Bring Back the Joy: Creative Teaching, Learning, and Librarianship

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For the first time, research shows that American creativity is declining. What went wrong—and how can we fix it.” (Bronson & Merryman, Newsweek, July 19, 2010, p. 44).

A decade of strict standards, serious budget cuts, and sobering statistics has left teachers stressed out and students apathetic. It’s time to bring the joy of learning back into our schools.

Humans derive pleasure from constructing, innovating, and building. In addition, a balance of critical and creative thinking is important in learning. Creativity is emerging as a popular theme in the latest round of standards revisions.

“Creativity and Innovation” is the first standard on the International Society of Technology Education’s National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS).

The American Association of School Librarians’ Standards for the 21st-Century Learner stress the importance of students “creating new knowledge.” Students are asked to “create products that express new understandings” and “create products that apply to authentic, real-world contexts”.

In this article, we’ll explore engaging technology tools that involve students in creative thinking, constructing knowledge, and developing innovative products.

THINK DIFFERENT

Start your quest for creativity by thinking in new ways about reference sources. Use new tools to help you and your students explore, ponder, and contemplate. For instance rather than using a traditional paper thesaurus, think graphically by exploring a visual thesaurus.

Search for words such as “creativity” and “innovation” using three different online tools: Visual Thesaurus, www.visualthesaurus.com/, VisuWords, www.visuwords.com/, Lightweight Visual Thesaurus awordlike.textdriven.com/. Figure 1 shows an example from the Visual Thesaurus software.

Visual dictionaries are also great tools for thinking in new ways about curriculum content and assignments. Use the Visual Dictionary at visual.merriam-webster.com/. These images can be embedded in student blogs or other web-based projects using their blog tools, visual.merriam-webster.com/tools_blog-tools.php. Simply click the “Blog This” choice in the upper right corner of the page containing the visual, copy their code, and paste it into the HTML of your page.

Use vocabulary websites such as VocabAhead, vocabahead.com, to jumpstart a discussion with students about how they might create their own animated dictionaries using a tool like Go!Animate, goanimate.com/.

PROVIDE OPTIONS

When addressing the needs of today’s diverse student population, we need to provide varied opportunities and resources to stimulate creativity. When a child’s vision doesn’t match their artistic skills, technology can help bridge the gap.

Avatar generators are a great example of engaging tools that can provide a springboard for innovative thinking.

After reading books such as Cock-a-Doodle-Moo: A Mised Up Menagerie by Keith DuQuette, Scraminals by Jack Prelutsky and Peter Sis, I Wish I Had Duck Feet by Dr. Suess, and The Whingdingilly by Bill Peet, children go to the Build Your Wild Self, buildyourwildself.com/, website and design a human character with animal body features. The website provides scientific information about each body part that can be incorporated into a fictional story about animal adaptation.

Web sites such as Grabba Beast, grabba beast.com/, can be used for doing a project such as Monster Exchange, www.monster-
exchange.org/, where one child creates a monster and a written description. Then, a peer tries to recreate the visual based on the description only.


MODEL INNOVATIVE TOOLS

By modeling use of technology, young people can generate ideas for how they might incorporate audio, video, and animation into their projects. For instance rather than a teacher reading a book aloud their class, you might suggest playing the audio book version instead. Or, reading from an e-book reader. Then ask students to create their own audio version of a story they’ve written.

The Sea of Trolls WebQuest, sites.google.com/site/theseaoftrollswebquest/, by Jessica Hinnan provides an example of how teachers can incorporate innovative approaches and technologies into their assignments. Before asking students to use the animation tool GoAnimate, goanimate.com/, Hinnan wove the technology into another assignment to demonstrate its use.

Jumpstart projects by providing young people with tools and resources they can use in completing classroom assignments. Rather than spending time “googling” for Viking images, show students free or public domain resources such as DK Clipart, dorlingkindersley-uk.co.uk/static/cs/uk/11/clipart.

