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Can creativity be relearned? Restoring childlike traits as catalysts for innovation in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is widely recognized as a critical capability for success in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Yet a paradox exists within higher education: while students acquire specialized knowledge, analytical skills, and technical competence, many struggle to generate original ideas or approach problems from unconventional perspectives. This paper argues that creativity is not permanently lost during adulthood but is often suppressed by educational practices and social conditioning that discourage experimentation, curiosity, imagination, and exploration. Drawing upon literature from creativity studies, educational psychology, developmental psychology, and innovation research, the paper examines five childhood-derived creative traits—curiosity, playfulness, experimentation, imagination, and wonder—as foundational drivers of creative thinking. Building upon these insights, the paper proposes the Creativity Recovery Hypothesis, which suggests that creativity can be strengthened through the deliberate restoration of these natural exploratory tendencies. The paper discusses implications for higher education and highlights its relevance to the goals of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Keywords: Creativity, Innovation, Higher Education, Curiosity, Playfulness, Imagination, Wonder, Creative Thinking, Creativity Recovery Hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity has emerged as one of the most essential competencies for the twenty-first century, driving innovation, entrepreneurship, scientific discovery, and social progress. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, global competition, and complex societal challenges, higher education institutions are expected not only to impart disciplinary knowledge but also to cultivate graduates capable of original thinking, adaptability, and creative problem-solving. Consequently, fostering creativity has become a central objective of contemporary educational reforms, including India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates multidisciplinary learning, experiential education, critical thinking, and innovation.

Despite these aspirations, a significant gap exists between educational outcomes and creative capability. While students often develop strong analytical skills and subject-specific expertise, many struggle to generate novel ideas, question established assumptions, or approach problems from unconventional perspectives. This paradox raises an important question: why do young children, who naturally display curiosity, imagination, experimentation, and playfulness, often appear more creative than adults who possess greater knowledge and intellectual maturity? This paper argues that creativity is not an innate ability that disappears with age but a natural human capacity that gradually becomes suppressed through educational practices, social expectations, fear of failure, and excessive emphasis on standardized performance.



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Rather than treating creativity solely as a skill to be taught through isolated innovation courses, the paper proposes that higher education should focus on restoring the childlike exploratory behaviors that originally foster creative thinking.

The creativity paradox

Across the world, educational institutions are increasingly expected to produce graduates capable of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creative problem-solving. Governments, industries, and universities consistently identify creativity as a key twenty-first-century competency.

Paradoxically, however, many students who perform well in examinations struggle when confronted with open-ended problems requiring original thought. While they can often reproduce established knowledge, they may hesitate when asked to challenge assumptions, generate alternatives, or envision possibilities that extend beyond conventional approaches.

This paradox raises an important question. Young children frequently demonstrate remarkable creativity through questioning, imagining, experimenting, and exploring. Why then do many adults and college students appear less creative despite possessing greater knowledge and intellectual maturity? This paper explores the possibility that creativity has not disappeared but has instead become dormant beneath layers of educational and social conditioning.

Where does creativity go?

The apparent decline of creativity cannot simply be attributed to a reduction in intelligence or learning capacity. Adults possess significantly greater knowledge, experience, and cognitive resources than children. The issue therefore appears to be behavioral and environmental rather than intellectual.

Formal education plays a vital role in developing discipline, analytical reasoning, and subject expertise. However, it may also unintentionally discourage some behaviors associated with creativity. Several influences are particularly noteworthy:

- **Fear of failure:** As students progress through educational systems, mistakes often become associated with poor performance rather than learning. This systemic pressure reduces their willingness to take intellectual risks or explore untested ideas.
- **Examination-Oriented learning:** Educational environments that prioritize memorization and standardized answers may inadvertently discourage divergent thinking and open exploration, training students to value the destination over the journey of discovery.

- **Social conformity:** The desire for social acceptance and validation often increases with age. Students frequently suppress unconventional ideas or unique insights simply to avoid criticism, judgment, or peer rejection.
- **Excessive specialization:** Deep disciplinary knowledge is undeniably valuable but can build rigid cognitive boundaries. This narrow focus limits exposure to diverse perspectives that traditionally cross-pollinate and stimulate creative insights.

