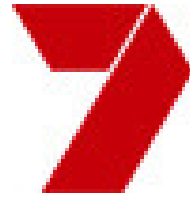


Leadership for Creativity and Learning



Alan Curtis
Inventor of Spit it Out



Q. How was your interest in learning developed?

Before we start, I'd like you to ask you a couple of questions. How much does your learning diminish if you are bored? How much does your learning increase when you are engaged, fascinated and having fun? It's not rocket science.

My interest in learning was first sparked when I became a tennis coach at the age of 19. A few years later when I got involved in business, I was privileged to work with Robert Kiyosaki, Blair Singer and Wayne Morgan. They lead courses on accelerated learning and squarely placed the student's performance as the responsibility of the teacher. That made me strive to find whatever way I could to teach whatever subject I was teaching, incorporating visual, auditory and kinaesthetic tools.

Q. What has lead you to believe that creativity and learning are connected?

This came initially from my tennis background and later I found that a mixture of creative games inspired the students to want to learn more. As soon as the enjoyment increased, so did their skill level, leading to excited students, who were very keen to learn. Wayne Morgan once said to me, your job as an educator is first to be an entertainer, then to be an educator.

When I began to work on my board game – Spit it Out, it completely cemented the importance of creativity. I watched a Grade 5 student at a small public school play an early version of my game, and he was using the letter E, twisted on it's side to form the letter M. Initially, my first thought was to tell him that it was not "right" to do that. Then I looked at the bigger perspective and realised it was his creative, lateral thinking, problem solving mind that had come up with a wonderful solution to not having a letter M. I went back and changed every letter that could be adjusted based on what I saw him do.

One of the most memorable experiences came when I was about to give up on my game. I had packed everything away in cupboards, in tears and left it there for two weeks. I had forgotten a promise I made to a local teacher to take my game and play it with the kids. I worked with 6 children

at a time and had just 10 minutes per group. We were sitting on tiny kids chairs and unbeknown to me, the teacher was looking over my shoulder for the last session. I had a boisterous lad opposite me, and an extremely timid boy on my right. Within 3 minutes they were all having a blast, spelling clues, laughing and playing. She tapped me on the shoulder when I had finished and said that the boisterous lad hated English and NEVER participated in class, and the timid boy RARELY EVEN SPOKE in class.

I began to realise the impact the game made on them and that it had the ability to bring kids out of themselves, to participate and to learn, all without them knowing it. They were just being creative and having fun, and the learning was a by-product. I went back home, unpacked the game and made a commitment that I'd never give up on it.

Q. How do you use that understanding in the work you do?

Whenever I am asked to teach anything, the first question I ask myself is "How can I make this fun and active in order for my students to easily remember what we have been working on"

My game creates a level playing field. It's not a spelling game, it's essentially a problem solving game, like charades with letters. They use the letters to communicate, and they don't have to spell correctly to do that.

For example, a severely dyslexic lad had a mystery word of PIRATE. He spelt ARRR as a clue. Not a correct word at all, but his team guessed pirate almost immediately. So the "establishment" would consider this incorrect, however these kids are beginning to have a positive relationship with letters, which in turn helps to break down the mental barrier they often have due to their dyslexia. So I've learnt by experience that some kids that would be totally lost with their literacy skills can become engaged by the use of a creative game. I believe the answer to working with these kids is finding MORE creative ways for them to learn.

Q. What have been the greatest challenges for you in promoting this concept?

Unfortunately education has the longest lag time for any profession, from when a great idea comes along, to when it is implemented on a wide scale. Memory techniques and speed-reading have been around for 50 years and yet our kids don't get taught these things. In my experience it's not the teachers that are limited in their thinking, quite the reverse, I have worked with amazing teachers who are passionate about education and their students welfare. Unfortunately they are often handcuffed by an antiquated curriculum that hinders their ability to be creative.

Fortunately this is beginning to change, as my experience with the Victorian Department of Education has been very encouraging, with them recently embracing the giant TV version of Spit it Out.

Q. What have these challenges taught you?

It's taught me that just about every one I talk to agrees that their own schooling was boring be they parents, teachers or children.

It's only made me more determined to make a difference. It's not about the teachers, it's about the system. Take aim at the system and provide solutions that teachers can implement inside their current constraints.

An incredibly inspirational speaker on the subject, Sir Ken Robinson was commissioned by the UK government to find what was needed in the next 50 years of education. He delivered his comprehensive findings in 2003 and was knighted for his work. The number one thing he said was needed – To foster and encourage creative thinking within our students.

Q. How can we maximise our potential as human beings through the use of creativity to enhance our learning?

Re-learn what we all knew as little kids. Explore your potential. Focus less on competition and more on personal growth.

As a little kid, when you were learning to walk, it wasn't a competition. You weren't trying to learn to walk faster than your siblings, or the kid next door. It was a personal exploration, like evolution itself. Watch a child learning to walk, they are genuinely fascinated.

Find what fascinates us as an adult and get the spark back that we all have inside. It might be a hobby, a sport, cooking, gardening, working with kids, whatever - nothing breeds growth like a genuine interest and passion in something.

Passion breeds creativity and creativity enhances our learning, turning a full circle, creating more passion.