

# 31 Ideas to Make Any Classroom More Creative



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## to Make Any Classroom More Creative



1. **Grant opportunities to explore.** UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior found that "creative changes exist at the edge of chaos." In other words, students will increasingly engage and create when allowed outside the realm of right and wrong answers.



2. **Consider more than just compliance.** The school environment can sometimes encourage more compliance than creativity in students. The traits of reliability, sincerity, good-naturedness, and peaceability make for a quiet classroom but are also associated with the lowest levels of creativity. Make room for some noise, experimentation, absurdity, and respectful argument—and watch your students become more creative before your eyes.

3. **Make space in your students' brains.** Allowing the free-flow of ideas from students not only gets them thinking; it gets the ideas out of their brains. Expelling ideas from the imagination actually makes mental space for the next idea.
4. **Create A LOT.** Pablo Picasso created between 10,000 and 50,000 works of art, depending on how they're counted. Researchers know that the number of creative pieces produced is the number-one predictor of creative achievement. Let students be creative and talk about their ideas frequently, regularly, and habitually ... maybe even more often than you think you should, at first.
5. **Improvise.** Researchers from John's Hopkins University discovered that improvising jazz musicians learn to "switch off" areas in their prefrontal lobes responsible for monitoring and self-censorship. This allows the musician to generate ideas quickly and freely without the need to force it. Try exercises that don't end in a specific outcome, such as cooperative poetry- or lyric-writing, random dancing moments, or drawing while the teacher reads a poem or a chapter of a novel.



- 6. Encourage visual reflection.** Make a bulletin board titled “The Best Thing I Learned Today Is...” and provide index cards and pins. Encourage the students to contribute to the board every day, and make sure you contribute to it regularly, too! It allows students to share their reflections with one another while enhancing their contextual understanding of the day’s content.
- 7. Keep your classroom layout adaptable.** Optimize your classroom space to accommodate whatever activity your students will undertake. Move students to large tables during group study or conversation, then move students to one side of the tables when they must focus on a presentation. If you must maintain a strong sense of focus often with all students facing one



direction, add a group table in the back of the room so students can move into a team as needed without disrupting the rest of the class.

- 8. Listen to a podcast.** Free educational podcasts abound on the Internet these days, and many give great ideas for the creative classroom. Browse the Internet for a podcast to help you gain some new insights that suit and engage your subject matter and students’ personalities.

9. **Facilitate meaningful conversations.** Although chatter can be distracting in a classroom, teaching students to converse respectfully around a subject not only helps them think but rehearses a skill they need in the workforce. Make an easy-to-read poster of conversation starters, such as “I agree with \_\_\_\_\_, because...” or “I noticed that...” or “Couldn’t it also be true that ...?” or “Another example is...” or “Can you tell me more about ...?”

10. **Add color or light.** There’s nothing wrong with adding color to a learning space, no matter what the subject or age of the students. Consider changing the color or light in various areas of your room to suit its purpose, e.g., increase natural light and soft color in a corner where students can read, or use bright colors against a wall where thoughtful discussion will take place.



11. **Vary the assignment.** Give students several options to meet the criteria of an assignment. For example, allow students to write essays, make posters, give presentations, display multimedia, design infographics, or even lead the class in a discussion or debate.

12. **Reward, reward, reward.** Give award certificates not just for perfect assignments but for excellence in

discussion, facilitation, creativity, new ideas, participation, compassion, meeting a challenge, overcoming a mistake, humor that helps others learn, apologizing publicly, courteous interaction ... think of ways to encourage the interpersonal traits and accomplishments that aren't typically noted.

13. **Allow the “umbrella of mercy.”** Leadership guru Bill Hybels used this concept to encourage brainstorming when his team felt intimidated about sharing their ideas in a group. A student may ask for a covering from the “umbrella of mercy” before offering an idea or comment to a discussion; this automatically forbids other students from giving harsh criticism. The umbrella of mercy gives students courage to contribute their views without risking judgment or embarrassment, and it also indicates an opportunity as a creative springboard for other ideas.



14. **Create a weekly “goal calendar.”** Setting goals is a great way to get students to think of creative ways to achieve those goals. The more goals they achieve, the more courageous they become in setting them. Create a poster with a space for each student. On Mondays, students set an (achievable!) goal for the week, write it



on a sticky-note, and place it in their space on the poster. Teachers can increase the creative factor when, instead of condemning missed goals, they help students rewrite or revise the goal for the following week so it is more likely to be accomplished. Don't forget to reward, reward, reward!

- 15. Help students deal with failure.** What students consider impossible might merely indicate where they can't emotionally afford to fail. However, creativity always increases when the risk is noticed more than the botched goal, and students who fail in a sympathetic environment become a bonded team in their shared experience. Put posters up in your classroom reminding students that failure equals learning, and use positive language when discussing problems and shortcomings.



- 16. Use victory rituals.** Ceremonies mark an accomplishment moment in the students' life-journey—a "finish line," you might say—but they also mark the start of something new going forward. A victory ceremony doesn't have to be complicated or time-consuming; it can be as simple as a classroom sing, a dress-up day, a recitation, a random-dance moment, anything! Get the students' input on what would symbolize a victory for them, and then do it!



