



Playfulness in the post-16 classroom

Taking inspiration from the primary classroom, **Rachel Jones** explains how to put the fun back into post-compulsory learning with a range of playful ideas for teaching serious concepts.

Creativity and creative practice seems to be somewhat a given in the early years of schooling. Just have a look at the blogs or Pinterest boards of primary practitioners and you will see inspiring classrooms overflowing with creative ideas to advance learning and optimise potential.

Something seems to happen to the teaching profession as children advance in age and move through the education system. The teaching practice, activities and approach to learning become less and less creative. By the time many children get to sixth form or level three study, creativity – and all that it implies in terms of play or even fun – has been lost to the pressure of exams and the perceived rigour of a classroom driven by didactic teaching.

We labour under the idea that because education at this level is not compulsory, it means that the learners want to be there. Not so. Many learners stumble into college from a school system that has not prepared them for higher order thinking or independent work. They often arrive with little or no idea about what they want to do after college, and therefore without specific grade aims for UCAS points, or even a specific career goal in mind.

Without aspirations, the pressure of the step up from GCSE can often mean that attendance and hand-in rates for homework suffer, to the extent that some learners give up on education all together. As teachers, we fail those students who are not motivated, and we owe it to them to rethink our practice so that we focus on the outcomes for students – not just their final A level result.

Engaging older students

In my experience, engagement in lessons is the key. For many of our learners, sixth form study represents a chance for a new start, as many of them are vulnerable and didn't find school easy. In many respects our learners are treated as young adults, yet they are still children, and will still enjoy many creative learning opportunities in the classroom that you might think they are too old for. My classroom practice has very much been developed by engaging with creative ideas, often drawn from primary school examples. Balls pits, finger painting, building bridges to develop evaluation skills, and planning essays in 3D... all things that happened in my classroom last year in order to develop learners' higher order thinking skills.

I can already feel sixth form teachers cringing. Ball pits? Paint?! I know – it's not the usual way of teaching older students, and I know that teachers can get just as excellent results using more conventional methods too. However, as teachers, we often become entrenched in our habits – we get comfortable with what we do year in and year out, and many people do not see the need to radically change their practice. So don't. Maybe try one idea. I'm a massive advocate of taking a creative approach to teaching and learning, however my class still sometimes sit and read in silence.

Adapting some of the ideas here and making them right for you is key. To be at your most creative in the classroom, you need to really know your learners. I have a fancy-dress box, which my class with lots of performing arts students love. However, it does not go down so well with my class made up of sports and public services students. Creativity in the classroom is not a one size fits all solution. You need to think carefully about the type of lesson you are preparing.

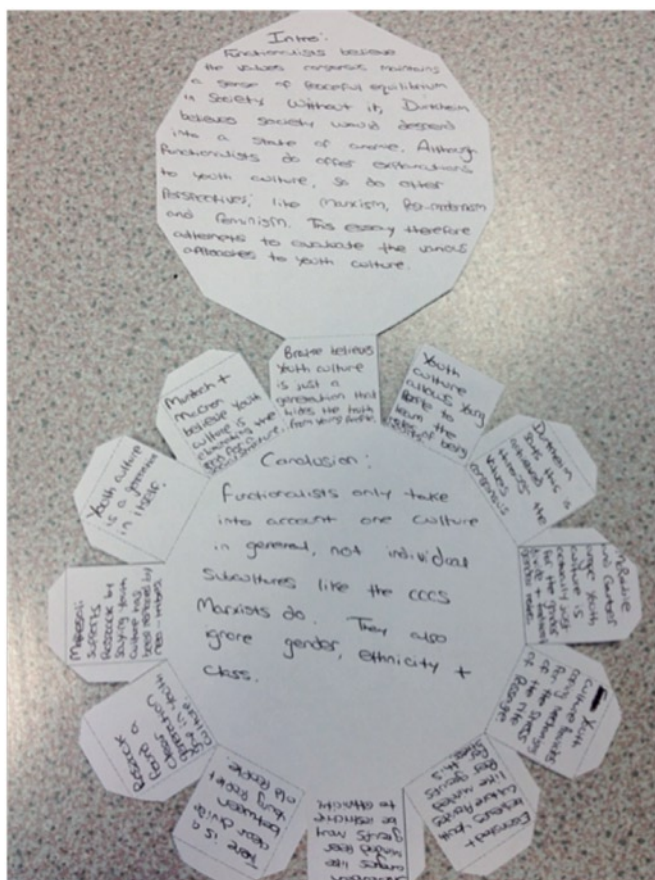
Even so, I would also encourage you to take risks with your teaching – just as I'd encourage students to take risks with their learning. You have a position of power as a teacher and can consequently make really effective use of role modelling those learning characteristics that you want your learners to demonstrate – take risks, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes (and share them) and move on as a more effective learner.

