Developing Creativity in Academic Reading and Writing Courses

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Abstract

Creative thinking and critical thinking were, for a long time, seen as distinct. Since the 1980s, this distinction has been challenged and it is now recognised that the two are closely connected. Indeed, critical thinking *and* creative thinking are regarded as highly desirable, if not essential, dispositions among undergraduates and employees. Significantly, creative thinking is recognised in publicity materials at International Christian University. However, the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) curricula and syllabi documents make little or no reference to creative thinking. We believe that this is an important oversight. This paper therefore outlines the need for the ELA to pay more explicit attention to fostering creativity among its students by developing a shared understanding of its meaning, by purposefully implementing classroom activities to enhance creative thinking, and by amending the curriculum and syllabus documents.

A survey of major companies in 2018 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) found that, 'analytical thinking and innovation' were the most desirable traits of employees, with 'critical thinking' and 'creative thinking' placed third and fifth respectively (WEF, 2018, as cited in OECD, 2019). However, as economies continue to digitalise and automatise, creative thinking is seen as an ever more valuable ability that AI cannot yet fully replicate (OECD, 2019). In fact, the same survey predicted that creativity would surpass critical thinking and become the third most desirable skill of employees by 2022 (WEF, 2018, as cited in OECD, 2019). Indeed, references to both creative thinking and critical thinking now abound in university promotional materials. International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo is no exception. The first claim in the ICU Diploma Policy is that students will "learn creatively while strengthening their academic foundation" (Undergraduate). In addition, students will "produce original insights based on scholarship." In other words, students can expect their instructors to provide a stimulating environment that will foster creative thinking. Similar assertions can be found on the homepage of the university's English for Liberal Arts programme (ELA) where creativity is referred to four times (English for Liberal Arts Program). Nevertheless, although both of the authors have taught in the ELA at ICU for over a decade, to their recollection, they have never attended a departmental meeting which explicitly focused on how to teach creatively or how to teach creative thinking. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is widely and regularly discussed both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, informal discussions with ELA colleagues reveal that, whilst excited by the notion of creative thinking, most struggle to define it. This situation has led the writers to consider the extent to which the ELA is fulfilling the educational promises made by ICU. Therefore, our paper seeks to both define and understand the relationship between creative and critical thinking, and explore the pedagogy that will nurture creative dispositions in our students.

Creative and Critical Thinking

The perceived relationship between critical and creative thinking has changed over the last forty years. Writing in the 1980s, Bailin (1987) noted that the two had, up until this point, been perceived as separate skills, differing in their very nature. Critical thinking was viewed as reasoning taking place within specific frameworks (or disciplines) and thus, constrained or defined by the conventions of those frameworks. In contrast, creative thinking was viewed as being "generative, spontaneous, and non-evaluative" (Bailin, 1987, p. 24). The lack of judgment or evaluation in creative thinking is antithetical to critical thinking, where analysis and evaluation are central to the approach. Creative thinking had typically been characterised as being limited to the arts, relying on talent, being fun and original, requiring no prior knowledge, and discovering major breakthroughs (Cambridge Assessment, 2021).

More recently, the understanding of creative thinking has changed. In the literature, there is now agreement that the goal of creative thinking is to create something not only novel but also practical (OECD, 2019). This element of utility is worth stressing. If what is created does not have utility, then it probably has little value. In other words, the focus is not on newness for the sake of being new, but rather a novel approach to fulfilling a task. In fact, creative thinking tasks can broadly be described as problems requiring solutions. Since problems exist in all disciplines, creative thinking is thus not restricted to the arts but in fact multi-disciplinary. For effective solutions to be found, it is also important that they conform to the expectations of the relevant discipline or disciplines (Dennet, 2012, as cited in OECD, 2019). A creative thinker is therefore someone who has a developed understanding of the field within which they are working; that is to say they are a proficient critical thinker in the field. Thus, the desired outcome of creative thinking in an academic discipline is to create something new that is of use, whereas for critical thinking, the desired outcome is analysis resulting from examination and evaluation of reasons and evidence (OECD, 2019). Indeed, in critical thinking, there may not be anything new or novel to emerge and what is currently believed in a particular domain may simply be reinforced by the critical examination. However, Bailin (1987) argued that the hitherto suggested dichotomy between the two types of thinking was a false one and that, in fact, they are complementary.

