



TREADING SOFTLY ON THEIR DREAMS

Fostering Creativity in Boys

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To help your students develop creatively, you need to provide opportunities to be creative in an environment where they feel safe to be different and to occasionally be wrong.

Ultimately, if you expect your students to be creative you need to be a little creative too. It is hard to be creative when all the criteria for an assignment are spelled out in minute detail. You need to model creativity. Open ended assignments, where criteria are flexible, lead to creative responses.

Why Should I Waste Precious Class Time On This?

1. Neuropsychology

- A. Novelty
 - The brain is constantly seeking novelty
 - If there is no novelty externally, the brain seeks it internally
 - Technology, diet, and other cultural changes ramp up need
 - 2004 Gallup survey of 800 students 13 – 17 asked to select 3 adjectives that describe how they feel about school. 50% chose *bored*. 42% chose *tired*.
- B. Transfer
 - If we address the novelty issue for the brain then we can get students to spend more time on-task
 - More processing = deeper understanding
 - Need to understand the contexts in which they will have to apply knowledge for it to be useful.
- C. Gender
 - hippocampus (memory centre) grows faster in girls than boys. Boys need to work longer and more deeply with material to be able to consolidate information compared to girls.

2. Economics – Only through the application of creativity can we reliably compete with developing countries. Knowledge is an easily accessible commodity, but personalisation and innovation are the keys to our success

3. Communicate effectively in a variety of ways – not just with the essay.

How Do I Do This?

Teachers have to model creativity – take risks, recognise and even value errors, be different!

1. Decide on essential outcomes of an assignment
 - A. For my social studies classes: Read critically, communicate effectively, understand views they do not share
 - B. Sometimes it might be very content specific: demonstrate an understanding of the law of supply and demand or the causes of WWII, or to be able to write an expository essay or solve a differential equation.
2. Create an environment conducive to creativity
 - A. Safe: in order to take risks, students need to feel they will not be stigmatised if it does not work (Boys School Advantage: all boys environment = more risk taking, but it needs to be channeled)
 - B. Cooperative: Need to bounce ideas off each other to formulate them fully. They should initially develop their ideas independently to have an opportunity to wrestle with the ideas themselves.
 - C. Choice: As much as possible, students should have some choice in the final product
 - i. Allow for different media or styles of products
 - ii. Make sure all choices meet your criteria
 - iii. Choices should actually be different – multiple intelligences & differentiation
 - iv. Too many choices can be paralysing: not more than 2-3 for younger students, and not more than 6 for older students (or adults)
 - D. Flow: the goal of a great assignment is that it fosters *flow*, a complete immersion in the task.
 - i. Motivation not as a cause but as a consequence of achievement (ultimate intrinsic motivation)
 - ii. Complete absorption in the activity in which they are engaged
 - iii. Since boys tune out more readily than girls, this is an essential part of boys education
 - E. Not everything has to “work”
 - i. This applies to both students and teachers!
 - ii. We learn more from our failures than from success. Of course this requires some scaffolding.

Some Creative Assignment Ideas

As part of their Understanding by Design (UbD) model, Wiggins and McTighe urge educators to look beyond the innumerable content requirement and standards and focus on what is really important. For my class in current events (offered at the grade 9 level – for 14-15 year olds), I decided that what really mattered were the following three skills:

The boys need to read critically.

The boys need to communicate effectively.

The boys need to understand views they do not share.

Using these skills I can rethink my traditional assessments to include more choice for students in terms of topics and final products.

Here are some of the favorites I have used:

Fallacious Editorial: In my Current Events class I begin the year having the students look at bias and then at logical and rhetorical fallacies. I have them write editorials using as many fallacies as they can, and then a piece to explain the fallacies they used. To keep it simple, and to keep content knowledge on a level playing field, I have them editorialise about me. Not only is it a lot of fun for them to lampoon me a little, they really get a better sense of how fallacies obscure the truth, and how pervasive they are in media.

Sell My Junk: When we begin marketing in my economics class, I give each student (or team of students) a piece of junk I have collected in the month leading up to the class. It could be anything from a scrap in insulating foam to a chewed pen cap or a broken branch. The boys have about 20 minutes to come up with a sales pitch for their product (focusing on the core and actual product). They then present this to the class. By having them focus on the critical attributes of the item and spinning it in a positive way, this could also be used in an English class to help with persuasive writing. (Based on idea from *Teaching Content Outrageously*)

Newscast: Sometimes, instead of a research paper, have students collaborate in creating a newscast or newsmagazine about their topic. Each student is responsible for an aspect of the topic (in the example I showed on the Arab Spring, students looked at economic, political, geographic and historical causes and consequences of the turmoil in Egypt and Libya). The information can then be presented through a scripted interview either presented live or recorded.

Faux Journal: In lieu of a research paper, students can write a journal from the perspective of a person (or people) involved in a story or issue they are researching. This requires them to really look at a situation and try to understand it from different points of view. I have had students write journals from the perspective of both a member and an undercover informant in the drug cartels in Mexico. Another student, examining the concept of immigration from the developing world, wrote letters from the perspective of both a young rural Pakistani and a xenophobic Canadian writing a letter to his MP.

Business Plan: In my economics course, students are required, as part of the entrepreneurship unit, are required to develop a business plan which becomes part of a New Venture Fair, where judges from our community give the boys feedback and award prizes for a variety of criteria. Some are practical, like the two boys who would parlay their computer knowledge in to a business to help people set up their home networks. Others are more visionary, like the boys who wanted to create a web-based business to help teams scout amateur athletes by offering a host of statistics and game film online.

Historical Roundtable: Students have to research historical figures to determine how they might feel about modern issues that touch on concepts from their day (this year we looked at the use of racial profiling to investigate or prevent crime). The students have to write a position paper where they cite their research that supports their points of view about their historical figure, and then engage in a more free-form conversation with the other characters.

Math & Rock Climbing: Students use our climbing wall to understand a variety of math concepts from finding the midpoint of a segment to sine law and cosine law. They also see how these are useful things to know when rock climbing and during a mountain rescue.

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Must Views

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