

Clearing perceptual and habitual blocks in learning

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I believe in the importance of creativity in the constant reshaping of the world in which we live and, more specifically, believe in the importance of creativity in the schools. It is easy to consider the essential role of creativity in bringing joy and meaning to the human condition—without creativity we have no art, no literature, no science, no innovation, no problem solving, no progress. It is, perhaps, less obvious that creativity has an equally essential role in schools. The processes of creativity parallel those of learning. Recent calls for authentic activities, teaching for understanding, and real-world problem solving all require engaging students with content in flexible and innovative ways. Students who use content in creative ways learn the content well. They also learn strategies for identifying problems, making decisions, and finding solutions both in and out of school. By default, everyone is creative. It is a myth that only a few persons are labeled as creative. It is impossible not to be creative.

When we agree that all of us are creative, then the question arises as to why all of us do not demonstrate same levels of creativity in our day – to – day work. What holds us back from our natural creativity? What are the barriers?

There are many barriers that come in the way of displaying our natural talent. The major barriers are-

1. Emotional blocks,
2. Perceptual blocks,
3. Habitual blocks,
4. Cultural blocks,
5. Environmental blocks,
6. Intellectual blocks and
7. Expressive blocks.

I will be limiting the discussions to the effects of only two blocks, namely, the Perceptual blocks and the Habitual blocks

Perceptual blocks:

These are obstacles that prevent us from clearly perceiving the problem or the information needed to solve it. A few perceptual blocks are:

Stereotyping:

This assumes that once an item or idea is identified it can have no other use or function. Sometimes we begin to see an object only in terms of its name rather in terms of what it can do. Thus, we see a mop only

as a device for cleaning a floor, and do not think that it might be useful for clearing cobwebs from the ceiling, washing the car, doing aerobic exercise, propping a door open or closed, and so on. Please try to make an effort to find out in how many ways we can use a newspaper for reasons other than getting news and information. You will be really surprised. In one class, a set of students, in one hour, listed as many as 85 uses of a newspaper! Similarly try to list the uses of a paper clip. Now, you will realize that the newspaper or the paper clips were not manufactured for the reasons that you have been using them, but they can be used for so many purposes. Let us not perceive that a material or an idea has only one use.

Imaginary boundaries:

We project boundaries on the problem and solution that need not exist in reality. The older we get, the more preconceived ideas we have about things. These preconceptions often prevent us from seeing beyond what we already know or believe to be possible. They inhibit us from accepting change and progress.

Example: How to connect sections of airplanes with more ease and strength than using rivets. A modern solution is to use glue-glue the sections together. We probably would not think of this solution because of our prejudice about the word and idea of glue. But there are many kinds of glue, and the kind used to stick plane parts together makes a bond stronger than the metal of the parts themselves.

Another problem: How can we make lighter weight bullet proof windows? Thicker glass is too heavy. Answer: Use plastic. Again, we are prejudiced against plastic. But some plastics are not flimsy at all and are used in place of steel and in bullet proof windows.

Functional Fixation:

There is also a functional fixation of businesses. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the railroads saw themselves as railroads. When automobiles and later airplanes began to come in, the railroads didn't adapt. "That's not our business," they said. But if they had seen themselves as in the people transportation business rather than in the railroad business, they could have capitalized on a great opportunity.

Similarly, when the telephone began its rise, some of the telegraph companies said, "That is not our business; we are telegraph companies." But if they had said, "Hey, we are in the communication business, and here is a new way to communicate," they would have grown rather than died. Compare Western Union to AT&T. And have you heard of those big calculator companies Dietzgen or Pickett? No? Well, they were among the biggest makers of slide rules. But when electronic calculators began to rise, they did not know what business they were in. They thought they were in the slide rule business, when they were really in the calculator business. They did not adapt, they did not accept the challenge of change and opportunity, and they fell.

And there is a functional fixation of people, too. Think a minute how you react when you see your state Governor mowing his lawn, or your auto mechanic on a television show promoting a book. Stereotyping

can even be a form of functional fixation--how many people would laugh at a young girl quoting Aristotle? Too often we permit only a narrow range of attitudes and behaviors in other people, based on bias, prejudice, hasty generalization or limited past experience. Think of those statements like, "I cannot believe he said that," or "Imagine her doing that," and so on. But recall the proverb, "The goal of my life is not to live down to your expectations."

Strategies for avoiding perceptual blocks:

Some means of overcoming these blocks are:

Remove the fear of failure:- Encourage wild ideas from the students. Make Idea generation groups to be peer groups. Emphasize that all solutions belong to the group. Encourage humorous atmosphere. Have the ideas written down and passed around anonymously.

