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Created to Create: Fostering Innovative Education

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Created to Create: Fostering Innovative Education

Abstract

"Can we teach kids to be creative? Can we teach students to wonder, to ask questions, to innovate? Or is this, in fact, something that is naturally within them?"

Posting about shifting school culture to allow for more creativity from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/created-to-create-fostering-innovative-education/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at [Dordt College](#).

Created to Create: Fostering Innovative Education

 allthings.org/created-to-create-fostering-innovative-education/

Dave Mulder

For over a decade now, I have been a part of [Dordt Discovery Days](#), a week-long summer camp for middle schoolers we put on each summer at Dordt College. It's a great experience for the campers: they get a taste of college life, it's a fantastic social opportunity, and — hopefully — they learn something, too.

I have taught a course called “Geek Squad” for a few summers. The dozen or so campers who would sign up for this course were self-identified as “geeks,” so it's no surprise that we talked about superheroes, discussed *The Lord of the Rings*, and argued the finer points of why *Star Wars* is actually superior to *Star Trek*. In its essence, though, the course was about exploring, experimenting, collaborating, as well as celebrating successes. We built all sorts of contraptions: marshmallow cannons, desktop catapults, tiny straw rockets, junk robots with tiny motors to make them buzz across the floor, and marble runs, and we captured video of the whole thing to edit and share online.

Four days into the camp, with my geeks up to their elbows in hot glue guns and soldering irons and scraps of junk all over the room, an amazing thing happened. While adding a propeller to the motor on his junkbot, one geek leaned over to his table partner and observed:

“This is what school should be like.”

Without looking up from his soldering iron, his friend wistfully replied:

“Totally.”

Wow.

This made me wonder about the way school works for kids. Granted, this was summer camp, but when I think about the kind of authentic learning these kids were doing... I agree with my self-professed geek: this is what school should be like!

The eminent developmental psychologist Jean Piaget has had a tremendous impact on teaching and learning over the past 50 years and wrote prolifically about child development and education. I recently came across this quote from his book *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*: “Education means making creators... You have to make inventors, innovators — not conformists.”

This got me thinking some more about creativity and its role in learning. Can we teach kids to be creative? Can we teach students to wonder, to ask questions, to innovate? Or is this, in fact, something that is naturally within them?

We read in [Genesis 1](#) about the way the Lord has created human beings:

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Perhaps part of the way we reflect the “image of God” is in our creativity. God is the Creator; perhaps our reflection of His mighty, creative power is in our own ability to exercise creativity.

I believe that human beings are created to create. School — formal education — should not only “make room” for this... we should *actively seek to develop students’ creative capabilities*. I am not equating “creativity” with being “artistic,” though I definitely think that the arts are a great place to give kids room to be creative. And perhaps we expect students to write creatively from time to time in their English classes. But what about science class? Could creativity show up there? Or in physical education? Or history? Or geography? Or math?

What if creativity is *an essential capacity for learning*? What if Piaget is right, and becoming educated actually means becoming creative?

Maybe I’m a little worried that school culture seems to be centered on high-stakes testing and convergent, universal curriculum. I worry about how this affects creativity, motivation, engagement and true learning. What are students going to come away with? Excellent test-taking skills?

I’m sorry; I know that sounds cynical. It’s just that, in a conformity-focused classroom, there are likely kids whose capacity for creativity is being slowly ground out of them.

They are the doodlers.

The story-tellers.

The kids itching to *do*.

The ones who might shock you with their unique perspectives.

The ones who see surprising connections between diverse ideas.

The ones who create, create, create, create... the ones who can’t seem to shut off the flow of ideas.

How is school for them? Are these things celebrated? Or do teachers shut them down? Tell them to get in line, to stay on task, to... conform?

There are historical reasons for today’s school culture of conformity, of course, and there are ongoing cultural forces at work pushing schools into this sort of direction. One of my favorite concise explanations of this conformity culture is a 12-minute TED Talk by educator and creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson, “[Changing Education Paradigms](#).” Here he explains his thinking about the historical and cultural forces giving shape to contemporary school culture. In a nutshell, his argument is this: schools today have been shaped by an Enlightenment-era view of the student and a Modernist-Industrialist economic model of the role of education in society. Yes, he has to leave out a lot of history, and yes, there are some places he glosses over details and leaves out alternative perspectives. But in total, I think Robinson’s argument is quite sound. His fundamental point — that today’s schools are not serving today’s students as well as they could be — rings true for me.

So, what does this mean for schools? For teachers? For parents concerned about their children’s education? Could we break out of this historical mold? Could we start to shift school culture? Could we change a focus on conformity and start to celebrate creativity instead?

I don’t have a lot of answers, unfortunately. But, I offer these questions as some places where we might begin to shift school culture:

- What would school look like if we *expected* to foster creativity?
- What would school look like if we prized innovation over conformity?
- What would school look like if we made deliberate physical and mental spaces for students to play with ideas, create contraptions, and solve authentic problems? Would students be more engaged? (Would *teachers* be more engaged?)
- What structures and policies would have to change?
- How do content standards fit into this approach?
- What would we be giving up by incorporating more innovation? What would we gain?
- If we made innovation and creativity the norm... would that be trying make everyone conform to innovation?

There are not easy answers to questions like these, but I will suggest that we will not see schools embracing creativity as an essential element for true learning if we continue down the course we are currently traveling. I'll leave you with this graphic I created some time ago. I hope it fosters some reflection for you.

