

11 CREATIVITY GAMES FOR THE CLASSROOM



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Everyone is creative. *Everyone.* Every single one of your students. Even YOU.

A child doesn't have to be particularly gifted to be creative. Creatives aren't just artists or musicians, and creativity doesn't require unlimited resources nor a disregard for self-control or limits, either. Creative potential can be fostered, improved, exercised, and brought to fruition in any student's life ... and even in a teacher's life.

As education pioneer Sir Ken Robinson explains, creativity is nothing more than "the process of having original ideas that have value." Creative thinking can be applied to not just artistry but to any human pursuit on the planet. Math, science, technology, politics, business, communication, teamwork — all these areas of our lives need creative solutions and always gain from seeing things in a fresh way.

When researchers asked students what learning aspects made them feel most creative, the answer was the freedom of not having to choose right and wrong answers. Indeed, freedom to explore and practice without a specific goal in mind is a key element of developing creative competence. Teachers must be permitted to cultivate these behaviors by introducing them to students without establishing correctness or incorrectness. And, like in every other endeavor, the more the students practice recognizing and employing their creative intuition, the better they become at doing so.

PRACTICING CREATIVITY

The following activities don't just give your students a chance to be creative; they increase their creative potential going forward. In fact, after trying some of these in your classroom, don't be surprised if your students begin to make better decisions or come up with more ideas on their own.

Teachers can try these games with students in pairs, small groups, or with the entire class. You could also use them as 5- to 10-minute creativity “warmups” while waiting for class to begin. While you could certainly let students play these games on their own while you, say, finalize your preparation for class, consider participating in these games with the students when you can. For ease in description, I will assume the students are participating while the teacher directs them.

1. **“Finish the Picture.”** Have one student draw a squiggle or a series of lines on a piece of paper. The other student finishes the drawing with no further instruction from the one who did the drawing. Prompt with questions: “What do you see in this?” After the drawing is finished, have the students switch roles; have the second student draw a squiggle for the first to complete.
2. **“What Is This Picture?”** This is a simpler game based on a more complicated drawing. One student draws a more intricate squiggle but does not allow the other student to add to it. Instead, the other student must give the drawing a name, answering the question, “What is this?” or “What do you see in this drawing?” Again, they might find more than one thing in the drawing, and again, when one finishes, the other student draws a complex squiggle for the first student to title.
3. **“What Would Happen If ...”** Write an off-the-wall question on the board for the class as a journal topic or a quick essay prompt. Give students a time limit, and hold fast to it; Sometimes students come up with more creative ideas when the clock is ticking simply because they must. Here are some question ideas:
 - a. What would you do if school was cancelled for a day? Where would you go? Who would you do it with? How would you get it done? Why?
 - b. What if gravity didn’t exist? What in this room would have to change? The neighborhood? The world?
 - c. If you were a plant or a flower, which would you be and why?
 - d. If you were a scientist with your own lab and unlimited resources, what would you research?



- e. If you were a sound, what sound would it be and why?
- f. You're a teacher who is particularly passionate about the course you teach. That course is ... and I care about it because
- g. If you were a small kitchen appliance, you would be a ... because
- h. Who would win a fight between a pirate and a ninja?
- i. What would happen if Medusa went to a salon?
- j. Invent an animal. (Draw a quick sketch of it or describe its features. What does it look like? Sound like? Smell like? Feel like?)
- k. What if you found a secret door in your house? How would you open it? Where does it lead? What do you see there? Would you tell anyone about it?
- l. Pretend you are 80-something years old. What would you say about "kids these days"?
- m. What is the most annoying song to you on the radio or television? What annoys you most about it?
- n. I (the teacher!) am not at school today! I am on vacation! Where do you think I am?
- o. Write a short description of "a day in the life of a left sock."

4. **The Prop Game.** Collect a box full of random items. Do not spend any money on them; collect them from around your home, your classroom, or junk your neighbors don't want anymore. Have students take turns pretending to use one or more of the items, but they cannot use the item(s) in the way they were meant to be used. For example, the student can't use a stockpot to pretend he/she is cooking, but it might make a nice hat! With a tennis racquet, a student could act out fencing or baseball ... or maybe flip pancakes with it!



5. **Categories.** Think of a category and, as a class, come up with things that fit in it. Categories might be simple or complicated depending on the students' age or the number of people playing. Consider categories familiar to the students from popular culture, such as "Movie stars with last names starting with M," or "Songs with the word 'Love' in the title." You might even incorporate a book you're reading or a part of history you're currently studying: "Female characters

we've studied this semester so far," or "Cities in Europe starting with 'S'" or "Places you can't go without a boat." Count your answers, and see if you can break the record on your next Category game.

