
Introduction

In a recent documentary on the creative work of the legendary teacher Albert Cullum*, live footage of his interactions with young students is enough to forever settle the question of whether or not creativity should become a staple in the classroom. In one class, middle school students earnestly debate the merits of Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Shaw. Although a number of these students are gifted, all possess varying degrees of ability and experience. Cullum’s creative approach to teaching accommodates this diversity and enables all students to experience what he called their “success level.” What he brought to his students was an invitation to participate in an adventure, to use real materials—real books (not readers), real objects, substances, and textures—and explore real issues in the world. Each child did so with a motivation and enthusiasm rarely seen in public school. Each exceeded performance standards for their grade level.

Among the creative strategies Cullum used, he seemed most at home engaging his students through dramatic techniques that unlocked the imagination. His students traveled to another time (history); drew, designed, touched, and crawled around in space (geography); and participated in simulated debates and campaigns. The children built, constructed, imagined, explored, and lived what they studied. What Albert Cullum discovered 50 years ago was the adaptability of creative work to the individual strengths and needs of students. As he described it in the documentary, the creative approach he adopted allowed the “thoroughbreds” (i.e., the gifted kids) to pull to the front of whatever journey they were on, but at the same time, no one is left behind.

In workshops and seminars, teachers often express a wish to use creative processes more. They know that creativity plays a significant role in the growth of concept building and higher-level thinking. But they are afraid. The fears most commonly cited include the following:

*The documentary is called *A Touch of Greatness* (2004), directed by Leslie Sullivan, produced by Aubin Pictures in collaboration with Independent Television Service.

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“I don’t have expertise in creativity or the arts.”

“When I see the kids having such a good time, I wonder if they’re really learning anything.”

“Creative work is too chaotic; I feel out of control.”

“I don’t know how to relate creativity to the curriculum I have to cover.”

“It’s hard to tell if creative projects are really teaching them anything. We’re always accountable for that.”

This book aims to address these concerns through the voices and experiences of teachers who have successfully used creativity in their classrooms. They come from all kinds of schools—public and private, big and small. They serve different communities: mixed-ability gifted, bilingual, multicultural, suburban, urban. A number of them teach in gifted programs where they have learned the importance of throwing caution to the wind on occasion and where they have found a renewed belief in creativity as a life force in teaching gifted learners. Most also teach in places where the focus on curriculum standards and learning goals can sometimes become a preoccupation that, along with the struggle to find adequate time to plan and do creative work, challenges their most inspired ideas. Yet, they have found ways to do it.

One of the advantages of presenting a book by teachers is that it breaks barriers for the readers to find examples of those who are teaching creatively and doing so in circumstances that don’t necessarily encourage it. They have spent years honing their techniques and have found ways to navigate around the obstacles (e.g., school schedules and limited resources). What they have achieved is truly remarkable. The chapters on specific subject areas (Chapters 3–7) clearly show that teachers can use creativity and the arts in any classroom anywhere. Guidelines and descriptions in their own words will be assuring to readers who want to know from other teachers how they plan for creative work, how they decide what strategies work best in their subject area, how they relate these to learning goals, and how they sequence creative processes so as to minimize the chaos that sometimes accompanies creativity.

The teacher-authors explain how links can be made to national curriculum standards as well as to teachers’ own learning goals, since without this, creativity quickly loses relevance in the classroom. Teachers who’ve discovered ways to accommodate the creative needs of the gifted within the context of district curricula, state standards, and learning goals are in a unique position to aid fellow teachers in a similar endeavor. Understanding how to make creativity work in the classroom is a fundamental concern that needs to be addressed if they are to take hold of it as a fundamental resource and to realize the significant benefits—to students

of all ability levels—of classrooms alive and energized by a more participatory approach to the curriculum.

In this book, “creativity” has a broad application to the classroom because it has less to do with becoming “creative” in the traditional sense and more to do with how children process the ideas set before them. The content that gifted students master is not more important than the process by which they master it. In fact, the process often determines the extent of their mastery. (Has it stimulated higher-level thinking? Inspired the formation of new concepts and ideas? Enabled learners to create links between different bodies of knowledge?) Instead of receiving information, committing it to memory, applying it to textbook problems (in the case of mathematics), or reading a chapter and answering questions (in a reading assignment), the teacher-authors in this book design activities that require mastery and that ask learners to bring forth something more of themselves—their insight, their observation, their imagination, their experience, their passion.

The first chapter provides the rationale for meeting the creative as well as intellectual needs of gifted learners. The benefits to students are clear, and they extend to their emotional well-being as well as to their intellectual or creative life. The chapter concludes with the firsthand experience of a junior high music teacher, a sensitive piece that shows how the creative process, under the guiding hand of a caring teacher, can bring a healing touch to a gifted child in turmoil.

Chapter 2 addresses some of the stickier problems faced by teachers as they try to structure creativity into their daily teaching in diverse, often mixed-ability classrooms. It explores some of the most common concerns teachers have about making creativity a more integral part of the life of their classrooms and shows, through reports from other teachers, how to address these concerns. Drawing on their experiences and insights, it focuses on strategies and general practices that they have found useful in making creativity a rich resource for meeting the learning needs of all their students, particularly the gifted.

The subject chapters include a chapter each on literacy (reading and writing), social studies, mathematics, science, and the arts (both visual and performing). For readers to quickly grasp the different approaches presented, the book includes work from approximately 6 to 10 teachers in each chapter—some from the K through 3 range and others from Grades 4 to 6. In the majority of cases, the age range doesn’t matter because strategies can be adapted to accommodate students in a higher or lower grade. This fact in itself provides insight into the versatility of creative teaching strategies.

Each chapter has a simple, easy-to-use structure. The strategies or creative ideas are defined at the beginning of each teacher’s contribution, followed by the approximate grade level, its applicability to different subjects, and a description of the process. In most cases, each contribution includes other resources and suggestions if readers wish to explore their idea further or make adjustments for different student needs.

Chapter 8 concludes the book and focuses on ways teachers can discover their own creativity, as this will only enlarge what they can give to their students. Three teachers share their most helpful ideas on tapping this inner reserve and on finding ways to forge a more creative path in today's educational system.

A fundamental aim of this book is to let the lives of teachers speak directly. The chapters are filled with real case studies and provide candid reporting both on areas of challenge and those of notable achievement. An appendix offers additional material—a list of resources and Web sites recommended by the contributors, compilers, and other teachers whose stories have found their way into this volume.

Among its many benefits, certainly a significant one is that creativity in the classroom means significant learning for all students (regardless of ability). For gifted students, though, the creative dimension can become the critical element that saves them from limiting the direction and extent of their personal journeys as learners. Within a creative context, advanced mathematics becomes a wondrous phenomenon, a scientific process presents hidden possibilities, a paragraph becomes the beginning of a book-length fantasy. Creative teaching also reaches the thousands of neglected gifted populations—those who live in remote rural areas, the deprived urban ones, those who speak different languages, those who lack resources for their talents, and those who have special learning problems. Wherever they attend school, they can find, in the rich context of creative classrooms, a path suited to their feet, adaptable to their strengths, and responsive to their needs.