You know as a teacher if a lesson is failing miserably, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a good idea to try something different. Many times I have started a lesson by sharing the aims with my class and saying, 'I am not sure this will work, but...' What made the lessons work was my students' enthusiasm, not only for the subject but for their own learning.

On most occasions, students relish the opportunity to try new things and widen their experiences of learning, and will work really hard to meet the objectives in class – many times surpassing them and creating their own extension work. This engagement and immersion is magical when it happens, and it never ever happened when I was teaching in my comfort zone.

Creative revision techniques

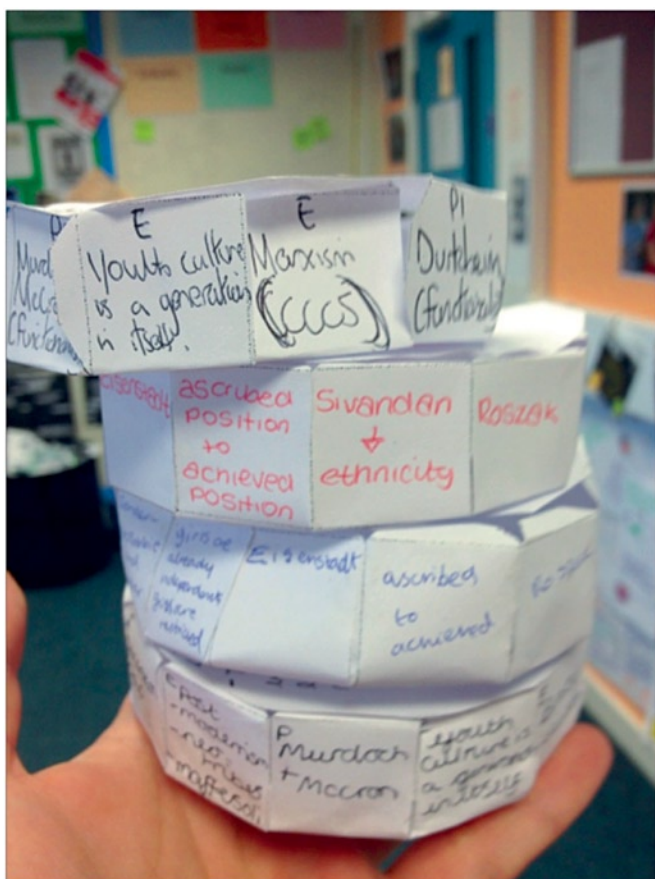
I would say I have been teaching this way for about seven years, and during this time, have been growing in confidence that a more creative approach is beneficial – especially in my current post as a teacher of sociology and classical



civilisation in a sixth form. Results at both AS and A2 vastly outperform national averages, and the highest grades are nearly double. As an inclusive setting, we are often teaching learners who did not reach their full potential or thrive at other settings, so this is a considerable achievement.

However, the reasons for taking a more creative approach are not simply driven by exam results and data. I firmly believe that we need to focus on the process of education – that by adopting a holistic approach and embedding core skills, we are preparing the student for further study and the wider world. It is simply not enough to teach them to be good at exams. We also need to teach them to be resilient, effective communicators, team members and digital citizens, alongside developing skills of analysis and evaluation that they will need in later life. We can do this by not by simply focusing on knowledge, but also considering the kind of person and learner you are moulding. A creative approach here is key – if your learners are engaged and buy in to the aims of the lesson (no matter how playful they are!) you will be able to transfer not only knowledge but also these skills.

Many of the more creative techniques I have developed have arisen from wanting to develop traditional learning skills, such as questioning and planning essays and answers to exam questions. One such technique involves keeping a ball pit (ok – it's more of a paddling pool) in my classroom, full of plastic balls. I write the key terms the students will need for their exam on these balls and then have them work in teams to race to the front and find the



right answer. We then use the key words from the balls to write sections of essays.

I also have a parachute which the students fill with answers on scrunched up balls of paper. We all hold the parachute round the edge and take turns to catch an answer. Students then have to state the question to the answer – an ideal revision technique. Both of these tasks originate in questioning but also reinforce tricky vocabulary. You can then further develop the lesson to utilise the knowledge you have reinforced to develop higher order evaluation skills.

