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Editorial

IAL News

Message From The President
by Gail Heidenhain

IAL Conference Overview
by Sarah Spengler

Major Articles

Accelerated Learning: The
Inner Dimension Of Change
by Lonny Gold

Teaching Out Of The Box:
Creativity In The Classroom
(Part 2)
by Chaz Pugliese

Short Articles

Writing To Learn
by Clarice Dankers

Leadership Through
Appreciation
by Madeleine Duclos

Review

Resa H. Steindel: The Call Of
Brilliance
A Review by Charles Bubar

Teaching Out-of-the Box: Creativity In The Classroom (Part 2)

by Chaz Pugliese

This is the final part of an article on creativity which appeared in the July issue of IMAGINE. We saw in the first part of the article that creativity could be developed. The trick is to focus the mind, challenge assumptions, tease out the invisible connections. This section highlights a few essential principles of the creative process and presents a series of exercises that illustrate how the principles work in a teaching situation. Chaz stresses that he is concerned here with everyday creativity and that his focus is on the teacher's creativity rather than on the student's. (Although in at least one exercise described below these overlap at one point or other.)

Combining

The first of these principles is combining (hence combinational creativity). This is a good start and perhaps the easiest way in, in the sense that a major output is not required. It is more like hitchhiking on other people's insights. The idea is simple: some creative people focus on something that has already been invented, and provide variations with the intent of improving the original idea or making it work in a different context, or just for the sheer fun of it. So basically this boils down to taking an idea as an inspirational stepping stone for another great idea. Let's see how this principle works in teaching, specifically in a dictation exercise.

Just who invented dictation nobody really knows and it is, in fact, totally irrelevant. What we do know is that this type of exercise has been around for centuries. For example, in the sixteenth century school texts were printed annotated in the margins and on interleaved pages with a commentary that was likely dictated in the classroom and copied over neatly in the printed book. In one example from 1629 in Paris students in the same class came away with full-text notes from a course on geography. Identical but for aural mistakes, the entire text of this extracurricular course was evidently provided by dictation.

Rinvolucri and Davis wrote a great little book that contains dozens of variations on a theme and is a wonderful example of combinational creativity in action.

The exercise below combines dictation and the use of the mother tongue.

Exercise 1

L1 Dictation.

Procedure:

- Pair off students. Stick a few short texts in the students' L2 on the walls of the classroom. Tell A that s/he is to read a chunk to B who has to write it down in L1.
- When B has finished dictating, give A a few minutes to tidy up his/her notes.
- Now get A/B to work together and try to reconstruct the text in L2.
- Swap roles.

Describing

Another exercise that has traditionally been very popular with language teachers and students alike is describing. Asking students to describe things is part of what we do: their weekends, historical events, a book they have read, a movie they have seen, etc. Asking students to describe pictures in particular is a classic. (Comenius first used visuals in the 17th century.) The exercise below combines this technique with the students' mother tongue and works particularly well with multilingual groups.

Exercise 2

Take my word

Procedure:

- Display a large selection of pictures of works of art. Ask the students in pairs to choose a picture they would like to do some work on.
- Ask all A's to write a description of the picture in their L1. All B's write a description of the (same) picture but in L2.
- When they have finished writing, tell them to merge their descriptions, write one final text in L2, and leave some of the words/expressions in L1 (highlighted).
- Now ask people to stand, mingle and guess the meaning of each other's words in L1. To do so, students will have to look at the picture: the context, of course, will help.

Acknowledgement: this is a variation of an activity described in *Ways of Doing* (Davis-Rinvolucri, CUP).

Exploratory behavior

Creative people learn from their experiences. Often the best way to develop our creativity is to enhance our ability to see and process what is going on through reflective practice. The exercise below is a tool I have often used with fairly good results. It can be used by anyone on their own, or in groups.

Exercise 1

Taking stock

Procedure:

1. Allow yourself to relax. Look at something neutral in your environment.
2. Take your time to think of a good lesson you have taught. Try to pay attention to the images, voices, emotions. Visualize the room and draw the group nearer to you if you can. Now work on the following questions:
 - What happened? (Make a conscious effort to recollect events: what you did, what the group did.)
 - Why was it a success? (Frame the event: What worked?)
 - How do you plan to capitalize on this? (Leverage the event: In what ways are you planning to extend or build upon your experience?)
 - Share with a partner.

Variation. The same exercise can be done to talk about a bad lesson, or any defining moment in the life of a teacher.

Acknowledgement: The conscious reflection, framing and leveraging paradigm upon which this exercise is based comes from the work of Howard Gardner.

About the Author

Chaz Pugliese is a freelance teacher and teacher trainer who has worked in the U.S., the U.K., Italy and the Czech Republic. He has been based in Paris since 1992. A regular presenter at international conferences, Chaz has written for several professional journals. Since 2002, he has edited the activity column for *Voices*, the IATEFL newsletter.

Chaz is interested in creativity issues, ways to help teachers deal with unmotivated groups, and designing materials based on neurobiological research findings. When he's not teaching, he fronts a band of 5 called Bluesiana, where he plays guitar. His motto is *docendo discimus* (when one teaches, two learn).