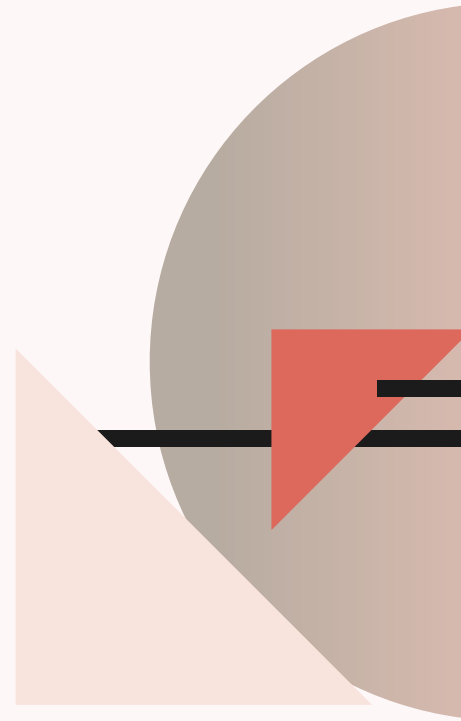


Why Teacher Creativity May Be the Key to a More Fulfilling Career



Brett Fischer

After nearly a decade of precarious migrations from one school to another, I was finally awarded tenure at a CEGEP. What I dreamed would be a moment of relief—if not a full-blown cause for celebration—actually came with a heady dose of anxiety: Could I really teach for 25 more years? Was this honestly how I saw my life unfolding? Rather than ushering in a new era of job security and financial stability, tenure was the beginning of what I would later call my mid-career crisis. And, as I later discovered, I was not alone in feeling this way.



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According to a landmark study by the Swiss researcher Michael Huberman (1989), most teachers go through an experimentation and reassessment stage between their seventh and eighteenth year in the profession. This mid-career stage culminates in a series of crises, which can be resolved in one of two ways. Most of the participants in Huberman's study took a step back from the profession in a process he called "disengagement." However, a minor subset of the population resolved their mid-career crises by doing the exact opposite: charging into teaching with renewed vigour and zest. Often, this involved making small adjustments, such as changing academic subjects or switching schools. Other teachers found their second wind by seeking out more creative, ambitious ventures on a larger scale. Regardless

of the way they chose to challenge themselves, what Huberman wanted to underscore was that the act of consistently striving for novelty and enjoyment somehow insulated these educators against the "slow erosion of the spirit" (p. 351) that their disengaged peers experienced.

Diving into creativity... through research

Huberman's study provided me with the impetus to seek out novelty in my own career, but it also left me wondering: Whose example could I follow? Who were the outliers in the college system who continued to find novelty and joy in their practice? To answer these questions, I enrolled in a PhD program at McGill University under

the supervision of Mindy Carter, an expert on creativity. Dr. Carter suggested I begin my research with a literature review of past studies on creativity and then identify the population of teachers I would need to recruit for my research.

Fortunately, the literature review was expedited by a long-established correlation between creativity and self-actualization, beginning with the work of American psychologists Abraham Maslow (1968) and Carl Rogers (1963). Maslow was the first to sequence psychological needs along a hierarchy, at the top of which he placed self-actualization, the need to fully realize one's potential. When studying self-actualizing people, Maslow observed a generalized, habitual creativeness that is "emitted"

like radioactivity, and hits all of life, regardless of problems" (p. 135). Similarly, Rogers's work revealed that the defining characteristic of fully functioning people (his term for the self-actualized) was a constant openness to possibilities and the seeking out of new experiences. Just as Huberman found that the happiest teachers were those who pursued novelty and change, psychologists like Maslow and Rogers noticed that the happiest, most fulfilled people in society were those who remained open to new ideas and personal growth. In fact, the more I read about the psychology of well-being, the more it seemed evident that creativity and sustainable happiness were highly correlated regardless of profession.

