

## Fostering and Celebrating Creativity in Education: A Formidable Challenge<sup>1</sup>

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*Once children learn how to learn, nothing is going to narrow their mind. The essence of teaching is to make learning contagious, to have one idea spark another. There is a brilliant child locked in every student.*

Marva Collins

### Abstract

*The paper begins by providing snapshots of what happens in our schools and classrooms to illustrate how the current practices inhibit creative teaching and learning. It then looks at the conditions necessary for creativity to flourish in schools and communities, and what it means in practical terms to teach and foster creativity. The implications of embracing the nurturing of creativity for learners, teachers, and schools are examined. The paper provides a critique of the education systems in which the content of learning is driven by a narrow range of knowledge and academic abilities, rather than an understanding of the competencies young people will need to succeed in the digital age. The paper calls for a radical change in our thinking as educators, parents, and nations, if we are to promote and celebrate the creative capacities of all our peoples.*

### Introduction

At every start of the school year we see 'Back to School' inserts in the newspapers, on the radio, and on the TV advertising items such as stationery, text books, calculators, school bags, uniforms, shoes and diaries. The text books are getting bigger and bigger, and the school bags are get-

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ting heavier by the year. The same old grind begins. Children sit through period after period listening to the teachers most of the time. Once in a while there is the token 'have you understood? any questions?' from the teacher. No one is asking students, 'Is there a problem you would like to explore?' or 'Would you like to know more about this topic?' or simply, 'How did you spend the weekend?' There is no room for such *time-wasting* diversions— teachers will have to finish the syllabus and prepare students for term and annual examinations. Tests and examinations loom large in the minds of students, teachers, and parents. The school's success is determined by the number of passes in the national examinations irrespective of the entry level of the students, the quality of teaching, and the resources available to the learners.

Then there is pecking order to the choice of subjects. Some subjects are 'holier than others', and are only given to the so called bright students. The rest will have to live with what they are given for the rest of their school and college life. Subjects such as art, music, dance and sports, are given token importance and relegated to the periphery despite designating them as 'core' subjects. Yet these are the areas that break the monotony of school life and give opportunities for students to break out and explore their creative selves. Sadly it is quite common for schools to stop these activities and use those periods to revise the 'more important' subjects to prepare for examinations.

I have heard many teachers tell with pride, 'I have covered the syllabus in two terms – I can use the whole of third term for revision'. My answer to them is, 'Your job is to uncover the syllabus to the students, and to understand that learning takes time.'

The scenario I have depicted is more or less applicable to most classrooms in our school systems. Let me now present some snippets of classroom episodes in Fiji picked from my observations in schools both as a teacher educator and as a researcher.

### Experiences with Student-teachers

Working with student-teachers, I began to realise that they had great difficulty in explaining basic concepts in their subject areas and in planning simple demonstration experiments. Students who were majoring in physics confused a lens with a mirror, and an electric motor with a dynamo. They could, without much difficulty, state Newton's laws of motion but struggled to apply them in simple situations. Chemistry majors had used lime water since their school days but had no idea of how it is prepared. They could do calculations involving pH values but no one had

told them of the origin of the pH symbol. It was common to hear from these students that they had done very little practical work at school.

### ***We did the experiment on the board***

Further concerns about science teaching began to emerge during my visits to a number of classrooms to observe teaching practice. On one occasion, as I was coming out of the laboratory after observing a lesson by a student-teacher, a group of girls from a neighbouring class stopped me. One of the girls in the group asked, 'Sir, can you tell us how phosphorus looks?' I was taken by surprise, but after recovering quickly I asked them why they were particularly interested in phosphorus. They said that they had just done an experiment with phosphorus. The response puzzled me and I said to them, 'If you have done the experiment, surely you must have seen phosphorus.' One of the girls replied, 'we did the experiment on the board.' The student's innocent statement made a deep impression on me and I have often wondered what motivated the girls to share their concerns with a stranger. What troubled me was that they thought that an *experiment* could be done on the board.

