So, you want to be a creative genius?

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Here are five levels and types of creativity, from the easiest to the most difficult to master.

By Jeff DeGraff

Is everyone creative? Sure they are but in very different ways and to varying degrees. There is a big difference between the folksong you wrote for your college sweetheart and a symphony composed by Beethoven. Our democratic longing to make everyone and everything equal has lead us to make creative greatness indistinguishable from an act of personal expression. What is lacking is meaningful appreciation of the different levels of creativity and how we can use them as steps for increasing our own potential.

Borrowing from everyone from Aristotle to Zappa, let’s examine the five levels and types of creativity, from the easiest to the most difficult to master, and some of the creative methodologies associated with each.

**Mimetic Creativity**
Mimesis is a term passed down to us from the Ancient Greeks meaning to imitate or mimic. This is the most rudimentary form of creativity. Animals from Caledonian crows to orangutans have the ability to create tools simply by observing other creatures. Watch a mother and child together and it becomes clear that we do the same. It is the foundation of the learning process.

An often overlooked form of creativity is simply taking an idea from one area or discipline and applying it to another. For example, a physician at the Mayo Clinic who wants to improve the patient experience may pay a visit to a Ritz-Carlton, known for its customer service.

Steve Jobs saw this ability to move across boundaries to adapt ideas as the key to useful creativity: “Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things.”

**How to Improve Your Mimetic Creativity:**

- **Go On Field Trips:** Travel to new places and meet new people. Bring your phone or digital camera and record events so that you can both be aware of the experience as it happens and review it when you have a little time and distance to spot things you may have missed before.
- **Make New Friends:** To get new ideas you have to swim in a different gene pool. Find some interesting people who don’t think like you, believe the same things you do or frequent the same places. Ask questions about their thoughts on traditionally taboo subject such as politics or religion and just listen. If you’re not a little uncomfortable, cast your net a little wider.
- **Copy Nature:** Inventor and architect Buckminster Fuller created the geodesic dome Spaceship Earth by copying the geometric structure of spores and plankton. This form of design, where something is observed in the natural world and then modified into man-made creations, is called biomimicry. Think of it as an accelerated form of evolution. Leonardo da Vinci drew flying machines after observing birds in flight and maple leaves spinning their way to the ground. The US Navy does the same when it fashions a rudder of a battleship after the aerodynamic fluke of humpback whale. Pay attention to form and function of the natural world around you.

**Bisociative Creativity**

“Bisociative" is a term coined by the controversial novelist Arthur Koestler in his celebrated book, *The Act of Creation*, to describe how our conscious mind can connect rational with intuitive thoughts to produce eureka moments. In the Zen tradition this act of communion is called satori, meaning sudden enlightenment. Bisociative creativity occurs when a familiar idea is connected to an unfamiliar one to produce a novel hybrid.
Though connecting ideas is often done through more contemplative means, it can also be stimulated by bombarding the mind with a barrage of random thoughts to see what catches. The general description for this type of activity is called brainstorming. For example, in 1994, while coming out of a near bankruptcy experience and working on Toy Story their first feature film, four of the original Pixar directors had lunch at a diner and brainstormed ideas about movies they wanted make. Building on each other’s concepts, from this one informal meeting came A Bug’s Life, Monsters Inc, Finding Nemo and WALL-E. The motion picture industry was changed in an afternoon by Hollywood outsiders throwing ideas together.

Bisociative creativity builds on the electrifying dynamics of the 3F’s:

- **Fluency** – It is more productive to have lots of unpolished ideas than a few “good” ones because the greater the diversity of ideas the wider the range of possible solutions
- **Flexibility** – Often we have the “right” idea but we’ve put it in the “wrong” place so we have to move them around to see where they best fit to meet our challenges
- **Flow** – We aren’t creative on demand. We need to be both simulated and relaxed to draw out the energy required to create. Ideas pour out smoothly when we get into a groove

