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Toward a theory of relearning creativity: Restoring childlike capacities for innovation

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Abstract

Creativity is widely recognized as a critical capability for addressing the challenges of an increasingly complex, uncertain, and innovation-driven world. Despite its importance, educators and researchers continue to debate whether creativity is an innate talent possessed by a select few or a capacity that can be deliberately developed. This conceptual paper argues that creativity is an inherent human capability that is highly visible during childhood but frequently becomes suppressed through educational, social, and cultural conditioning. Drawing upon a synthesis of conceptual studies examining curiosity, questioning, wonder, fascination, imagination, playfulness, experimentation, and psychological safety, the paper proposes a Theory of Relearning Creativity. The theory suggests that creative capacity can be strengthened not by introducing entirely new skills, but by restoring childlike capacities that naturally support exploration, possibility thinking, and innovation. A conceptual model is presented to explain how these capacities interact to produce creative outcomes. The paper concludes by discussing implications for higher education and directions for future research.

Keywords: Creativity, Innovation, Curiosity, Imagination, Playfulness, Experimentation, Wonder, Psychological Safety, Higher Education.

Introduction

Creativity has become one of the most frequently cited competencies required for success in the twenty-first century. Governments, industries, and educational institutions consistently identify creativity as essential for innovation, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, and adaptation to change.

Yet a significant paradox remains. While young children naturally display curiosity, imagination, experimentation, and playfulness, many adults struggle to generate original ideas or approach problems from unconventional perspectives. This apparent decline has led some observers to conclude that creativity diminishes with age. An alternative explanation is possible. Creativity may not disappear naturally; rather, it may become suppressed through educational structures, social expectations, and habitual ways of thinking. If this interpretation is correct, the challenge for contemporary education is not to create creativity from nothing but to restore capacities that already exist within learners.

This paper develops a Theory of Relearning Creativity by integrating insights from previous conceptual studies on the foundations of creative thinking and innovation.

The child as the original creative thinker

Children engage with the world in ways that are naturally aligned with creative thinking. They ask questions freely, imagine possibilities without concern for practicality, experiment without fear of failure, and engage in play without requiring immediate outcomes.

Several characteristics commonly observed during childhood appear closely connected with creativity. Children demonstrate a sense of wonder toward everyday phenomena, persistent curiosity about how things work, vivid imagination regarding what might be possible, playful engagement with ideas, and a willingness to learn through trial and error.

These behaviours enable them to discover patterns, generate alternatives, and approach situations from multiple perspectives. From this viewpoint, creativity appears less as a specialized talent and more as a natural mode of engagement with the world.

The suppression of creative capacities

As individuals progress through formal education and socialization, many of the characteristics associated with childhood creativity begin to weaken.

One contributing factor is the fear of failure. Students often learn to view mistakes as indicators of poor performance rather than as opportunities for learning. Educational systems frequently reward accuracy and compliance while providing limited incentives for exploration and risk-taking.

Another factor is the dominance of answer-centered learning. Many classrooms prioritize the reproduction of established knowledge, leaving relatively little room for questioning, experimentation, or problem-finding. Social conformity further discourages unconventional thinking by rewarding behaviours that align with prevailing expectations.

In addition, increasing specialization may limit opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration and creative synthesis. Students often become highly knowledgeable within specific domains while receiving limited exposure to ideas from other fields.

Finally, the absence of psychological safety may discourage learners from expressing unusual ideas or engaging in intellectual risk-taking. Concerns about criticism, embarrassment, or negative evaluation can lead students to remain silent even when they possess valuable insights.

Collectively, these influences encourage caution and conformity while discouraging the exploratory behaviours that support creativity.

Foundations of relearning creativity

The theory proposed in this paper suggests that creativity can be strengthened by intentionally restoring a set of interconnected capacities commonly associated with childhood. Wonder and fascination provide the starting point of the creative process. They encourage individuals to observe deeply and pay attention to phenomena that others

may overlook. Curiosity and questioning transform attention into inquiry. Through questions, learners identify gaps in knowledge, challenge assumptions, and initiate exploration. Imagination enables individuals to move beyond present realities and envision alternative possibilities. It expands the range of potential solutions available for creative development. Playfulness introduces flexibility into thinking by encouraging the exploration of unconventional combinations and alternative perspectives. Experimentation converts possibilities into action. Through testing, feedback, and iteration, ideas evolve into practical innovations. Psychological safety functions as a supporting condition throughout the process. It provides an environment in which learners feel comfortable expressing ideas, taking risks, and learning from mistakes.

Together, these capacities form the foundation of creative development.

A theory of relearning creativity

The central proposition of this paper is that creativity can be relearned through the deliberate restoration of childlike capacities that support exploration and innovation.

