ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY IN ONLINE UNIVERSITY CLASSES

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"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined."

Henry David Thoreau (American essayist, poet and philosopher, 1817-1862)

Introduction

Educational and business literature affirms the importance and value of creativity.Unfortunately, this knowledge is not always presented in a manner that is useful to online instructors who want to integrate more reflective lessons into their courses. The discussion will provide vital background information on creativity and offer relevant instructional suggestions to promote creativity in online classes.

What is Creativity ?

The term creativity can be an illusive term to define because writers do not want to undermine or diminish the positive aspects that are often associated with the word. For instance, if someone relates that they consider you a creative person, it is considered a compliment and an affirmation of your abilities. A survey of creative definitions does offer insights into this intriguing term. Harris (1998) provides one of the best descriptions of creativity.

An Ability: A simple definition is that creativity is the ability to imagine or invent something new.

An Attitude: Creativity is also an attitude: the attitude to accept change and newness, a willingness to play with ideas and possibilities, a flexibility of outlook, the habit of enjoying the good, while looking for ways to improve it.

A Process: Creative people work hard and continually to improve ideas and solutions, by making gradual alternations and refinements to their works

(paragraphs 2, 4 & 5).

The description highlights the multidimensional nature of creativity while stressing that individuals must realize that it involves hard work and a flexible mental attitude. There seems to be some misconception about the need for hard work but it is affirmed by today's writers. Howe (1999) has conducted a biographical analysis of people who were considered in the category of being a genius (i.e. Einstein) due to their exceptional work. A detailed historical examination of their lives has shown that most were characterized by having a tremendous work ethic. This enabled them to have the diligence and patience to use problem solving techniques to reach brilliant solutions and ideas.

Online instructors want their students to demonstrate fresh ideas and perspectives in their written assignments, essay exams, online discussions, Power Point Presentations and learning team projects. Students who participate in stimulating instructional activities will be encouraged to cultivate their imaginations and it should be one of the trademarks of a good education. Instructors must work with individuals who come from cultures that sometimes undermine critical thinking and self-directed learning. White (2003) argues that Americans have settled for a superficial creativity built upon passively observing others display their imaginations in the entertainment industry. Business leaders have managed creativity into neat film or television show formulas that are financially profitable but fail to intellectually challenge people to be truly reflective and autonomous thinkers. "The culture informed by the strategies of the Middle Mind promises intelligence, seriousness, care, but what it provides in reality is something other. What the Middle Mind does is flatten distinctions. It turns culture into mush" (White, 2003, p. 10).

Teaching Philosophy and Strategies

Instructors can promote creativity by developing course materials and activities that reinforce reflective skills. Recently, educators have stressed the importance of metacognition which Livingston (1997) defined as "thinking about thinking" (paragraph 2)

2). The word relates to a form of self regulation or executive control of the cognitive processes. Flavell (1979) has described metacognition in terms of three basic categories:individual knowledge about learning, knowledge of variables to complete a task and knowledge strategies. Metacognition skills play a vital role in a student's ability to succeed in higher education and being able to resolve daily problems or issues in their future jobs. Students must make a diversity of learning decisions based on their understanding of their skills and study habits. For instance, an individual might select a library over a university dorm room as being the best place to effectively study and prepare for an exam (Livingston, 1997).Metacognition is closely connected to critical thinking because both involve selfregulating activities. Lipman (1995) states "….critical thinking is skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it (1) relies upon criteria, (2) is selfcorrecting, and (3) is sensitive to context" (p. 146). The definition reveals the dynamic nature of critical thinking and perhaps why it is not always being taught in our traditional and online universities. The author has completed six graduate degree programs and sadly some of his course work involved tedious rote memory work for essay exams. There is a place for knowing basic knowledge in every academic discipline. Educators must make a deliberate effort to have learning objectives and instructional activities that address foundational knowledge while providing adequate opportunities for reflective thinking. Teachers who want to enhance the teaching and learning process realize that fostering critical thinking skills will require extra work to effectively communicate complex ideas to their students. Bullen's research (1998) reveals that a student's ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills during online discussions is influenced by four major factors: cognitive maturity, teaching style of instructor, student's prior learning experiences and degree of understanding the critical thinking process. The factors reveal that students will vary in their understanding of critical thinking skills and cognitive abilities. Therefore, teachers will need to develop a set of instructional strategies that will help them to meet a diversity of student needs. It is important for teachers to provide a rich intellectual environment that helps to eliminate myths about creativity. Teresa Amabile who heads the Entrepreneurial Management Unit at Harvard University conducted a research project on creativity. Amabile's team collected information from 238 individuals involving almost 12,000 daily journals comments who were working on projects from seven different companies. Breen (2004, pp.75-78) relates how Amabile's research study has identified six myths about creativity:

- Creativity comes from creative types: Creativity depends upon a number of things; experience ,including knowledge and technical skills; talent; an ability to think in ways; and the capacity to push through uncreative dry spells.
- Money is a creativity motivator: People are most creative when they care about their work and they're stretching their skills.
- Time pressure fuels creativity: Time pressure stifles creativity because people can't deeply engage with the problem.
- Fear forces breakthroughs: We found that creativity is positively associated with joy and love and negatively with anger, fear, and anxiety.
- Competition beats collaboration: In our surveys we found that creativity takes a hit when people in a group

compete instead of collaborate.

- A streamlined organization is a creative organization: Creativity suffers greatly during downsizing. Every single one of the stimulants to creativity in the work environment went down significantly.

