

Creativity Toolbox

creative approaches to improvement

Thirteen three-minute films offering exercises and tools to help you break problems apart, take new perspectives and formulate new questions. Used collectively, they will help embed creative thinking and an openness to transformational change into planning and improvement.

Whether you are responding to the National Improvement Framework priorities or reacting to a recognised need for improvement within your own context, the Creativity Toolbox films will offer you new ways of looking at your priorities and challenges, and help you to generate original, innovative ideas.

They offer effective ways of brainstorming, asking good questions, and how to take staff, learners and communities beyond traditional responses, towards imaginative new possibilities.

The films can be used individually to support a single planning session, or collectively as part of a broader process.

They can also be used in conjunction with the [Transforming Learning Approach](#), which offers a structured process for planning for improvement.

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You can access the [full playlist](#) on Youtube: bit.ly/creativitytoolbox

Creativity Toolbox #1 Better Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a popular way of exploring a problem, or more specifically solutions. However, what most people don't know is that psychologists proved way back in the 1970s that brainstorming in a group doesn't work very well. What works best is to brainstorm **on your own**, before bringing everyone's ideas together to discuss what you collectively have.

This is because people can worry about their ideas being too simple, too similar, too silly, too revealing. It's no coincidence that the self-awareness part of the brain goes quiet when we're being truly creative.

So, take your particular challenge and work individually to come up with as many solutions as you can on your own. You can do this right now by going away for 5 minutes, or set the task a few days before you meet and give yourselves a few days to come up with the ideas.

Once you have the ideas the group leader can collate and share them anonymously, or if that's not possible you can all write them all up on a board, the one large sheet of paper, or even online using a Wiki.

You may want to group ideas together that have a similar theme to allow the main big ideas to show through, whilst ensuring that the subtle differences and nuances are still shared with everyone. Sometimes it's the details that can turn a bad idea into a genius one.

Now you can finally start the process of synthesising, prioritising, rejecting and tweaking ideas, safe in the knowledge that you have the very best and broadest range of ideas available from your group.

Note: if the word brainstorming is being used to describe a meeting where participants are suggesting ideas, then its use is not offensive to people with epilepsy according to a survey carried out by Epilepsy Society in 2005.

Creativity Toolbox #2

Questorming

Brainstorming can be an effective way of generating solutions to a challenge, but sometimes it can be difficult to find the right question, or to see past your initial preconceptions on what needs to be done.

For example you might be wondering how to design a new literacy approach for your learners, and spend lots of time generating wonderful solutions to that challenge, when the underlying problem is in fact that the learners are not attending consistently, or they are bringing stresses from their home lives into the classroom. Sometimes another direct approach may not be an effective solution and a more creative approach is required.

So instead of brainstorming solutions, why not brainstorm the questions. Questorming. What questions can we ask ourselves about the challenge? What do we not know? What do we need to know? What might we ask if we knew nothing about the challenge?

You may want to arrange your board to record them on in a triangle and, starting at the outside, challenge the team to come up with deeper and deeper questions relating to your challenge.



By brainstorming the questions you might ask around a challenge you can quickly identify areas where knowledge or evidence is missing, and where any preconceptions might be hiding in plain sight. You may find that this leaves you with more questions than when you started. But some of them will be absolutely vital questions that will help you to avoid expending valuable time on solutions that may miss their mark.

Note: if the word brainstorming is being used to describe a meeting where participants are suggesting ideas, then its use is not offensive to people with epilepsy according to a survey carried out by Epilepsy Society in 2005.

Creativity Toolbox #3

The 5 Whys

The 5 Whys is an approach used in business and even the NHS to ensure that planned activities will create the impact you're really looking for. For example, a school might identify that the learners are not wearing their school uniforms and work to change this, when in fact the underlying aim behind the uniform is to generate a sense of community, pride, equality and self-respect in the learners. Identifying these underlying reasons for an action might mean taking completely different approaches – such as a programme to celebrate the uniqueness of every learner, staff wearing the school tie, or encouraging the learners to personalise their own additions to the uniform.