Essay planning, along with evaluation skills, are key to my learners. I have developed essay planning as a 3D experience with students creating 3D plans using box nets, as shown on the opposite page. They write the introduction on the top, the conclusion on the bottom, and four lots of the 'Point, Evidence, Evaluate' structure to make up the 12 sides. These nets can then be placed alongside each other and moved around to give new and alternative evaluative perspectives to the question.

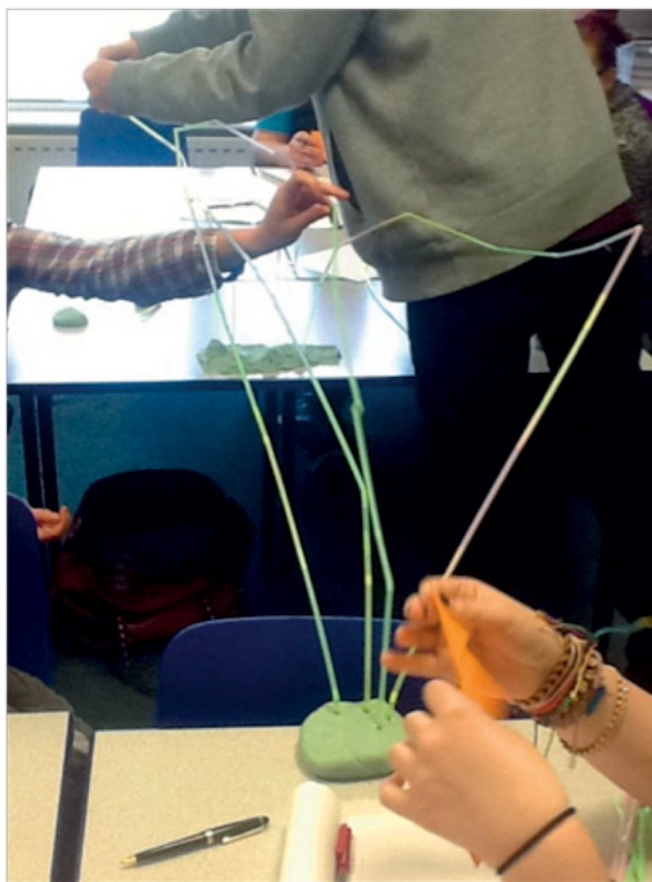
I have also used chalk to draw around a learner on the floor, CSI victim style, and after labelling the 'dead body' with an exam question, asked the class to mark the crime scene with cards detailing key essay points, using the shape of the body to promote effective evaluation.

During another lesson we built bridges between tables using plastic straws (and play-dough to anchor the bridges to the tables) to represent the opposing theoretical perspectives. My students then labelled the very wobbly straw bridges with the arguments of specific theorists.

This task was difficult – the concept of physically representing the theoretical arguments was effective, but often the bridge collapsed. We could be tempted to say the idea was unsuccessful, however it also taught them it was okay to fail and that the important thing was to try, accept the failure and then to try again. This enabled me to build into the task the importance of resilience.

Making homework fun

In addition to questioning and essay planning, I have also set creative homework tasks. My learners often have a choice about what they produce as homework, and many of the tasks are digital to allow them freedom of expression. For example, I have set homework to build a Pinterest board on a class page, create a podcast,





add to a class 'ThingLink' (www.thinglink.com – online editing tool to make images interactive) or use Aurasma to create an augmented reality resource (www.aurasma.com). I have really learned this year that creative teaching need not be about play-dough and paint, but can simply be taking advantage of the learning opportunities that technology can offer. (For another interesting way to use technology in the classroom, see the box 'QR code treasure hunts'.)

Aside from the possibilities technology can offer, I also recommend letting go of some of your teacher control and giving students power over how they produce homework. I run one homework task/project at the beginning of the year that is particularly successful – I ask my

learners to tell me about their identity, in any way they choose. The work given in is of such a high quality, and the variety is amazing. Students have handed in collages, poems, videos, raps – one student even wrote me a song. Because I allowed my students freedom to express themselves creatively, the level of engagement was extremely high, and I also got to know them really well right from the start of the year.

Another task I set is a 'destroy' homework, based on the photography of Rankin, who would encourage celebrities to destroy photographs of themselves in order to say something more than the superficial image on its own would perhaps express. I ask learners to destroy images of theorists in order to represent their theoretical perspective. The work which is produced, despite

not being traditionally textual, is always a revelation, with many of my learners demonstrating an advanced understanding of theories that they had not been capable of demonstrating in writing. For many, this is a confidence building exercise as well as serving to engage them and reinforce the idea that homework is useful and important to complete.

