When I first began my teaching career over two decades ago, I wondered how long I would last in the profession. My worry wasn't that I would find teaching too challenging or even that I would become bored with its daily routine. My concern was with the bureaucracy of schooling. I worried that within the prevailing climate of teacher accountability and back-to-basics instruction making its way through our society at the time that the joy and excitement I felt for teaching as a challenging craft would slowly dissipate. Fortunately, I found a position at an independent school that viewed teachers as fundamental partners in the education process, encouraging exactly the kind of creative response to the work of teaching that attracted me to the field in the first place. By giving me permission, even encouragement, to try new things in my classroom, create my own curricular materials, make mistakes without recrimination, and challenge the status quo, I was able to fall in love with teaching in a way I never imagined.
The kind of institutional fostering of creative and innovative teaching I experienced years ago is no less important today. If anything, these types of environments are needed even more. Such environments not only sustain individual growth and commitment to the profession, something recent surveys show is waning,¹ but also advance the general process and progress of education by providing examples of new ways of thinking about school, curriculum, and learning. In fact, nurturing classroom innovation and providing regular avenues to talk about and learn from one another’s practices offers one of the best avenues for improving the educational experience of all students.

In the current era of standards and accountability, this view of creative teaching represents a significant countercultural move, however. Increasingly, teachers feel the need to narrow their teaching to conform to external exams.² Even in independent schools, which are usually exempt from curricular and assessment mandates, there are pressures to deliver the goods in terms of test scores and advance preparation for higher education. While the end goal, to ensure a quality education for all, is worthwhile, we need to be careful that our efforts to ensure across-the-board quality in the educational experience don’t diminish the very excellence we prize, that in our efforts to raise the floor, we don’t revert to lowering the ceiling instead.

To keep homogenization and standardization at bay, we must look for ways to bring out diverse responses to the pressures of standards and external exams. To better understand what this might mean, three questions need to be addressed: What is creative and innovative teaching? How does innovation in teaching serve the process and progress of education? And, finally, how can schools simultaneously foster creative and innovative teaching and standard outcomes?

**WHAT IS CREATIVE TEACHING?**

When first asked to think of what creative teaching looks like, images of charismatic and eccentric teachers most likely pop into our heads: Robin Williams in *Dead Poet Society*, or perhaps the more real but no-less cinematic Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, or LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*. Most of us can even identify such characters from our own educational histories, a special teacher who dressed outrageously, turned the room into a replica of a medieval castle, or fired us up through grand competitions and adventures. Although this might be the pervasive image of creative teaching, it is extremely limited. It restricts us to creativity as a personality trait; something one either has or doesn’t, and promotes a narrow view of the purpose of creative teaching as entertainment. Within the broader context of the profession, this form of creative teaching offers little in terms of lessons or replicable examples. A more encompassing view of creative and innovative teaching moves us beyond this cult of personality to a broad and accessible form of teaching practice that can be understood on three levels: curricular, instructional, and student.

**Creativity and curriculum**

On the curricular level, creative teaching seeks to transform the curriculum students experience. This doesn’t mean that teachers toss out the existing curriculum and substitute their own content. Rather, it involves looking at what one is asked to teach with an eye towards shaping it in new and more productive ways. For instance, Bill Coate at the Sierra Vista School in Madera, California, has the responsibility of teaching the American Civil War to sixth graders. While that content is given, Bill chooses to have his students learn this history from a regional perspective. After choosing a resident from among the tombstones at the local cemetery, students go on a journey to investigate this person’s life story and how he or she was affected by national events. In diaries, students take the perspective of the resident and record reflections on both the local and national events.

A creative approach to content is directly connected to a teacher’s insight into his or her subject matter. A teacher’s understanding of and passion for ideas reveals itself in a curriculum in which the subject matter is organized in a way that facilitates connections, encourages excitement, and makes learning a powerful endeavor. Big ideas — that is, important concepts central to a discipline or domain — play a central role in most creative classrooms, at the same time requisite skills and knowledge are developed in the service of helping students achieve some greater understanding.
While the end goal, to ensure a quality education for all, is worthwhile, we need to be careful that our efforts to ensure across-the-board quality in the educational experience don't diminish the very excellence we prize, that in our efforts to raise the floor, we don't revert to lowering the ceiling instead.

