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Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming The Unseen Forces That Stand In The Way Of True Inspiration

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Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration

by *Ed Catmull and Wallace Amy*

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Creativity plays an important role in education. Almost daily, academics and students alike face situations that require them to be flexible and creative. The work of faculty is a fine balance between the needs of their students and the requirements of the institutions they work for, and so, quick-thinking and resourcefulness are useful attributes for any educator. There are numerous articles and books that focus on issues faced in academic contexts, but few target the flexibility and creativity needed in academia. The book, *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration* (Catmull and Wallace, 2014), while written for a corporate environment, gives useful strategies in this regard for academic contexts as well.

The author, Pixar founder and President Ed Catmull, is a pioneer in innovation in animated films. In his book, he shares his experience in establishing and supporting a creative environment at Pixar for 33 years. The book reveals his journey in four parts: becoming a part of Pixar; establishing a creative environment; facing new challenges; and maintaining quality that his company has built a reputation for. In the first part of the book, the author discusses being inspired very early on in his life by Walt Disney and animation, but finding his drawing skills lacking, he took up computer science as a degree instead. However, being one of the first few people to see computer animation as the future of movies, the author's passion and talent eventually led him back to his first passion, resulting in the company Pixar and the creation of highly successful never seen before animation and movies.

Throughout the book, the author provides insight into managing and maintaining a creative culture in organizations similar to that achieved at Pixar. He details strategies such as focusing on open communication, eliminating fear of failure, encouraging collaboration,

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accepting change and managing hidden risks – strategies that are very relevant to academia as well. These strategies are divided into two areas – creativity in the classroom and creativity in the hierarchy – discussed below.

Creativity in the classroom

Just similar to good managers can encourage creativity in employees, similarly educators play a vital role in developing their students' creative skills. Strategies for more creativity and success suggested by the author most relevant to educators and their students are the following.

Communication

“If people in your organization feel they are not free to suggest ideas, you lose.” (Catmull and Wallace, 2014, p. 195). Catmull asserts that inspiration can come from anywhere, and hierarchy in any organization should not hinder the flow of ideas. This philosophy resonates with the classroom environment as well. Faculty should be open to ideas, criticism and healthy arguments from students. Students should feel allowed to challenge and discuss the lecturer's opinions/thoughts in a healthy manner. This culture goes a long way for evoking curiosity and enhancing creativity.

Fear of failure

“Fail early and fail fast” (Catmull and Wallace, 2014, p. 109). This ideology is highly relevant and adaptable to academia. Catmull points out that often failure is associated as a weakness and considered as a stigma by students. However, in a classroom, this fear of failure prohibits students from being creative and innovative. According to Wagner and Compton (2012), one of the essential traits of an innovator is the ability to tolerate failure. Faculty need to instill in students the idea that failing is an opportunity to learn and a chance to accept constructive criticism. Unfortunately, educators need to adhere to a grading scale that supports only success, which usually has very little room to accept failure. So how can we accommodate and accept deficiencies without compromising teaching standards?

By taking guidance from Catmull's strategies of encouraging ideas without fear of failure, especially in the beginning of projects, faculty can do the same. A tolerant environment can be created in classrooms, so that students feel they can err without judgment especially in the beginning of courses where assessments are few. Regular classes and labs can provide space and time for students to fail, especially formative assignments wherein faculty have the discretion to establish their own criteria for success. If educators can make students view failure as opportunities for success rather than roadblocks, it will encourage student exploration and creativity.

Rules and discipline

“Be wary of making too many rules”, Catmull says, “Too many rules for an organization make the life of managers easier, however, it can be demeaning to the majority that behave well” (Catmull and Wallace, 2014, p. 197). This principle applies to the academic context too. When an educator is authoritarian, the classroom does not allow for student–student or student–teacher interactions. This creates a fearful atmosphere that prohibits students from exploring their creativity. A skilled educator maintains an appropriate balance between classroom discipline and student involvement. Rules that relate to academic dishonesty, misconduct, disruptive behavior are major, therefore, need to be emphasized and enforced, but there can be flexibility with minor rules. This enables students to be disciplined but not

feel inhibited from expressing themselves in learning. From a Gulf perspective, it is worthwhile for instructors to consider cultural and traditional customs before enforcing classroom rules. According to “Everyday Rules That Really Work” (2003), effective language encourages students to respect and follow the rules of the group. Thus, an instructor’s language also bears high significance in the classroom for maintaining discipline while still creating an encouraging environment.