Debunking some myths

The next step in my research involved defining creativity and the level of creativity I wanted to observe. I soon learned that there were two common misconceptions around creativity. The first is that children are more creative than adults (possibly promulgated by Ken Robinson's TED Talk *Do schools kill creativity?* (Robinson, 2006)). The reality, however, is that novelty must be yoked to value having what experts define as truly creative ideas, products or solutions. So, while children excel in imaginative thinking, they often lack the critical thinking and depth of knowledge to produce anything useful. Current research has shown that creativity is a dance between both divergent thinking and the ability to then evaluate the utility of one's ideas (Beatty *et al.*, 2016). Creative individuals, therefore, are those who can use both creative and critical processes together.

The second popular misconception about creativity is that it is synonymous with innovation. The difference between the two is simple: creativity refers to generating novel and useful solutions, whereas innovation is applying those solutions on a large scale (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). Viewed in this way, creative ideas do not necessarily lead to innovation. In fact, there are likely thousands, if not millions of creative solutions in education that never catch on. Consequently, it is not enough to have an incredibly new and useful idea; it must also be adopted by others if it is to lead to widespread innovation.

What do creative teachers have in common?

Having understood these myths, I set out to find creative teachers with both novel, useful ideas that were also adopted by others at an organization-wide, if not college-wide magnitude, known as "localized creativity" (Worth, 2010). This meant recruiting teachers who had consistently staved off disengagement by developing projects that were exciting, practical, and inspirational for others. Through a snowball/chain-referral sampling process, I found six participants (Sarah, Julie,

Valerie, Chris, Colin and Cara) who shared three common attributes:

1. They were engaged in activities or projects¹ that were new and useful in at least a college-wide context.
2. Their initiatives had earned a great deal of recognition from other experts in the field. Five of the six participants had won national awards at the time of the interviews and one teacher was inaugurated into the Quebec Order for Excellence in Education shortly thereafter.
3. The teachers had demonstrated a sustained commitment to creative practices over several years and were actively engaged in locally creative enterprises at the time the study was conducted.

The perfect methodology for this study did not yet exist. However, Lynn Butler-Kisber (2010), one of my thesis advisors and an expert on qualitative research methodology, suggested I approach data collection and analysis through two different methods, a process known in qualitative studies as complementarity (Flick, 2011), which is similar to triangulation in quantitative research. The first method, known as constructivist grounded theory (Char-

² Among the participants, this included the implementation and development of a centre for universal learning, an inter-collegial writing competition, an organization for the province-wide monitoring of the quality of French in CEGEPs, a YouTube chemistry channel with over one million views, a living campus initiative to connect different disciplines to the natural environment, a certificate programme in sustainable happiness, a community of inquiry for CEGEP science teachers, the research and development of active learning classrooms, and an informal inter-collegial mentoring programme for new teachers.

maz, 2006), requires researchers to conduct interviews with multiple participants and then to reduce the data into manageable categories through a process of comparison, rule generation and memo writing. This method is well-established in the history of qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and provided a scientific rigour that appealed to my logical-mathematical side. The second method, known as narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), is a holistic process that involves collecting and analyzing stories through the three-dimensional framework of interaction, continuity and situation. In addition to interviews and observations, this integrative approach allowed me to examine creative processes through a variety of artifacts such as email exchanges, photos, lesson plans, course syllabi, newspaper articles, project outlines, blueprints, mind-maps, a Youtube channel, and even one participant's opening address on finding joy in teaching. Consequently, by alternating between a traditional, rigorous method and a holistic, storied exploration, I hoped—in a meta way—to simulate the very processes of evaluation and imagination that occur in the creative brain.

The four interconnected creative processes

The results of my chimera-like research endeavour were predictable in some ways, but surprising in others. The following four-processes model summarizes these findings in an accessible, easy-to-apply manner. Reading the model, it is important to be cognizant of two things. First, inspired by Carol Dweck's theory of growth mindset (2006), I oriented the model

toward *processes* rather than *abilities*. This means that no matter what your current level of creativity is, there is always room for improvement. The second thing to bear in mind is that the processes in the model are interconnected. No single process alone can spark or sustain creativity. However, combined, the four processes provide a useful heuristic to guide educators toward a more innovative, fulfilling, career.

Process 1

Introspection

Colin, one of the participants in my study, told me about how uncritical he had been of his pedagogical practices when he first began his career: "Taught like I had been taught, as a lecturer, without thinking whether that was effective or not." Then, one day, when Colin was serving on a hiring committee for the Physics department, the dean of his college asked a question that took both the job candidate and Colin by surprise:

— Tell me, how do you teach?