### ***Carbon dioxide turns lime water milky***

On another occasion, a student-teacher was taking a lesson on 'What gases do exhaust fumes contain?' He showed an inflated plastic bag to the class, saying that it contained the exhaust fumes collected from a car the previous day. He told the class that he had already tested the gas for carbon dioxide and sulphuric acid, and as evidence, showed them a milky liquid in a test tube and a strip of blue litmus paper which had partly turned red. The students were then asked to write the aim, procedure, observation and conclusion for the activity. As I went round the class, I noticed a student writing: 'When I passed the gas into lime water, the lime water turned milky.' I had great difficulty in convincing the student that she had neither done nor seen the experiment. The student's conclusion was: 'Carbon dioxide turns lime water milky.' Her earlier experiences in science lessons had perhaps forced her not only to accept what the teacher said but to believe that she had made the observations herself. I was less concerned with the unsatisfactory lesson given by the student-teacher than I was with the good report he received from the associate teacher.

### ***Fixation with the right answer***

I also became aware of the authority of the textbook through another incident. A student-teacher was working out a problem from one of the exercises in the textbook. He explained the steps clearly and the class was responding well. When he finally wrote the answer on the board, some students in the class said, 'Sir, wrong answer', while others said, 'no, it's correct.' The students were of course looking at the answer in the textbook and comparing it with the teacher's answer. I could see that the teacher's answer was correct but the teacher got a little disturbed and started to look at the working on the blackboard. Meanwhile students continued to say 'wrong' and 'correct'. I could not understand this because they were referring to the answer in the same book. I decided to go round the class and check the answer in the books. What I discovered was that some students had the first edition of the text while others had the second edition; the wrong answer in the first edition had been corrected in the second edition. I passed on this information to my student-teacher and ultimately the problem seemed to be resolved. What is interesting here is that the students were more concerned with the final answer than the method used to arrive at the solution and that they had greater trust in the book than in the teacher.

### ***Obsession with marks***

The external examinations for Class 8 had just finished, and I went to a prominent primary school in Suva to meet the Class 8 teacher and the students. I noticed that everything was quiet in the class and I saw the students sitting and writing in an exam-like atmosphere. When I asked the teacher what was happening, she said to me that the school was putting the students through a re-run of the just-completed Class 8 examination, the purpose of which was to know the marks the students might score even before the actual results were announced. I could only express my dismay at the teacher's response.

### ***A question without words***

The teacher gave a test to Class 8 students during one of my visits to the school. When I looked at the first question I had no idea what students were supposed to do - there was no statement but just the blanks (Figure 1).

When I went around the class I discovered that students knew what

they were supposed to fill in: 1. *Substances*, 2. *Living*, 3. *Non-Living*, 4. *Plants*, 5. *Animals*, 6. *Natural*, 7. *Man-made*. I asked the teacher how the students knew what to do. She casually said, 'they have done it so many times – as soon as they see the diagram, they know what to fill in the blanks'. I then realised the conditioning they had gone through; they could respond to questions even without statements.

**Figure 1: Question 1 on a Fiji Basic Science Class Test**

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 6 \_\_\_\_\_ 7 \_\_\_\_\_

There was more to come: When the teacher was going over the answers to the first question, she asked for an example of a natural object. One student mentioned 'grass' but this example did not fit into the classification system given in the book which divided 'living things' into 'plants' and 'animals', and 'non-living things' into 'natural' and 'man-made'. Therefore 'grass' could not be identified as a 'natural' object, and so the answer was not acceptable to the teacher. This again illustrates the rigidity in teacher's thinking resulting from a lack of adequate background in science.

It should be apparent from the above that there are many obstacles in our education systems to promoting, let alone celebrating creativity in our classrooms. Across the world there is a demand for creative and imaginative individuals who can communicate effectively, work with others, and apply their knowledge and skills to create useful products. There is also a growing concern that many young people graduating from school systems and universities have become *test-wise* and *knowledge-poor*, and do not possess the necessary skills industries and organisations are looking for.