Collectively, these institutional and social influences can slowly weaken the cognitive habits that naturally support long-term innovation.

Lessons from childhood

Developmental research consistently suggests that young children engage with the world in ways that directly support creative thinking. Several characteristics appear particularly important:

- **Curiosity:** Children display a persistent, intrinsic desire to understand their environment. Their frequent, uninhibited questioning creates continuous opportunities for organic discovery and deeper learning.
- **Playfulness:** Play enables children to explore complex possibilities without the psychological fear of immediate judgment or structural failure. It builds fundamental cognitive flexibility and adaptability.
- **Experimentation:** Children learn through repeated, active trial and error. They typically view mistakes as a natural part of the learning process rather than evidence of personal or academic inadequacy.
- **Imagination:** Children readily construct alternative possibilities and easily envision fluid realities far beyond present physical or systemic constraints.
- **Wonder:** Children often experience genuine fascination with ordinary events and objects. This deep sense of wonder encourages careful observation, prolonged focus, and sustained engagement.

Taken together, these traits suggest that creativity is closely linked to natural exploratory behaviors rather than merely to specialized, technical innovation techniques.

The creativity recovery hypothesis

The central argument of this paper is captured in what may be termed the Creativity Recovery Hypothesis. The hypothesis proposes that creativity does not disappear during adulthood. Instead, educational systems, social expectations, and professional routines gradually suppress the behaviors that support creative thinking. Consequently, the core challenge facing higher

education is not simply to teach creativity as an entirely new subject, but to help students recover the natural exploratory tendencies that were more evident during childhood.

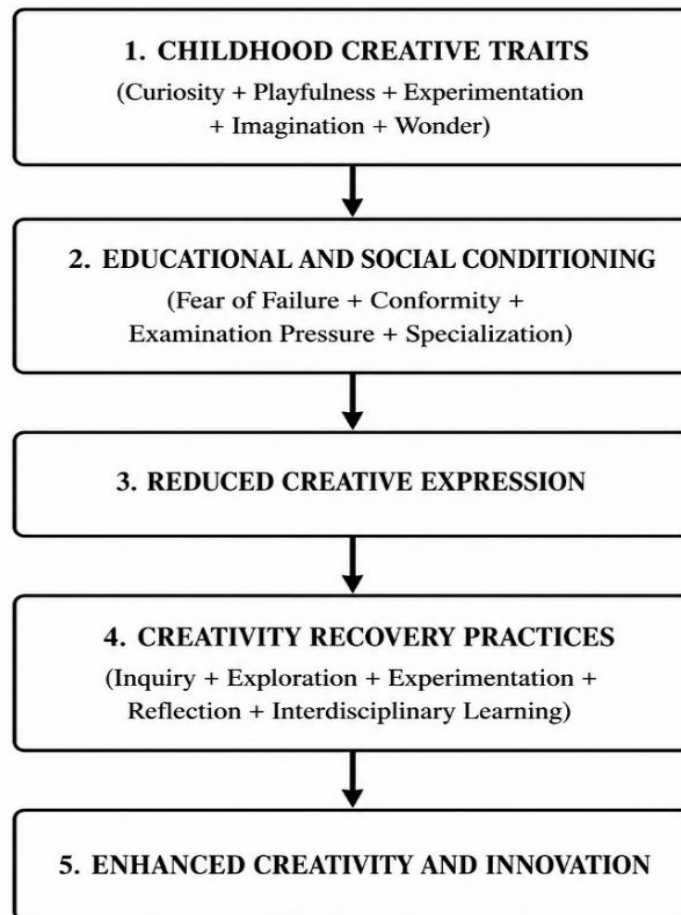
From this perspective, creativity development involves two parallel, interconnected processes:

1. Acquiring advanced domain knowledge and technical expertise.
2. Preserving or restoring the open cognitive habits that enable creative, innovative application of that knowledge.