Creativity and instruction

Whereas creative approaches to curriculum involve finding new topics for students to explore, creative approaches to instruction usually entail finding new ways of accomplishing familiar tasks. Creative teaching practices are both effective and innovative in promoting the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and understanding. Such practices provide motivation for student learning and often infuse a class with excitement and activity. Creative learning practices may involve students with material in new ways, using new modalities, approaches, or ways of thinking. In many instances, these creative instructional practices often recognize the multiple ways in which human beings are smart and use these multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) to help engage students and promote learning. Creative approaches to instruction happen whenever teachers ask themselves, how can I make this content more engaging and meaningful for my students? How can I teach it in a way that will help them interact with the content in a new way?

The answer to such questions can be as simple as finding the perfect book to launch a unit, a good experiment in a science class, or the right example for a math concept. Other times it can be more radical. Kenna Barger in Elkins, West Virginia, engages her Algebra I students with linear equations through a series of labs in which they determine how to construct an appropriate bungee cord to save their water balloon from an ignoble encounter with the asphalt once launched from the school's roof. In Ben Wentworth's integrated science and math class in Colorado Springs, Colorado, students learn about the cell by creating a life-size, walk-through model complete with semi-permeable membrane. They then use the model to teach local elementary students. In Connie Weber's fifth-grade class in Ann Arbor, Michigan, students experience a class structure in which the learning goals and work of the week are completely laid out on Monday and students must learn to organize, record, and reflect on their learning independently throughout the week.

Creativity and students

In a truly creative classroom, the students are doing more than learning the curricular content, and teachers are doing more than teaching it. In these classrooms, the creativity of students is also being cultivated. This means that there are often many avenues for personalized expression as students think for themselves and develop original responses to the curriculum. This often means designing open-ended projects and assignments. For example, in Chris Elnicki's seventh-grade social studies class, students are asked to create a poster that, for them, exemplifies the "American Dream." The project not only uncovers individual understanding but also fosters self-expression through the choices that are made in the process. Other times, teachers foster students' creativity by turning the class over to them. In Heather Woodcock's humanities class at Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she regularly gives students the responsibility of leading discussions of their readings. She calls these "leaderless discussions," since responsibility for posing questions and advancing the conversation regularly shifts within the group of students. The process encourages individual students to bring their own thoughts, questions, and sensibilities into the conversation in a creative way.

These three areas of creative teaching — curriculum, instruction, and students — are easily separable in theory, but often more commingled in practice. As teachers imagine a new way of shaping content, their instruction often shifts as well. When this happens, the opportunities for students to engage their creativity may increase. Likewise, new teaching practices often suggest subtle shifts in the focus of content. As integrated as these three facets are in the life of the classroom, they nonetheless provide a useful set of individual lenses for looking at teaching.

How does innovation serve education?

Although this new definition of what it means to teach creatively may be useful in helping us to understand just what it is we are talking about, the bigger question of its importance for education remains. How does creative teaching serve learners in a particular classroom and education more
broadly? At least four different kinds of benefits for students come to mind: (1) motivational benefits in terms of engagement with the curriculum, (2) social benefits with regard to the sense of community within the classroom, (3) efficacy benefits related to the development of self-confidence and one's ability to learn, and (4) performance benefits in terms of increased understanding, retention, and transfer of skills and knowledge.