## The Challenges

The emerging demands of life and work for the 21st century make it clear that we will have not only to work 'smart' but also to learn 'smart' in an environment in which the only constant is change.

We will have to work on many fronts simultaneously if we want to prepare our young people for the challenges of digital age: New ideas need to permeate the whole education process that includes the design of curricula appropriate for the times; assessment for learning that happens throughout the learning cycle, and not just at the end of it; well qualified and motivated teachers who are creative themselves; appropriate online and offline resources for teaching and learning; adequate free time for teachers and students to explore ideas. And as we go along, we must also use the results of our assessment protocols to improve the teaching-learning process.

Elmore and others point out:

The teacher's responsibility is to create a social environment in the classroom that promotes active engagement and risk taking on the part of students, as well as a high level of interaction among students around problems. Classrooms that represent this view of learning are characterized, for instance, by students interacting around difficult and interesting problems that engage their interests, rather than by passive assimilation of knowledge purveyed by a teacher standing in the front of the room (1996: 5).

In classrooms where curiosity reigns - where questions are valued as much as answers - students are enabled to take charge of their learning. Such classrooms encourage risk-taking and experimentation, thereby allowing students to learn from failures as well as successes.

Intrinsic motivation is a powerful factor in developing skills that enable autonomous or independent learning, skills critical for life and work in an ever-changing social and work environment. Autonomous learners, however, do not depend upon teacher direction and control, but are able to initiate, plan and monitor their own learning. When teachers encourage students to reflect on not only the 'what' but also the 'how' of their learning, they help their students become more autonomous and successful.

Student responsibility for their own learning can be fostered through the use of problem-based learning, student exhibits and portfolios, group projects and community service.

Learners are challenged to develop thoughtfulness when pushed to search for meaning in complex, non-routine situations, to be adventurous with solutions or interpretations, and to be reasonable in their choices and judgments. *Knowledge-centered* schools have to transform into *thinking-centered* schools.

Sir Ken Robinson who chaired the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education in the United Kingdom that produced the thoughtful report *All our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* in 1999, and who gave the much acclaimed 2006 TED talk 'How schools kill creativity' says:

My contention is that creativity now is as important in education as literacy and numeracy, and we should treat it with the same status. And my argument is that all children have tremendous talents but we waste them, without much thought.

I read a beautiful story recently of a little girl who was in a drawing lesson. She was six and she was at the back of the room, drawing, and the teacher said this little girl hardly paid attention, but in this drawing lesson she did. The teacher was fascinated and went over to the girl and asked, 'What are you drawing?' and the girl said, 'I'm drawing a picture of God.' And the teacher said, 'But nobody knows what God looks like.' And the girl said, 'They will in a minute.'

Carl Davis's collection of young students' remarks even on scientific subjects is not only interesting, but hilarious. Here are some examples:

*Newton noticed that anything at rest tended to remain at rest. For this he became famous.*

*Climate is with us all the time, while weather comes and goes.*

*After chemists went to all the trouble to learn how to mix iron and oxygen, they only came up with rust.*

*We say the cause of perfume disappearing is evaporation. Evaporation gets blamed for many things people forget to put the top on.*

*Rocks are gradually softened through aging. The first hundred years of a rock's life are the hardest.*

*Some oxygen molecules help fires to burn while others choose*

*to help make water, so sometimes it is brother against brother.*

In a similar vein, John Holt, the author of the famous book, *How Children Fail* says:

When children are very young, they have natural curiosities about the world and explore them, trying diligently to figure out what is real. As they become 'producers' they fall away from exploration and start fishing for the right answers with little thought. They believe they must always be right, so they quickly forget mistakes and how these mistakes were made. They believe that the only good response from the teacher is 'yes,' and that a 'no' is defeat.

It is almost a cliché to say that the whole world is in the midst of a great revolution. And what is that revolution?