To use the 5 Whys - take an action that you plan to undertake, or something that you wish to improve. This could be anything from implementing a new policy to redesigning a lesson plan, from designing a poster to solving global warming. Write that thing down. You can do this on your own, or as a group.

Now you have your action point, ask Why? Why do you want to do that? Don't think too long or hard, but write your answer directly beneath.

- Action Point
- Why? 1
- Why? 2
- Why? 3
- Why? 4
- Why? 5

Once you've done that you should ignore your first statement, focusing ONLY on the answer you gave. And again, ask Why?

You should keep going until you have asked Why? five times.

If you kept on going you would probably get something like inner peace and happiness, but by asking Why five times you will have fully interrogated your motivations, the real needs and reasoning behind your action. What you end up with may NOT challenge the thing you planned to do, instead reinforcing your understanding and belief in it.

- Action Point
- Why? 5

However you may find it doesn't entirely match up with the thing you were planning on doing. Your answers may reveal subtleties or priorities you had missed and even suggest a completely different direction altogether.

Creativity Toolbox #4

Flip the Challenge

Approaching a challenge creatively can be difficult, especially when it is a persistent challenge that has resisted the usual solutions, what we sometimes call a wicked problem.

Our brains are designed to create motorways of neurons between challenges and their familiar solutions and it can be almost impossible to break this automatic response even when we know that it is not working. Instead, we need to force our thinking to take the less travelled country roads, to make unexpected connections, and to bypass the preconceptions that have been forged along the more usual routes.

One technique to do this is to Flip the Challenge. You can do this on your own or as a group.

Take the challenge you have and write it down. Now spend a few minutes swapping one or two of the words until it becomes the exact opposite to the challenge.

For example – you may want to Encourage better collaborative team working. You might flip this to become STOP collaborative team working.

Now you can start brainstorming ways of solving this flipped problem. For example you might suggest banning email communication between those involved. Asking everyone to unfriend each other in their personal lives and on social media. Deliberately speaking in different languages. Using acronyms that only you understand.

Some of the ideas you generate will be funny, and this is great because humour can help break the ice on a challenge and encourages creative thinking.

You may find that some of them are actually already happening, and this can help to highlight obstacles you can start to work on.

But importantly you may find that some of them spark fresh ideas for the real challenge. In this instance encouraging friendships and social media links beyond the work itself might not be something you would formally have considered, but which the exercise points out as having a value that is worth looking at.

Other examples might be to flip the meaning from Prevent Bullying to Encourage Bullying, from Make cutbacks to Generate Income, from Raise Attainment to Lower Attainment.

Creativity Toolbox #5

What if?

What if questions are one of the simplest ways of encouraging creative thinking. Whether it be in a classroom, in our own lives, or at work. Essentially you are asking 'What if the world was different', and how might that change how we look at and solve challenges.

When working on your own particular challenge it can be a powerful way of looking beyond the perceived limits and barriers. Sometime it can reveal that what seems impossible, is actually possible. It will lead you to think differently, look with fresh eyes, and find innovative solutions.

As a group or on your own take your particular challenge and ask one or more of the following What If questions.

- What if we had unlimited money and resources to achieve this challenge?
- What if we had already solved this challenge? What might things look like then?
- What if we had 24 hours to solve this challenge?
- What if we had no money at all to solve this challenge?
- What if we couldn't use words? What if we could only use pictures?
- What if we only had to solve this challenge for one person?

You can use any of these ideas or even better, create your own What If question that you think best suits your particular challenge.

Creativity Toolbox #6

Polarisation

Challenges can be complicated, messy and inter-dependent things with many layers. It can be easy to get weighed down in the nitty-gritty and lose sight of what's possible and what the ideals you hope to keep with you are.

One way of tackling challenges like this can be to polarise your thinking – turning the grey into clear distinctions between black and white. You can do this on your own or as a group and use it to tackle everything from setting a new vision for an organisation to deciding how to tackle a small engineering challenge.

For example, if you're considering doing something you might ask the polar opposite questions:

- What is the worst that can happen?
- What is the best that can happen?

This can help suggest what the most important things are that you want to focus on – if the best and worst elements both concern the same thing then you know this is hugely important. Or you may find that all of the worst elements can be easily avoided with a simple tweak to your plans.