**17. Survey your students.** Students will enjoy their work more when it reflects something they love. It also implies a stamp of approval on who they are rather than who they are supposed to be.

On the first day of each year, distribute a survey to the students to find out their favorite foods, movies, games, books, and music. Ask them what they want to be when they “grow up.” Find out who else lives with them, their favorite subjects, and their favorite quotations or heroes. Then use them in test questions, word problems, writing prompts, room décor, rewards, victory ceremonies, anywhere you can.

**18. Schedule regular 10-minute creativity workouts.**

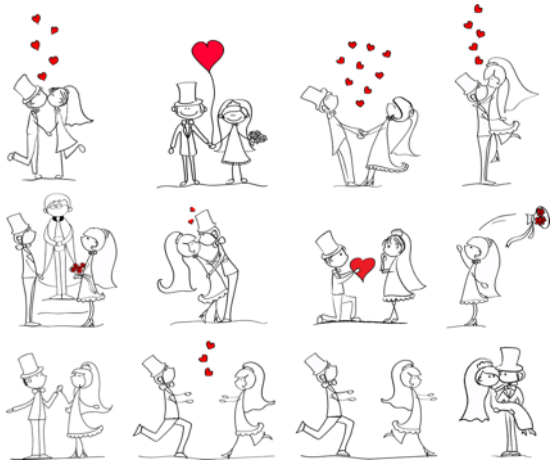
Some believe creativity is a talent, but it’s actually a skill that improves with practice. It doesn’t matter whether the subject is ELA or math or science or P.E. or band; creativity workouts help students approach assignments and challenges more playfully and less fearfully. Start the class period with a quick, simple exercise: “Draw something—ANYTHING—but do not judge yourself and do not erase.” “Use a drawing application on your smartphone or other device and draw half of



something symmetrical, then use the Mirror effect to create the other half.” “Play music and draw whatever

comes into your head while listening.” “Create a sculpture with a pile of odds-and-ends or lost-and-found materials.” “See how many things you can make with a handful of paper clips.” “Create a floorplan for your dream home or an itinerary for your dream vacation.” “Take a selfie, then cover it with tracing paper and try to draw your face.” “Draw something without lifting the pencil from the paper.”

19. **Storyboard.** When the class needs to prepare for an assignment, create a visual storyline for it together. Ask everyone in the class or group to write ideas, quotes, details, etc. for the process on sticky-notes, then collect them. Ask a student or students to arrange them on the white board as a progression. By organizing the ideas this way, the group can easily gain ideas on how to proceed and what aspects do not support the assignment’s objective.



20. **Try word banking.** This is another creative method to break an assignment down into parts and connect them together toward a goal. Draw a big box on the white board. Ask students to offer words that describe the theme, assignment, instructions, and/or objective. Write these words in the box on the board. When finished, the banked terms will help students understand the most important characteristics of the assignment, think critically about the connections between the terms, and map a sensible plan for completing the work.



21. **S.C.A.M.P.E.R.** Taken from the business world, S.C.A.M.P.E.R. is an acronym for a process helping students look at a concept from different angles. Ask a different question for each letter:

- **Substitute:** What would happen in the content, assignment, or story if we switched \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_?
- **Combine:** What would happen to the content, assignment, or story if we combined \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_?
- **Adapt:** What changes would we need to make to bring the story into the present day? What would happen if

the deadline of the assignment changed? Or the number of essay pages changed? Or if it was assigned as a group exercise instead of a solo exercise?

- **Modify:** How could we change the assignment or content to make it more valuable or easier to understand? What other important conflicts or themes do you see in the content? What other purposes or objectives could this assignment fulfill?
- **Eliminate:** What would we need to remove from this content, assignment, or story to make it simpler without changing its fundamental theme or objective?
- **Reverse:** How could the project or content be reorganized so it is clearer and more effective? Try this process when the assignment is *over* to gather ideas on how to improve it for next time.

22. **Six Different Hats.** Psychologist and author Edward de Bono created this problem-solving tool to help team-members examine six areas of thought: Logic (the facts),

Optimism (the value and benefits),

Devil's

Advocate (the difficulties and dangers),

Emotion (feels and intuition),

Creativity (possibilities and new ideas), and

Management (making sure the rules are observed in the discussion). Break the students into groups and ask each team to wear a different "hat" for a conversation



around a piece of content. For example, the group wearing the “Emotion” hat will discuss how feelings and emotions play out in the content, the group wearing the “Optimism” hat explains how the content is valuable and important, and the group wearing the “Devil’s Advocate” hat offers what difficulties and problems the content brings to the group. (Consider purchasing six different colored or styled hats from a party-supply store, naming them, and distributing them to each group as a symbol of their job.)

