

Teaching Newsletter: How to Infuse Creativity in the Classroom

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Creativity in Psychology Courses

Conventional wisdom suggests that teaching students how to be creative is a task best left to the arts and design. But faculty members from other fields are increasingly seeing the benefits of cultivating in their students the kinds of integrative and lateral thinking that creativity can foster. Two examples from psychology came to us in response to our recent [request](#) for your thoughts on this topic.

Risa Stein, a professor of psychology at Rockhurst University, infuses the subject in her introductory course. One way she does it is by using the premise of the television show *The Last Man on Earth*, a comedy set two years after a virus has wiped out most of humanity.

In Ms. Stein's exercise, students' task is to develop one-, five-, and 10-year plans for a new society for the 1,000 people left on the planet. Students work in groups organized around the societal functions they've identified as worthy of preserving, like education, safety, family, and health care. As part of the project, they interview three faculty members from different departments about how their discipline affects the function on which the students are focusing. They also research cultural and historical data, weigh their personal values, and consider the impact of psychological concepts they've studied.

"It's an eye-opening exercise," wrote Ms. Stein, who is also director of Rockhurst's Innovation Academy. Sometimes students get frustrated and agitated, she says, which can often spark their creativity.

At Southern New Hampshire University, Shawn Powers, associate dean of the School of Arts & Sciences, has teamed up with Justina Oliveira to use photography to teach social psychology. They engage students in a method called "guided noticing." For example, they will assign students to look at photos taken during the Great Depression and ask them questions like, What's going on in this image? What do you notice? What colors and shapes do you see? And what are the relationships between them?

The questions, Ms. Powers wrote in an email, help students connect the images to social-psychology concepts in the course: discrimination, love, community, altruism, hate, peace, power, and generosity. And they must provide evidence, grounded in the artists' choices or in their own interpretations. Eventually, they create their own photographic works depicting a theme of the course.

"Suddenly," she wrote, "they are seeing elements of power in the empty classroom they snap or evidence of discrimination in the shot of the welcome sign to a mixed-income housing development."

A Collaborative Effort



Recently we [asked](#) how you ease the stigma students may feel in asking for help. For Cathe Nutter, senior director of university advising at Texas Tech University, a change in terminology has made a big difference. “I recently lighted on the idea that using the term ‘collaborate’ works much better than ‘ask for help,’” wrote Ms. Nutter, who teaches academic-success classes for new students and those in academic jeopardy.

“I’ve begun teaching that education is a collaborative effort,” she wrote, “and there are partners all across campus for students to add to their team.”

This framing works against feelings of inadequacy, she added, because where seeking help works in one direction, collaboration “builds up all partners involved.”

Not only that, Ms. Nutter wrote, collaboration ties right into two of the skills research suggests employers most hope to see in new graduates: communication and teamwork. How do you link the qualities you hope to cultivate in your students to their post-college lives? Send your thoughts to beckie.supiano@chronicle.com and they may appear in a future newsletter.

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ICYMI

- A student once asked Justin McDaniel, a religious-studies professor at the University of Pennsylvania, why anyone would want to live a monastic life. Rather than turning to sociological theory, Mr. McDaniel had his students test out how such a lifestyle might actually feel. As Beckie [wrote](#) in our recent [issue](#) on innovative teachers, Mr. McDaniel now has his students live monastically for a month. They don't talk, use electronics, or make physical contact — in class or outside — among other things. It's all part of what his dean called “the only humanities course that has a lab section.”
- As the second half of the fall semester gets underway, it's time to take an honest look at how the actual experience of teaching your course may be diverging from your initial plans, [David Gooblar](#) recently wrote in *The Chronicle*. Tweaks to your course can be made in response to data students provide, like in-class work and assignments. Another option is to ask them to anonymously write on both sides of an index card: on one, they describe something that's working well for them in the course; on the other, something that can be improved.
- At a time of escalating political and cultural tensions on and off campus, professors are trying to find ways to navigate hot-button issues in their teaching, according to the [The New York Times](#). For [more](#) on this [topic](#), you can read some of *The Chronicle's* past [coverage](#).
- The “quality of student learning” was ranked as the most urgent factor in need of improvement in undergraduate education, according to a recent Ithaka S+R [survey](#). Concerns about student learning outpaced other priorities, like degree completion, affordability, and cost. Respondents also described the current state of undergraduate education as “somewhat above neutral”, or 4.71 on a 7-point scale, where 1 is extremely poor and 7 is excellent.

Quality Relationships, In-Person and Online

A few weeks ago, we [asked](#) how you are trying to provide your students with more effective feedback, perhaps by detaching it from grades and making it more descriptive. Peggy Shannon-Baker shared the challenges she faces in her online courses. It isn't easy, she said, because online courses lack the kinds of opportunities for informal interaction that regularly pop up in person.

That's why Ms. Shannon-Baker, an assistant professor of curriculum, foundations, and reading at Georgia Southern University, uses online tools like rubrics with comment sections, discussion boards, and a week-in-review newsletter that allows her to share general feedback.

How, we asked, do her online interactions with students compare with those that take place in person?

“In face-to-face courses,” she wrote, “it is often the informal and unplanned conversations or comments that bring depth and quality to building relationships with students.” It’s easy in these contexts, she said, to comment when people seem unprepared and, depending on what she learns, to change how she teaches in response. She’s still looking for the right mechanisms to do this online.

This brought up a larger observation she had about the nature and burden of risk in each mode of learning. In a face-to-face course, she wrote, “I am used to ‘going out on the limb’ to have such a frank/real conversation with the students; online it seems I can best get these interactions if the students go out on the limb to respond or otherwise reach out to me.”

She ended with a question, which I will extend to you all on her behalf: “I would love to hear how others form quality interactions and relationships with students online.”

What ideas do you have? Please drop me a line at dan.berrett@chronicle.com and I may use it in an upcoming newsletter.

Thanks for reading. If you have questions or suggestions, please write to us at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com. If you’ve been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up, you can do so [here](#).

— Dan and Beckie