The research study highlights the complexity associated with cultivating creativity in work and educational settings. A major educational problem involves how to effectively promote creativity in an environment that sustains both individuals and learning teams during their online courses. As a mentor of faculty candidates at the University of Phoenix, some instructors will verbalize their belief in a student-centered teaching philosophy. Yet, their actual online presence is one of dominating the student dialog with an excessive number of daily comments. The negative facilitator practice can diminish the quality of the discussions as students become reluctant to express their ideas which seem less important than the instructor's.

Encouraging student creativity will require providing specific instruction on reflective thinking by helping students to understand the nature of critical thinking. The teaching of critical thinking should be considered as a normal part of the curriculum and should be integrated in some manner into every subject area. Also, teachers must offer clear and detailed instructions in their assignments while creating an open ended dimension for the exploration of ideas. The instructions are essential because even graduate level students need guidance and students must feel secure in the evaluation and grading process to become risk takers in their work. The author recalls approaching a doctoral teacher about taking a class in the independent study format without having to attend the traditional face-to-face classes. The teacher agreed to the proposal and the course syllabus was adjusted to the following requirements: read 8 books and write 11 papers! The author completed the work and asked the teacher why so much work was assigned and the teacher responded by noting "it was to make up for lost seat time." The incident is a good reminder that teachers and students must work together to foster positive learning experiences.

Teachers should communicate a picture of a creative thinker through their teaching style, sharing stories of innovative individuals and demonstrating novel ideas through the use of charts, lectures and Power Point Presentations. Brookfield's (1987,pp.115-116) characteristics of a critical thinker are informative about understanding the illusive process of understanding how people become creative:

- Creative thinkers reject standardized formats for problem solving.
- They have interests in a wide range of related and divergent fields.
- They can take multiple perspectives on a problem.
- They view the world as relative and contextual rather that universal and absolute.
- They frequently use trial-and-error methods in their experimentation with alternative approaches.
- They have a future orientation; change is embraced optimistically as a valuable possibility.
- They have self-confidence and trust in their own judgment.

Distance educators could learn valuable lessons about encouraging creativity from today's business organizations. Gore-Tex fabrics is a superb example of an innovative major corporation which has over 63,000 employees and $1.5 billion in annual revenues. W. L. Gore has developed a thriving organizational culture which emphasizes small teams, cutting edge products and leaders who regularly devote time to speculative thinking. The company has experienced continuous product breakthroughs which reflect a business built on long term goals. Gore's leadership philosophy and work rituals are

designed to affirm creativity. Deutschman (2004) observes that the teams will celebrate both project successes and failures. Why do they celebrate a failure? It is an intentional way to affirm that risk takers are always honored in their endeavors. Perhaps, a missing ingredient in today's online degree programs is the absence of adequate number of student risk taking opportunities. Teachers and students must be given enough freedom to pursue imaginative and valuable work that sometimes transcends the normal curriculum.Teachers will need to develop a class structure and online teaching style that encourages creativity, reflective thinking, and self-directed learning. It is important that teachers enable students to have the freedom to ask questions and take intellectual risks in their written assignments and discussion groups. Teachers can provide valuable guidance by keeping dialogues focused, relevant and probing deeper into issues. This will require moderating discussions and creating a list of key ideas, references and student contributions. Distance educators can pose a diversity of questions to foster reflective comments. Collision, Elbaum, Havvind & Tinker (2000) have created five types of questions to encourage richer student responses that are called full-spectrum questions:

- Questions that probe the "so what ! " response - relevance, interest level, urgency and context.
- Questions that clarify meaning or conceptual vocabulary- ambiguity or vagueness and common concepts.
- Questions that explore assumptions, sources and rationale- qualities assumed and study evidence.
- Questions that seek to identify causes and effects or outcomes-primary or secondary and causes, internal or external factors.
- Questions that consider appropriate action-weigh different courses of action (p.143)

Teachers should view the full-spectrum questions as a tool for enhancing dialog. The choice of questions can be used to guide the discussion and help energize online interaction. It is wise not to overuse a particular question approach because students will begin to lose interest if the process becomes too predictable or even annoying. For instance, instructors who frequently respond to a student's comments with a question are guilty of over using a learning strategy. Also, it can annoy students who want more indepth interaction over their ideas. Instructors can spark a lively dialog by using quotes, pictures, cartoons, simulations or graphics at different times during the course. A thought provoking quote can stimulate discussion and breathe new life into an apparently stale topic.

Teachers and students are confused about what constitutes genuine reflective thinking that complicates efforts to integrate it into the curriculum. Woolfolk's (1990) chart helps to clarify what are some of the major elements in the critical thinking process:

Defining and clarifying the Problem

- Identify central issues or problems.
- Compare similarities and differences.
- Determine which information is relevant.
- Formulate appropriate questions.

Judging Information Related to the Problem

- Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment.
- Check consistency.
- Identify unstated assumptions.
- Recognize stereotypes and clichés.
- Recognize bias, emotional factors, propaganda, and semantic slanting.
- Recognize different value systems and ideologies.

Solving Problems/Drawing Conclusions

- Recognize the adequacy of data.
- Predict probable consequences (p. 278).

The chart can seem a bit overwhelming to educators who want to include higher order thinking in their instructional plans. It is important to recall that the essence of critical thinking is making good judgments which includes having criteria, self-correcting procedures, and being aware of context (Brookfield, 1987). The chart offers an excellent resource to create lesson plans and discussion questions that support higher order skills and creativity.

Conclusion

The discussion has briefly explored teaching creativity in online university classes. There is a degree of mystery associated with the subject of creativity that challenges educators to continuing studying how individuals translate their imaginations and ideas into innovative products. It is a valuable educational issue that holds the promise of enriching student learning experiences as students become more effective at utilizing their cognitive skills and knowledge.

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