

# On Teachers' Creative Life

Daniel Xerri discusses creativity in the classroom ahead of this year's EFL Monitoring Board conference on the same theme.

## Introduction

It seems symptomatic of the social media era that most people's diet of inspirational quotes is nowadays supplied by social networking sites, awash as they are with the pithy quips and maxims of a host of enlightened writers, artists and celebrities. What was once the job of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is now being done by Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest among others. The original source of these quotes is rarely cited and almost never given any importance. It seems as if we have all read Albert Einstein, William Shakespeare and Mahatma Gandhi, we have all listened to Steve Jobs's (2005) Stanford University commencement speech, and we have all watched *Dead Poets Society*, *Forrest Gump*, *Rocky Balboa* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*. In the process of ultra-skimming through countless posts and tweets, with some luck such inspirational quotes are read and shared. However, if they are not properly digested the words would not be worthy of being termed 'inspirational'. In this article I reflect on the significance, with respect to teachers' creative identity, of a quote I came across recently.

A school in Nicaragua used Instagram to post the following quote by the American author Joseph Chilton Pearce: "To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong." This quote was meant to encourage its students not to be afraid of making mistakes in their struggle to master the English language. Pearce wrote a number of books about child

development and this particular quote is perhaps one of the most famous pronouncements on creativity. Beyond the school's use of the quote as a means of goading students to experiment with the target language, this sentence should also resonate with teachers in their endeavour to be creative practitioners.

## Creative Practitioners

Some teachers' misconceptions about what constitutes creativity impede them from positioning themselves as creative practitioners (Xerri, 2013). The myth that creativity is only about creating works of art or enabling learners to be artistic is detrimental to teachers' efforts to be creative. As language speakers we are all creative individuals. It takes a lot of creativity for a child to acquire a language, for a learner to use the language we teach them. However, as language teachers we can be even more creative when we think

of new possibilities for language teaching and learning. Being creative does not just mean using arts and crafts, poetry or film in language lessons. While lessons incorporating activities based on those media and genres have the potential to act as creative impulses for learners, the essence of creativity for teachers goes beyond classroom activities.

Being creative means daring to do things differently, thus expanding the boundaries of what you know about teaching and learning in order to discover new

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worlds within the confines of your classroom. In fact, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines the creative individual as “*someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain*” (p. 28). Being creative means you do not just do what trainers and other experts tell you you should be doing, but rather trusting your intuitions as educators to break new ground, research your practices, experiment with new pedagogies, and try out new activities or spin-offs of things you are used to doing. Being creative means you are not just followers but leaders, not just consumers but creators, not just an audience but sharers. Being creative means you do not hermetically seal your knowledge and experience inside your head, but rather expressing the willingness to share with others. A community of creative educators is made up of professionals who are constantly learning from each other.

Most teachers are all too willing to sit back and learn from others, fearing that they cannot teach anything to their peers or to themselves, fearing that they have nothing new to say, that they are incapable of being creative. They do what they are instructed to do on a teacher training course, at a conference, or in a methodology book. However, possessing all that knowledge should not hinder teachers from doing things differently, finding out for themselves what works and what is unlikely to be effective. There is no recipe for the perfect lesson; there is no manual that will ensure success in every single activity with every single student. Being creative means having faith in your expertise as a teacher, as someone knowledgeable about your context, your learners, the language, and the repertoire of methods and approaches at your disposal. Being creative means you do not let the dictums of others straightjacket you, but rather demonstrating the willingness to question everything and to apply multiple perspectives to every issue and problem you encounter.

Creative teachers are not just born creative. Creativity is a state of mind. It is a boundary that you need to cross in order to discover your potential to do things differently and be an inspiration for others. According to Alan Alda (2007), you need to

*Have the nerve to go into unexplored territory. Be brave enough to live creatively. The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. It is not the previously known. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't go there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you're doing, but what you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself. (pp. 21-22)*

Most teachers are not creative because they allow fear to dominate them. They prefer living in the comfort zone rather than exploring the unknown. Whilst there are practically no more places on Earth for anyone to discover for the first time ever, there is a lot that can still be discovered about teaching and learning. However, the number of teachers willing to act as explorers is far too little. Education requires as many teachers as possible determined to explore new frontiers.

Being creative means you are not afraid to fail, especially since failure is a fundamental part of the teaching and learning experience. Which teacher has not tasted the bitterness of failure at least once over the course of their career? The most brilliant educators are the ones who have failed many times in their quest to achieve success, whether this be an amazing lesson, wonderful feedback, or a learner's attainment of seemingly impossible aims. Being creative means you are willing to transcend your fears in order to discover that you can be right sometimes besides being wrong at other times.

As Edward de Bono (1990) points out,

*The need to be right all the time is the biggest bar to new ideas. It is better to have enough ideas for some of them to be wrong than to be always right by having no ideas at all. (p. 108)*

The need to be right all the time is the essence of vertical thinking, which is a problem solving and decision-making approach that entails being selective, analytical and sequential as a means of avoiding failure. According to de Bono (1990), an “Exclusive emphasis on the need to be right all the time completely shuts out creativity and progress” (p. 108). This is why it is important to use lateral thinking, which consists of both the willingness to perceive things in divergent ways and a series of thinking methods that can be learnt (de Bono, 1982).

## Conclusion

Teachers need to lead a creative life rather than just experience creative moments interspersed among non-creative lesson activities. Being creative is not something you do temporarily. It should be a permanent fixture of your professional life. You do not stop being a teacher when the lesson ends. Teaching is an intrinsic part of your identity. Similarly, creativity should be a constant feature of your teaching and your professional inquiry as an educator within and outside the classroom. However, for that to happen you need to overcome your fear of being wrong. As Ken Robinson (2006) maintains, “if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original”. I dare you to lose your fear of being wrong. I dare you to be wrong sometimes. That is how you can be right at other times. That is how you can be creative.

*The theme of the 4<sup>th</sup> ELT Malta Conference is Creativity in ELT. The conference will take place on 22-25 October 2015.*

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