**23. Do a Zero Draft.** Teachers of writing and ELA understand the importance of the first-draft, but sometimes students’ ideas for writing get blocked by distractions, misunderstandings, or just plain fear. Doing a “Zero Draft” together or individually can help students pry ideas from their minds. Ask the student(s) to fold a piece of paper into four sections, then use one for each step (don’t worry about neatness at this point):



- Write down everything you know about the topic or project.
- Write down what you need to know about the topic or project but don’t already know.
- Write down why the topic or project is important.

- Write down anything else that comes into your head (this step often gets the distractions and confusion out of the way).

This exercise gets what the student knows down on paper so there's not a white page staring back at them (and intimidating them) when they try to start work.

24. **Think wishfully.** Another of Edward de Bono's techniques for creative thinking, "wishful thinking" exercises allow students to consider the ideal solution to an issue with no constraints—financial, physical, ethical, or otherwise—and no judgment of their thoughts. Most of the time, says de Bono, when we can't find a solution to a problem, we automatically try harder in the same direction. Wishful thinking stops the flow of thought and forces the students to try *differently*, not harder—to consider the "what if" to inspire opportunities for success that might not be obvious at first.



25. **Look for the creative dichotomy.** Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a specialist in spurring creativity, says creative people often present predictable personality traits. According to his 30-something years of research, creative people exhibit what seem to be polar attributes: They work hard and play hard, they are intelligent but imaginal, and they can be fun-loving

but are also very disciplined. They exude humility and respect but are proud that they accomplish more than most. They gain a great deal of pleasure from their work but tend to care about it just as much, so when it's not up to par, they feel it deeply.

**26. Give a creative license.** Not all students think they can be creative; they may say they just don't have "the gift." Creativity is not a gift; it's a skill. Even in science, math, and engineering, creativity is a part of all of us. Bernie Mosher, Director of Creative Development Services at Walt Disney Imagineering in Florida, says he once told his wife, an interior designer, that she was incredibly creative. She reciprocated by saying he was also creative, but he disagreed. She then proceeded to make a certificate for him reading as follows: *Creative License: This certifies Bernie Mosher is recognized as a creative individual who possesses the quality and ability to think creatively and problem-solve in innovative, unique ways.*



The certificate taught Mosher that "engineering and problem-solving both require an imagination and an ability to think beyond obstacles and limits." He keeps the certificate in his office to inspire him. Try giving a



similar certificate to that student who argues that he/she doesn't have a creative brain.

**27. Prioritize play.** Tim Brown, in a TED Talk on creativity, said play can be defined as “thinking with your hands.” Keep building blocks, clay, construction paper, tape, glue, and other materials on hand when students need to solve a problem—or when they just seem overwhelmed by life. Set a good example and join them!

**28. Adapt solutions from popular culture.** When discussing a piece of content or an assignment, ask students where they see similarities in movies, music, architecture, nature, advertising, television, or things displayed in their homes and workplaces. Researchers at the University of Manchester developed Gecko Gloves after watching the wide-release film *Spider-Man*. The gloves feature a self-cleaning micro-hair adhesive to

allow climbers to cling to vertical surfaces, like geckos and arachnids. See if what your



students enjoy culturally can assist them in understanding and thinking critically in literature, history, science, math, and other core subjects.

**29. Motivate intrinsically.** The Harvard Business School says the intrinsic motivation for completing tasks is passion. If your students seem unmotivated, examine if assignments and discussions are personally interesting, involving, challenging, or satisfying instead of simply a requirement of the course. Too many extrinsic motivators (like surveillance, competition, evaluation, etc.) can actually undermine the more intrinsic motivators. Ask students what they are passionate about and incorporate these into assignments and content choices.

**30. Visualize complex ideas dimensionally.** A self-proclaimed “Ride Guy” for Disney, Paul Baker suggests using fun physical materials to communicate a complicated concept. For example, he asks, “How could you visualize fractions for math students using fruit? Perspective for artists and designers using string? Jury selection for

government students using body language?” Baker once sent hundreds of pages of engineering drawings to reviewers with an



attachment of a PEZ dispenser, lots of refills, and a track layout scaled so the ride vehicle was about the size of a PEZ candy pellet. Reviewers could then visualize and try out the coordination of the ride by moving the candies around the track layout (and they enjoyed it, too!).

**31. Incorporate music into the curriculum.** Studies by reputable researchers all over the world are proving again and again that making music supports all learning. Music-rich experiences contribute to increased scores on every standardized test known to humankind—in areas like mathematics, science, comprehension, problem-solving, critical thinking, language development, memory, IQ, fine motor, spatial-temporal

skills ... you name it.

Music helps students develop emotionally, too, in areas like

grounding,

self-soothing, motivation, and manifesting personal joyfulness despite hardship or challenges. Use music in mnemonics for complicated content. Allow students to complete assignments and presentations using music. Play soft, soothing music during tests to reduce anxiety. Assign evaluation of lyrics or ask students to compose a song about the curriculum. There are countless ways to use music creatively in the classroom; an Internet search will bring you mountains of ideas.



This resource is freely provided by Britfield Institute as a gift to teachers dedicated to fostering in their students an aptitude in creativity for the purpose of excellence in education and success in life.

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