creative, you must practice. Consider these famously creative people (more in the sidebar):

- Thomas Edison, regarding one of his many creative ideas, said, "I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."
- Johannes Brahms spent at least fourteen years completing his first symphony in 1876, with sketches dating back to 1862.

These "greats" would not be very great had they not kept at being creative. Remember, "Creativity is the capacity for, or state of, bringing something into being." There is nothing in that definition that says that each creation must be brilliant.

Many of the cognitive processes that are related to creativity may not produce anything creative unless they occur over and over again. Divergent thinking, associations and analogies, for example, will not likely produce the best results the first time around (as made evident by the "greats"). However, as they are practiced over and over, and become part of your daily "creative workout routine," you will become increasingly better equipped to be creative.

Principle #3: Put in the dirty work.

I bet you were hoping that nothing like this would show up. You were probably wishing that I would just say something like, "Hang out at coffee shops or art galleries" (which doesn't hurt) or "Wear a beret" (which may have less obvious benefit). This final principle, however, is critical to your creative life. Consider these stories:

- Richard Farnsworth became an actor after 40 years as a stunt man.
- Anton Bruckner played church organ some in his twenties he did not become a composer until his 40s.
- Rodney Dangerfield sold aluminum siding for years while he struggled as a writer/comedian. He did not get his first big break until he was 42.

It is also not atypical to find authors that publish their first books in their late-50s or 60s. Why does this happen?

If you have never read a note of music in your life or touched a piano, how likely do you think it is that you could compose the next great piano concerto?



It is quite difficult to be creative if you do not even know the basics. It has been demonstrated by Runco et al. (in press) that basic factual knowledge is correlated with performance in that domain.

Granted, there is a limit to the benefit of education. Rubenson and Runco (1995) have demonstrated the puzzling effect of experts being able to understand things that others can not, but then have difficulty being original. Look at these statistics published by Simonton (1984):

Interestingly, only one U.S. President has earned a doctorate (but that's no excuse for you!)

- Optimum education level for scientific achievement is just below PhD
- Optimum education level for politicians is 1-2 years of college

Does this suggest that learning the basics is optional for creative people? NO! Rather, it suggests that being creative requires “putting in your dues” before becoming eminently creative.

In the meanwhile, as you learn the basics, experience new things (Principle #1) and practice creating (Principle #2)!

Where to go from here...

This paper only covers the basic principles to becoming a more creative person. If you need assistance getting going with your creative self, consider these resources:

- **New Experiences**
 - <http://www.thingstodo.com/>: Discover new experiences with this online guide for family travel, recreation and entertainment information. Whether you need to know what movie's playing at the nearest theater, or simply need information on recreational activities for your next vacation, you will soon find it here.
 - <http://www.my50.com/>: Join thousands of others who are using My50 to achieve their lifetime goals. Find inspiration and motivation from the hundreds of ideas on the site, the suggested 50 suggestions to do, or from other users who have chosen to make their list public.
- **Creative Exercises**
 - <http://www.braingle.com/>: Over 17,000 brain teasers, riddles, logic problems, quizzes and mind puzzles submitted and ranked by users like you, Braingle has the largest collection anywhere on the internet. The large array of unique online multiplayer games will keep you entertained for hours, and if you want to improve your brain, check out the Mentalrobics section. Increase your creativity, boost learning and become a better person. Get ready to have your brain tangled!



The 3 Principles in review:

- 1. Make new experiences part of your daily life.*
- 2. Practice creating.*
- 3. Put in the dirty work.*

- ***Caffeine for the Creative Mind: 250 Exercises to Wake Up Your Brain*** by **Stefan Mumaw & Wendy Lee Oldfield**: For any one who wants to quickly limber up their imagination on a daily basis, *Wired* helps readers get into the creative zone, from which all their best work springs. Packed with 15-minute simple and conceptual exercises, this guide will have readers reaching for markers, pencils, digital cameras, and more in order to develop a working and productive creative mindset.

- **Learn the Basics**

- **<http://www.5min.com/>**: The idea behind 5min is very simple: any solution can be visually explained in no more than 5 minutes. The goal is to create the first communal Life Videopedia allowing users from all over the globe to contribute their knowledge by sharing visual guides in areas such as arts, business, fashion, sports, health, tech, food, and much more.
- **<http://www.idiotsguides.com/>**: You're smart, curious, at ease with yourself, and interested in learning. And learning is what *idiotsguides.com* is all about. Explore our hundreds of books-from home repair to religion, health to hobbies, investing to parenting, and everything in between. Check out the Quick Guides and Top Tips. Take a minute to drop an email-and then come back... there's always something new.

How to Reach Me

If you wish to contact Benjamin Williams, he can be reached by phone at (330) 268-2590 or via email at benjamin@williamscomposer.com.

The Last Word

Thank you for your interest! I welcome your comments, feedback and suggestions. Please drop me a note if this has been of help for you.



Resources

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