So, [the candidate] started talking about lecturing.

— So, how do you know that works?

And the guy says:

— Well, that's the way I did it.

And then [the dean] said:

— Well, where's your data? You would never give me an opinion from astrophysics! You'd never just tell me you think something's true from astrophysics without talking to the data. Where's the data? How do you know lecturing works?"

And the guy was just floored, right. And I remember thinking, "Christ!"

That pivotal moment in Colin's career led him to the realization that the same rigour he appreciated in science could also be applied to teaching. This epiphany led him to question his own values and assumptions as an educator, and then to later help others do the same.

Data from my research showed that the introspective process consisted of three steps, beginning with the cultivation of self-awareness and the identification of values. Journaling, discussions, and experimentation all help creative teachers to recognize and reconnect with their ideals. Values are what help creative teachers to develop what Burnett and Evans (2016) call a "compass and a direction." With compass and direction, creative teachers can then begin mapping a journey by engaging in the second step: aligning practices with values. In *Teaching from the Heart*, Jerold Apps (1966) suggests asking the two following questions: "Is what I am doing truly an expression of who I am? And if it is not, why is it not?" (p. 16-17).

The difference between vision and reality allows creative teachers to pinpoint what needs solving. Solutions, however, rarely present themselves in ready-made packages. For this reason, the third step in the introspective process is to stay vigilant. Scholars like Keith Sawyer refer to creative ideas as an accumulation of insights (Sawyer, 2013) or what Johnson calls a build-up of "half hunches" (Johnson, 2010). Introspection, therefore, is a three-stage process of knowing who the teacher wants to be, checking how values compare with observable practices, and then staying alert for ideas that can make visions and reality align.

Process 2

Reification

The inventor and scientist Thomas Edison famously stated that inspiration is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. While I believe this undermines the importance of the introspection process, it shows that the most observable aspect of creativity, the reification process, encompasses a variety of behaviours that must be continually built upon over time.

The first component of reification is collaboration. Peers, colleagues, and friends all provided the creative teachers in my study with support, information, and ideas. Many of their achievements were the results of co-collaborations or projects that had already been initiated by other creative people in their networks. Thus, while it appeared that creative teachers were effective collaborators, careful study also showed they were *selective* collaborators. Rather than surrounding themselves with "yes" people, creative teachers look for other equally engaged individuals whose skills and abilities complement their own. For example, Colin spoke of how he often invited his research partner to observe his classes:

I'd say:
— Wasn't that great?
And she'd say:
— Yeah, but did you notice what three quarters of the girls were doing? Three quarters of the girls weren't participating and maybe it's because of this...
And I'd kind of go, "Really? You noticed that?"

Thus, it was through their networks that they not only received information and opportunities, but also felt challenged and invigorated.

In addition to teaming up with the right people, creative teachers also reify their visions by learning how to rally others to their cause. In other words, creative teachers are excellent salespeople. Linda Hill, a professor of collective genius at Harvard, argues that an individual's ability to advocate for a point of view is essential in a creative organization (Hill, 2014). One of my participants, Sarah, explained how she first learned this from a colleague while advocating for a centre for universal learning:

He helped me to understand that you have to sensitize people. Cause I forget sensitization. Everyone knows it's an issue, let's just move on.

And he's like:

—No, no, no Sarah. If people aren't sensitized, they won't help or they may not help effectively. But if they're sensitized, they'll wanna help.

So, he really helped me with the ideas of testimonials, perspective-taking, and having to appeal to people's sense of fairness and empathy.

Without salesmanship, creative ideas do not get the funding or attention they deserve. This highly developable skill may be what most separates the locally creative from the disengaged.