In a fascinating article he wrote for the TIME magazine in February 2011, titled *2045: The year man becomes immortal*, Lev Grossman says:

Five years ago we didn't have 600 million humans carrying out their social lives over a single electronic network. Now we have Facebook. Five years ago you didn't see people double-checking what they were saying and where they were going, even as they were saying it and going there, using handheld network-enabled digital prosthetics. Now we have iPhones. Is it an unimaginable step to take the iPhones out of our hands and put them into our skulls? ....

Already 30,000 patients with Parkinson's disease have neural implants. Google is experimenting with computers that can drive cars. There are more than 2,000 robots fighting in Afghanistan alongside the human troops (2011).

This is the revolution referred to earlier, and that is that computers are getting faster. Not only that, computers are getting faster *faster* - the rate at which they are getting faster is increasing. Grossman wrote this in



2011; now we are six years closer to 2045. Should we not be preparing our young people for this exciting future? Yes, we should, and we must begin that process now.

Sir Mark Robinson, who has written extensively on creativity and on who is regarded as a world leader on the subject, writes:

I am on the one hand fascinated by human creativity and on the other, saddened by how our upbringing and schooling causes us to gradually lose touch with our innate creative abilities. It seems many of the old rules and ways of thinking that were taught in school, no longer apply. So many children have natural talents and gifts that don't fit into the fixed model that the school system caters to.... Today, while our traditional school systems are stressing standardization and routine patterns of thinking, the world outside is demanding more conceptual thinking, self-directed motivation and the ability to be flexible in all kinds of different situations.... I would argue that creativity and innovation in education are not just an opportunity, but a necessity. First, several emerging trends demand a change in the way young people learn and understand. Teachers have to attract students' interest and attention in new ways, and as a result the development of creative approaches is called for. Second, the current and forthcoming generations of learners are growing up surrounded by video-games, mobile phones, and a whole host of other digital media. This overwhelming spread of technologies brings a new understanding of communication, information retrieval and meaning-making. Third, creativity has been seen as a form of knowledge creation. For all these reasons, it seems clear that creativity and innovation are unavoidable conditions for the present and future of education (TED, 2007).

Creativity can mean different things to different people. Creative processes are rooted in our imagination. Our lives are shaped by the ideas we use to give them meaning. We all have creative capacities but in many instances we do not know what they are or how to draw on them.

In recent years researchers and educational writers have extended the general meaning of creativity so that it incorporates ideas about inventiveness and imagination.

This reflects a growing acceptance that creativity is not simply about coming up with big ideas, but coming up with practical solutions to

everyday problems and then applying them to real life situations. Everything around us - our homes, cities, medical services, transport and communication systems - are conceived and developed by practical people who know how to implement creative ideas. Creativity can be readily associated with a wide range of everyday tasks and activities, and the importance of creativity at a personal level is often greatly underestimated.

Daniel Pink talks about the shift from left to right, not in politics, but in how we use our brains. According to Pink, the industrial age required procedural left-brain thinking but now to fix the problems created by the industrial age and navigate the fast-moving Information Age we need a more creative, right-brain way of approaching and solving our problems.

'Hard' and 'soft' thinking are terms often associated with creativity and they reflect the neurological processes associated with different hemispheres of the brain. Research suggests that the right side of the brain is visual and processes information in an intuitive and simultaneous way, looking first at the whole picture then the details (soft thinking). The other hemisphere - the left brain - is verbal and processes information in an analytical and sequential way, looking first at the pieces then putting them together to get the whole (hard thinking).

The right side of the brain is often associated with characteristics such as intuition, imagination, emotions, feelings and artistic creativity. The left side is more usually associated with planning and organisation, logic, analytical thinking and deduction. The right side of the brain is sometimes referred to as the 'artist', whereas the left side is regarded as the 'judge'.

