Small steps to creative learning: the toolkit approach to creativity [2000 words] by Louise Tondeur

Breaking it down

My own experience of turning my creative process into small steps so I could make my teaching better.

I teach Creative Writing. When I arrived in my current post I started to think about what it means to teach the 'creative' part of Creative Writing. There have been several debates about whether it is possible to teach Creative Writing at all, with a couple of recent well-researched summaries published by Michelene Wandor and Paul Dawson. My difficulty with that debate is that it usually ignores the role of excellence in teaching. Therefore I wanted to skip those repetitive arguments and ask how we nail down that elusive term 'creativity' and how we go about actually teaching it? At the same time, I realised that many of the techniques I was teaching weren't approaches that I would take myself. I decided to look at my own creative process and come up with a list of what I did to access my own creativity. Lists are good, by the way, because they free you (and your students) from having to write in sentences for the time being and they promote a kind of word association that becomes easier with space around the words. It turned out that the approaches I was using weren't wacky or mysterious or particularly unusual or even particularly original. Not only were they tried and tested, they could be explained to other people!

How to look at your own creativity and break it down into small steps.

When did you last do something creative? If you are a writer, an artist, musician, dancer or performer, think back to the last time you practiced. Or think more broadly about how you are creative in your every day life. Alternatively, use this exercise – called *Frog-Green* – as an opportunity to be creative:

- Go for a walk. Notice the different versions of the colour green you see along the way.

- When you get home, close your eyes and think about your walk. Imagine all the detail you can. Picture the colours.
- Go through all of your senses one by one and recall the experience.
- Now think specifically about the different versions of the colour green you saw.
- In a notebook make a list of the kinds of green you saw by pairing 'green' with a noun. For example 'frog-green'.

Once you have thought about a time you were creative, write down what you did. Don't analyse too much. Make a list of *what you actually did*. Anything is allowed. For example:

- Moved
- Used all of my senses
- Thought in pictures
- Observed the world around me

Some of the tools in my toolkit.

After I had looked at my creative process and broken it down, I created tools that I could pass on to my students. I had to depersonalise these tools. Those that work for me won't necessarily work for others. In my teaching I present them this way: experiment with the tool; if it works hone it and use it regularly. I use the term 'creative tools' because I want my students to be able to visualise a toolkit that they can 'carry' with them into different situations. Some of the tools in my toolkit are:

- Freewriting. By this I mean writing without stopping, without editing, without taking the pen off the page, for a set amount of time – usually one minute to start with. It's a term described by Peter Elbow at the beginning of his book *Writing with Power* (OUP, 1981).
- Close observation. This simply means looking at something, in minute detail, and describing it. Try to remove the visual bias, too. Use all of your senses. Close observation can be done deliberately just before writing about something: going on a walk to observe the environment or looking at an

object in your hand, for instance. It can also become a daily habit. Try to develop 'writer's eyes' and observe the world around you closely.

- Creative Visualisation. If you did the 'frog-green' exercise you've already tried this. As a writing exercise, Creative Visualisation means picturing something in your head – in as much detail as you can - and describing it using words on the page, or telling someone about it. It can be based on direct experience, or can be made up.
- Reading. As Julia Skinner points out in her article 'The 100 Word Challenge' (*Creative Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 2: 4, Feb 12) children may feel they don't 'have reason to write […] unless [they] have taken to blogging or are a closet author'. But one reason to learn and teach Creative Writing is that it develops interest in reading and, at the same time, our scope for creative and broad thinking. We could argue that both reading and writing are ways of thinking, or ways of working out what we think about the world. At the same time, reading develops our capacity for creativity.

Making it easy

Why make it easy?

Psychologists have proved that the easier a task becomes, the more likely we are to do it. This may seem obvious when reduced to a single sentence but consider them implications: make stopping smoking or road safety seem 'easy' and our brains have been hoodwinked into making life a little bit better. This is also a principle we can apply to learning and teaching creativity. 'Be creative' does not sound easy. It sounds abstract, and possibly elitist, too; something other people have time for. Some of my students tell me they think it sounds 'childish', suggesting that to be creative we need to get back to being more child-like and more playful. You can 'make it easy' by breaking it down into small steps like this:

- Find a stone.
- Hold it in your hand.

- Feel its weight.
- What colour is it?
- Is the surface rough or smooth?
- What does it smell like?
- With a partner, write down some words about the stone.
- Describe the place you found the stone.
- Who might use the stone? What for?
- Someone *remembers* using the stone. Write down the memory.
- Now you can add any writing activity you like (for any age group or ability) and extend it in any direction: a word association game, a poem about textures and smells, a murder mystery that starts on a beach, a feature article about unemployment in tourist resorts, an interview with an older person about memories of childhood.

