

Sherrie R. Johnson

# *Tuck Everlasting:* Nurturing Students' Comprehension, Creativity, and Critical Thinking



## Planting the Seed

When a plastic tabletop terrarium appeared in the corner of my classroom, it didn't take long for a student to notice it and say, "Cool, what's this?" followed quickly by, "What are you growing?" As a fifth grade teacher in a suburb located in central Texas, I realized the importance of incorporating creativity and critical thinking into the literacy curriculum for my 23 students. Research suggests that creative thinking on a topic deepens the comprehension of that subject matter (Baer & Garrett, 2010). Further, students who are actively constructing and employing their content knowledge are undertaking an important skill called generative, or self-motivated, learning (Osborne & Wittrock, 1983). Designing original products, such as transforming a terrarium into the setting of a book, provides an opportunity for students to forge connections between the book they are reading and the product they are creating, thus encouraging deeper comprehension.

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My intent in this article is to share valuable discoveries about fifth grade students' reading comprehension as well as their creative growth in a classroom environment that infused a variety of creative and critical thinking activities into a four-week study of *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975), a rich fantasy meditation on the quandaries and challenges of immortality. When a wayward family from the 1800s, who unknowingly drank from the fountain of youth 87 years earlier, meets up with a lonely preteen named Winnie Foster, two worlds collide and moral and ethical choices emerge.

## Roots of Creativity and Critical Thinking

Surprisingly, the term *creativity* is something that remains elusive, and it seems to evoke many different responses within the education community. Many people immediately presume the word means something linked to art or music. Other practitioners equate the word with students in gifted and talented programs. Reid and Petocz (2004) remind us to discover what it means to be creative, within our specific field. My working definition of creativity in an educational setting is producing a product, idea, or behavior that links originality with task appropriateness (Plucker, Beghetto & Dow, 2004).

Critical thinking differs from creativity. Critical thinking includes assessing the worth of arguments and knowledge

Both creativity and critical thinking can be incorporated into lesson plans through activities such as producing a product, asking open ended questions, creating cross-curricular connections, and using reading response journals.

(Beyer, 1985). Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as sensible and reflective thinking that has the goal of aiding in decision making. Fairweather and Crammond (2010) argue that while creativity generates the ideas and critical thinking evaluates the ideas, they are both intertwined in the big picture of learning. Both creativity and critical thinking can be incorporated into lesson plans through activities such as producing a product, asking open-ended questions, creating cross-curricular connections, and using reading response journals.

### Cultivating a Plan to Infuse Creativity and Critical Thinking

While the addition of a terrarium in my classroom sparked the curiosity of my students, it also gave me the beginnings for simultaneously nurturing their growth. That unobtrusive, transparent box held the necessary fertilizer to grow my lesson plans. Its jet black soil acted as a petri dish for learning. I moved it to a more prominent position in the classroom, and as we walked into the rich description of Treegap, the fictitious setting in *Tuck Everlasting*, my students began remodeling the terrarium into the setting of the book. Author Natalie Babbitt, known for her rich literary style, was awarded the inaugural E. B. White Award for achievement in children’s literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and *Tuck Everlasting* has been noted by the American Library Association (2002) as a book that should have won a Newbery award.

As we read rich descriptions such as, “It looked just the way it does now. A clearing, lots of sunshine, that big tree with all



Figure 1. Terrarium with cedar added.

those knobby roots” (p. 38), one student added a sprig of cedar to represent the big tree (see Figure 1). Days later, a tiny toy frog appeared perched on a log after reading a vivid description of a toad—“The toad did not so much as flick a muscle or blink an eye. It looked dried out today, parched. ‘It’s thirsty,’ said Winnie to herself. ‘No wonder, on a day like this’” (p. 112). Discussions arose between students as to why things in the terrarium were placed where they were. “Do we need a cow path meandering around the wood?” I heard one student ask another. The terrarium transformation allowed my class to explore their own creativity, express their critical thinking, and expand their understanding of the setting of the book.

In order to determine if my students’ perceptions of their own creativity grew over the course of this unit, I created a short survey that I administered to my students as a pre and post assessment. Survey questions were worded in order to provide an understanding of my students’ attitudes toward specific components of creativity such as risk taking, divergent thinking, self-perception of ideas, and task commitment. Students responded to statements like “I consider myself a creative person” and “I feel like I have a good imagination” on a scale of one to four with one being “never” and four representing “always.” Individual scores for each question were recorded, and a class average was calculated for each response (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Students’ Self Perceptions of Creativity Before and After the Unit Study

Question	1. I consider myself a creative person.	2. I would rather think up a picture rather than trace one.	3. I would rather try and answer incorrectly than not answer at all.	4. I feel like I have a good imagination.	5. I like to take time to think before solving a problem.
Pre Assessment Class Mean	3.22	3.26	2.39	3.43	3.13
Post Assessment Class Mean	3.43	3.00	2.61	3.43	2.87

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## Watching the Blooms of Comprehension and Creativity

I also began observing and noting the students' comments about the book as well as the creative products as they were unfolding. Students felt comfortable questioning and commenting about the book each day. The class terrarium continued to transform and grow just as my students' knowledge and creativity blossomed before my eyes. Paper characters depicting Winnie and Jesse lingering by the spring were added as well as green moss and rocks. Each day I noted a high level of engagement. One student even asked me if we could read another class novel in this same way. Other positive comments included, "This is fun!" and "I want to share my project." One student commented, "I can't wait for [language arts] every day! It is the best part of school."

I monitored my students' comprehension through their reading response entries and written quizzes. A unit test was also administered at the conclusion of book. These ongoing assessments provided me with confirmation of high reading comprehension. The class average on the unit test was 96.5 out of 100. I was impressed by my students' understanding of the complex topics presented throughout the book, such as the cycle of life, the nature of freedom and responsibility, and the impact of choices you make.

In addition to a deep understanding of the class novel, my students also demonstrated some change in their self-perceptions of creativity. In comparing the pre and post creativity survey results (see Table 1), students felt more creative after participating in the variety of creative and critical thinking activities linked to the reading passages (Table 1, question 1). Equally as important, they appeared to be willing to take more risks. On item 3 ("I would rather try and answer incorrectly than not answer at all."), the post-survey mean increased from 2.39 to 2.61.

As we completed the novel, our terrarium was showing signs of its age. The plants were not as healthy as they had once been, and the frog and paper people were bleached from the strong afternoon sun. Our terrarium had moved through its life cycle; it took us from the beginning of *Tuck Everlasting* to the end. It also created an environment to incorporate more creativity and critical thinking into my classroom.

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