The Giver: GETTING STUDENTS OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE

By Tara Wilson

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Abstract: Within the context of a first-person account of pedagogical growth, a literacy professor details a way to bring preservice teachers out of their comfort zone and participate in divergent thinking. The project that the professor assigned is supported by current research on creativity and divergent thinking. The rationale for focusing on these two aspects are offered. Additionally, how this experience fueled the professor's fire for teaching is provided in order to help ignite fellow educators' passion for teaching.

Keywords: creativity, preservice teachers, literacy, divergent thinking, classroom practices

briskly walked into the classroom prepared to present a new assignment that would encourage creativity. My group of preservice teachers could tell that I had something up my sleeve by the gigantic smile on my face.

"Now that we finished reading *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), I have an assignment for you that you will LOVE!" I naively exclaimed to my students. Their assignment seemed simple, or so I thought. The only directive I gave was to "design a visual conveying *The Giver's* theme." Eyes blinked and jaws dropped. The students were clearly puzzled. Due to the open-ended nature of the assignment, the students blurted out numerous questions. Some of these questions were: "What kind of visual?" "Will we have to present it?" "Do you mean like a PowerPoint?" "Where is the rubric?" I assumed my students would love the chance to use their creativity freely to demonstrate their understanding of *The Giver's* theme. I did not place any restrictions on their project. They had free reign to use anything their hearts desired to complete this task. However, it seemed my preservice teachers were accustomed, constrained even, to following exact guidelines in order to complete teacher-directed assignments. Maybe the students were afraid to take risks, to step out of their comfort zone, because of their previous classroom experience. Would they prefer to write the usual lackluster term paper?

Over the next couple of weeks, the students treaded cautiously through the assignment as they planned, constructed, and took responsibility for their creative endeavor. During this time, I received numerous emails containing questions, comments, and concerns. I told my students that they needed to step out of their comfort zone and try something new. Still, my students struggled with the freedom this particular assignment allowed. They begged and pleaded for explicit, step-by-step directions. I reminded my students that one of their main goals was to express themselves. I wanted them to develop their own ideas and choose their own ways of portraying *The Giver's* theme. Allowing students to make their own choices instead of handing them all the possible information involves the students in their own learning (Andrews, 2010). Fortunately, I held my ground by replying with reasons for such an assignment and continued to offer words of encouragement. Before assigning this project, I conducted a brief literature review in order to ensure my idea was research-based and relevant to preservice teachers' training.

Importance of Divergent Thinking Learning Activities

Divergent thinking (DT) has been defined as the ability to think in multiple directions and is operationalized in terms of fluency, originality, and flexibility (Runco, 2013). In a seminal study, Guilford (1977) described DT as multifaceted. That is, DT tasks are open-ended and elicit vast associations. *The Giver* assignment did just that. Most of these tasks are free of verbal biases and offer the potential for creative problem solving (Hudson, 1966). Plucker (1999) adds that longitudinal studies support the usefulness of DT as a predictor of future creative achievement.

Of the three terms that DT operates under, originality is most directly related to creativity (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). DT is needed in order for students to generate original works. Students start their work by first conducting brainstorming sessions, preferably independently (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007). The more brainstorming a student participates in, the larger their repertoire becomes, giving them more ideas for future endeavors. Askell-Williams, Lawson, and Skrzypiec (2012) warn

Figure 1: A preservice student's project using black-and-white and color selfies.

that regular brainstorming activities limit the speed of learning because students need several brainstorming experiences before they can develop a rich knowledge base that enhances their DT skills. They suggest that educators conduct specific generation activities dealing with association, combination, and abstraction.

Creativity

I believe that everyone possess creative capabilities. The Robinson Report (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999) describes the development of creativity as an area where all people can be successful in the creative process. Sharp (2004) agrees, noting, "It is appropriate to adopt a broad, democratic definition of creativity. In this way every person can be considered to have creative potential and to be capable of creative expression" (p. 6). Students need opportunities to realize their own talents and allow themselves to be stimulated by ideas. Robinson (2009) believes that creativity, not standardization, is the key to successful futures. The Giver project did not ask all students to write about the theme or create a poster; instead, the assignment pushed standardization aside and let creativity flow.

