

Creative Thinking

The following transcript is based on material in *Skills for Success: The Personal Development Handbook*, by Stella Cottrell.

Creative thinking can benefit any aspect of life, including academic study or our working day. All too often, we act as if creativity were the preserve of a special breed of people – great artists, musicians, designers and inventors. However, you don't need to be good at drawing or painting or music in order to be creative. Because of this misperception, we can tend to underestimate our own capacity for creativity and the wide range of situations to which we could apply creative thought. In this audio, we'll talk about practical ways that you can develop and enhance your creative capacity.

What do we mean by creative thinking?

Creativity is about applying the imagination to finding a solution. This could be a solution to an artistic problem, but it could just as easily refer to finding an answer to a routine work issue, resolving problems in your life, friendships or relationships, or completing study assignments. The creative aspect is in finding the solution, rather than in simply applying a pre-given formula. If you devise your own solutions, find your answers, you are thinking creatively.

Sometimes, a great idea can seem to drop from nowhere. When this happens, it is easy to feel that we are very imaginative and clever, especially if the wonderful idea came to us quickly. More typically, a creative outcome is the result of a series of processes, the application of strategies, and bringing the right attitude to the task – and these may not always feel very creative at the time.

Creative thought thrives in certain conditions, so to foster creative thinking, it is worth taking steps to put those conditions into place. Certain types of creative

thinking take place when we are very relaxed, with time to spare, when we are only half focused on the issue, perhaps when we are day-dreaming or doodling. We may even be deep in thought about a different activity altogether. When released from having to find a solution to a particular problem, the brain often feels freed up to look for an answer in its own way. You may have noticed this yourself- that when you stop trying too hard, the answer seems to pop out of nowhere when you are least expecting it.

Many great discoveries and ideas have been made in this way, or even in dreams. This kind of creative solution does require certain kinds of conditions. In particular, the apparently magic solution often comes after a period of very ordered thinking, working through many possible solutions, followed by change of pace or situation, accompanied by some 'down-time' in which the brain can work on the solution.

Creative thinking tends to be characterised by a drive to find the very best solution, continually looking for an even better, or quicker, or more effective, or more elegant solution. If you are happy with the first idea that comes along, then there is no real spur to creative thought. An element of moderate dissatisfaction, or an edge of perfectionism, encourages the creative process.

You can also help the creative process by putting the right conditions into place and applying some basic strategies.

First of all: don't be satisfied with one solution. Once you have one good idea, look for another, and then another. Give yourself the opportunity to choose the best from several options.

Secondly, put yourself under different levels of pressure. Sometimes, we find we respond to pressure; other times we don't.

Thirdly, feed your brain with different experiences. Go on a journey you wouldn't usually make; read an article from a different subject discipline or a magazine you wouldn't usually read; undertake an activity that you feel isn't 'you'. When the brain is working hard on a problem, it can be very good at drawing parallels in an apparently unconnected experience.

Fourthly, be willing to experiment with ideas that seem unlikely to lead straight to the answer, even if this seems like it may be a waste of time. Combine solutions from other problems that you have answered successfully; play with possible ideas even if these don't seem very sensible. Many a great idea has started out as something, which seemed wild or unrealistic, modified and adapted and developed into something that really worked. Don't eliminate ideas too early- look for a way of making them work. Although a particular idea may lead nowhere, the process of working through solutions can help develop a much deeper understanding of the task before you. It is this thorough and complex understanding of the issue, which helps the brain come up with a creative solution.

Fifthly, when you have worked in an organised way on developing ideas, give the brain some down-time so it can work on these in an unforced way. This does mean planning your study or work so that there is time to move between structured approaches to the issue, followed by more relaxed, unforced, even unconscious, thought.

Finally, once you know the idea you want to work on, be prepared to work at it, and to work at it some more, to fine-tune it. Inspiration is a very small part of creative thinking. Process, strategy, attitude, and application are also essential ingredients.

In short, it doesn't take a special kind of person to engage in creative thinking. There are approaches you can take and strategies you can apply that can assist

you in arriving at innovative ways of seeing and thinking. Best of all, as creative thinking benefits from new experiences, doing things a little differently, musing with ideas and being open to playful and unusual approaches, it can make your study very enjoyable.

We hope this basic introduction to creative thinking has been useful. If you want to develop your creative thinking further, ask your bookseller for a copy of *Skills for Success*, written by Stella Cottrell and published by Palgrave Macmillan.