

Creativity: The Ultimate Renewable Resource

The More You Use, the More You Have

By: Dick Kuiper

Contrary to much popular thought, creativity is neither a birthright nor a mysterious trait exclusive to certain lucky or gifted individuals.

People who claim that creativity cannot be learned or taught are categorically wrong and I personally am living proof of that.

Another misconception many people have is that creativity is manifested in the form of individual acts of brilliance; e.g. “hey, that’s pretty creative.” In reality, creativity is more of a process than a demonstrated act.

People labeled as creative understand that it is a continuously unfolding way of life. It is always being nurtured, consciously or unconsciously, and applied over and over again as required or just as a flight of fancy. It’s the process of coming up with original ideas of value on a repeated basis.

Steve Jobs said: “Creativity is just connecting things.....”

Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while.



-- Steve Jobs

Adding to Jobs' thought, I say the seed of creativity is awareness. Awareness is a trait that certainly can be learned and developed.

All that is required is an open mind and a little self-discipline. Instead of merely letting life's event pass you by without much notice, just take a little time to absorb them and learn whatever you can from them. There is no need to thoroughly analyze them, take any action on them or figure out how they fit into any bigger picture; just be aware of them as they pass through your field of consciousness.

Given this awareness, our brains will automatically tuck them away in the massive "database" in our cerebral cortex to remain available for access at a later time. This is where Jobs' "connecting things" comes into play. The more events of which you took the time to be aware, the more raw material you will have stored away in your cerebral database.

The more "puzzle pieces" you have stored away, the better you can connect the dots in thousands and thousands of combinations to fit problematic situations. When faced with a challenge, look beyond the obvious solutions for something that may even seem a little bizarre at first. Psychologists call this "divergent" thinking.



I firmly believe we are all naturally creative and, like every other skill, some people have more natural talent than others. However, each of us can increase our own creative skills, just as we can increase our skills in other areas such as athletics through physical practice or academics through studying.

This is not to say anyone can become an Arnold Palmer or Albert Einstein. Attaining perfection is not necessary, all we have to do is show improvement over time. In fact, striving for perfection can easily lead to overkill and a colossal waste of time.....unless of course, you happen to be a brain surgeon.

Our brains are built for creative problem solving, and it does not require a degree in nuclear physics to reveal and improve on our natural inventiveness.

The human brain evolved over millions of years into a very complex organ that is optimized for innovation. Our highly evolved brains are always assessing our ever-changing environment, mixing and matching our responses to fit each situation.

Every sentence we craft is unique, and each interaction we have is distinctive. The fact that we have the ability to come up with a nearly endless set of unique responses to questions that arise around us prove that we are naturally creative.

These skills can be enhanced with specific tools and techniques. Problem solving exercises top my list of creativity tools. In general, we have been conditioned since birth to avoid problems. My take on it is this: Don't avoid problems; embrace them because problems are just opportunities in disguise.

Many of my career advancements over the years have resulted from my penchant for proactive problem confrontation. I bring them to the surface so

they are highly visible and then work out a solution. Then I shamelessly take credit for the solution.

Problem solving does not come without concerted effort. One must thoroughly define the problem, fight the smokescreens (aka excuses) that usually surround them to get to the root cause, develop alternative strategies for fixing the situation and take decisive and visible action.

The development of strategies is where creative juices can come to the surface. The technique I've found most effective is to submerge myself into my own personal "think tank." Don't laugh, but this is my bed in the wee hours of the morning. Rather than jumping out of bed as I awaken in the morning, I lay in bed and just think deeply about the challenge I have chosen to take on.

There was a study done by Australian researchers some time ago that found the most effective posture for solving complex puzzles is lying on your back, not sitting up or standing. It certainly works for me, especially when I do it in the dark in the comfort of my bed.

Once I got into the habit of doing this, the 4:00 AM epiphany became a regular occurrence. Such epiphanies are almost always followed immediately by an acute sense of clarity and the solution comes into view. BANG! Then and only then do I spring out of bed and go into action.

