



Master Class

How to Stimulate Your Own Creativity

By Jessica M. Choplin

One might get by in life by following set pathways, routines and scripts, and by thinking about problems and their solutions in set ways. Doing so is safe, but also, well, a little boring, isn't it? If we never veer from our safe routines, things will never improve much. The quality of our lives will stagnate. New inventions won't be possible. Our arts will be dull. Our science will not advance. We will be unable to solve novel problems.

Creativity makes our lives better, improves our standards of living, produces better art and generates scientific ideas to better understand the world in which we live. How does one get creative ideas? More often than not, creative ideas come from drawing analogies.

Analogies allow us to get ideas about a target domain by importing ideas from other, sometimes very different, domains. The cognitive processes that allow us to draw analogies involve three steps: 1) **thinking** about a separate domain that might have some relevance for the target domain, 2) mapping the two domains and putting them in one-to-one correspondences, and finally 3) analogically transferring ideas or solutions from the separate domain to the target domain.

Alexander Graham Bell came up with the idea for the **telephone** by analogy to the mechanical phonograph (an earlier invention). Niels Bohr received **insights** on the structure of atoms by drawing analogies to the solar **system**. Gertrude Stein's unusual literary style and compositions are said to have been inspired, in part, by analogies to the modern art that hung on her walls.

1. **Expose yourself to a variety of ideas.** If you want to be creative within a given domain, don't think only about that domain. Read widely. Be open to other fields and very different ideas.
2. **Draw analogies.** As you explore very different domains from your target domain, think about ways that those other far-flung domains might possibly be relevant to your target domain. Many of the potential analogies will be absolutely crazy and ridiculous. That is OK. You never know when a crazy, ridiculous analogy might turn out to be brilliant.
3. **Hang out with people who are different from you.** Diversity is an engine of creativity because we get ideas and draw new and novel analogies when we are around people who are different from us. Don't just tolerate others; embrace the challenges of being together. Interdisciplinary work, cross-cultural work, racially and ethnically integrated neighborhoods, immigration—these are the engines of human progress and improved well-being. They make us more creative and better off.

By using analogies, you, too, can learn to be as creative as you want to be.

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