

English for Innovation (<https://eflmagazine.com/english-for-innovation/>)

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In the spoken word video *The People vs. the School System* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqTTojTija8>), Prince Ea quotes the famous maxim that “if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” Internet memes attribute these words to Einstein but there is no substantive evidence to confirm that he is the author. Nonetheless, Prince Ea and many others use this statement as a premise for the argument that education as we know it, needs to be put on trial and reformed for the benefit of all young people. This argument is most often made with respect to how education is still bound to the 19th century model, in which teaching and learning are standardized and the acquisition of knowledge in a one-size-fits-all manner is prioritized above everything else. This model does not effectively equip students with the required competences and skills in order for them to adapt to 21st century realities. One of the skills gaps that are increasingly being identified in young people educated in line with this model is their lack of a capacity for innovation.

Nurturing Innovation

According to the sociologist Everett Rogers (2003), “An innovation is an idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (p. 12). A country’s ability to generate innovation is pivotal for its economic prosperity and international competitiveness. Hence, it needs to exploit every possible source of innovation at its disposal. Perhaps the most readily available source is a society’s young generation, especially since their presence in schools makes the nurturing of innovative capacity possible. In his book *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, Wagner (2012) maintains that “if we are to remain globally competitive in today’s world, we need to produce more than just a few entrepreneurs and innovators. We need to develop the creative and enterprising capacities of all our students” (p. 4). Here Wagner (2012) is talking about the USA but his suggestion resonates with educators and policymakers all over the world.

The idea that innovation can be nurtured is not embraced by everyone. Like creativity, innovative capacity is sometimes considered to be innate and thus incapable of being fostered in those people who are born without it. Wagner (2012) challenges this entrenched belief by arguing that

the most fundamental qualities of a successful innovator constitute a set of skills and mental habits that can be developed by teachers and parents. These are:

- curiosity, which is a habit of asking questions and a desire to understand more deeply;
- collaboration which begins with listening to and learning from others who have perspectives and expertise that are very different from your own;
- associative or integrative thinking;
- a bias toward action and experimentation. (p. 16)

If we subscribe to the idea that these skills and mental habits can be developed, then it follows that all teachers play a crucial role in their development, including those teaching English.

Within ELT, some teachers tend to focus on the development of proficiency without fully realising that young people will be using the language in contexts, where they will require the ability to be innovative in order to meet the expectations of a 21st century global economy. This implies that rather than just teaching English, teachers are tasked with providing students with a more holistic experience. Ensuring that the English language classroom acts as an incubator for innovative capacity is a new responsibility that teachers are being given in the current educational milieu. How successful they are in fulfilling this responsibility will largely depend on their own adoption of innovation, as well as the support they receive from schools and policymakers.

A Culture of Innovation

Innovation is unlikely to happen if innovators toil on their own. The local context in which an innovator operates needs to be proactive in its recognition and support of innovation. This applies to innovation in education as much as it does to other sectors of society. As Hyland and Wong (2013) point out “It is futile...to change just one aspect of a national policy, institutional plan, classroom approach or beliefs of one group. Stakeholders need to ‘learn change’ together” (p. 3). Hence, English language teachers who choose to nurture young people’s innovative capacity need adequate support from the context they form part of. They might also need forms of professional development that target their ability to position themselves as innovators. Reimers and Chung (2016) assert that “The aspirations of 21st century education require new thinking and new ways of doing, and those require everyone involved, particularly the adults working in schools and those who support them, to learn new ways” (p. 5). At the same time “Innovators need to be prepared for resistance, to persevere and to develop strategies for turning initial failure into enduring success” (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 203). Without the cultivation of teachers’ innovative capacity, it is unlikely that the educational system is going to be successful in its attempts to **create a future generation of innovators** (<https://www.eflmagazine.com/valuable-systems-help-online-teachers-save-time/>).

A culture of innovation in education is to some extent a product of disruption given that the traditional model of education needs to be displaced by one in which the potential of every single student is maximised. The **theory of disruptive innovation** (<http://www.claytonchristensen.com/key-concepts/>) indicates that disruption in education can only happen if young people’s learning experience becomes personalized (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). This entails harnessing those resources that would enable us to move away from standardized teaching and testing in order to create opportunities for student-centric education and thus the customized development of something as essential as innovative capacity. Technology has the potential to afford us such opportunities but only if used in ways that do not merely dress up monolithic methodologies. As Wagner and Dintersmith (2015) affirm, “The impact of innovation on education isn’t in using technology to deliver obsolete education experiences. It lies in understanding what skills students need in the innovation era, and constructing classroom experiences that promote skills that matter” (p. 196). The English

language classroom can be a space for such experiences, but only if teachers and other stakeholders facilitate the personalisation of learning. Doing this might act as a stepping stone for every student's discovery of their capacity for innovation. What are your thoughts on this?

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