**How to Improve Your Bisociative Creativity:**

- **Random Words** – Pick up a dictionary or any book for that matter and open it up and point to a random word. Connect your challenge to that word. For example, let’s say you are trying to find funding for a new restaurant and you finger lands on the word “bicycle.” You might get the idea to put your restaurant on wheels or provide delivery service only. Both ideas would lower the amount of money needed to start the business.
- **SCAMPER** – Adverting executive extraordinaire Alex Osborne is largely credited with coining the term brainstorming in his 1942 book How to Think Up. Osborn posed six questions that were later turned into the acronym SCAMPER: What can we...Substitute? Combine? Adapt? Magnify? Put to other uses? Eliminate? Reverse? By asking these simple questions you connect ideas and actions in new ways to easily produce useful variations.
- **Thinking Hats** – Physician Edward de Bono developed a method for indirect creative reasoning he calls lateral thinking. The basic idea is to think around a problem instead of trying to solve it directly. This allows individuals and groups to have a wider range of creative approaches to a challenge and to identify their blind spots. The six thinking hats represent different types of thinking and roles played by group members: Blue- Objectives, White- Information, Red- Emotions, Black- Judgment, Yellow- Optimism, and Green- Creativity. This technique is often used when you want to get a new angle on a problem.

**Analogical Creativity**
Great innovators, from Archimedes in his bathtub to Einstein riding his elevator of relativity, have used analogies to solve complex problems. We use analogies to transfer information that we believe we understand in one domain (the source) to help resolve a challenge in an unfamiliar area (the target). For example, the design of vacuum cleaners was largely unchanged for nearly a century when inventor James Dyson used a different analogy, cyclones, to devise a new way to separate particles through the spinning force of a centrifuge.

Analogies can be used to disrupt habit-bound thinking to make way for new ideas. In the same way that an analogy helps us make sense of our experiences by assimilating what we don’t know into what we do know, the process also works in reverse. That is, we can take something we believe we know and use an analogy to make it unknown. Artists call this defamiliarization. Nobel Laureate Albert Camus frequently narrated his stories from the point of view of a housefly. Consider what your strategy development process would look like if it was done from the point of view of your children instead of your shareholders or customers.

**How to Improve Your Analogical Creativity:**

- **Adaptive Reasoning** – Adaptive reasoning is a general description of how your perspective or relative relationship to a problem can change or evolve through the use of analogies. The basic approach can be summarized as follows: “How is [your problem] like [your analogy]?” For example, how is [creating a successful marketing campaign for your new line of fashionable handbags] like [making friends at a new school]? The key is to vary your outlook and make numerous new connections.

- **Imaginary Friends** – This is a role-storming method where the creativity comes from imaging what someone might say or do. “What would Steve Jobs do if he had this challenge?” So the analogy source, the challenge, is the same as with other analogical approaches, but the target, the unfamiliar area, is a person instead of a second idea. This can either be someone you know, like the crazy stuff your Dad says, or a famous person you admire, like Teddy Roosevelt, or a character from your favorite book or movie, like Gandalf. Watch documentaries; read biographies, encyclopedias and comic books. Put together your own imaginary board of advisors.

**Narrative Creativity**

Have you ever heard a child try to get a story straight? Or maybe you have a dear friend who always blows the punch line of a good joke. Both are examples of how hard it is to tell a coherent, meaningful and compelling tale. Stories are a complex mash up of characters, actions, plots, description, grammar and sequence. Most importantly, they have a narrative voice – our voice - authentic or personified. How we tell the tale can either energize the most mundane anecdote or dampened even the most rousing spellbinder.
Narrative is a story communicated in sequence. It is how the tale is told. Stories can be readily deconstructed and reconstructed to make different versions or new concoctions altogether. For example, many American’s first drank Dos Equis beer during their college years in the 1970’s while on winter break in California or Mexico. It wasn’t exactly a premium brand. Then the Cuauhtémoc Moctezuma Brewery, which had been in business since 1900, changed the story of the product with an advertising campaign about “The Most Interesting Man in the World.” This character is a combination of James Bond and Ernest Hemmingway and the commercials chronicles his manly feats of derring-do. Simply by changing the narrative, Dos Equis experienced explosive growth in a shrinking market.

How to Improve Your Narrative Creativity:

- **Storyboarding** – For years Walt Disney came into our living rooms each Sunday evening from his animation studio. He would sit in front of a wall filled with drawings connected by small lengths of twine. Disney developed this storyboarding process of pre-visualizing a movie by representing the various characters and scenes on large note cards. This allowed his animation team to easily change the sequence of the action, add and subtract characters and get a real sense of what the motion picture would look like before production began. These days there are a number of software applications that eliminate the need for note cards and string but the power of telling and retelling a story in a group is still an incredibly effective ways to create new ideas.