6. **Color hunt.** This one works great with younger students. Separate students into groups and take them for a walk on campus. Assign each group a color. Ask each group to count how many instances of that color they see on the walk. You might even have them take a photo of each color example, then project the photos for everyone to see when you return to the classroom.



This encourages the students to look at familiar things in a different way or from a unique perspective — the essence of creative thought.

7. **Giant mural.** Recent creativity studies show the brain can become "clogged" with unexpressed thoughts, concerns, worries, hopes, dreams, etc. This clogging actually prevents the flow of creative and innovative ideas from the unconscious to the conscious mind, from the emotional to the visceral parts of the brain. By giving students a place to speak out as they will, you actually assist in clearing those thoughts and concerns out of the brain, "making room" for creativity and innovation. You also provide a safe space for students to express themselves; this personal safety is a prerequisite for any creative thought.

Tape a large piece of butcher paper on the wall in your classroom. Ask students to put at least one thing — *anything* to which they relate — on the paper every day for a set amount of time, perhaps a week, a couple weeks, a month, while a certain series of lessons is being taught (like a certain book, a certain scientific technique, a certain time in history, or a certain area of the world), or even the whole semester. Students could write a statement or a poem, make a drawing, tape up a photo or a clipping from an online/print magazine, whatever. It's fun to watch the mural fill up over time. It's also an important representation of what your students are thinking about in that given season of their lives.



8. **Drawing to music.** Play some music in your classroom, then instruct students to draw a line on a piece of paper, changing the line based on what they hear. Consider using only pencils and blank paper, or allow the students to use a color or a series of colors. When the song is finished, have students write the song name and performer on the page.

Then try another song later. Over time, watch how different students hear different things in the same songs, as well as how different songs induce different drawings for the same student.

9. **“Stop the Hamster,” a.k.a. Grounding.** As mentioned before, creativity is deeply connected to emotions. Most creatives can’t make anything when their minds are running like a hamster on a wheel. Try this easy technique with your students: *Notice five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste.* Research “grounding techniques” online for more ideas on how to stop that hamster-brain from running. Students may find these techniques helpful to them outside the classroom and for the rest of their lives whenever they need to focus their thoughts.

10. **Make up a story together.** This game helps students learn techniques to fight against the mind “going blank” or “writer’s block.” When faced with uncertainty or fear, the body enters fight-flight-freeze mode, and blood moves quickly from the brain to the arms and legs so it can act fast or protect itself. Unfortunately, that means the verbal and memory portions of the brain are left without support simply because those parts don’t help the body fight, run, or be on guard. The creative parts of the brain get stuck on the short end.

Choose a student to start a story. Ask him/her to come up with two or three sentences off-the-cuff. The next student continues the story with a few quick sentences, and so on. The story could go on forever (just pick it up the next day with the next student), you could set a time limit, or end the story with the last person in the group.

If a student insists he/she has no ideas at all, suggest one of these techniques to help loosen things up:

- a. *Summarize what the last student said.* This can help the student gain momentum to move forward in the story.
- b. *Ask someone in the room to help you.* Make it OK for a student to say to the class, “I lost my place. Where were we?” Someone in the class will explain. The teamwork may decrease the fear-level for all students, not just the one affected at the time.
- c. *Say anything.* Think of something relevant to the story — the characters, the situation, the setting, the conflict — and just say it out. Saying something will start to thaw the “brain freeze,” and it might be all that’s needed to keep the story moving.
- d. *Decide not to be a perfectionist.* Perfectionism is a lie that wrecks students of all ages. It’s the delusion that we’ll never make a mistake if we just try hard enough. Don’t ask for perfection; just get the student to join the group.
- e. *Remember this is a game, not a test.* Remind students that this is an exercise to help them improve, not an assessment of their brilliance. If they go blank at first, set a goal to work through it, and cheer for them at each improvement.



11. **Establish the “umbrella of mercy.”** A leader of a large church near Chicago invented this concept, and it’s a great approach for every learning situation and people of all ages. At any time, anyone in the group can ask to be under “the umbrella of mercy,” which temporarily forbids anyone else to give negative feedback to that person or their idea. It has the effect of creating a safe space for creativity. If students know they can be safe from hurtful criticism, they are much more willing to share thoughts and ideas. They might not share “right” answers, but their comments can act as springboards leading to the right answer.

Creativity isn't all that unique, mysterious, nor elusive, and it certainly can be taught. Not everyone can be Beethoven, Dickens, or Monet, but everyone can sing, write, and draw. And everyone — teachers and students alike — can increase their creative potential with practice. Use every method you can uncover or invent to make your classroom a place where creativity thrives, and your students can thrive right along with it.



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