INFUSE VARIOUS RESOURCES

When designing pathfinders expose students to many methods of communication. Then, infuse a wide variety of resources into learning materials and assignments. Let’s use the topic of Charles Darwin and The Origin of Species as an example. Ask students to explore resources. Then, create their own original technology-rich products based on a science topic of their choice. Students could:

- Listen to a public-domain audio recording; then create a podcast from original content. Use the LibriVox <librivox.org/the-origin-of-species-by-charles-darwin/> audio version of The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin to demonstrate effective reading techniques.
- Watch historical re-enactments; then create a vodcast of original content or historical accounts. Use Evolving Ideas, teachersdomain.org/resource/tdec02.sci.lif.evado.darwin/, from Teacher Domain for multimedia examples.
- Read a picture book; then a visual story based on science content that would be accessible for young children. Use One Beetle Too Many: The Extraordinary Adventures of Charles Darwin by Kathryn

![Figure 3: GoAnimate and the Sea of Trolls WebQuest](image-url)
**Figure 4: Trickster Tale in PowerPoint.**

Lasky as an example,
- Read historical fiction; then write a narrative connecting science with humanity. Use Charles and Emma: The Darwins’ Leap of Faith by Deborah Heiligman as an example.
- Read a graphic adaptation; then create visual projects to convey important scientific principles. *Use Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species: A Graphic Adaptation* by Michael Keller as an example.
- Read nonfiction; then create timelines or concept maps to share scientific ideas. *Use Evolution Revolution* by From Darwin to DNA from DK for ideas.
- Explore diaries and drawings; then create visuals or electronic scrapbooks to convey scientific ideas. Use Charles Darwin’s notebooks, *darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductons/vanWyhe_notebooks.html*, for example.
- Examine caricatures; then create cartoons and caricatures to represent scientific ideas. Use A Venerable Orang-outang, *commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Darwin_ape.jpg*, as an example.

**SAFECOLD CREATIVITY**

Students can be overwhelmed when faced with producing a totally original product. Design learning environments that provide support and guidance as they learn the concepts necessary to successfully complete a creative task. The Trickster Tales WebQuest, *web.me.com/alshoema/Trickster_Tales/Welcom.html*, by Alissa Shoemaker is a wonderful example of how a well-designed series of activities can provide scaffolding for student creativity. Young people take small steps toward a creative product. In this case, they begin by reviewing prior knowledge, learning about trickster tales and comparing stories, adapting and retelling story. Then students create their own original work.

If you don’t have access to Comic Life software for creating original stories, use some of the PowerPoint Sidekicks, *eduscap.es/sessions/sidekicks/stories.htm*, to get started. Then, add visuals from DK Clipart. Rather than teaching all aspects of PowerPoint, introduce the tools necessary for a particular task. For example, use the TRANSPARENCY tool in PowerPoint to remove the white background in the objects. Use the CROP tool to show one aspect or to focus on the main element of a visual. Use other tools such as flip and rotate for different views of the same creature. With this approach, a couple of backgrounds and objects can be used to tell an entire story.

**STONE ARCH**


$23.65 each. Grades 3 and up.

Publishers learned a long time ago that they can make a quick buck off cheaply made retellings of classic (i.e., out-of-copyright) fairy tales. As a result, librarians are automatically wary of a publisher who releases a spate of new fairy tale adaptations.

Well, you don’t have to be wary of these books. Stone Arch has put its best foot forward with this new line of graphic novel adaptations of fairy tales, books that succeed on every front. The ones I’ve listed above are my particular favorites, but I have not seen a bad book in this new line.

*Centenicienta*, a Spanish-language retelling of the familiar Cinderella story, is a fine example. The book is bound in a sturdy yet attractive library edition, and the high-quality paper makes the painted colors leap off the page, as for example in a panel featuring the brilliant glow from within a magical coach headed toward a certain legendary ball. The translations are also strong, with natural word choice and dialogue that pays attention to the nuances of class as the poor and the wealthy speak to one another.