- **Morphologies** – Morphologies codify challenges into their most discrete elements. They are often used in biological sciences to understand what makes an organism tick. Think of it like building blocks that you can take apart and put back together in new ways. By breaking down a story into characters and actions a wide range of possible solutions can be reconstructed. Similarly, by looking at a product or experience as a collection of functions and attributes in a matrix, a series of new combinations can be assembled – uses, colors, size, flavors, etc.

- **Scenario Making** – There is no data on the future where breakthrough innovation happens. So how do you see the future first? You consider how underlying forces at work today may drive what happens in the future – politics, economics and social well being just to name just a few. Scenarios are just projected courses of action. They ask the “what if?” questions and help you gauge the impact and probability of each possible story.

**Intuitive Creativity**

This is where creativity becomes bigger and possibly beyond us. Intuition is about receiving ideas as much as generating them. There are several methods for freeing and emptying the mind – meditation, yoga and chanting to name a few. The basic idea is to distract and relax the mind to create a flow state of consciousness where ideas come easily. Disciples are typically apprenticed by acknowledged gurus and often take years to master these techniques.
Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate, developed some meditative practices specifically to enhance personal creativity, as did Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Waldorf education system. The approaches to intuitive creativity are too numerous to chronicle here. They range from autonomic writing to taking mind alternating drugs (not recommended).

**How to Improve Your Intuitive Creativity:**

- **Creative Visualization** – Much of the apparatus of our brain is designed to make pictures. We are unique in that the pictures we create in our minds can alter our experience of reality for better or worse. For example, successful athletes often visualize themselves performing at a high level – clearing the bar, beating the time or lifting the weight. Visualization as a form of positive thinking helps us overcome our doubts and pulls us toward what we seek. Because visual information is so vivid and difficult to distinguish from our experience of ordinary perception, visualization often provides a compelling source of new ideas.

- **Free Writing** – It is said that Mozart never made a single correction to any of his sheet music. He composed it all in his head. For most of us the process works the other way around. It is in the iterative expression of our thoughts that we come to discover that we have some new and compelling ideas. The basic premise of free writing is that it is an act of us communicating with our intuitive, and presumably, creative self. The challenge here is to suspend your voice of judgment and simply observe what flows out of the pen or the tapping of the keys. The aim is to achieve a flow or trance state where we are writing faster than our mind can edit. It is only after we have poured ourselves out on paper that we can double back and “discover” our creative ideas.

- **Dream Interpretation** – German chemist August Kekulé is reported to have discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule after he saw it in a dream. Dreams are tricky because they are difficult to capture and even when we do we often adjust them to make them more sensible. Some research suggests that it is helpful to wake up at the exact same time each day to prepare the mind to end the dream cycle at a fixed time. It’s important to immediately record the dream as it is given and not provide a narrative which is often an act of sense making imposed upon it. Keeping a journal or chronicle of your dreams will help you develop an understanding of your own unique language of symbols - swimming means you are getting sick, etc. While there may be universal symbols, most therapists agree that your own dream vocabulary is quite unique.

You may not be a Shakespeare, Rembrandt, or Leonardo, but you can always work to increase your own creative capacity. All of these approaches are within your power—you just have to keep trying new things. Remember, a creative life means you make it up as you go along.

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FIELD GUIDES TO CREATIVITY

Mimetic Creativity:

Borrowing Brilliance: The Six Steps to Business Innovation by Building on the Ideas of Others by David Kord Murray

Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type by Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger

Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature by Janine M. Benyus

Bisociative Creativity:

A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative by Roger von Oech. There is also an app: Creative Whack Pack by Creative Think.

Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking by Michael Michalko

Six Thinking Hats by Edward de Bono

Analogical Creativity:

The Power of Thinking Differently: An Imaginative Guide To Creativity, Change, And The Discovery Of New Ideas by Javy W. Galindo

101 Creative Problem Solving Techniques: The Handbook of New Ideas for Business by James M. Higgins

I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World by James Geary

Narrative Creativity:

Directing the Story: Professional Storytelling and Storyboarding Techniques for Live Action and Animation by Francis Glebas

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting by Robert McKee

Scenario Planning: A Field Guide to the Future by Woody Wade

Intuitive Creativity:

Use the Power of Your Imagination to Create What You Want in Your Life by Shakti Gawain
Accidental Genius: Using Writing to Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, and Content by Mark Levy

Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth by Robert A. Johnson