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# Creative Design: Asking “What is it Like” and “Who Cares?”

January 13, 2021 | By Matthew Barclay  
Instructional Design  
Teaching Effectiveness

How do we put creativity into academic courses without getting irrelevant or distracting? Creative design is somewhat of a holy grail in many industries, and this is certainly true in the area of teaching and learning. As designers and consumers of instruction, we seek creativity.

## **Are you creative in your designs?**

Some people believe that we are either born with creative ability or we are not. You’ve heard the argument. It comes in different forms. One example is the person who says, “I’m not the creative type” or “I just don’t have a creative mind.” Others believe creativity can be developed.

What do you think?

I believe the latter. Here are two questions that designers can ask to produce more creative instruction: “What is it like?” and “Who cares?”

## **How can we design more creatively?**

Let’s revisit the question that I began with: How do we put creativity into academic courses, particularly ones we need to redesign? One of the problems with academic courses is that they often deal with abstract ideas and relationships and stay in the abstract. It’s also common to see an emphasis on covering content by requiring students to read and then write a paper, over and over again. Even though students learn by writing papers, there often isn’t much creativity to it. And without creativity, it is not very enjoyable for many students.

## **“What is this like?”**

Take an abstract idea or one that doesn’t seem to be very interesting and then ask, “What is this like?” The abstract idea is probably very important but is somewhat limp and lifeless.

For example, I recently redesigned a management course about organizational culture. One of the existing assignments was called “Strategy, Execution, and Culture.” Students were required to write a paper about the relationship between these three elements of organizational culture. While these elements represent an important dynamic, the assignment was dry. I began to ask myself, what is this dynamic like in other aspects of life? In short, the thoughts that came to my mind led me to consider visual compositions, such as paintings, and how the important elements in them combine to form a sophisticated, dynamic whole.

I decided to have the students depict the relationship of strategy, execution, and culture as an image that could be featured in a CEO board room to inspire others to develop strong organizational culture. The assignment now challenges students to create their “masterpiece” through drawing, painting, Photoshop, photography, or a collage of images they gather and repurpose to represent the relationship of these three elements. Furthermore, each piece must be accompanied by a one-page interpretation of their work, explaining and justifying the representation they chose for the interplay of strategy, execution, and culture.

## **“Who cares?”**

After we ask “What is it like” and develop an idea, we should check ourselves with the follow up question, “Who cares?” This is really a question about the intended audience. Who among them cares about our determination of what other thing the abstract idea or relationship is like in life? In this instance, who cares about being able to explain the relationship between strategy, execution, and culture in pictorial form?

In this case, we could say that most if not all the students would care because we challenge them to put a significantly unique and personal touch on the relationship of those elements in business. Note that this does not equate to “any answer will do.” Students still have to meet the learning outcome. They have to justify their work succinctly and convincingly. But we designed the assessment so that an abstract relationship takes on very personal meaning while still representing the dynamic truthfully.

## **Start thinking this way and see creative ideas emerge.**

Another example from this course is an assignment where students were required to write a short paper comparing and contrasting “strong” versus “adaptive” cultures. This assignment represented the fourth paper in two weeks. I asked myself, what is this like (comparing and contrasting these items) that students care about? To me, the comparing and contrasting was like researching the benefits and drawbacks of various cell phones, cars, or other items. I thought about the comparing and contrasting features on certain websites that allow the user to select three or four models of a product and compare them side-by-side. There is also usually an editor’s choice on such websites.

So our assignment now has students acting as though they were the editor of “Organizational Culture Magazine.” They create an editorial featuring a comparison between strong and adaptive cultures in the format commonly used by product review websites. Students then make the editor’s choice and describe why they would choose a strong or an adaptive culture in an organization.

**Try it!**

I'll finish with one more. But this time you get to design the instruction. In the same course on organizational culture, students were asked to write a paper analyzing and giving examples of "the ways that specific forces affect culture today." They were required to choose two forces that affect culture and discuss how those forces significantly affect the culture of an organization. The learners are working adult students, with an average age of about 33 years.

What would you do to add creativity to the assignment?

**When instruction includes content that is abstract, ask "what is it like?" and match it with "who cares?"  
Whenever we can do that, we are likely to increase our design creativity and engage learners.**

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