The process begins with wonder and fascination, which stimulate attention and engagement. These experiences generate curiosity and questioning, encouraging individuals to seek deeper understanding. Questioning expands into imagination, allowing alternative possibilities to emerge. Playfulness provides cognitive flexibility, while experimentation enables ideas to be tested and refined. Through repeated engagement in this process, individuals develop creative confidence and become increasingly capable of generating innovative outcomes. Psychological safety supports every stage by reducing fear and encouraging exploration.

Creativity, therefore, is not viewed as a fixed trait but as a developmental process that can be intentionally strengthened.

A conceptual model of relearning creativity

A THEORY OF RELEARNING CREATIVITY

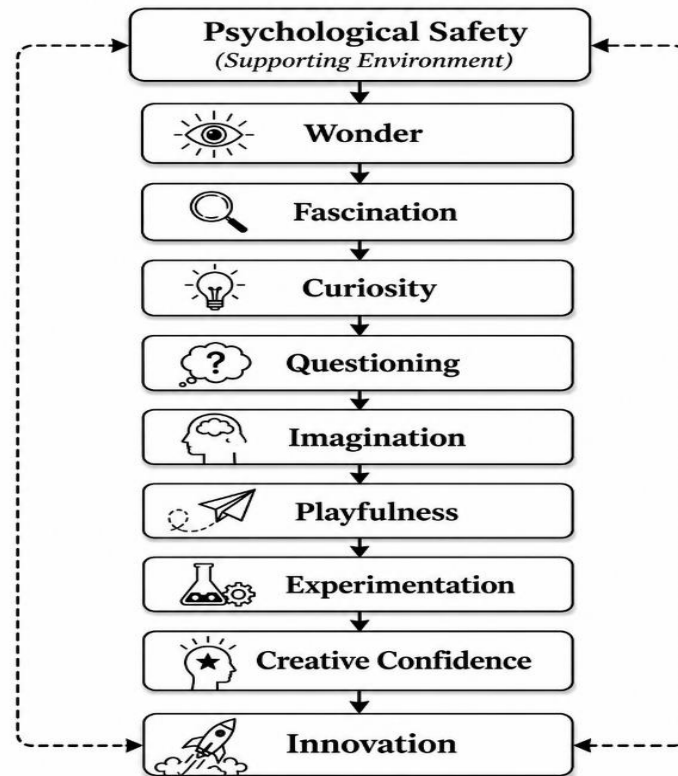


Figure interpretation

Figure 1 presents the proposed Theory of Relearning Creativity. The model suggests that creativity develops through a sequence of interconnected capacities beginning with wonder and fascination and progressing through curiosity, questioning, imagination, playfulness, and experimentation. Repeated engagement with these processes builds creative confidence, which increases the likelihood of innovation. Psychological safety operates as a foundational condition that supports each stage by reducing fear and encouraging exploration.

Implications for higher education

The theory presented in this paper has important implications for educational practice.

First, creativity should be viewed not as a separate subject but as a developmental process that can be embedded across disciplines and learning experiences. Second, educational environments should provide opportunities for questioning, exploration, experimentation, and interdisciplinary engagement rather than focusing exclusively on content transmission.

Assessment systems may also require reconsideration. Alongside accuracy and technical competence, institutions should recognize originality, inquiry, experimentation, and learning from failure as valuable educational outcomes.

Most importantly, universities should cultivate psychologically safe learning environments where students feel comfortable expressing ideas, challenging assumptions, and taking intellectual risks.

Such changes can help higher education move beyond information transmission and toward the development of innovative thinkers capable of addressing complex challenges.

Directions for future research

The theory proposed in this paper is conceptual and requires empirical validation. Future research may examine the relationships among the proposed creativity capacities, investigate their relative influence on creative performance, and explore differences across academic disciplines and cultural contexts.

Longitudinal studies could examine how creative confidence evolves during higher education, while intervention-based research could evaluate the effectiveness of educational practices designed to restore childlike creative capacities.

Such investigations would contribute to a deeper understanding of how creativity develops and how it can be intentionally cultivated.

Conclusion

Creativity is often treated as a rare talent possessed by a limited number of individuals. This paper advances an alternative perspective.

Creativity may be understood as a natural human capability that is highly visible during childhood but frequently becomes suppressed through educational and social conditioning.

Rather than attempting to teach creativity as an isolated skill, educators may achieve greater success by restoring the capacities that naturally support creative thinking. Wonder, fascination, curiosity, questioning, imagination, playfulness, experimentation, and psychological safety together provide the foundations for innovation.

The challenge for higher education is therefore not simply to produce knowledgeable graduates, but to help learners reconnect with the creative capacities they possessed before those capacities were constrained by habit, fear, and conformity. Relearning creativity may ultimately be one of the most important educational tasks of the twenty-first century.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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