Creativity is important at post-compulsory level. A level exams are hard, and the process of learning needs to be engaging. Although trying new things is not a magic wand that will fix problems such as behaviour management, I believe that taking a creative approach can improve retention, attainment, and most importantly, the outcomes for our learners. As teachers, our practice should always have the outcomes for the learners at its heart, and I believe this is an effective way of doing that.



Rachel Jones is a Teacher of Sociology and Classical Civilisation at Richard Taunton Sixth Form College in Southampton. For more creative teaching ideas and anecdotes, follow her on twitter @rlj1981 or visit her blog: www.createinnovateexplore.com.

QR code treasure hunts

I designed a series of lessons which made use of Solo Taxonomy as well as indulging my geekier side, based around the idea of a treasure hunt using student-generated QR codes. This was designed to self/peer teach Feminist approaches to inequality, and replaced lesson plans that last year featured a 34 slide PowerPoint (the horror!).

Lesson one

Students were divided into small groups of two or three and given an area of Feminist enquiry into inequality to become experts in – for example Hakim, the pensions gap, and so on. They had an hour and a half to research the topic and then create a Solo style station with QR codes that would enable other students to research and become experts in that area.

The classroom was soon filled with learners utilising their own devices to research and then create resources for the use of other groups. By the end of the lesson, all the groups had produced QR codes (many found www.qrcode.kaywa.com useful for generating the codes) that linked to relevant web-based or student-generated content. They had achieved the unistructural phase of learning.

Lesson two

The students arrived with a QR scanner already downloaded onto their devices. They then worked round the room using the QR stations to complete a grid that covered the content of the specification.

I was amazed at the quality of the content that the QR codes led to. Students had not only linked them to web content, but had also created podcasts, infographics, and even a twitter account (for a dead Marxist



A QR code

Feminist) to assist their classmates in their learning. The beep noises the phones make when they scan the codes made my classroom sound like Tesco checkout, but the students were totally engrossed in working round the various stations to ensure that they completed the grid. I found that there was a surprising amount of peer support and sharing of information. All students completed the grid, which was a demanding amount of material. This was the multistructural phase of their learning.

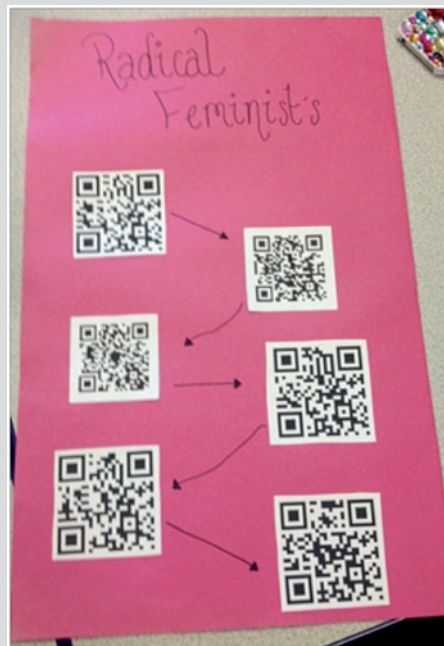
Lesson three

This was the day the sun first came out and so we decided to decamp outside. Before doing this, each group was given a giant hexagon and told to summarise their initial unistructural learning onto it. We then took the hexagons outside and spent time as a whole class moving the hexagons around to create evaluative links between the theorists.

This was more complicated than it sounds and took some negotiation between the different opinions and evaluations of individual learners. This negotiation, and the evaluative skills that it required to reach a collaborative conclusion, was the relational and extended abstract phase of learning as it encouraged the learners to think beyond the information presented and utilise learning from other modules and even areas outside the formal learning of the course.

This type of treasure hunt is really successful if all your learners have access to the technology to create and undertake it. You can run into problems if they are sharing phones or devices, so you need to ensure that you plan effectively around this issue. However, because the students knew other learners would need their information to complete the task, they were invested in the quality of their output which resulted in some amazing finished pieces and an enjoyable learning experience for my class.

If you are interested in finding out more about using QR codes in the classroom, try here:
www.ictevangelist.com/how-to-make-use-of-qr-codes-with-your-ipad-teachers-students



Knowledge trails

- 1. Motivating A Level students** – Marcella McCarthy outlines some of the problems KS5 teachers face when it comes to behaviour management and self-motivation, and offers some simple yet effective solutions. (Available with subscription to School Leadership Today)
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/motivatingalevelstudents.htm
- 2. One thousand days** – Andrew Morrish explains the unique and creative strategies he employed to inspire a love of learning and discovery in his young students.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/ctl31p2227onethousanddays.htm