Why it isn't easy

I'll stop to contradict myself now: one of the important things about creativity is that it isn't easy. Sometimes I wonder if this applies to adults wanting to 'be creative' more than to children. What do I mean? There are three different aspects to this way of thinking:

1. You have to look in a new way. It's sometimes easy to go for the most obvious: the stereotyped phrase, story, character, image, or situation, the one we've seen repeated on TV or on the Internet. Creativity means (perhaps using close observation) avoiding the most obvious path or reworking it. We're not finding something new, but often we're looking at ordinary things in a new way.
2. You have to be brave. When everyone else seems to be going for an uninteresting or same-old approach, it takes some nerve to stand out from the crowd, to say 'yes, I am creative', to get your idea out – especially as it might be criticised.
3. You have to be disciplined. Creative practice takes practice. There is no such thing as getting it right first time, or even getting it right. With a media (seemingly) full of instant gratification, and a

vision of creativity influenced by the Romantics, it can be hard to understand that creativity is not about instant results or bolts of lightening. The more you practise, the better at it you get.

Why constraint is important

One of the things I discovered as I looked at my own creative processes was that anything at all can be an idea (or perhaps it's better to say anything can be a starting point or a trigger or can tell a story). In a way, creativity is a way of describing *your ability to shape*, like a potter shapes clay. That is, we take the material (the idea, starting point or trigger) and we apply a constraint to it. This can be as simple as playing a Creative Writing game or as complicated as plotting a 100,000 word novel. There is something about the constraint that allows one to be creative. When we teach creativity we're suggesting constraints (or exercises or structures) for students to adopt and explore, and we're allowing students space to apply their own constraints. In so doing we make the process easy at first, repeatedly using short exercises or wordplay activities. Gradually we build on this approach, extending the exercises and making them more and more open ended, until we start to ask students to come up with their own structures and patterns.

Making the steps small enough

You've looked at your own creative processes and have begun to write down what you do when you're 'being creative'. You can extend and develop your list over the coming weeks, remembering the different approaches you took and recording them in a notebook. Once your list is fairly substantial, turn what you have into a list of short writing exercises. Take steps backwards until you have a set of instructions. Make sure the first instruction is as simple as possible. How do you make sure your steps are small enough? Keep taking steps back until you can't simplify the process any more. Look at my close observation exercise called 'Find a Stone' above for an example.

Setting it up

How to set up your own small steps approach to creative learning.

Here's a recap:

1. Look at your own creative processes. Think back to a time when you were 'being creative'. Don't analyse too much. What did you do? Make a list.
2. Keep adding to your list over a few weeks.
3. Turn your list into a set of writing exercises. Write a series of instructions for each item on your list.
4. Keep taking steps back until you've made the first instruction as simple as possible. (For example, 'Find a Stone'.)
5. Try adapting the activities for particular groups of students, based on particular themes. (For example, the beach.)

What can you do to make the environment creative.

Pay attention to the layout of the room. Experiment with seating students in small groups in circles, for instance, or around a small display of natural objects, or everyday objects they have brought in themselves. (A bag with objects spilling out of it is a good stimulus.) You can also use props: a wooden spoon, a box, a set of dominos, or a plant pot, for example, are all interesting props that can be displayed in an empty space. I recently had the opportunity to start a writing activity in a drama studio, with some beginner playwrights. I used a photo album, a set of postcards, an umbrella and a hat. The resulting pieces of writing were all very different.

Using stations and jigsaw learning

Laying the room out in small groups, with a prop or display in the middle, allows you to create learning stations. One way to structure creative learning is to ask students to move between different stations, responding to particular activities. Alternatively, use jigsaw learning. Have students work on the same activity together in small groups, and after ten minutes, ask one representative of each group to move on to a new group. That person reports on what happened in his or her original group.

Considering all of the senses.

You'll notice from the close observation (Find a Stone) exercise and the Creative Visualisation exercise (Frog Green) that the senses are very important. When setting up creative activities, consider how you stimulate the senses and avoid always using visual stimuli.

Find out more

For more on the creative process, see *The Sound of Paper* by Julia Cameron (Penguin, 2006).

For some examples of short Creative Writing exercises, see *The Five-Minute Writer* by Margart Geraghty (How To, 2009)

About the author

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