If you're still wondering about your aims, your vision or what you want to achieve you might ask the following:

- What would the worst failure look like?
- What would the ultimate success look like?

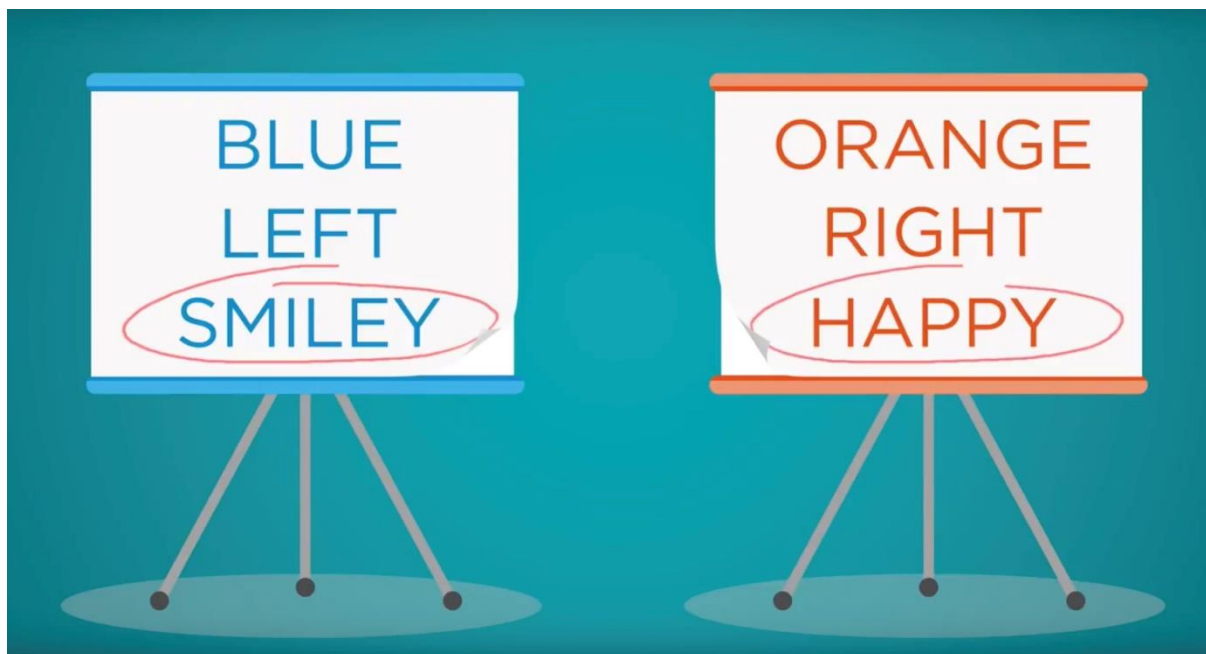
Taking this approach helps to simplify the discussion and get to the roots of what you are planning or hope to achieve, allowing you to tackle the complexity with more clarity and direction than before.

Creativity Toolbox #7 **Let's Do Both**

This could be called the 5 year old's challenge – faced with a situation that us grown-ups see as an either/or - you can either have ice cream or a toy for example - children can often be heard offering the third option – Let's do both!

If your challenge has reached a point where you have to make hard decisions – which priority is most important, whose opinion are you going to pick, one action rather than another – it may be worth saying Let's do both!

You can do this on your own or in a group and lay out the two options you have on the table. Take the elements of each option and write them down each side of a piece of paper, flipchart or screen. As you do this try to find the equivalent element in the other option. You should end up with two lists, each with similar elements opposite each other.



In this way you may find that the differences are not as stark as you might imagine, there may be commonalities, there may be things that are the same, just tweaked for difference audiences.

For example, you may be deciding whether to deliver an event or write a document to share a new vision or piece of learning. The two lists might both include the need to agree on key messages, the need to create images that communicate the thinking clearly, and the need to contact your key audiences by email. Suddenly two very different pieces of work have a lot in common and doing both doesn't necessarily mean twice the work. In fact, an event might benefit from a document being shared ahead of the date, and the document might benefit from a more visual approach that can be used on the day itself too.