The connection between critical and creative thinking became most evident when Bloom's original taxonomy was updated in 2001 as Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In the original taxonomy, published in 1956, creativity was not identified as a thinking skill. Perhaps this indicated that creative thinking was perceived as being distinct from critical thinking or even impossible to teach, since it was the result of natural talent. However, the revised taxonomy introduced the term "create" and recognised it as the highest level of thinking, placing it at the top of the hierarchy. This is because critical and creative thinking are indeed interconnected in important ways. Firstly, as suggested above, critical thinking cannot take place without an understanding of the target of analysis. Similarly, effective creative thinking can only take place if it is supported by a solid grasp of a topic. Moreover, it is implicit that as creative thinkers propose novel solutions, there need to be critical examination and evaluation of those solutions. Furthermore, in Bloom's revised taxonomy, creativity sits at the top but the taxonomy should be viewed as representing a dynamic set of skills not as a strictly sequential series of activities. Creativity is therefore viewed as "...a *process* [italics added] involved in skills at all levels represented in the taxonomy, and increasingly so with higher order skills" (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021, p. 55). For example, Bailin (1987) argues that when thinking critically about complex issues, "answers" are seldom clear-cut and decisions often require a new, creative synthesis of the

competing viewpoints. That is, although ostensibly nothing new has been created, the synthesis itself is evidence of creativity. Thus, a creative disposition can be fostered at all stages of the taxonomy, from remembering to analysis, and therefore, teachers need to pay explicit attention to this.

Considerations for Task Design

To understand how to foster creative thinking. it is important to identify the interconnected dispositions it requires. Creative thinking implies a degree of trial-and-error and a willingness to do something in new or innovative ways. Thus, creative thinkers need to be prepared to take risks (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021). This may well be one of the most important elements of creative thinking. Associated with risk-taking is the acceptance that errors will occur as a normal part of the creative process (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021). In other words, the creative thinker develops resilience to failure. Additionally, the creative thinking process requires a degree of tolerance for ambiguity as possibilities are explored. The dispositions described above are especially significant for students such as those in the ELA who may have come from educational backgrounds where such dispositions have perhaps been discouraged.

Creative thinking and associated dispositions are best promoted when tasks incorporate specific features. It is therefore helpful to articulate those features and The Cambridge Life Competencies Framework (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020) provides a thorough description. Firstly, as already established, the goal of a creative thinking task is the generation of novel ideas to solve a problem, make a decision or achieve another kind of objective (p. 10). To help foster originality of thought, tasks should comprise three main stages: preparation, generation of ideas and implementation (p. 5). In the preparation stage, communication and collaboration are desirable. Students may explore a topic by, for example, discussing hypothetical scenarios, raising their own questions, considering multiple perspectives or looking for connections between ideas both within and across disciplines (p. 5). In the second stage of generating ideas, they are encouraged to produce as many suggestions as possible. Using brainstorming techniques such as mind mapping can be an effective way to do this (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021). Moreover, for the creative process to be as uninhibited as possible, it is important at this stage that instructors and students remain open-minded and suspend their critical judgement. Indeed, fostering a playful mood in which originality is celebrated is most conducive to promoting the flexibility that is a key feature of creative thinking. Lateral thinking, thinking 'outside the box', is to be encouraged as much as linear logic in the quest for originality. Nevertheless, since the desired outcome of creative thinking is a product that is valuable, students should be asked to elaborate on their suggestions with specific details. This process will help to determine the effectiveness of respective ideas. In the implementation stage, students select the best idea and test it, before finally reflecting upon and evaluating their work. Depending on the feedback, they may subsequently refine their work or return to the generation of new ideas, meaning that the creative process may be cyclical in nature.

Although open-endedness and flexibility are key features in the design of creative thinking tasks, too much freedom may overwhelm students (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020), particularly if they are practicing such activities for the first time. It is therefore important to initially provide some constraints, conditions or examples when setting up a task (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020). As students become more familiar

with and proficient at creative thinking tasks, the degree of open-endedness can be increased. Furthermore, as with all skills, students will better understand how to think creatively if the teacher models creative thinking (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020). Indeed, this can take place not only in the setting up of a task but at any point in a lesson, when the teacher demonstrates curiosity, points out a connection between ostensibly distinct concepts, or visually depicts a concept on the whiteboard. A final important consideration is that the value of creative thinking and how it connects to learning outcomes should be made explicit, particularly if students' previous educational experiences have minimised its importance (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020).

With these general criteria as a framework, we now want to examine how we can teach creative thinking tasks in our first-year Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) course. When considering task design, it is helpful to be aware of different levels of creativity in order to better understand learning objectives. Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) have discussed four levels of creativity: Mini-c creativity, Little-c creativity, Pro-c creativity and Big-c creativity (as cited in Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021) In reverse order, Big-c creativity results in significant innovation within a discipline and is achieved by only a few, such as Picasso or the economist Keynes. Pro-c creativity, on the other hand, exists in the domain of professionals who are able to develop or refine their area of expertise, for example university researchers or professional musicians. Thus, at the level of first-year undergraduate work, instructors should not expect to witness Big-c or Pro-c creativity. More attainable and teachable levels of creativity are to be found in the domains of Little-c and Mini-c. Little-c is the kind of creativity that manifests itself in finding solutions to everyday problems and can be developed in learners through extended practice (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021). Mini-c is the most common form of creative thinking and occurs whenever someone employs 'flexibility, intelligence and novelty' of thought (Craft 2005 as cited in Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2021, p. 53). Students might for example find a connection between an academic concept and their own experience, thus deepening their understanding of the concept. In the tasks that we outline below for our ELA students, we are therefore not aiming to exceed the level of Little-c creativity.