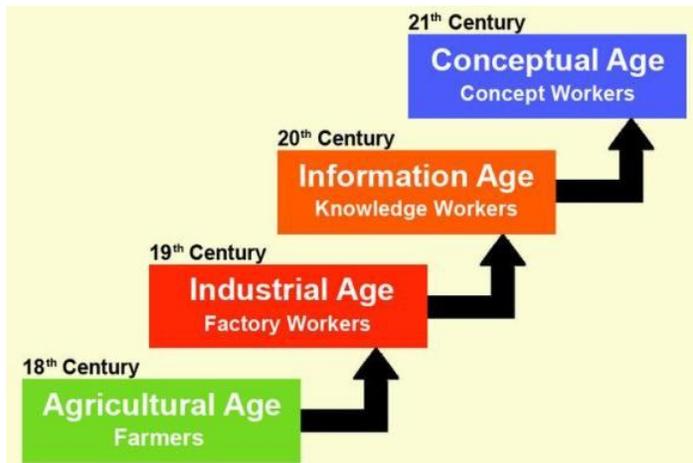
The distinction between hard and soft thinking can be illustrated as follows:

<b>Hard thinking</b>	<b>Soft thinking</b>
From certainty	To doubt
From closing down	To opening up
From one right answer	To many possibilities
From exact	To approximate
From fast	To leisurely
From looking	To waiting
From black and white	To many shades of grey
From analysis	To hunches
From logic	To intuition

Hard thinking	Soft thinking
From differences	To similarities
From categories	To connections
From rational	To dreamlike
From precise	To diffuse
From serious	To playful
From familiar	To new

[adapted from: <http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rsfosteringcreativity.asp>]

In an influential book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers will rule the world*, Daniel Pink argues that man has evolved from an agriculture age (farmers) to the Industrial age (factory workers) to the Information age (knowledge workers) according to an increase in affluence, technology, and globalization. Pink's major focus lies in the transition from the Information age to what he calls the conceptual age of the 21st century. Pink explains the benefits of working on the right side of the brain. He has created a reference for us to consider right brain activities such as design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning. According to Pink, 'Artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, and big-picture thinkers will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys' (2005: 1). These are the emerging areas where creative individuals will have an edge.



(Source: <https://areete.worldpress.com/2011/11/02/conceptual-age/>)

In a Brookings Institution blog, Daniel Araya (2016) writes:

What you know today matters far less than what you can *do* with what you know.... The really important factor in the work of the future will not be technical proficiency alone, but a capacity to bridge skilled expertise and machine intelligence through entrepreneurial invention and design. What is needed ... is a greater investment in problem solving and consilience. Beyond assembly line schools designed for the Industrial Age, what we now need are interdisciplinary programs that foster creativity for the Conceptual Age. While disruptive technologies will eliminate a wide range of occupations, I believe that education can adapt to the needs of the Conceptual Age by emphasizing innovation through creative design and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Stressing the importance of higher order thinking for the conceptual age, Sam Brinson argues:

Higher order thinking and creative problem-solving are the new in-demand skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and they rely on our ability to find meaning, to see things that exist outside of raw facts and numbers, to see the beauty and identify meaning in patterns and creatively use our insights to solve problems that cross a variety of different fields.... Higher order thinking centers around using schemas and systems in new ways to synthesize new information (Brinson, 2015).

What Pink, Araya, and Brinson have said has important implications for the design of curricula and subject offerings in our secondary and tertiary education systems. To navigate successfully in the conceptual age, we can no longer fit subjects into compartments but will have to provide a holistic exposure of the arts, humanities, science, and technology to all our students.

On educating people for an age of uncertainty and change, the British educator, Guy Claxton, asks: 'What tools can we give people when we do not know their jobs?' He himself provides the answer: 'We cannot. But what we can (and must) do is to give them the capacity and the confidence to be tool-makers: to be able to fashion and refashion their tools appropriate to the needs of the time' (1997: 42).

John Holt, the great American educator, wrote in a similar vein many years ago:

Since we can't know what knowledge will be most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned (1964: 176).

