

Lesson 4 Rethinking Creativity

Reading 1

Less Is More: Creativity in Simplicity

When people think of creativity, they often imagine that it emerges from a complicated process. They think that creativity consists of generating new ideas that have not been thought of before and putting together different ideas to create something unique. They also believe it involves discovering sophisticated ways to solve existing problems. However, being creative does not necessarily mean that something has to be complicated. You don't have to pile on detail after detail and idea after idea to be creative. In fact, creativity often requires you to figure out what truly matters and get rid of anything unnecessary. That is, creativity tends to demand simplicity.

The Words Left Unspoken

Imagine an iceberg. The part of the iceberg you can see above the water is like the story written on the page. However, there is a huge part of the iceberg below the water that is not visible, which is like the unwritten part of a story. This is how Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), a famous American writer, described his "iceberg theory" of writing. He meant that stories hold more than just written words. This allows readers to imagine things beyond what is described by the actual words on the page. Hemingway's iceberg theory is closely associated with his writing style, which he refined during his career as a journalist. Being simple was key. Hemingway believed that by leaving out unnecessary details, he could make his writing more intriguing for readers. According to him, if writers know a lot about their subject, they can leave things out, and the readers will still follow along. When you write something, you might try to fill every page with a lot of words. Yet, sometimes, leaving words out can actually make your story even better. That is the essence of creativity through simplicity.

Simplicity as Complexity Resolved

Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957), a sculptor from Romania, is well-known for his sculptures depicting birds in flight. What's fascinating about his sculptures is that, instead of focusing on the appearance of a bird itself, Brâncuși directed his attention towards its movement. This creative approach led him to make his famous series of sculptures, Bird in Space. Here, he intentionally eliminated the bird's wings and feathers, opting for an elongated oval shape. It was the feeling of flying rather than what the bird looked like that he wanted to convey. For Brâncuși, simplicity was not the goal but the means that he used to capture the essence of things. In this artwork, he captured the essence of flight. This principle can be applied to all forms of art, not just sculpture. With the essence of an object captured, you can present it in a simplified but impactful form.

The Harmony Simplicity Makes

Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706) is a beautiful piece of music that many people love. It's actually very simple, as it features just three violins and a cello repeating eight bars of music 28 times. Pachelbel approached this piece like a mathematical problem.

The cello plays the same bass line over and over again. Meanwhile, the three violins play identical notes, with each violin starting at different times. You can hear this if you listen closely to the low bass notes that are repeated throughout the piece, and then to the violins passing the melody between each other.

The combination of the simple and catchy bass line and the violins creates a memorable piece of classical music, even for those who do not usually listen to classical music. In summary, Pachelbel's Canon demonstrates how a few instruments and a repetitive structure can result in a timeless piece of music.

Charles Mingus, a famous jazz player, once said, "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity." Being simple is tough. It requires a lot of effort to communicate the essence of something without using unnecessary details. If you are able to express your ideas in a simple and clear way, people will appreciate your creativity with pleasure.

Reading 2

“Familiar” Innovations

What comes to your mind when you think of innovation? Even before the advent of things like AI, innovations you encounter every day—the toilet, ice, and even the stairs!—have transformed our lives.

What innovations have become so familiar that people have forgotten how new they must have seemed long ago? Let’s find out!

The Toilet

Did you know that the first modern toilet—that is, a toilet that could flush waste—was invented in the 18th century? It was in 1778 that the modern flushing toilet was invented by Joseph Bramah. Initially, the flushing toilet was a luxury item that could be enjoyed by only a few privileged people. It became popular across the Western world after a major event in England: the Great Exhibition of 1851. The exhibition displayed technological marvels from all over the world, including flushing toilets. These toilets were called “monkey closets,” as the shape of the plumbing resembled a sitting monkey. These toilets were the first modern public toilets—they were open to anyone who could pay a penny. During the exhibition, over 800,000 people had the chance to try them out!

Ice

As a modern individual, you often take it for granted that you can get ice in your drink at any café or even buy whole bags of ice from any convenience store. However, this was not always the case. In fact, until the 19th century, people did not think anyone would buy ice at all. Yet, one day, an American man named Frederic Tudor had an idea: “Why not make money by selling mass quantities of ice from America to people abroad?” The idea seemed unusual to many people. People wondered, “Who would want to pay money for something that one could get for free during the winter?” Despite many critics, Tudor started the international ice trade in 1806. He founded the Tudor Ice Company, which sourced ice for free from ponds and lakes in New England and sold it to people in America, Ireland, India, and many other countries. Tudor’s idea paid off, and he made a huge profit. Tudor’s critics were surprised that people wanted ice for everything—ice to keep their drinks cool or even to make ice cream!

The Stairs

Whenever you walk into a building, there will probably be stairs. The oldest wooden staircase yet found is believed to be 3,400 years old. It was discovered a hundred meters underground in a salt mine in Austria. The stairs are 1.2 meters wide, making it possible to transport large loads. The stairs also allowed two-way access—that is, people could go up and down the staircase simultaneously. With their hands freed to carry things, laborers in the mine would have been able to carry loads of salt conveniently using the stairs. Compared to ladders, stairs may have been a better option to choose.

As these examples show, we are surrounded by innovations even in our daily lives. Look around, and you may discover other “familiar” innovations that have made life easier for everyone!