Creativity and Inspiration in the classroom

Introduction

Be the game changer

Be the change you want to see

(There is a post it note on your desk. Inspire and challenge us with your own epithet.)

The topic that I have been asked to consider is creativity and inspiration in the classroom. I would like you to really listen to what I have to say, so I have written that out for you to take away with you so you can focus. You have one task! Make a decision about how and in what measure you are going to facilitate and free the flow of inspiration and creativity in you and in your school by the end of this talk and please do share and feedback via the e mail below. By all means then reflect on your decisions and tweak them, but go with your gut response first and foremost. Try and free some of that creativity and inspiration within! They are often about flow! ‘Be the game changer!’ ‘Be the change you want to see!’

I’m going to start by reciting two poems to you. In the first, I would like you to tell me what this creative teacher/ author is talking about:

A fairy tale ending

You’re the ugly sisters to my Cinderella,

You withdrew all shelter when I needed an umbrella

You’re the big bad wolf hiding in the woods

Or hunting down the little pigs, the enemy of good.

You’re the beastly minotaur hiding in the maze

You’re the troll under the bridge, waiting for your prey

You’re the wicked witches of the east and west

You’re the pirate bluebeard with his treasure chest

You’re the icy snowqueen filled with poisoned rage

You’re the fiendish woman who locks children in a cage

You’re the dragon in a cave with fiercesome breath of fire

Did Cruella teach you how to be a nasty little liar?

You’re the crone that keeps Rapunzel under lock and key

You’re the dreadful giant, the fi fo fum and fie.

But I found a pail of water and killed the wicked witch

I made it to the prince’s ball and found the shoe that fits

I followed all the breadcrumbs that clever Hansel laid

I followed Ariadne’s thread ,and came out of the maze

I let my long hair tumble down, from the lofty tower

I slew the dragon with my sword and found my hidden power

I chopped the mighty beanstalk down, fled to my house of brick

The wolf in bed in Granny’s house did not pull off his trick

I went beyond the rainbow’s end and found the pot of gold

And now my story’s just begun, a new tale will be told

I found the buried treasure, the snow melted away

I crossed the bridge to pastures new

and found a brand new day.

Then here is one of my efforts:

Oh my word, it’s Mrs Agnot,

Here she comes,

She is really one of our lovely Mums,

But she is going to tell the same story again,

Tom is not in the A team and she’ll complain.

She says he’s better than all the rest

And he’s under such pressure to do his best.

If he gets it wrong, it’s our mistake,

We take it on the chin for all our sake.

What is it today, I wonder alone,

She’s smiling, but I know she’ll moan.

She creeps in on tiptoe so as not to disturb,

But does so, ‘Sorry, Sorry’ with just that word.

I was right, wrong team, not happy at all,

Well, there’s not much I can do, she’ll just have to play ball

I promise to review it later at break,

Come up with some reasons for all our sake

I know what it is though and she’ll find it tough

Tom is simply not yet good enough

We all want what is best for Tom of course,

But it is horses for courses and he’s not yet that horse!

In just two poems, I have asked you to look at mental and emotional health, be it of yourself, your staff, your children or your parents. I have also asked you to look at the pressure that we teachers can be under to deliver a bought education with early fixed targets decided by the parents.

By writing a book of poems to illustrate repeated parental patterns of behaviour and performing it to my most challenging set of parents, I got them to look at their collective behaviour and have a think about it. It was never directed at any one person which would have been a disaster! Imagine the effect of that behaviour on Tom and how it might have changed teacher response to him. These poems proved to be a very creative and humorous solution and avoided so much conflict.They used to come in and say: ‘I am not the woman in your poem Mrs Burrett’ and I could say, ‘ Ah, but you are! We could work it out much more lightheartedly from there’ It is important to establish both understanding and authority with your parents in order to free creativity and inspiration in your school, give your staff and children permission to have a go and make the odd mistake. There is also always value in the creative solution except when it creative accounting! Equally, as the first poem illustrates, you may need to turn some established story telling on its head to discover pastures new.

Knowing your value and your teachers knowing their value:

So let’s move on to you!

Simon Sinek - let’s start with why

( Talk to a person beside or near you about what inspires you to do your job and where you see yourself being inspiring or creative)

Sarah Willingham - best known for her time on Dragon’s Den and celebrity ambassador for the Duke of Edinburgh’s award.

