

THINKING FAR OUTSIDE OF THE BOX

Creativity



"The world is but a canvas to the imagination."
Henry David Thoreau

Although it sounds cliché, these college years will be a high point in your life. This is a time when you can foster your independence and be yourself. With so many varied individuals on a college campus, you will certainly find roommates, teachers, friends (and maybe, soul-mates) who will recognize and appreciate your uniqueness. These will be great times for you, but they will not necessarily be easy times. So, how to succeed and be happy?

*"You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!
You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose."*
Dr. Seuss

CREATING THE FOUNDATION

Mastering time management and study skills will give you an edge, while focus and drive will help you to meet the challenges of a constantly changing environment. "Smarts" are important, but they're not everything. You'll need to think a bit differently in order to succeed. This will require you to develop your own sense of creativity.

While you probably know someone who you would label "creative", everyone has the potential. Being creative allows you to look beyond your direct experiences and explore alternate solutions to problems. It allows you to make something from nothing, to use an object in an innovative way, to think "outside the box." Creative people are flexible



and therefore not tied to the way things have always been. Everything you do that is not habitual is creative. The key to adapting to the challenges of your daily life is to harness your creativity – curiosity, enthusiasm and passion, persistence, imagination – and direct it toward your work, studies, and life. The creative process is ongoing!

“Creativity requires the courage to let go of uncertainties.”

Erich Fromm

Unfortunately, the educational system often fails to help students develop and retain a creative spirit. So much emphasis is placed on learning through rote memorization that cultivating the imagination is shortchanged. In fact, most adults demonstrate only 10% of the creativity they displayed at age five (Shrieves, 1996). It’s not that our creativity has actually been lost; it’s just that we’ve all been conditioned to repress it. As a result, we need to consciously work to redevelop our creativity.

“You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.”

Maya Angelou

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR CREATIVITY

Creativity is an ongoing process. Some individuals are gifted artists and thinkers, but most of us need to work on improving and developing our own sense of creativity. Take some time to reflect on the following steps to improve your creativity, so that you will be empowered to try new things and be more innovative in addressing challenges.

- **Think outside the box-** By the time you finish college, you will have taken over 2,600 quizzes, tests and exams (von Oech, 1983; Degraaf, Jordan, & Degraaf, 1999). Many of the questions that you are asked will require only one right answer. Unfortunately, this “right answer” approach starts to affect our way of thinking. Instead, you should realize that life is ambiguous and that there are many right answers, depending on the question or unique situation. Be receptive to thinking about problems in a new and different way, so as not to restrict your imagination.
- **Play more-** Don’t be too serious! In fact, choose to be serious only about important things. Game playing and hobbies can improve problem-solving and creative skills. There are many types of activities that involve intellectual thought and application of creative solutions: jigsaw and crossword puzzles; board, card, and computer games; building blocks; drawing; role playing/acting; stamp and coin



collecting; sports; visual and performing arts. Simply talking to others and asking questions will contribute to creative thought and practice. While you need to keep life and your responsibilities in perspective, play is essential. It refreshes you to take on challenges, and provides relaxation, release, and the chance to reconnect with friends, family, and yourself.

- ***Focus on novelty-*** The more familiar we are with something, the less stimulating it is. To enhance creativity, insert interruptions and novel moments into your day: change your work/study hours, walk to classes a different way, listen to an unfamiliar radio station, read a magazine you don't normally read, eat something different at mealtime, or watch a television program or movie you wouldn't normally watch.
- ***Create your own creative space-*** Having your own special place for creative experiences has many benefits. Take a space in your home, dorm, or office, and make it a place that stimulates you to think and be creative. Make an effort to surround yourself with the tools and resources you'll need to be creative. Think about your ideal creative space. Think about where and how you will create this space. What will you need? A computer? Art supplies? Musical instruments? Where will it be? Will you have a view of the outdoors? Whatever you do, find a way to regularly escape!
- ***Keep records-*** Keep a daily journal. Record your thoughts, ideas, sketches, and doodles. Make a note of the things that surprise you every day. Make it a point to do something to surprise others, as well. Review your journal regularly and see how you've developed creatively.
- ***Develop outside interests-*** The world is full of experiences to be discovered. Take advantage of new opportunities and schedule creative time into your day. The more diverse your knowledge and interests, the more you'll learn. Develop an interest in something different, preferably well away from your normal sphere of activity. For example, read comic books or magazines you wouldn't normally read. Take a class that you had never before considered. Join a book club, artists' workshop, writer's guild, or musical group. It is a common trait of creative people to be interested in a wide variety of subjects.
- ***Don't work too hard-*** You need time away from a problem in order to address it creatively. Planning some time for a workout will give your body needed exercise, your mind a chance to rest, and your subconscious the opportunity to better digest information. Because your mental and physical health are prerequisites to creative thinking, they need to be exercised, yet thrive on periods of relaxation. You may find that while jogging or painting or playing an instrument you can clear your mind and



better think through life's challenges. You may be able to visualize computer programs, develop ideas, conceptualize papers, or process solutions to problems.

- ***Daydream and doodle-*** Don't fight the urge to sleep, dream, day dream, and doodle. Again, sometimes our subconscious helps us to solve problems. Einstein was a day dreamer, and look what he creatively accomplished! It is important to give your mind a chance to relax, refresh, and think more clearly. Once you're distracted, the ideas will come. Keep a notepad by your bed and bath, and a recorder with you when you work out, relax between classes, or take the shuttle, so that you can keep track of your thoughts whenever and wherever you have them.
- ***Listen to your inner voice-*** Try to visualize yourself performing your best. This might include doing well on a test, getting an A+ on your presentation, giving good advice, scoring a goal, or helping a stranger. Using mental imagery can help you to anticipate and/or solve problems and identify critical interactions. If you want to be more creative, believe that you can be. With this attitude you'll take more risks, and ultimately come out ahead.

*"Creativity comes from trust. Trust your instincts.
And never hope more than you work."*

Rita Mae Brown

- ***Find the right route by mind mapping-*** We all get bogged down in thinking linearly; that every action leads to the next one in a step by-step progression. However, we also have the capacity to think associatively; where every action and idea leads to a variety of other actions and ideas in an interconnected and creative web of thoughts. Writing a paper? Planning a party? Begin by writing a few words representing the main idea (e.g., party theme) or activity (e.g., paper topic) in the center of the page and work outward in all directions writing additional related ideas or activities. Continue the process for each subsequent idea or activity, drawing links between the items. This mapping exercise will produce a growing and organized structure composed of interrelated key words and images.
- ***Brainstorm without an umbrella-*** The best way to generate new, innovative, and quality ideas is to engage in brainstorming (without filtering). To do this, work individually or with a group to first generate a long list of ideas without pausing to judge each option. The sky's the limit! Generating a large number of ideas will yield higher quality thoughts. The greater the number of ideas, the greater the likelihood of developing new and effective alternatives. Only after developing this exhaustive list should you work to critique and evaluate each idea.



- ***Make mistakes***- If you make a mistake, that's o.k. Move on. Simply rethink your answers and generate ideas you might not have otherwise discovered. Remember the two benefits of failure: first, if you fail, you learn what doesn't work; and secondly, you'll have an opportunity to try a new approach.
- ***Be happy***- Increasing happiness increases creativity (Baron & Byrne, 2000). Laughing will relax you and help the ideas to flow, so use humor to put yourself and those around you in a creative state of mind. If you're in a good mood, you'll be a better, more flexible and creative thinker.

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