However, a pause on creativity remains. The stress of meeting state standards causes this pause, as any educator will proclaim. After conducting studies on test-based instruction, Nichols and Berliner (2008) refer to the narrowing of the curriculum as "artificial goals." Helm's (2008) research on student engagement

found engaged students can still partake in enjoyable learning experiences while meeting state standards. Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2013) suggest that educators need to "urge students to play around, to take risks, to discover what can happen and try alternatives" (p. 97). Students seem to excel using different media while communicating with peers and teachers in a way that goes beyond just meeting the standards. Through the student-chosen medium, I was able to determine whether they understood the theme of *The Giver.*

Figure 2: A preservice teacher's project of a constructed robot and symbolic features.

Connors (2013), concerned about the scarcity of opportunities for children to develop creativity, advises that "with so much time being focused away from creativity, we need to balance this with time spent on developing more creative ways of thinking—time when children can experience themselves as creative thinkers and when we encourage and support them" (p. 1). How can educators do this? Miranda (2015) suggests that teachers reflect on their own creative imagination to plan strategies that will both engage students and allow educators to use different media in classroom learning.

The Final Products

Finally, presentation day arrived. To be honest, I expected to see the students slowly dragging their feet along with their project into class, but that was not the case. The students cheerily entered the room, their enthusiasm for their projects evident. I wondered how I could capture this excitement as part of our weekly class meetings. One by one, the students eagerly presented their projects by sharing what they believed the theme of *The Giver* to be, and they explained how their project conveyed that theme.

At the onset of the project, a student requested that the class to send selfies of themselves. She made two copies of each picture, one in color, the other in black and white. One side of her visual were the black-and-white photos with the word "Sameness"

Figure 3: A preservice teacher's project of a symbolic baby quilt.

written in the middle. She explained how in *The Giver,* color did not exist; this aided in everything looking the same. On the other side of her visual, she had the colored portraits with the word "The Givers" written in the middle; this represented how Jonas wanted the community to be, colorful and unique. (See Figure 1.)

A second student created a mock robot out of cardboard. The reason she gave for constructing a robot was that she said all the people in the community reminded her of robots. On the robot's body, she attached pictures of a heart, sled, brain, apple, and smiley face. Each picture served as a symbol from the story. (See Figure 2.)

Another student sewed a baby quilt. Each square of the quilt contained a symbol. Some of the symbols she included were a rainbow, needle, snowflake, Band-Aid, heart, music note, and family tree. This small quilt represented memories. The purpose of the quilt was to provide love to each of the babies in the community. (See Figure 3.)

A fourth student created a 3-D Christmas tree. Her theme for *The Giver* was "the importance of emotional memories." Since no one in the community knew about Christmas except for Jonas who saw once it when he was with the Giver, she chose to attach ornaments to her tree. Each ornament contained a picture or word symbolizing either an emotion or memory. The ornaments were red apples. (See Figure 4.)

Not one of the 26 projects was alike. Still, each project conveyed the student's perception of the theme of *The Giver,* and students provided enlivened explanations of their thinking. (See Figure 5 for additional examples.) The students also conveyed to me that even though they complained in the beginning about this assignment, the outcome was that they felt it was the most enriching assignments of their educational journeys. This project allowed them to organically experience a task that required divergent thinking. The students could not wait to do such activities in their own classrooms in the future.

I displayed the projects in the room for a few weeks. One day a colleague approached me and asked, "What did you assign your students?" I explained that the only directive I gave students was to design a visual conveying *The Giver's* theme. The colleague could not believe what the students created with such little guidance. She and I began to wonder what other choices could be made available to students to continue capturing the excitement. This assignment not only affected 26 preservice teachers, but it also will influence thousands of young minds in the future.