### The New 4Rs - The Curriculum of Lifelong Learning

What makes a good learner? What qualities, knowledge, skills and dispositions do people need to be successful learners?

Guy Claxton argues that in this age of uncertainty, in addition to the old 3Rs, *Reading*, *wRiting* and *aRithmetic*, we need to develop in children a new set of 4Rs namely:

- *Resourcefulness* (being ready, willing and able to learn in different ways),
- *Resilience* (being ready, willing and able to lock onto learning),
- *Reflectiveness* (being ready, willing and able to become strategic about thinking), and
- *Reciprocity* (being ready, willing and able to learn alone and with others).

These 4Rs are seen as a set of learning strategies rather than a set of subjects. They describe the curriculum of lifelong learning rather than of education. It is this that Claxton believes schools should be emphasizing. These learning strategies are also seen to promote creativity and independence in learners.

At the conclusion of his TED talk, Sir Mark Robinson said:

Now, what does all this mean to schooling and education and creativity and to our communities? I believe that we will have to come up with a new conception of the ecology of education, one in which we start to rethink our ideas about the richness of human talents and capacity. ... we have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we are educating our children. The essence of creativity is in making new connections. These possibilities can be frustrated by rigid divisions in subject teaching which the current systems tend to encourage. Outside schools and universities, in the real world, the most dynamic developments are the result of the interaction of many disciplines. For example, the growth in multimedia technologies is being driven by the close partnership between the arts, sciences and technology (2007).

Over 50 years ago Dr. Jonas Salk, the renowned virologist and developer of the polio vaccine, established the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego. His goal was to create an Institute that would serve as a 'crucible for creativity' to pursue questions about the basic principles of life. He wanted biologists and others to work together to explore the wider implications of their discoveries for the future of humanity. A humanist to the core, Salk once remarked, 'If all the insects were to disappear from the earth, within 50 years all life on earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the earth, within 50 years all forms of life would flourish.' Nobody would disagree with Salk.

### Concluding Remarks

To use Sir Mark's phrase in the context of the Pacific, our education systems have stripped our minds in the way that we mine the earth for a specific product, like they dug phosphate on Nauru, and left behind sharp pinnacles. It is for our educational leaders and thoughtful teachers to repair the damages and put our teaching-learning systems on an even keel so that our children and grandchildren will have a better future and a greater confidence to navigate the new world. We owe it to our people to prepare our youth to develop into self-confident, motivated, autonomous, responsible and thoughtful individuals. We have to use the gift of the human imagination wisely for the well being of our vibrant nations populated by young women and men.

Pacific Islanders live close to nature, and indeed some live in very fragile environments. Dance, music, weaving, sharing and caring, resourcefulness, resilience and reciprocity are second nature to them. We should celebrate the creative capacities of our people for the richness they exhibit, and jealously guard and nurture the same capacities in our young people. Our task as educators is to nourish their bodies and minds to enable them to face the future with greater confidence and make a unique contribution to their communities. To borrow from Jonas Salk once again, 'There is hope in dreams, imagination, and in the courage of those who wish to make those dreams a reality' (1992: 18).

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Humanities. He was invited to take up the position of Foundation Chair in Education at the University of Fiji in 2006, and was subsequently appointed Vice-Chancellor. Professor Muralidhar resigned from the position of Vice-Chancellor and returned to India in 2012 to pursue music, travel, writing and community engagement. Currently, as Chair of the Teach Mission in a Rotary Club in Bangalore, he is engaged, with his wife Sundari, in providing Teacher Support, developing E-learning, promoting literacy, and creating a learning environment in a number of Government primary schools. Email: muralidharfiji@gmail.com

## Author

**Srinivasiah Muralidhar** has had a distinguished career in education in the South Pacific spanning over four decades. His journey began in 1965 as a lecturer/warden at the Vivekananda College, the first tertiary institution to be established in Fiji, and took him to the University of the South Pacific where, over a period of 34 years he became the Head of Education and Psychology, and the Head of the School of