Creativity Toolbox #8

What would Scooby Do?

We don't know what we don't know and we can't act in a way that isn't our own. Unless we try to think like somebody else. Bumper stickers have long asked 'What would Jesus do?' and we often look to our role models for inspiration. So why not take your challenge and ask - what would someone else do? This exercise can inspire you to be bolder, be braver and be more aspirational in your thinking.

You can do this on your own or bring together several examples from a group.

First. Think about someone who has inspired you.

This could be someone from history, someone in the news today, a family member, or even a character from film, television or a book.

Spend some time discussing and considering the qualities they have, the things they achieved and the ways they did things differently that make them an inspiration. You might want to write these things up.

From here you might want to apply the inspiring qualities to your thinking on the challenge. How might you tackle the challenge with the bravery your heroes had? Or the compassion they showed?

Or you could simply wonder What would your particular role models do with your challenge? What would Scooby do?

Creativity Toolbox #9 In Another World

Sometimes knowing too much about our own world can limit our thinking – we don't know what we take for granted, because we take it for granted.

It can be invaluable to look at a challenge from a completely different perspective and imagine what solutions might look like in that world.

So take your challenge and set it in one of the following alternate worlds – you can explore two or three of them and see just how far away from your own reality you can go.

So if we have an education based challenge we might want to explore that challenge as though we were in the military, or the health service, a sports team, a web site, a charity, a farm, a restaurant, a cinema, a jungle outpost, a space station, a soap opera, a pirate ship, or the Olympics.

If you find one of them isn't working, you might want to scale it up or down to create a better or more challenging fit, for example, you might set your challenge in a shop; or a supermarket, or a shopping centre.

If all of this is too challenging then simply consider a world closer to home. For example, a secondary school based challenge might benefit from wondering how a nursery might tackle it, a primary school, a University or a distance-learning provider.

Creativity Toolbox #10

Looking Inwards

When facing a difficult challenge, or a sticky problem, making small changes to our plans and behaviours can sometimes get us nowhere. What might be needed is a system change, change that is transformational.

To make these kinds of changes you need to explore the whole picture, holistically. Take a step back and look at the things you can change from a far wider perspective.

To help you to have this perspective you can follow a simple process of looking inwards, looking outwards and looking forwards.

Looking inwards can be seen as self-evaluation, 'what do we know about what we do? What do we know about our challenges?' But to become transformational we need to ask the questions we don't even know to ask. Here's a simple way of tackling that, on your own or as a group.

Begin by mapping all of the people involved in your challenge – all of them: staff, learners, parents, and partners.

Now start a wee list next to each of them of the questions you already ask of them, the data you collect from them.

Finally have a brainstorm – what don't we ask them? What other information might they have?

All too often self-evaluation only looks at the things we deem to be 'valuable'. To explore transformational change, anything can have value. For example, looking at the information you hadn't considered important, you might find that the parents attending your open-evenings are predominantly mums, but that those subscribing to the twitter feed are predominantly dads. This might offer a unique opportunity to engage with learners' father figures – something that you might have been struggling with or might not even have considered.

Creativity Toolbox #11

Looking Outwards

To help with transformational change you can follow a simple process of looking inwards, looking outwards and looking forwards.

Looking outwards can often be seen as looking at case studies – what works in other places. However, case studies can be difficult to adapt to your own context, may be uniquely placed for success, and can be dated by the time they have been captured and shared.

So in order to look outwards effectively here are three research challenges to set yourself or your group:

1. Look globally.

If you can find examples of good practice in Scotland, you'll no doubt be able to find the same from around the world. For example creative change is thriving in the developing world, more than places like the US and Japan. When looking at solutions to deprivation and attainment, you may find creative solutions in the most unexpected and possibly most deprived places in the world.

2. Look across sectors.

It can be easy to stay within the safety of your own sector, knowing that the differences between, say Early Learning and Secondary School are profound. However, the purpose of these quite different worlds are often very similar and looking across the different sectors can offer the 'different angle' you need to challenge your own assumptions. Should Broad General Education be more like Nursery? Should Primary Schools offer work experience?