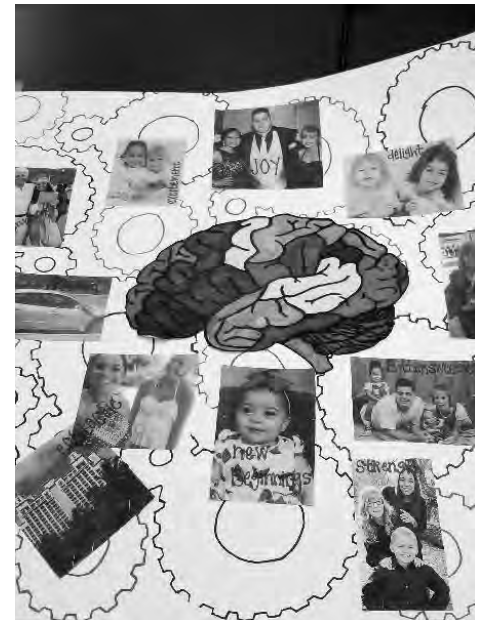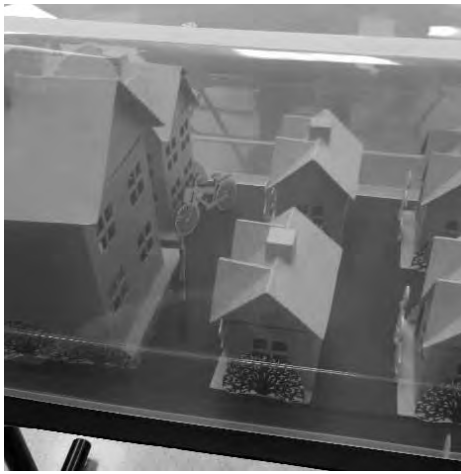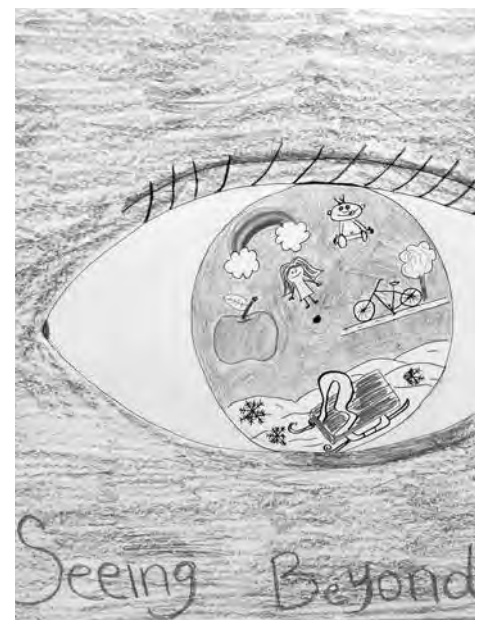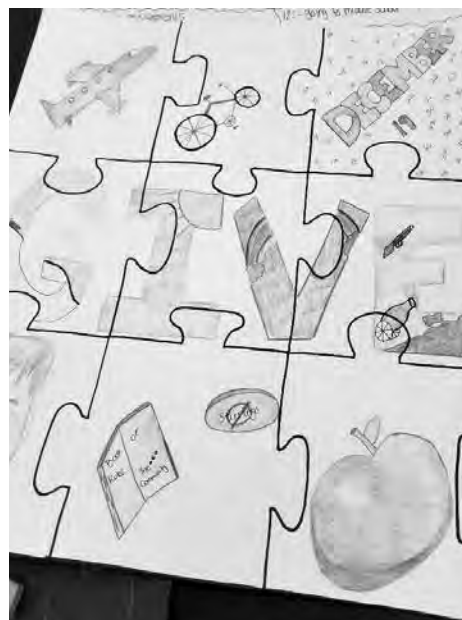*Figure 4: A preservice teacher's project of a Christmas tree.*

Figure 5: Additional examples of pre-service students' projects.