The hypothesis therefore suggests that institutional innovation can be systematically enhanced by deliberately cultivating curiosity, playfulness, experimentation, imagination, and wonder within higher education environments.

A Proposed model of creativity recovery

The proposed model may be represented as follows:



The model does not imply that adulthood inherently reduces raw creative potential. Rather, it suggests that creative potential becomes underutilized when exploratory behaviors are systematically discouraged.

Relearning childhood-derived creative traits in higher education

1. Relearning curiosity

Higher education institutions can actively encourage curiosity by moving away from passive lectures toward inquiry-based learning, problem-discovery assignments, and evaluations driven by student-generated questions.

2. Relearning playfulness

Structured play in higher education does not compromise academic rigor. Instead, utilizing complex simulations, open-ended creative challenges, design-thinking exercises, and gamified learning spaces can effectively restore cognitive flexibility.

3. Relearning experimentation

True innovation requires a safe space to fail. Classrooms must provide environments where students are permitted to test raw ideas, build rough prototypes, learn openly from mistakes, and iteratively refine solutions without immediate grading penalties.

4. **Relearning imagination**

Scenario planning, future-thinking exercises, strategic storytelling, and speculative inquiry can be woven into existing syllabi to strengthen students' imaginative capabilities and expand their horizons.

5. **Relearning wonder**

Field observations, deep reflective journals, exposure to unfamiliar fields, and hands-on experiential learning can help college students look past superficial answers and rediscover a deep fascination with their surroundings.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a conceptual and integrative review approach. A wide range of literature from creativity research, educational psychology, developmental psychology, experiential learning, and innovation studies was systematically examined to identify recurring childhood-derived traits associated with creative behavior. These theoretical insights were then synthesized to formulate the Creativity Recovery Hypothesis and derive concrete, practical implications for higher education classroom practice.

Implications for teaching and learning

The discussion suggests that creativity development requires much more than isolated, standalone innovation courses. It demands learning environments that actively prioritize exploration and reduce the fear of failure. Educators may foster this creative environment by:

- Valuing and grading thoughtful, exploratory questions alongside standard correct answers.
- Creating psychologically safe, supportive spaces for classroom experimentation.
- Encouraging mandatory interdisciplinary collaboration across disparate college streams.
- Expanding the structural weight of project-based and experiential learning.
- Providing students with greater autonomy in choosing their research topics and methodologies.
- Explicitly rewarding originality and unique approaches during formal assessment processes.

Relevance to higher education and NEP 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, multidisciplinary learning, and root-level innovation. The Creativity Recovery Hypothesis aligns perfectly with these national objectives by suggesting practical, actionable ways to move classrooms beyond passive knowledge acquisition toward active exploration and genuine discovery.

By systematically nurturing curiosity, imagination, experimentation, playfulness, and wonder, higher education institutions can create the

exact ground-level conditions that support both academic excellence and lifelong innovative capacity.

Future research directions

The arguments presented in this paper are conceptual and serve as an invitation for structured empirical examination. Future research studies should investigate:

- The statistical relationship between measured childhood-derived traits and actual innovation outcomes among college graduates.
- Variations in creative blocks and cognitive rigidity across different academic disciplines (e.g., Science vs. Commerce vs. Arts).
- The measurable effectiveness of specific classroom interventions designed to restore exploratory behaviors over a semester.
- Longitudinal tracking of student creative confidence as they progress through higher education.
- Socio-cultural influences on the creativity recovery process within regional college ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The question of whether creativity can be relearned is increasingly important in a world that demands continuous innovation and rapid adaptability. This paper argues that creativity is never permanently lost during adulthood; it simply becomes obscured by educational and social practices that prioritize rigid compliance over active exploration.

The Creativity Recovery Hypothesis offers a liberating alternative perspective on student development. Rather than viewing creativity solely as a complex technical skill to be imported and taught, educators should focus on helping students uncover and recover the natural exploratory tendencies that once came easily to them in childhood. By intentionally restoring curiosity, playfulness, experimentation, imagination, and wonder, higher education institutions can design vibrant environments that nurture innovative thinking and prepare graduates to boldly address complex future challenges.

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