**Motivational benefits**

Creative classrooms are often places where students are engaged in fun projects and activities that capture their attention and keep them interested. However, if one looks below the surface, one will see that there is more to the motivational picture than just making learning fun. Creative classrooms also foster a joy of learning that provides an internal motivation for learning. One's joy is fostered by what Israel Scheffler (1991) calls cognitive emotions — such as a love of truth, commitment to fairness, zest for exploration, joy of verification, and delight in surprising outcomes and new ideas. In creative classrooms, teachers provide opportunities for students to experience these emotions. Intellectual passions also contribute to a joy of learning by developing the aesthetic side of learning — that is, by helping the learner to become “enraptured with the phenomena, principles, and discrepancies they encounter in the environment.”

Teachers in creative classrooms foster intellectual passion by paying attention to the role of affect in learning. In other words, they teach to both the head and the heart.

This sense of inquiry is palpable in Kenna Barger’s algebra class. There is clearly excitement on the part of students when they are given the opportunity to work with materials such as water balloons, graphing calculators, and rubber bands. However, this initial fascination is soon replaced by engagement in the problem itself, that of figuring out how to accurately model the bungee jump so that accurate predictions can be made. The joy of verification when a balloon narrowly misses the pavement or the surprise from an unceremonious splat is evident in students’ faces and written reflections.

**Social benefits**

Creative classrooms function as learning communities in which the contributions and special talents of all individuals are respected and valued. In these classrooms, developing understanding tends to be a shared mission of the group, rather than an individual activity. At the same time, individualization plays a role as each student’s talents and interests are acknowledged and cultivated.

This sense of shared purpose is evident in Bill Coate’s classroom as students pursue the common goal of inquiry into the life of a California pioneer. This is further enhanced by the joint task of writing and publishing the biography of that settler, something that no one student can do alone. Likewise, in Heather Woodcock’s leaderless discussion, students embark on a shared quest to understand the text they have read through their collaborative discussion and sharing. Woodcock accomplishes this by shifting the emphasis from students’ answers to basic comprehension questions to their preparation of probing questions that will take fellow students deeper into the text.

**Efficacy benefits**

Efficacy relates to one’s sense of one’s effectiveness within a particular situation or domain. It addresses the question: Can I be productive here? In creative classrooms, students gain a sense of efficacy as they learn how to learn and develop the habits of mind that support good and productive thinking. Efficacy demands that students develop actual tools and skills for successful learning, rather than artificial pride in their abilities. David Perkins (1992) refers to these tools as the metacurriculum that all
schools need to teach. The metacurriculum consists of knowledge about how ordinary subject-matter knowledge is organized and how one thinks and learns. Teaching this metacurriculum alongside the regular curriculum is often a tacit goal of teachers in creative classrooms and serves to direct much of their work.

The metacurriculum is at the heart of Connie Weber's creative instructional approach. She wants students to see themselves as independent learners capable of navigating the world of ideas. To accomplish this, she not only works with students on developing organizational skills, but also by enriching their understanding and use of the resources around them. Thus, while students are individually responsible for their own work, they quickly develop a sense that the larger task of learning is a shared one. Students learn to help one another, and peers, rather than the teacher, quickly become a valued source of information, feedback, and encouragement.

As Chris Elnicki's history students engage in a public-issue debate on the issue of immigration, the depth of their understanding becomes visible. Gathered in a circle, the class independently directs the debate with individual students putting forth their position with a well-articulated rationale, challenging the facts others present, offering counter arguments, and using analogies to clarify an issue. Through these actions, the thinking of students becomes visible, and it is clear that they have explored the complexity of the issue and not just memorized a set of facts on the subject.

The broader context

Innovative teaching practices serve the broader field of education by providing rich examples of effective practices that enrich learning. Creative and innovative teaching is always a responsive act, demanding both insight and judgment. However, an overemphasis on standard curriculum and instruction reduces the possibilities for more innovative responses, robbing both students and teachers of the opportunity to fully engage in the richness of the learning and teaching experience. Without innovation, any field of endeavor becomes stagnant. When that happens, the profession, as a whole, loses its allure for creative individuals. Thus, innovation not only fuels the larger enterprise of education, but also sustains the passion of individual teachers.