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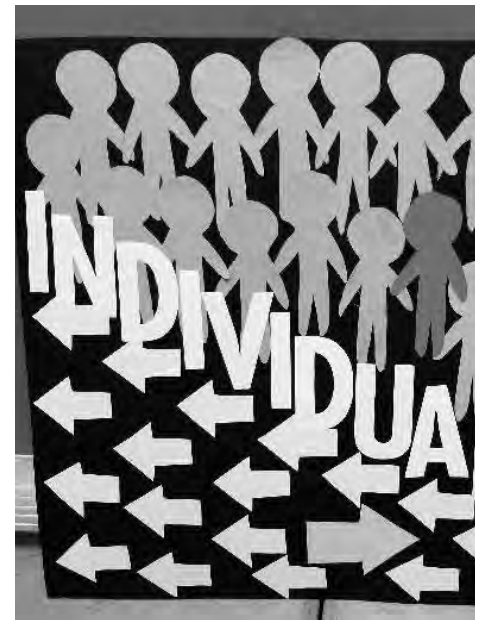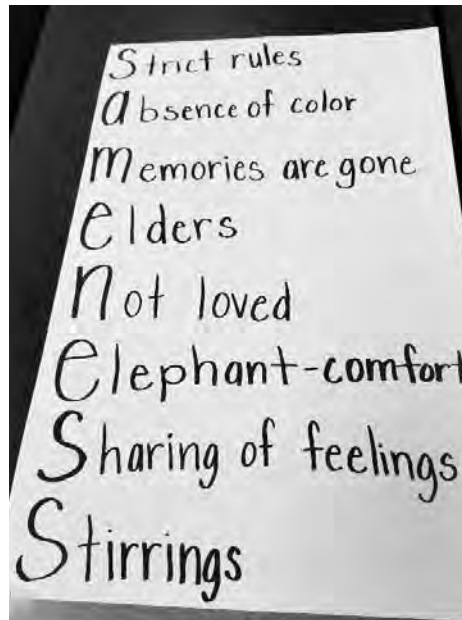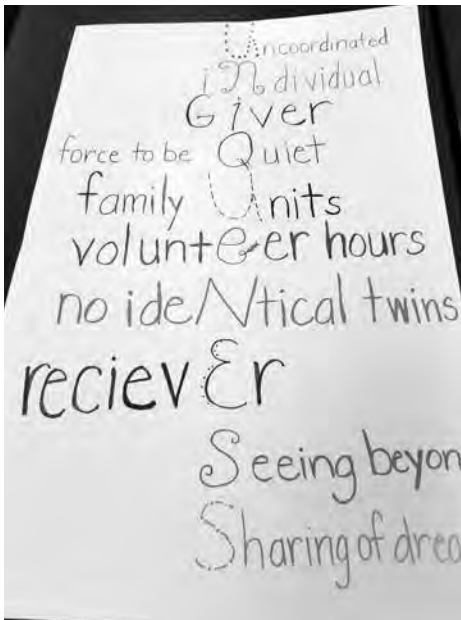
Implications for Educators

Students, regardless of age, need a creative outlet and need to take ownership of their work. All educators need to be open to trying new ideas in pedagogy and function as facilitators, abandoning traditional teacher-as-disseminator roles. This transition is commonly referred to as "sage on stage" to "guide on side" (Stewart & Walker, 2005). Facilitating helps students to navigate through the learning process without directly telling them what to do or how to do it. Students receive encouragement to become independent learners. Educators can foster creative, divergent thinking by creating a positive environment of respect so students feel safe to express themselves, scaffolding opportunities, offering new and challenging experiences, stimulating students' natural curiosity, encouraging exploration, inspiring originality, and deepening learning (Kay, 2013). McElhany (2017) suggest that when students come to teachers with questions, teachers should not provide an answer but instead respond with three to four what-if questions; "by wording your suggestions in the form of questions, you are redirecting the students' thinking without imposing a direct solution. With time, they will depend less on you and more on themselves" (p. 34). Assigning open-ended projects welcomes students to unlimited solutions and invited new possibilities, ultimately fueling their fire and yours!

How This Project Fueled My Fire

I took note of the enthusiasm as my students presented their projects which gave me the much-needed fuel to keep going during a mid-semester hump. This experience reminded me of the important role educators play in encouraging creativity through scaffolding of ideas, implementing their own novel approaches, fostering a positive classroom, and allowing possibilities of integrating various content areas into the creative process. As I listened to my students talk about their projects, I kept thinking to myself that every educator and student should always feel that a classroom is a safe place where learning is joyful, exciting, and creative. My hope is that my preservice students take this experience into their future classrooms and ignite children's passion for learning.

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