

Try Thinking Creatively For A Change

By Rod Matthews

Part 1 – How to overcome barriers to creativity

At school, at university, and at work we are encouraged to think critically – to divide, analyse and, in some cases, to judge. In scientific subjects we are asked to establish a hypothesis, conduct experiments, observe the results and determine whether the hypothesis was accurate or not. Even in many of the arts, like music, languages and history, we are asked to divide a piece of music, analyse a text, and judge a historical development.

While this is a very useful way of thinking in some contexts, it is almost the opposite of creative thinking.

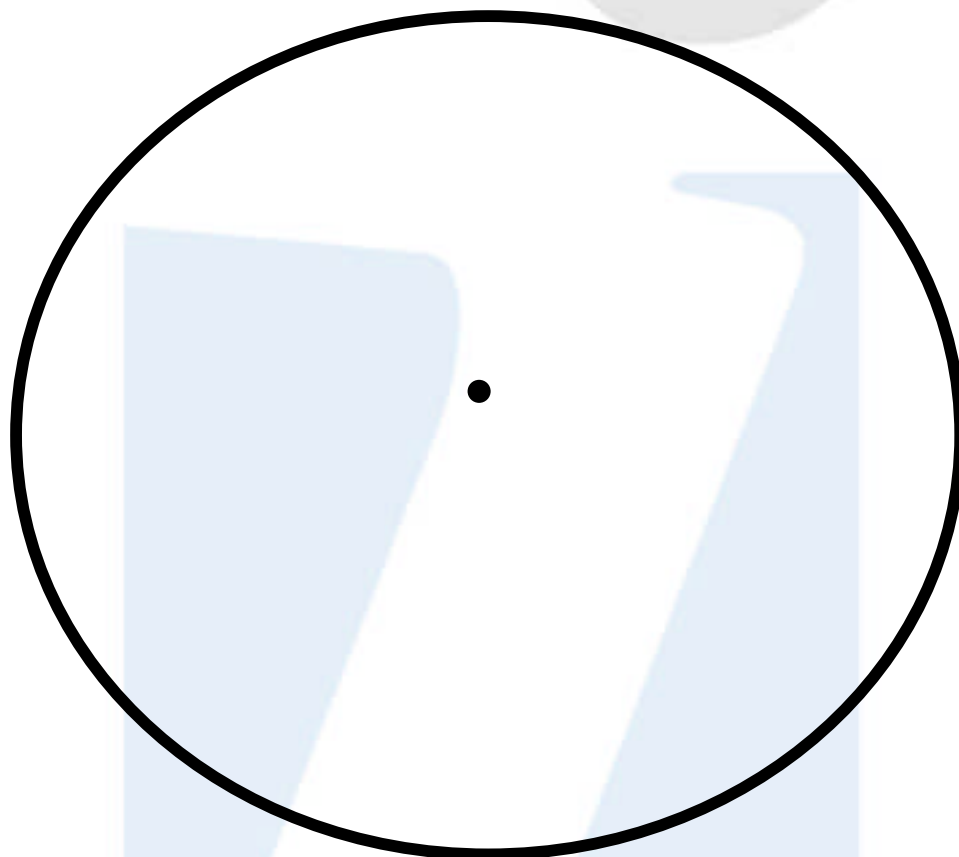
Creative thinking is more about linking than dividing, it is more about synthesis than analysis, and it is more about acceptance than judgement. These are skills that are difficult to develop in a school system that needs to assess, rate and mark, so it's not surprising that many people find themselves thinking, 'But I'm just not creative'.

Creativity is a skill, and like any other skill you can't expect to be able to use it well without study and, above all else, practise. How is it that athletes become Olympians? Not by reading about how to be an Olympic athlete in a book, then getting frustrated with their under-performance the first couple of times they give it a shot, only to quit after having tried just once or twice.

In this article we can divide, analyse and label how creative thinkers think. It is up to you to put these techniques into practice and to stick with it long enough to be able to see their value.

Let's get started ...

For the next minute, without looking at the following page, try this quick quiz:



Reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page

How did you go? Got any ideas? There are a few ideas that people usually come up with, including:

- **Fold the page**
Draw the dot in the middle, fold the paper so you can move the pen onto the back of the page and then move it to the outside to draw the circle.
- **Use a retractable pen**
Draw the dot, retract the pen, move the pen to the outside and then draw the circle.
- **Lay the pen down**
Draw the dot, lay the pen down on the page and then move it to the outside and lift the pen up and draw the circle.

There are in fact over 30 ways of reproducing the figure without lifting your pen off the page. I kid you not!