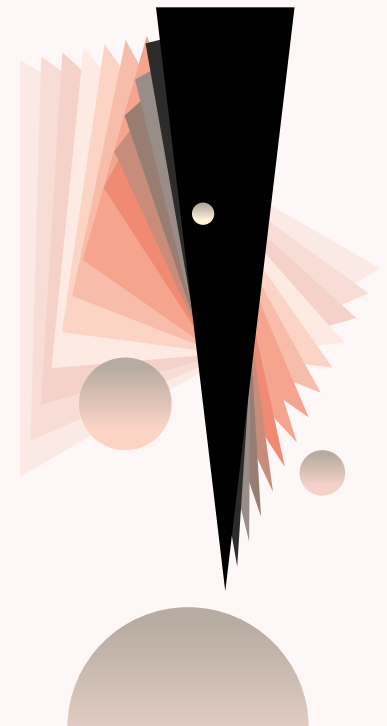
Finally, to reify their visions, creative teachers find a way to do less of what they dislike and more of what they do like. This process, the individual customization of one's role in a workplace, is known as "job crafting" (Berg *et al.*, 2013), and it is something in which everyone engages. However, creative teachers take job crafting to the next level by rewriting their job description. For example, Valerie got a grant to study students' misconceptions about chemistry. Then, she leveraged that grant to work on other projects like writing textbooks and creating a YouTube channel to address chemistry-related misconceptions. This kind of synergy between projects, combined with critical collaborators and an ability to sell ideas, allows creative teachers to bounce from one plan to another until they find themselves working full time on exactly what their introspective processes have guided them to do.

Process 3

Resisting

Being creative often sounds like the secret to a charmed life, but the truth is that being an outlier can occasionally set people apart from their peers. At the end of one interview, Chris confided his feelings of isolation to me: "It's a lot of hard work... Change is a lonely place and a tough place." Similarly, Julie spoke of how her overzealousness set her apart from her colleagues: "And I know that it's exhausting for the people around me... But it's about accepting who I am and knowing that other people can't keep up—they just can't." Being at the vanguard is generally rewarding, but it can sometimes mean loneliness and adversity.

One of the biggest challenges locally creative teachers face is rejection. Ideas that they see as useful and practical may seem "too far out there" for others who do not share their vision. Fortunately, when faced with disapproval from colleagues or administrators, or with a setback in rallying support for an idea, creative teachers demonstrate a high degree of "grit" or "resilience" (Duckworth, 2013; Grant, 2016). Typically, they either find a way to *forge ahead* or to *shift gears*. For example, the city by-laws would not allow Chris to dig a pond on school grounds, so he forged ahead by building one on the college's roof. Similarly, Julie recounted how she forged ahead in developing a collaborative reading project that an administrator initially opposed. Most of the time, forging ahead is sufficient; yet creative teachers who are consistently held back, rejected or devalued by their organization



eventually shift gears. For example, Sarah, Julie and Cara all left high school teaching jobs after years of dealing with unsupportive administrators before finding colleges where they were allowed to thrive. In short, creative teachers are resilient and know how to stand up for themselves, but as Chris cautioned, "If you don't support your champions... they're gonna disappear."

Process 4

Confidence building

According to Bandura (1977), expectations of personal efficacy "determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p.191). In other words, those who expect to succeed are more likely to do so. This is especially true of creative teachers, who,

with each triumph, broaden their collaborative networks, improve their salesmanship skills, and redefine their job descriptions to better reify their values. For example, Valerie spoke of the Matthew Effect to explain how with each grant she was awarded, her prestige grew and made it more likely she would receive funding and be invited to participate in other cutting-edge projects (Merton, 1968). Similarly, Chris used the term "risk capital" to describe the confidence he built through cumulative risk-taking and how he grew more ambitious with each new venture. In short, the final process is one of accumulation, whereby one must continually strive to be creative in order for each project to continue snowballing into the next.

Feeling the difference

The findings of this study taught me that creativity is as much a choice

as it is a gift. The creative teachers I met were undoubtedly talented individuals, but they also invested in an interconnected web of behaviours and processes to unleash their potential and to thrive where others floundered. Thus, I learned that even when creative teachers failed to find the right solution or to rally the support they needed to get a project off the ground, the accumulation of their efforts still succeeded in staving off the slow erosion of the spirit that ultimately awaits so many others in the profession. And so, while I may not yet be creative to the same degree as my participants and while I am often just as frustrated as I am exhilarated with this creative journey, I continue to follow these processes because with each step toward my values, I feel one step closer to self-actualization and one step further away from the disengagement I once faced. —

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