An Interview With...  
Dr. Don Treffinger

More Than Cupcakes: Supporting Your Child’s Creative Potential

By Nancy Green

Nancy Green recently had a chance to speak with Dr. Don Treffinger about creativity, creative problem solving, and how parents can foster it at home.

Q. The last time your name appeared within these pages, it was as Editor-in-Chief of Parenting for High Potential. Since you’ve moved on from that role, what has filled the time?

We’re just completing the third edition of Creative Approaches to Problem Solving, a foundational textbook that will now be published by Sage Publications. I’ve stayed involved with Destination Imagination and the Future Problem Solving Program. And I continue to work on problem solving style with a wide range of groups. We’re also looking at technology enabled instruction, and how to better take advantage of Web resources.

Q. You’ve obviously studied creative problem solving over a rich and productive career—can you share your working definition of creativity with our readers?

It’s important to look at the concept of creativity as the balance between novelty and usefulness. By that I mean creativity involves new perspectives, originality, fluency, and generating ideas, but it also means having the ability to germinate ideas and bring them to fruition. The concept involves not only “How creative are you?” but also “How do you express your creativity?” and “How do you want to pursue your interests and passions?”

We’re also coming to the point where we’re realizing there will never be one single test to measure creativity, because it can be expressed in so many different ways and in different contexts. Instead we use profiles comprising different sets of characteristics—always in play with one another. Educators used to ask, “How creative are you?” Now we ask, “How are you creative?”

Q. How does this play out in a classroom context?

Thinking about creativity has everything to do with the concept of differentiation for individual learners. In other words, “what works for whom under what conditions?” It’s essential to recognize that children do not think, learn, perform, or function in the same way—so teachers need to support and be responsive to differences. You won’t find just one way to foster creativity. . . . We’re past the idea that a teacher might say, “Take out your creativity workbook and complete pages 5–9.” As educators, we know that a fixed set of ideas that capture the creativity concept just doesn’t exist.

Q. I know you have traveled widely around the globe. What is it about American innovation and creativity that is so highly desired by our international counterparts?

I believe this question is changing. Maybe years back, it was “we’re going to export our Yankee ingenuity.” Today our international relationships are a mutual and collaborative exchange. The world is flat, and expertise is getting
The ability to understand how we deal with diversity, multicultural perspectives, comfort with multiple languages, for example—these issues are often handled more ably by our international colleagues. People are tolerant of differences in many other cultures in ways we as Americans can learn from.

America does have a key contribution to make, however, in understanding the explicit nature of the creative problem solving process. You can teach and replicate this process of innovation and creativity deliberately and explicitly. It’s not just about content anymore, but rather process and content as equal players. Content is important because you have to think creatively about something; but there are also process skill and tools for thinking creatively, critically, and solving problems that students need to learn explicitly and intentionally. In the past, process has been a servant to content but we’re feeling the need now to realize that both process and content are important in their own right and we need to give time and attention to both so they can work hand in hand.

Q. What trends do you see related to creativity in American public schools today?

Personally, I think that the story of No Child Left Behind and the vast over emphasis on high-stakes testing will turn out to be the great tragedy of this period in our educational history. A major tension exists in today’s classrooms. On one hand educational leaders place emphasis on testing and pouring content into kids’ heads just so they can achieve high scores, and on the other hand educators are beginning to place importance on 21st Century Skills—skills that capture the concept of collaboration, working in teams, critical and creative thinking, managing change, and asking the right questions.

More often than not, the more dynamic and complex challenges of innovation and problem solving have been sidelined by our desire to produce test scores that put school districts on the map.

Q. How can parents encourage creativity?

I always advise parents to create an environment that embraces the differences among family members. Parents and caregivers can do so much to help children learn to express and pursue their interests, passions, and strengths. We assume that our children think like we do and need what we need, but that’s not true. What works is exposing them to lots of possibilities, encouraging kids to be researchers, and to chase down answers just because they’re curious. As parents, we need to be models of continuous learning if we want to facilitate creative thinking in our kids. Parents also can apply and teach deliberate tools for generating ideas and for focusing our thinking to make good decisions with their children at home, just as we can in school. In many situations, rather than giving answers, we can engage children (or the entire family) in thinking of new and interesting possibilities and then choosing those to put to use.

You’ll find quite a difference between the parent who asks, “What are some additional questions you can think of about this assignment or project, and some possible ways of finding or creating answers?” and the parent who asks, “Are you ready for the test?”

Q. What does a school that values creativity look like?

You can see an exciting and dynamic school within the first 10 minutes after you walk in the door. We must move from the notion of schools as the place where teachers direct and give information to children, to the concept of schools as places where we’re engaging children and adults together in problem solving, projects, experiments, and community service projects side by side. I think about school as a lighthouse for learning in the community.” People of all ages come through the door to learn, pursue new information, and build community.

Parents can do so much more than bring in cupcakes to the classroom. For example, helping teachers create project ideas, guiding students to other resources, admitting as an adult that you don’t have the answer . . . and that you and the students need to find it together.

For gifted learners, these ideas apply, and also, content becomes more challenging. The more the curriculum opens up, the more kids are going to be learning about what adults/teachers may not know about—higher level learning opportunities. The inquiry process for a high-ability learner is the same. . . . The difference is that the projects and problems are providing the challenge to move them forward.

Q. If you were to recommend your top two or three resources, what would they be?

On the creativity side, Creative Problem Solving: An Introduction and the CPS Kit, both available from Prufrock Press, provide comprehensive materials and resources that an individual, a small team, or a group can use to learn and apply Creative Problem Solving in or away from school.
Q. If you could give our readers one piece of advice about the creative process, and fostering it in children, what would it be?

Be open to lots of possibilities and learning opportunities that are vastly different from your own childhood experience. Recognize the complexities, the risks, the new technology . . . learn to take advantage of it, and then have fun on the ride.

Dr. Donald J. Treffinger, President of the Center for Creative Learning, Inc., in Sarasota, FL (http://www.creative-learning.com), is an internationally known researcher, writer, teacher, and presenter in the area of creativity and Creative Problem Solving, as well as in the area of gifted and talented education. He has authored or coauthored more than 60 books and monographs, including Creative Problem Solving: An Introduction and Creative Approaches to Problem Solving, and more than 350 articles. He served as Editor of Gifted Child Quarterly from 1980–1984, and as Editor-in-Chief of Parenting for High Potential, NAGC’s quarterly magazine for parents for 8 years (2000–2007).

Author’s Note

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