While creative teaching provides rich localized examples, it enhances the larger good as well. Innovative teaching practices often migrate from small, hot-house-type settings to the larger field. Practices such as the use of portfolios, organizing instruction in self-contained learning centers, use of manipulatives to teach mathematics, service learning, and so on all have their roots in the creativity of individuals and small groups of teachers.

How can creativity and standards coexist?

Standards are not new to education, nor are they limited to public schools. There have always been objectives, guidelines, and external mandates to shape what goes on in the classroom. Of course, some of these external...
forces are more onerous than others, seeming to exert an inordinate amount of influence on the daily life of the classroom. That pressure can, at times, make developing creative instructional units challenging. However, by keeping standards, mandates, and demands for advance preparations in perspective, it is possible to address the standards and prepare students for tests and admissions to their next school and still teach creatively.

No matter what form standards take, it is important to keep their larger goal in mind by asking what the aims are. Sometimes a standards document, external exam, textbook, or curriculum document can look like a list of so much material to be covered. However, if you look behind this list and actually try to understand the standards themselves, a different picture often emerges. Most standards documents speak in terms of overarching goals, of what students should be able to do, how they should approach certain content and deal with certain problems. Attitudes, stances, and dispositions are often referred to as part of standards documents. Even tests and curricula are based on assumptions about the kind of thinking students are expected to develop in a course. All these documents are putting forth a vision of an educated person conversant in the various subject areas. Generally, it is a vision that takes the long view of education.

Teachers in creative classrooms generally find they can best address the standards by embracing this long view (Jackson & Davis, 2000). They don't let themselves become distracted or carried away by the pressures to take a short-term approach to teaching and learning. They keep their focus on the goals of the standards rather than on the path that someone else has laid before them. Middle school science teacher Judy Gulledge exemplifies this process. In explaining the process of putting together her curriculum for the year, she says, "I begin by examining current events. I look for issues lacking easy answers. The best are those issues that will
encourage my students to take action within their own community. When carefully selected, the content of my unit (the 'why') will enrich the lives of my students, preparing them for future work, education, and citizenship. Standards may contribute to 'what' is taught; however, they should never be the sole reason 'why' something is taught.

On the surface, the content of what is taught in a creative classrooms like Gulledge's isn't so different from that of other classrooms at the same grade and subject. However, the way the teacher and learners experienced that content differs dramatically. This difference is often the result of how the content gets organized, sequenced, and bundled together, and how it is approached. Teachers in creative classrooms look for and exploit connections in the material they are required to teach. Like Gulledge, they think about how the content connects to students' lives, to the world around them, and to other ideas about which students are learning. These connections help students to understand the material in a deeper way. This may mean exploring core issues or topics that are at the heart of several pieces of content, working with other teachers to sequence topics so that connections are more salient, or explicitly asking students to constantly make connections among ideas being covered in the course. Rather than accepting the mandated curriculum as a complete document, teachers in creative classrooms might ask themselves, "How can I situate these skills within a meaningful context? What are the central ideas behind this list of objectives that will really give students something powerful to hang on to?"

The pressures to cover the curriculum, prepare students for tests, and meet parental expectations can, at times, seem overwhelming. However, mere coverage without engagement is unlikely to produce long-term learning. In creative classrooms, teachers...
take seriously the need to motivate students and create engagement. That is why they think about making the work authentic and purposeful for students. It also means showing students the power of learning, the opportunity to make a difference, and the joy of discovering new things. Standards seldom address these issues. Therefore, teachers themselves must look at the content to be covered with an eye toward how they will engage students with that content. At the same time, teachers in creative classrooms recognize that when students are motivated to learn, it is often best to capitalize on that motivation even if it means steering away from the official curriculum. They recognize that, in such instances, the learning will be long lasting and can ultimately provide a strong anchoring experience to which they can later connect other ideas.

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NOTES

1 A recent survey by the National Educational Association (Association, 2003) found that 40 percent of teachers would not re-enter the profession today.
2 Sixty-one percent of public school teachers say testing stifles real teaching and learning (Association, 2003).


REFERENCES