Collaboration, feedback and candor

Educators are always trying to create the right formula to encourage, nurture and support collaboration in students, which is considered a powerful pedagogical tool. According to [Blaimers and Peterson\(2014\)](#), one of the enablers to nurture creativity in the classroom is through collaborative and social environments with students supporting each other’s creative development. Similarly, in this book, it is mentioned that Pixar has done the same by employees and managers supporting each other through difficulties to upsurge trust and develop bonds.

The author writes about the importance of creating a culture that encourages and embraces candor. At Pixar, honest and frank feedback is encouraged between employees, and this is done with empathy, praise and appreciation. In an educational context, this resembles peer review. Therefore, we must create a healthy class environment that allows constructive feedback and criticism by embracing candor. Students in a class cannot feel equally committed and part of that environment unless they feel a respectful relationship based on trust, both toward their instructor and others who are giving them feedback and criticism.

A good rule of thumb, according to the book, is to give feedback as soon as possible on any behavior or work starting with positive followed by negative feedback. This is an excellent system of feedback that can directly be applied to academia and in giving feedback on student work. Moreover, the most valuable feedback is when students get opportunities to reflect on this feedback, and so, once students are asked to comment on that feedback or give feedback to other students (peer review), they will be able to complete their learning cycle ([Ambrose et al., 2010](#)). The book also supports this by mentioning different viewpoints are “additive rather than competitive” ([Catmull and Wallace, 2014](#), p. 111).

Creativity in the hierarchy

Some of the strategies for creativity in this book are useful not only within the classroom but outside it as well. There are many insightful points in the book about how organizations and hierarchy tend to stifle creativity and ways for administrators and managers to avoid this. These situations are sometimes common in academia and are useful for educational institutions to heed as well.

Hiring

According to the author, hiring people on potential rather than their current skill set is important. In an academic context, it is important for educators to be adaptable ([Smith, 2010](#)) to every classroom and to be able to cater to the needs of a variety of students. Thus, looking at potential to adapt rather than just skill set is a good policy to consider in academic hiring as well.

The author also talks about taking a chance on hiring people more accomplished than those who may be in charge. Organizations succeed when they hire the most capable people they can find, as these people tend to innovate and excel in their fields and are able to help those around them improve as well. This advice transfers well to the academic context as a

diverse and up-to-date skill set is needed in the best educators, but many, while having devoted years to teaching and research in their field, may not have had the time or opportunity to update their skills or be exposed to different strategies and research on teaching. And so, taking a chance on faculty with better training, experience and qualifications will benefit those already at the organization, allowing for an exchange of ideas and skills and allowing organizations to become innovative and better.

Communication

The author asserts that often, employees do not feel free to voice their opinions. Therefore, it is the job of managers and administrators to look for these barriers to communication and remove them because when people are free to voice their opinions and are more open, a creative and innovative workplace is the result. Pixar accomplishes this through their Braintrust meetings, where employees are free to criticize and comment on the projects at the company. Thus, there should be a similar process in academic organizations where people are free to pitch in ideas and criticize rules already in place that may not be working.

Protecting future

One last relevant advice from the book is “protect the future not the past” (Catmull and Wallace, 2014, p. 197). An organization should not be rigid in old rules and procedures. To improve and be innovative, organizations need to be flexible and adaptable. Staff and faculty should be able to give feedback and be part of modifying rules and policies at an organization. The administration’s job is to not fear change but welcome it; that is how an organization can grow and become better – trying new things and then picking and choosing what works best.

Limitations

Although this book can be used as a reference for educators and educational administrators who are working to provide an innovative environment for students and seeking inspiration on how to be creative, much of the advice is aimed at corporations and set in the animation industry rather than to academia. Second, although Pixar is a very well-known company, the author has not mentioned any substantive failures. This makes the advice feel unbalanced, and guidelines give the impression of being infallible. Additionally, as the book is focused on American organizations, some tips do not transfer well to the Gulf region. For example, highly critical feedback openly given is not something usually practiced in institutions based in the Gulf, and even from a cultural perspective, it is not taken positively.

Barring these limitations, this book is a great additional resource for those looking for inspiration in fields beyond academia. It gives educators from any discipline useful lessons on communication, collaboration and failure, all of which are important themes in academia, and provides administrators of these institutions a different perspective on hiring and setting rules.

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Further reading

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