To try and work out what they are, get together with a group of people and spend 10 minutes coming up with as many ways as you can to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'.

Here are a few avenues to explore:

- Photocopy it – place your pen on the page and photocopy it
- It is not a dot on the page – it is a dead fly
- Use someone else's pen and leave your pen lying on the page

In the space below, list all the ways that you and your friends can come up with in the 10 minutes allocated. Do this before turning the page. Remember, that there are over 30 ways so you can't afford to be fussy.

How did you go this time? Did you come up with more ways than you did the first time you looked at it?

Here are more than 30 ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'.

- Fold the page's top left corner
- Fold the page's top right corner
- Fold the page's bottom left corner
- Fold the page's bottom right corner
- Use a retractable pen
- Use someone else's pen
- Use someone else's paper
- Use two people
- Use two hands
- Use your hand and a foot to hold a pen
- Use your hand and your mouth to hold a pen
- Use a pencil
- Use a texta
- Use a highlighter pen
- Use lipstick
- Use blood
- Photocopy it
- Take a photo
- Take a digital photo
- Scan it
- E-Mail it
- Copy it electronically
- Reproduce it in a computer program
- Hold a mirror up to it
- Write the word 'this' in running writing
- Write the words 'this without lifting your pen off the page'
- Drop the page rather than lifting the pen
- Reproduce it in sand
- Reproduce it in wood
- Reproduce it in metal
- Reproduce it in plastic
- Buy paper with a dot already on it
- Buy paper with a circle already on it
- Reproduce it in your mind

As you can clearly see, there are quite possibly infinite ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'. Strangely enough, it's all about creativity!!!

Now let's examine what happened as we moved through that activity, because it will give us some insights into the nature of creativity.

When you were first asked to 'try this quick quiz', chances are you thought a lot of different things. For example, you might have thought:

- It can't be done'
- I know this. I've seen it before.
- I'm no good at these things.
- Oh here we go. This is one of those lateral thinking tricks.
- I don't care. Just tell me the answer.
- Okay, I'll give it a shot.

The thing is, all these thoughts lead to, at most, just one way of solving the puzzle. Even if you've seen it before, chances are you'll remember the way you did it last time, and be satisfied with that answer.

And yet something happened to enable us to come up with over 30 ways of 'reproducing this without lifting your pen off the page'.

The Principles of Creative Thinking

What we did was employ three key principles of creativity:

- Re-set the standard
- Two heads are better than one
- Allocate time

Re-set the standard

In this activity, I told you that there were in fact over 30 ways to 'reproduce this without lifting your pen off the page'. This dramatically re-set the standard, and in so doing, forced you to re-examine the puzzle in a new light.

If I had told you that there were only three ways, you would have had less reason to re-examine the puzzle. Going from zero or one solution to three solutions is not sufficiently significant to force a re-think.

The standard needed to be significantly re-set to prompt you to have a second look from as many different angles as possible.

Two heads are better than one

If someone only has one way of looking at something, we often call it tunnel vision. When we can see two positions on a problem, this often leads to a dichotomy – one position wins at the other's expense. We call a person wise when they are able to view the same issue or problem from many different perspectives.

Getting together with others has the obvious benefit of increasing the perspectives on the problem. Creative thought is thinking that produces many different perspectives. Sometimes we need two heads to help us get started.

Allocate time

In order to come up with over 30 ways, you needed to allocate time to think about nothing else other than re-examining the puzzle.

In our society, we tend to reward movement rather than thinking. People are considered productive when they are moving around the workplace with apparent purpose. People are considered unproductive if they are spotted sitting quietly, just thinking. And yet in some contexts, this could be exactly what is needed, rather than movement for movement's sake.

How to use this information

Think of an area in your life where you feel stuck. It could be your work, your career, your family life, your hobbies/interests, a relationship with another person.

Write a positive statement about the outcome you would like. Please note that a statement of outcome is different to an answer. For example:

Answer: Fold the paper.

Outcome: Reproduce this without lifting your pen from the page.

Answer: To leave my current job

Outcome: To be happy with where I spend 8 hours a day 5 days a week.

Answer: For my family to appreciate what I'm going through

Outcome: To have a happy family.

Once you have stated the outcome in such a fashion, apply the three principles we identified above:

- Re-set the standard – Aim to come up with over 30 ways of making that statement true
- Two heads are better than one – Get together with a couple of friends who can help with the process
- Allocate time – Set aside 10-20 minutes to come up with ideas only, no judgements allowed!

Now that we have identified some principles behind creativity you might want to read Part 2 in this series where we will look at some creativity skills.



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