Adjust attitudes:- Emphasize the positive aspects of the solution. Ensure that risks are worth taking. Encourage the acceptance of alternate solutions.

Change the rules:- Temporarily suspend the rules and conditions for the problem and its solution, especially where specific rules or conditions block progress.

Change the solution mode:- If the problem is being explored verbally, try making a diagram or representing it mathematically. Use analogies. Assume a solution and see if it can be made to fit the problem.

Use provocative Questions:- Instead of dealing with the problem directly, consider a question that starts beyond the perceived block. Then work backwards. Once the perceptual block becomes familiar, it ceases to exist. Ask "What if" questions. Use a check lists.

Habitual blocks:

Habits take us where we were yesterday and our attitudes keep us there.

- Confucius

Habits are good in that they are efficient and conserve our mental energies for other tasks. However, habitual behavior can lead to a kind of blindness. One of the chief roadblocks to creativity stems from the physical, perceptual, and mental habits that we build up over time. Such habits tend to tune out those things and ideas around us that could be the basis for new insights.

Unfortunately, routine everyday decision-making works against searching for or accepting new ideas. In attempting to exercise good judgment and not make mistakes, people usually base their decisions on the best, most complete, and most accurate about what is established, common, and known instead of the newer and more unique the solution information or experience available. These habits allow us to deal with most situations without difficulty or trauma. Unfortunately, such high-caliber information exists only in specific specialized areas and it is harder to get good and sufficient information in every areas. That is why the easiest solutions are not new and different. Creative solutions by their very nature must be new or different.

Habits create mindsets and mindsets make our work routine and monotonous. When working becomes mechanical, the joy disappears. The habitual blocks not only affect individuals but institutions also.

The good way of overcoming the habitual blocks is to first realize that the working has become monotonous, boring and you are not liking it. This dissatisfaction is the indicator that you are getting into habitual block. Then take a close look at your working style. Write down all the possible different ways of doing the same job. Then, choose a method which appears very challenging. It may be difficult but you will certainly like it. Make a conscious effort to do whatever you are doing in different ways each time. These efforts will tax your brain but would leave you highly satisfied.

Overcoming Barriers to Learning

In the Twenty-First Century there are opportunities for learning all around us. Many people say they want a career change, and, to achieve their goal, some may need to go back to college or university to learn new skills. But despite all these amazing learning opportunities around them, many people who have taken the time to review opportunities never actually get started. Others, having started full of enthusiasm and excitement at the prospect of creating their new future, find that something happens to stop them.

So what has got in the way of their learning? How can they help themselves? And how can a teacher help them to learn more effectively?

Firstly, let's examine what learning is. Some define it in the traditional way, by arguing that it is a mental process. Yet when thoughts occur, something physical happens to us. When external events occur, physical processes take place in our bodies in reaction to them. These processes establish memories, reinforce or create behaviours and beliefs and actually change the physiology of the brain and the rest of the body.

Everybody's learning begins before birth. It takes place during our development and continues throughout our lives. In the beginning, we learn how to control our movement, how to feed and how to communicate with others. When we do that, we not only learn about the world around us, but also who we are as people. And it is at this stage that we may learn beliefs about ourselves - picking them up inadvertently from those around us.

Some of those beliefs can be less than helpful. For example:

- “I can't dance”
- “I'm not musical/artistic”
- “I can't spell”
- “I can't change”
- “I always fail”
- “I'm stupid”

It is here that the role of a creative teacher becomes important. She has not only to understand her own teaching style but also the learning style of the student. As every teacher has a different teaching style, every student has a different learning style.

Learning styles are “characteristic, cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning

environment”. The concept of learning styles has been applied to a wide variety of student attributes and differences. Some students are comfortable with theories and abstractions; others feel much more at home with facts and observable phenomena; some prefer active learning and others lean toward introspection; some prefer visual presentation of information and others prefer verbal explanations. One learning style is neither preferable nor inferior to another, but is simply different, with different characteristic strengths and weaknesses. A goal of instruction should be to equip students with the skills associated with every learning style category, regardless of the students’ personal preferences, since they will need all of those skills to function effectively as professionals. Generally, studies have identified four types of learning styles. They are not watertight compartments. But, every child shows predominance in a type. The four categories are – **visual** learners, **auditory** learners, **read/write** learners and **kinesthetic** learners.

A creative teacher continuously makes efforts to match her teaching style to the learning styles of the students. If she can teach the content with four aspects in mind, it is possible that she would relate it to all the students with different learning styles. The four aspects are sensory, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. If the class of a teacher has elements of these aspects, it would stimulate independent thinking, open up multiple options and make the student a self-learner free from the barriers to a large extent. That is the essence of creative education, true education and man making education.