With these stylish new fairy tale adaptations, Stone Arch has reset the standard.
TEACH CREATIVELY

Creative teaching uses a combination of modeling, scaffolding, and risk-taking to jumpstart innovative thinking and imagination. The Brooklyn Nine WebQuest, sites.google.com/site/thebrooklynninewebquest/home, by Karen Steinberger is a wonderful example connecting a novel with authentic learning. The novel The Brooklyn Nine by Alan Gratz uses the innings of a baseball game as the structure of book chapters. In the WebQuest, young people are asked to create baseball cards based on the themes in the book, as well as think about how local history could be organized in a unique way.

In this assignment, students learn to set the Microsoft PowerPoint slide to 2.5 x 3.5 to replicate the size of a baseball card.

Other historical themes and curricular topics could also be explored in creative ways using tools such as ReadWriteThink Interactives, readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/.

AUTHENTIC, CREATIVE APPROACHES IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

As you work toward bringing the joy back to learning, consider the resources and tools you suggest for teachers and learners. Look for innovative methods of communication and engaging learning materials.

The word “creativity” can manifest itself in different ways. We often lump all types of creativity into one category, however creativity can have many facets. Creative approaches shouldn’t be fake or contrived. They can result in real-world solutions and meaningful products.

Generative. Some young people need a seed, starter, or prompt to kick-start ideas and creativity. Generative assignments involve producing new life or propagating offspring from an initial seed or idea. A meaningful theme and pathfinder of resources can provide the seed.

The year 2010 is the 60th anniversary of the Korean War. Ask students to learn about the war and generate a product that reflects a local connection. One student might build a project focusing on the topic of the Korean War and military segregation using the website Stixy, stixy.com. Another learner could create a collage using showing a plan for a local Korean War memorial.
Inventive: Marked by independence in thought or action, inventive projects ask students to derive a new device or process from pre-existing or independently conceived ideas. Use a book such as The Unusual Mind of Vincent Shadow by Tim Kehoe to get students thinking about the process of inventing toys. Then, introduce the book and website Howtoons, howtoons.com, for examples of how inventions can be produced. Use downloadable software such as Sketchup, sketchup.google.com, to design models and Comic Life to share results.

Original: Beyond simply building a product, originate students develop seminal ideas that provide the foundation for the work of others. Encourage originate thinking by reading books that present different points of view such as George vs. George by Rosalyn Schanzer. This book explores the Revolutionary War through the eyes of both George Washington and King George III. Working in pairs, ask students to create their own informational story about two people, animals, buildings, events, sides of an issue, or possible solutions.

**Figure 8: Korean War project using Stixy.**

**Figure 9: Howtoons website.**
tions. Get them thinking in new ways of the world. Use tools such as Pixton, pixton.com/, or Creaza, creaza.com, to build products that express their fresh viewpoint.

Productive: Spending time wisely, making good choices, and constructing quality materials are signs of a productive student. By setting the stage with quality resources and easy-to-use tools, you can help students be more productive.

For instance Geoffrey Hayes has written a series of graphic stories for young people such as Benny and Penny in The Big No-No! These stories may stimulate interest in creating cartoons. Use the Cartoon Maker from Toon Books <toon-books.com/fun_cm.php> to scaffold student productions using character and illustration styles from the stories. Then introduce students to other tools for producing comics from scratch.

CONCLUSION

The school library should be a joyful place for learning. As you build relationships with teachers, seek out resources and activities that bring excitement to the learning environment. Rather than simply reading the book Leviathan by Scott Westerfeld, ask students to enjoy, explore, and engage with the reading experience. Start your movement toward a more creative library by rethinking your books lists and activity guides. Use tools such as Google Sites <sites.google.com> to build pathfinders that help young people explore the people, places, and ideas found in stories they read. The Leviathan Pathfinder, sites.google.com/site/leviathanpathfinder, by Karen Steinberger is a great example of this shift in thinking about how we engage young people in the joy of reading.

REFERENCES


Adapted from a presentation by Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson available at http://eduscrapes.com/sessions/creativity/.