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## Creative Course Design (Yes, You Can!)

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A lot of teachers don't think of themselves as being particularly creative. Creativity in education doesn't mean coming up with a revolutionary new idea or complete reinvention of something. Creativity means doing something original or unique. A lot of educational creativity involves repackaging or "putting your own spin" on something that somebody else has already used successfully. We believe in adding your own stamp and style to already existing educational approaches—that's being creative. Sometimes all that's required to take a course or lesson from sleepy to exciting is a small, but personal, creative adaptation. It is almost always easier to modify than to create *ex nihilo*.

Every program, course, and lesson can be made more effective, efficient, and exciting. What we're suggesting is illustrated by IDEO—a California-based design and consulting firm that specializes in product and process improvement. The design principles they use can readily be applied to educational course design.

Sometimes we lack creativity in education because we work in isolation. Collaboration with colleagues fosters creativity. IDEO, for example, uses a team-based design methodology that consistently results in product designs that no single team member could have created (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PCicM>). Here are some of the principles they use when collaborating as a group—repurposed with an emphasis on course design:

**Encourage wild ideas.** Too often we end up doing what we've always done. We're busy and need to get lesson plans, assessments, and assignments completed in a hurry. But take a moment, consider an ideal teaching situation: What would you do for or with your students to help them succeed and master your course? Let your imagination run loosely. Of course, there are constraints, but letting them go (just temporarily) can help unlock new solutions to old problems. "Blue sky" brainstorming can yield imaginative, yet realistic possibilities.

**Defer judgment.** Whether you're doing individual course design or working as part of a committee, it is easy to criticize new ideas. How often do we tell ourselves and others: "That won't work." "We don't do that here." "We tried that ten years ago, and it didn't work then. It won't work now." "Your students will hate it." It's easy to become "problem spotters" instead of "problem solvers." Early criticism kills the seeds of creative solutions. Like pulling up plants when they are still seedlings, ideas need time and space to take root if they're going to bear fruit.

**Share everything** that you've learned with colleagues. Sharing insights with others helps clarify and sharpen ideas. There are many times and places to share good ideas and best practices—informal luncheons, at the water cooler, during workshops, via email or text, while working out at

the gym—the list is endless. Exactly what you do with colleagues depends on your colleagues and your institution's culture. Don't be insular. There is wisdom in crowds; "we" are always smarter than "me."

**Stay focused.** Don't try to fix too many things at once. Focus on areas that need the attention or are currently of the most interest. Look for creative solutions rather than trying to fix everything at once. We also recommend tackling problems when they occur. Don't let them fester but get focused on different approaches that could be taken.

**Build on the ideas of others.** You may know the popular song "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. Actually, you probably don't know the original version. Chances are you're familiar with the one Jeff Buckley popularized or you've heard the one in the animated movie *Shrek*. The original song was not particularly popular, but later artists recognized its potential. They built on the original, taking it in slightly different directions and adding their own individual styles. As a result, "Hallelujah" has been recorded hundreds of times by various artists and is a popular hit. (You can link to a podcast that explains the evolution of the song here: <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/07-hallelujah>.) The same general process can happen in education. Creative teachers often just slightly tweak or alter existing approaches, and over time that results in better courses.

**Fail often in order to succeed sooner.** Fear is the thief of creativity. Failing is part of learning—for teachers as well as students. Interesting though, isn't it, how some teachers go to great lengths to avoid introducing anything risky in their course. In our careers, some of our most meaningful classroom sessions involved something that didn't work quite right the first time we tried it. Fear of trying something new limits options and possibilities. A teaching failure—whether it's an assignment that didn't quite work, exam questions that were misunderstood, or an approach that just didn't connect with students—is not a sign of a bad teacher. It's an opportunity to learn and grow.

Creative course design is within your reach. Don't be put off by the idea. The tasks need not be overwhelming. If you are willing to experiment with these principles and apply them to your courses, don't be surprised when you discover that you, too, are a creative person.

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