Creative Thinking Tasks

With the above considerations in mind, we developed a number of activities designed to foster creative thinking in our first-year ELA students, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Reading, writing and additional creative tasks

Reading tasks
Topic: Demonstrating understanding of the key ideas in a text **Activity**: Students suggest examples to illustrate a key point and explain how they do so. **Comment**: Students should also be encouraged to do this in their own writing to both show their understanding and improve the reader's understanding of key concepts.
Topic: Demonstrating understanding of the key ideas in a text

Activity: Writing a conclusion: Students write their conclusion to a text, ideally before reading the conclusion itself. They then compare their conclusion with their peers' and with the author's, and finally reflect upon the different versions.
Comment: As well as indicating comprehension, this also serves as a review of the function of a conclusion.

Topic: Deepening analysis of text by considering multiple perspectives
Activity: Interview with author: Having read a text, students brainstorm questions they would like to ask the author and select the best. They then write an interview, including the author's imagined responses. A subsequent step might be to ask them how a different author or a person they know well, such as one of their high school teachers, would answer the questions.
Comment: Although challenging, this activity allows students to consider the concepts presented in the text from different perspectives. All answers are acceptable provided that they can be justified by the student. In this sense, the activity meets the very important criteria of open-endedness.

Writing tasks

Topic: Presenting and reflecting upon the academic writing process
Activity: Students draw their typical writing process either as a diagram or as a series of vignettes. They then present it to their peers, compare and discuss the efficacy of their processes. Finally, they make any desired adjustments.
Comment: As well as reviewing the process, this should help students to understand that their process is iterative.

Topic: Overcoming individual writing difficulties, such as writer's block
Activity: Students spend a determined amount of time (e.g. 25 minutes) writing about any problems or difficulties they are having with their paper and explore potential causes of the problems. They then reflect on strategies to help them overcome their current writing obstacles.
Comment: Students can do this in their first language or English. The focus is on identifying problems and thinking about possible solutions. There is no focus on language.

Topic: Creating research questions for an academic paper
Activity: Based on a solid understanding of the criteria that define a "good" research question and an initial survey of the relevant literature, students brainstorm a main research question and supporting research questions for their paper. They then discuss them, comparing them against the criteria, sorting them into groups or themes, and revising them as necessary. The process of reflection and revision will continue until they finalise their essay outline.
Comment: Crafting research questions is probably the most challenging of the tasks listed here and may not happen until students take Research Writing, after completing their foundational ELA courses. It is important that students understand that knowledge of the topic is a prerequisite for success.

Additional suggested tasks

Topic: To consider what is required to successfully complete a task
Activity: Students create their own assessment rubric, for example, for a section of an essay (introduction) or a presentation.
Comment: The rubric can be used for self-or peer-review. The creation of rubrics necessarily requires students to think about how to group different criteria and how to prioritise them.

Topic: To study new items of vocabulary
Activity: In groups, students create a plan about how to study new items of vocabulary. This includes decisions about how many words to study, where to record the words, and how to demonstrate their understanding and ability to use the words.
Comment: In setting up and conducting this activity, students will share ideas about how to effectively study vocabulary, discuss what it means to "know" a word, and probably experiment with new ways of studying. It requires students to produce a concrete solution to a common problem.

Topic: Effectively and concisely expressing attitudes and feelings
Activity: Students use a simile, metaphor or analogy to explain how they feel about a specific topic: writing their essay (*It's like being in a tumble dryer.*); about today's class (*It's like drinking champagne.)*; or about their understanding of a text (*I am in Venice and walking across St Mark's square in thick fog when I suddenly come across the bell tower*). Students then analyse and reflect on the feelings expressed in the metaphor.
Comment: This will initially be challenging both conceptually and linguistically. Teachers may encourage students to start by using their first language. Additionally, although the activity may not immediately appear to meet the criteria of utility, creative and effective language use undoubtedly improves communication.

Implications of Designing Creative Tasks

As we brainstormed and considered the creative activities outlined above, we became more conscious of a number of issues raised by developing a creative pedagogy. Foremost among these is that the activities tend to need more time than other types of activities. For example, asking students to write comprehension questions about a text takes much longer than if a teacher presents students with such questions. However, it is reasonable to assume that as students become familiar with producing comprehension questions, for example, the activity will take less time. Nevertheless, the creative process, if moving through the stages of preparation, production and reflection, will always be time-consuming. We are therefore, not suggesting that students produce comprehension questions every time they have read a text; teachers need to make strategic decisions about when and how often creative activities take place.

