Credne 2.1
Can creativity be taught?

This handbook aims to show that it is possible to teach students to be more creative, and to provide tools to help them embark on this beautiful and risky adventure. So it should come as no surprise that we firmly believe that yes, creativity can be taught!

A scalar concept

The short answer to the question, "Can creativity be taught?" is yes!

But some elaboration might be helpful. This position is still sometimes met with scepticism – and often leads to inconclusive debates about nature vs. nurture.

First of all, let's dispel those notions around creativity that see it in terms of outstanding, eminent achievements and performances. Creativity is a **scalar concept**, a **matter of degree** and levels (see Kaufman and Beghetto). That means that to be creative, one doesn't need to achieve any superior results.

To be a creative writer, one doesn't need to be like Shakespeare. A visionary painter doesn't need to be Picasso, and a great educator doesn't need to match Dr Maria Montessori. In other words, we shall go beyond the mythology of the genius and cherish creativity in all its forms. **A scalar approach to creativity allows for a broader understanding**, one that recognises potential and that is particularly useful in an educational context.

Scholars such as **Tina Seelig**, **Ken Robison**, **Alfonso Montuori**, and **Larry Livingston** – among many others – all take the position that creativity is not the gift of the few but rather the potential of all. It can be fostered, developed, and enhanced. Creativity, in this context, is seen as a disposition that anyone can show when provided with the right tools and a supportive environment.

Some cognitive abilities are necessary to develop creativity, and knowledge and skills play an essential role too. Creativity doesn't happen in a vacuum, and it is not the result of divine inspiration. However, a degree of creativity can be taught and learned, because **creativity is not only a set of skills but also a disposition**.

What are the arguments against the teachability of creativity?

Historically, there have been two main arguments against the teachability of creativity. Both emerge from a focus on the sort of high-level of creativity associated with genius.

The first is the imitation argument, based on the following propositions:

1. All learning is a form of imitation.
2. Imitating someone or something is incompatible with being creative.
3. So one cannot learn to be creative.

The second is the rules argument:

1. All learning consists of the following of rules.
2. Following rules is incompatible with being creative.
3. So one cannot learn to be creative.

These arguments are straightforward, and plainly both take a rather reductive view of education – and a rather simplistic view of both imitation and rules. Fortunately, there are strong and convincing counterarguments, such as the following, from Berys Gaut:

> The premises of both arguments entail that one cannot learn creatively, but they do not entail that one cannot learn to be creative. If learning is a form of imitation and imitation is incompatible with creativity, it follows that learning cannot be creative; but even if that were true, it would not follow that one cannot learn to be creative […].

> Likewise, if learning consists in following rules and following rules is incompatible with creativity, it follows that learning cannot be creative, but it would not follow that one cannot learn how to be creative. Make the distinction between learning creatively and learning for creativity (and, correspondingly, teaching creatively and teaching for creativity), and the apparently plausible arguments are shown to be fallacious. (Gaut, 2014, p.267)

The foundation of the argument rests on **the crucial distinction between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity**.

Furthermore, the assumption that learning is imitation and consists of following rules can be challenged. Rules and imitation are indeed components of learning, but there is much more to it.

We can look at one example: the way we learn to speak. We learn to speak through imitation first, and by learning grammatical rules later. Yet, we all have unique ways of speaking.

The arguments for the unteachability of creativity rest not only on a fallacious interpretation of the role of imitation and rules in education. They also depend on a particular understanding of what education is. When education is seen as a way to transmit knowledge, then the school curriculum represents the contents. In this situation what is wanted is mainly the passive reproduction of the given contents. When the focus of a given curriculum is on the product (that is, on the grades), education becomes the instrument to reach that goal. But in these contexts, creativity can hardly flourish. A creative disposition can be better nurtured when we see education as development and the curriculum as a process. That allows students to **take risks, experiment, and build their confidence**. **The role of failure is reframed, losing its foreboding connotation, and that becomes an opportunity for growth.**

Teaching for creativity

On teaching creativity, **Ken Robinson** (2001, p.161) says that **"facilitating creative development is a sophisticated process that must find a balance between learning skills and stimulating the imagination to explore new ideas"** (p.161). This implies that the teacher must bring some expertise to the learners, but at the same time, that a creative attitude and ability can grow. **Teaching creativity is about finding balance and synergy**; it is about enabling the students, not about asking them to reproduce something.

Here's the great – and much lamented – Ken Robinson himself on the idea that creativity can be taught.

Knowledge and expertise *are* important, as are motivation and cognitive abilities. But for teaching creativity what is also important is the overall **environment**.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013, p. 336) says that "it is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively".

An environment that supports creativity is also one where creativity is recognised. Here it is important to reiterate an earlier point: creativity is *not* only the eminent expression of a rare genius. It comes in many different shapes and degrees (see Section 1.2 of this handbook, for a discussion of the "Four Cs", which helps to clarify this).

The following sections of this handbook discuss specific areas that help to foster creativity in a teaching and learning context – that is, things that help to produce an environment conducive to creativity.

Further reading

Beghetto, R. A. (2010). Creativity in the Classroom. In J. C. Kaufman & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity* (pp. 447-463). Cambridge University Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2013). *Creativity: the psychology of discovery and invention*.

Kaufman, J. C., & Beghetto, R. A. (2009). Beyond Big and Little: The Four C Model of Creativity. *Review of General Psychology*, *13*(1), 1.

Robinson, K. (2001). *Out of our minds: learning to be creative*. Hoboken N.J. : Capstone, 2011.

Seelig, T. (2012). *inGenius: A crash course on creativity*. Hay House, Inc.