‘ School allowed me to challenge and question in a safe environment. It allowed me to test myself all the time. Mrs Williams and Mr Leech never clipped my wings. They might not have totally understood me but that’s ok as long as they didn’t stop me. ‘

She talks about how important it is to leave your comfort zone and calls it ‘imposter syndrome’, doing something challenging and trying to carry it off. Soon she says, you don’t feel like an imposter anymore.

Chris Young’s story

I was 12 years old, and my mum had just died from cancer. It was horrific to watch that happen to someone. My dad had an alcohol problem that mum had been managing all these years – suddenly he had a good reason to drink, and no one to stop him any more. He hit the bottle hard.

I went from being quite a high achieving student to being in the bottom quarter for English. But among all this, there was my English teacher, Miss Ward, who was so supportive. She wasn’t trained in mental health: she just saw someone who was distressed and unhappy, but who also had potential. She changed my world.

She listened to me and engaged with me. She had me talking in front of the English class, and was always chasing me to write something for the school magazine. She’d always find the good in the stuff I wrote.

I started the #FindMissWard campaign after going to a class reunion. Nobody knew what had happened to her. I’d just written a book about my journey on foot around the edge of the UK to highlight the stigmas surrounding mental health – and I thought it would be fantastic if she came to the launch. I think about 1.3 million people saw the tweet asking for help finding her, and tens of thousands of people retweeted and engaged with it.

Teachers can inspire and create opportunity in too many ways for me to list.

Like these teachers I expect you love children, you want to make a difference, inspire passions and interests and a love of learning and give children the very best start in life. You love the fact that every day is different and that there is so much challenge and opportunity, usually in fabulous environments. If you are in leadership, you most likely want to facilitate others to love their teaching life , get results and set up the systems to allow it.

I imagine that something of the above and a few really rewarding stories elucidate your why, but sometimes life, time constraints, accountability, fear, the comfort zone or just being stuck in a set pattern get in the way.

What constrains creativity?

Does planning, trying to deliver each lesson at the right pace and level of challenge for each pupil, the need for interest and engagement, some recap and recall, summative and formative assessment to determine progress, presentation requirements, marking, feedback, improvement and evaluation, concerns over pupil well being and development and keeping endless logs to prove it lead to a rather uninspired perseverance? Does the monitoring of the above dull it further or bring out the very best in your teachers? Does the very nature of all that I have just said limit time or stuff time so full that there is no time for that creative flow? Are the Mrs Agnots or fear of stress and not coping getting in the way? Is it just easier to stick with the familier?

Let’s face it, you have taught story telling that way for years with that worksheet. It works. It gets the job done! Result. Move on. Hassle free. Thank you! ( Of course, it no longer inspires you in the least, apart from a mild enthusiasm triggered by the children’s interest and that new child Jackson who seems to have a particularly unusual way thinking, but there we are! Jackson needs to fit in! No time!)

Oh yes, and when they ask to see my planning, it’s sorted! No point upsetting any apple carts!

Or, they keep changing the curriculum. We just get told what to teach and how it has got to be done.

Why it matters to be creative and inspiring?

Can we truly inspire curiosity, enthusiasm, motivation, independence, all of which lead to children finding the right challenges for themselves if we do not take the time to renew and refresh ourselves from time to time and really create opportunity for this to happen. It is certainly hard work to do this, to engage fully in what we teach, but it is energising, inspiring and brings new creativity to us and our charges.

In the bigger picture, we know we need creative thinkers, energetic and solution oriented young people, team players and communicators who will make sense of the changing world of increasing artificial intelligence, fluctuating and renewing economies and political systems and power. We know that the League Table race did nothing to develop key characteristics so advocated to us by Professor Guy Claxton in his 7 Cs. Students with endless A\* s were apparently unable to collaborate, communicate, solve problems, show initiative and independence or make decisions. In his book Educating Ruby, we learn of the value of confidence, curiosity, communication, collaboration, commitment, craftsmanship and creativity. Professor Lucas, who co wrote the book with Prof Guy Claxton, is Director of the Centre for Real World Learning at the University of Winchester. He observes: ‘ There are many Rubys in every classroom. Many of the could be high achievers, but the education system as it stands is failing gifted pupils as much as it fails those with challenges.’ Daniel Goleman is clear in his 1995 book, ‘Emotional Intelligence’ that it is as vital to develop EQ as IQ and more possiblle. The 21st Century Curriculum has shifted emphasis, expensive university places, growing numbers of apprenticeships, the pull of the economy to develop creativity and entrepreneurship to compete globally have all changed the outcomes we value. We have only to look at the recent changes to The ISI Equality Inspection to see that shift in outcomes. I personally applaud it! It is a very positive step and values a much greater range of people.