Another key point we became aware of during the process of writing this paper is that we do not discuss creative thinking in the ELA, either within or outside the classroom. It is probably true that all teachers include creative activities in their classroom and it is also probably true that some teachers are not aware of this. Therefore, given that the university considers it to be essentially there needs to be much more explicit reference to creative thinking. This can take place in at least two important areas. First, the curriculum and syllabus documents need to refer to the concept, particularly with regard to the Learning Outcomes (LO) and the Learning Outcome Indicators (LOI). This is not currently the case. Second, teachers need to

draw students' attention to creativity in the classroom and in feedback. For example, when setting up a task such as mind-mapping, teachers can instruct students that there are no correct answers, and that students can be creative in terms of the content and also in how they organise the ideas, the colours they use, and any visuals. For many students, the concept of creative thinking may be new and they may wonder why they are doing these tasks (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2020). However, teachers doubtless see it as an important pedagogical disposition, while employees see it as an essential workplace attribute (OECD, 2019). Therefore, teachers should explain why it is such an important and desirable skill. In other words, it is an essential transferable skill. In addition, in order to enhance students' development of creativity, teachers should comment on it when it is demonstrated, regardless of the focus of the activity.

Another issue arising as we brainstormed is that we were able to come up with creative thinking activities in the process of writing a text, but struggled to think of many specifically related to a student-produced text. That is, what does creative thinking look like in a reaction paper, a research proposal, an annotated bibliography, or an essay? Since it is difficult to define precisely in written work, the question arises as to how we might grade creative thinking. With no precise definition, it could be difficult to identify and the interpretation of it influenced by the reader's experience or background. For example, a teacher new to the ELA, reading a bioethics essay on opt-in organ donation might see creativity more easily than a teacher who has read a number of these essays over several years and has seen similar ideas expressed previously. Similarly, grading creativity raises a question regarding for whom the idea should be creative: if it is new to the student but not to the teacher, can it be considered a demonstration of creativity? Furthermore, is it reasonable to expect creative thinking in student writing when students are first year undergraduates, studying in an second or third language, probably in a new academic culture, and in a new subject area? We need to consider what might be reasonable at this stage. If we accept that it is preferable not to exceed the level of Mini-c creativity, then synthesising sources in a paragraph could be considered a demonstration of creative thinking. Likewise, students raising questions in a conclusion could be a way of showing creativity. Identifying and stimulating creative thinking in student writing is an area that needs more discussion in the ELA.

Conclusion

This paper has identified an important gap in the ELA: namely, that while publicly stating that it helps students both learn creatively and learn to be creative, the programme rarely, if ever, discusses creative thinking and the term is absent from most, if not all, key discussions and documents. In contrast, critical thinking is highlighted in the ELA curriculum. What we suggest here is something of a paradigm shift towards a broader understanding of the crucial relationship between critical and creative thinking.

It is probably true to say that many or all ELA teachers do teach creative thinking. However, we could do so from a more informed position. This can be achieved through professional development, leading to a shared understanding of the rationale for creative thinking and greater appreciation of how creativity manifests itself in the classroom. Later, we will need to consider important curriculum and syllabus changes, particularly with regard to the LOs and LOIs.

One area needing further attention concerns evidence of creative thinking in student writing. First, teachers need to be aware of the extent to which an activity aligns with the LOs

and LOIs in terms of creative thinking. One example of this would be an essay asking students to identify the main benefits of a college education versus an essay asking them to consider whether more emphasis should be placed on vocational degrees rather than liberal arts degrees. The former is much less likely to allow students to demonstrate evidence of creative thinking. Furthermore, the question arises about how to recognise and grade creative thinking. To a certain extent, the concept of creativity is subjective in that what is creative for one reader may not be creative for another. Similarly, what is creative for one student writer may not be creative for another. These points will need to be taken into consideration if creative thinking is to be assessed. Furthermore, even assuming all teachers recognise student creativity similarly, could they or should they assess it? Is it simply enough at the stage of first-year undergraduate work to acknowledge and praise its presence? And, looking to the second-year Research Writing course, the ELA may wish to consider the teachability of creativity beyond the level of Little-c and into Pro-c.

Although we suggest a paradigm shift, the recognition of and explicit attention to creative thinking in the syllabi and classroom do not necessarily entail significant practical challenges for teachers. For example, when we brainstormed creative thinking classroom activities, we realised that many of them need very little preparation by the teacher but the work done by students will be significantly different. With these strategic changes, the ELA can live up to its publicly stated aims and at the same time equip students with essential transferable skills and dispositions for their university careers and beyond.

Acknowledgements

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