This springing out of bed points to another component essential to creativity. That is enthusiasm. Without getting enthusiastic about solving a problem or inventing something new, you will just be spinning your wheels and sinking deeper into a quagmire.

Even the hint of a thought that there might not be a solution to what you're trying to accomplish imposes a death sentence on your creativity. Enthusiasm leads to persistence, another essential ingredient of the creativity recipe. Don't give up!

Now let's examine the roadblocks that hamper creativity and they are everywhere, whether blatantly apparent or lurking in the shadows.

Since birth, we have all been saddled with seemingly endless sets of rules coming at us from many angles; our parents, our teachers, peer pressure, law enforcement and society in general.

Most of us have grown up in environments that demand conformity in varying degrees. Bend the rules and you're labeled a troublemaker or weirdo. Break the rules and you become an outcast. While many rules are necessary to maintain order and prevent anarchy, too many rules construct barriers that stop the flow of creative juices.

The timeworn "thinking outside the box" platitude still has some value when it comes to highlighting the essence of conformity most people have been forced to adopt. Many people throw this phrase around without ever having seen the puzzle that led to its creation and popularity.

The puzzle is all about self-imposed barriers that have come to exist in our minds.

“I want new ideas, so get back into your damn cubicle and start thinking outside the box!”



Looking again at the list of ingredients for our creativity recipe, we find another one that is an absolute necessity – Imagination. Without it, we cannot even get into the game. Yet, during the course of our lives, the regular and frequent exercising of our imaginations have been stifled in favor of practicality.

Most children start life with vivid imaginations but are gradually “cured” of that by the pressures of society; Get your head out of the clouds and go get a job!

If we watch children at play closely, we can see what great imaginations they all have. It comes naturally as part of the gift of birth. As children grow, the amount of play diminishes to make way for more practical endeavors such as chores, then school and then work and parental obligations.

When the playing ends, the imagination is no longer being exercised, and when the imagination slides to the back burner, creativity goes with it. Adults who enjoy playtime are often looked upon as slackers. There is an appropriate sign I saw at a park in Virginia decades ago that has always stuck with me – “You Don’t Stop Playing Because You Grow Old; You Grow Old Because You Stop Playing.”

Hand in hand with play time is relaxation time. Relax and take some enjoyment away from the daily grind. Take a leisurely walk, play a game. Let your mind be free of its normal obligations. Stop self-editing your thoughts and actions.

Don't be afraid to have an idea that you or others think a bit absurd. It's perfectly OK to have some 'stupid' ideas. Allow them to "marinate" and entertain you instead of feeling bad about having them. Remember that many wonderful inventions and breakthrough procedures began as 'stupid' ideas. Ponder the creation of the Post-It Note.

Give yourself permission to think freely. Critical thinking can come later when you get serious about implementing the idea.

While I see a great need for practicality, too much of a good thing is rarely good. If you keep your nose to the grindstone, all you'll end up with is a flat nose. We must stop feeling guilty about taking some time each day to just let our minds wander. It's great exercise. Day-to-day life is just plain boring without a regular dosage of daydreaming. Making it a staple of our existence gets us traveling the road to creativity.

To begin your journey gradually add some new twists to your daily routines, understanding that increased creativity will not happen overnight.

- Stay lying in bed some early mornings or when you wake up in the middle of the night and think about a challenge you faced yesterday or one you have on your agenda to handle today. Come up with a few 'stupid' ideas for meeting the challenge.
- Daydream without feeling silly or guilty.

- Take time out to play a game or just relax.
- Stop worrying about always playing by the traditional rules.
- Ponder a few thoughts of disregarding some traditional boundaries – either mandated by society or self-imposed.
- Take a break from being so practical and do something whimsical.
- Observe some things you normally would not take the time to observe. Don't analyze them, just be aware of them.
- Work a puzzle.

Add some of things to your daily mix, and some day in the not too distant future, you'll most assuredly have a burst of creativity...and then another.....and then another. Just enjoy!