Is an inspiring and creative curriculum the answer?

So is it all about an inspiring and creative curriculum?

This summer, I spent time with a Year 3 teacher who needed to investigate the Stone Age for her Topic Work with her class. The Stone Age will find its way into everything including numeracy and literacy and often in quite innovative and unusual ways. Her own five and two year olds are rather good at it already and have loved making their stone necklaces. I enjoyed my research trip to Kents Cavern when I happened to be nearby and I know her planning is meticulous.

What does that teacher get from that experience: ‘I loved doing this preparation! It is so interesting! I can’t wait to teach it! I’ve got so many exciting activities planned! I think the children will love it! My children are really into it!’

This teacher exhibits what Einstein so valued. ‘ I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious,’ he said. Einstein, whose early achievements were well known to be modest, was very aware that it was primarily his curiosity that eventually enabled him to explore the mysteries of the universe. This teacher is far more likely to inspire deep engagement and enjoyment and trigger individuals’ own thoughts and ideas because there is so much opportunity for inspiration.

So thus far, I have certainly valued refreshing the curriculum with opportunities within to stimulate both teacher and pupil. To what extent one might take that, I will come back to.

Sir Ken Robinson would approve. He feels that we are undermining our children’s natural curiosity through the way we set up our education system: ‘ Children are natural learners. It’s a real achievement to put out or to stifle it. Curiosity is the engine of achievement ... in place of curiosity, what we have is a culture of compliance. Our teachers are encouraged to follow routine algorithms rather than excite that power of imagination and curiosity.’

The value of inspiring the creative thinker

That really is our challenge. How can we persuade teachers of the value of creating the creative thinker? How can we develop them in our classroom without losing control? Does that mean a carefully monitored and assessed creative curriculum! Inspection matters and outcomes still need to be measurable as excellent. So let’s address each of these points!

Cultivating and inspiring creativity in the classroom

So the obvious next question is: How can creativity be cultivated in the classroom without losing control? It turns out there are lots of ways! Here are a number of key ways in which teachers can begin:

1 Focus less on the reproduction of information and more on critical thinking and problem solving. Create the creative thinker!

2 Curate activities that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, such as by painting murals that depict biological food chains, or acting out plays about historical events, or writing poems about the cosmos. After all, the world doesn’t come carved up into different subject areas. Our culture tells us these disciplinary boundaries are real and our thinking becomes trapped in them. Make links, make sense of learning and do it all together.

3 Pose questions : The open- ended question, the ‘what if... question’.and challenges for different abilities yes, but all with high expectations and the right support. Follow up with opportunities for solitude and reflection. This provides time and space to foster the forging of new connections that is so vital to creativity.

1. For the above to happen, teachers need good subject knowledge. A really inspiring teacher’s input subjects pupil thinking to different kinds of processing at different levels, allowing young minds to gain a deeper understanding of something by looking at it from different perspectives and by focusing on a given point that may arise.It is this kind of deep processing and the resulting integrated webs of understanding that make the crucial connections that lead to important advances and innovations in both learning and the development of societal thinking and knowledge. Think of changes in the Steady State and Big Bang theory. Sustainability discussions as part of geography, history, RE, Science and Maths, citizenship, internationalisation, language learning might ask about the validity of climate change, consider increasing, decreasing and itinerant populations, changes to nations, ponder the value of trying to lead and change human behaviour, wonder what can be done to develop answers to world challenges such as food, water and land shortage, question the role of spirituality in modern life and so forth.
2. Think about the dynamics of your group or class

Christina HOWE - Cambridge Professor of developmental psychology whose most recent research looks at whether classroom dialogue really makes a difference to a student. She acknowledges that it is challenging to do well, but if carefully planned and taught, teachers can become very good at group work and lots of children have the chance to explore concepts and gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum. She acknowledges that it is important to make the task challenging and amenable to a range of opinions, set up effective group dynamics and not over interfere. She values time for post group reflection when ideas have time to sink in and suggests that materials can be provided to support this thinking. Other spinoffs of group work include developing listening, teamwork, understanding social rules, showing initiative, decision- making, developing motivating attitudes to learning, all of which are highly valued by the Independent Schools’ Inspectorate.

HOWE, C 2010. Peer Groups and Children’s Development

I always celebrate my most creative art teacher who constantly asked ‘why?’ in all her lessons. One of her finest projects was the 450th pageant.

I asked her to represent the 450 years of history with the children, to lead a combined history, art, DT, Science project, whatever it took from a cross- curricular point of view, and this to culminate in a giant procession of the entire school and community coming down the road. I had thought the Tudor period might involve dressing up in the standard Tudor outfits, but no, the children were dressed as water with the Tudor galleons they had made and designed in DT on their heads and the capacity to reenact the Armada in their experience. A child dressed in bubble wrap from head to toe and carrying a transparent umbrella was asked by the queen on her visit to celebrate the 450th if he thought it was going to rain. ‘Oh no, he confidently replied! ‘I’m a jellyfish’, fully appreciating his place in the food chain after appropriate teaching in Science. The Great Fire of London, The Industrial Revolution, the royal family, revolutionaries, heroes, discoveries and generally a great extravaganza that delighted and inspired. The queen got the idea. She asked two young six year old horse guards with hobby horses how their owners kept them so well behaved and nodded sagely when she heard from their riders: ‘ We feed them and talk to them a lot.’

Such a project requires whole school buy in, careful planning, motivation, energy, commitment and shared knowledge. I am not advocating this except perhaps once in a while or when the value of creativity in your school is accepted. Such large scale projects can accommodate the brilliance of the few and other teachers can become worried about mushrooming ideas and activities which may mean loss of control over exactly what is happening!

Creating a school that inspires creativity

If you do want to create a real shift towards greater creativity and allow your teachers the freedom to inspire, then school systems must allow it and it must come at a pace that everyone is ready for. In my experience that is little by little, with careful planning within a well understood cycle of leadership and management. Look at your staff team and know which ones are naturally creative. I remember building the creative curriculum slowly via Art, Music and Drama and we did not over worry about assessment. We built from there, slowly working towards that curriculum with the stimulating and puzzling cross- curricular links. We learned about Professor Guy Claxton and his Rs and Cs and gave creativity its place. We had a big international water project led by Science and MFL and Citizenship that had teamed with a School in India. Each subject contributed one lesson to the project. The project, international goals, and lesson planning were set up by HSBC. CPD sessions on cross- curricular thinking and questioning moved things on. Once we had completed this, we were well on the way. Working towards inspection helps. It keeps focus, but there is plenty of freedom these days to decide your own aims and how you achieve them.

So it might be about getting STEM or STEAM projects going. It might be about linking Modern Foreign Languages with Citizenship. It might be about making PSHEE the responsibility of every teacher in every lesson and activity and encouraging them to understand how the whole child is in their care. It might be about murals to depict themes studied in-depth. It might be about excursions or forest schools making sense of classroom learning. It might be some key assembly. It might be about bringing all or some of that together.

If that gets what you are going to teach going, how are you going to get people to teach it? Can you buddy people up, the confident or experienced with the less confident? Can you create a working party to get creative thinking going? Can you share examples of deep questioning or have some inset training? Some inspiring examples can start the flow across the school and it can gain momentum through. Build A real learning community. At Wishford, we are working on teachers making videos to demonstrate excellent practice and then sharing. Can you value staff ideas in teaching, sharing, creating? Can you create coaching and mentoring approaches within your CPD and appraisal model? Can you write a Creativity Policy in which each discipline defines creativity for that subject and provides opportunities through a curriculum audit and some developments to deliver it. Does the audit serve to create links? Can you get a parent group together to share their ideas? What do the children say about the best teaching? What does it look like to them? How can it be improved? Have you got an action learning research project on the way? These are just some suggestions, no

Talk on creativity should give answers, but there are certainly lots of ways of developing creativity and inspiration.

In conclusion

Sir Ken Robinson has more to say:’ Teaching, properly conceived, is not a delivery system...Great teachers mentor,stimulate, provoke, engage.’ On an individual level, this can certainly be true and great teachers do indeed provoke and engage to make children curious. Just think of the power of that single word, ‘Imagine’. Let’s stop for a moment and imagine ourselves free of the chains of accountability. Would we teach differently? Would we be a more memorable teacher if we had time to go off piste a little more? Has anyone seen Alan Bennett’s History Boys’ here where old homosexual, Hector’s love of learning is replaced by Mr Irwin’s exam focused, purposeful, get me to the next stage learning? Once most of the History Boys learn that there is an efficient, teach to the exam style of learning, they quickly lose interest in learning for learning’s sake. How times keep a changing!

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