3. Look quickly.

A detailed case study can be a vital tool for improvement, but without that feeling of inspiration, the moment when your own imagination takes an idea and imagines it in your own setting, a case study will only offer something to be copied. Look for the stories. Share them with each other, visit other establishments whether they are doing well or not and examine what makes you different, and what you assumed couldn't be changed.

Creativity Toolbox #12 Looking Forwards

To help with transformational change you can follow a simple process of looking inwards, looking outwards and looking forwards.

Looking Forwards can feel either straightforward or hugely challenging. To help you get the most out of this perspective you can brainstorm as a group or on your own, and map your thoughts using the following prompts:

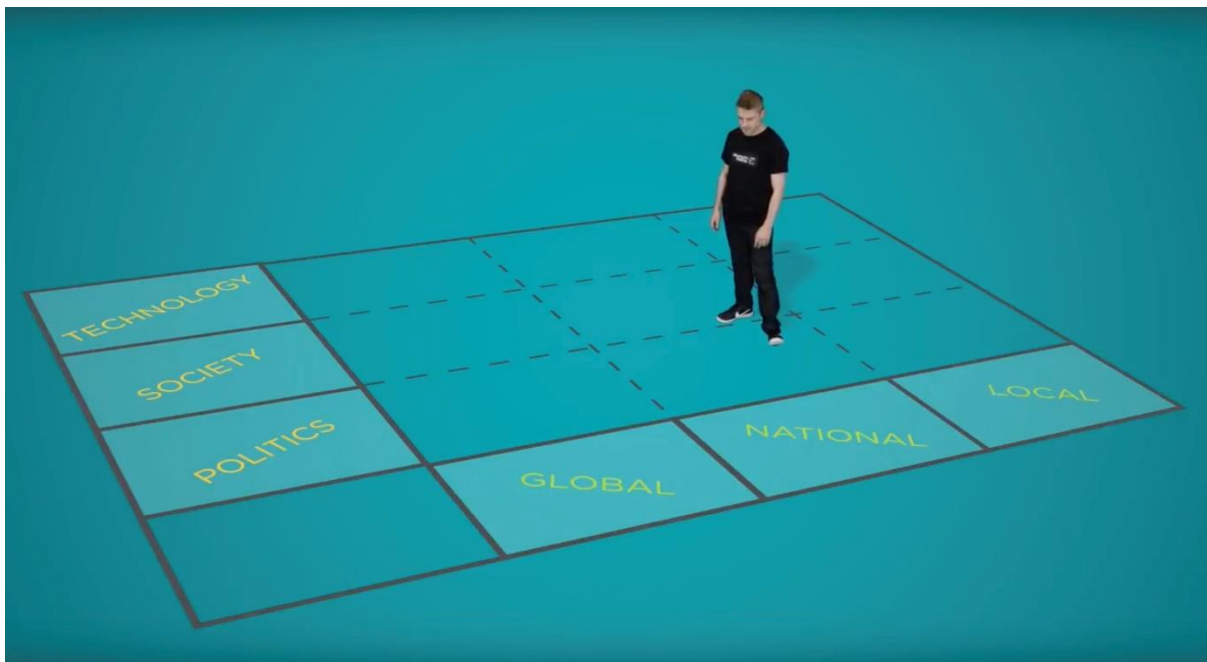
Think about **technology** and the changes this is bringing with it.

Think about **society**, and how attitudes and lifestyles are changing.

Then think about the **politics** that drive and influence your work.

With each of these themes first think about them on a **global** level. Then at a **national** level. And finally at a **local** level.

Challenge yourself to find something for each of the prompts.



And remember – forwards means next week, next year and in ten years' time. Explore all of these.

For example, we might put increased availability of online courses at a global level, driverless cars at a national level, and a new school website at a local level.

We might think about global recession, national austerity, and local poverty.

We might look at the global rise in nationalism, Scottish Government policies on the horizon, and a change in head teacher at a local level.

Creativity Toolbox #13 Find your Unique Problem Point

When we see really creative educators, schools and establishments we almost always find a seemingly insurmountable problem underlying and stimulating all of that creativity.

The Chinese have a word for this that means crisis – a crisis that is also an opportunity.

To help focus your creativity why not try finding your own unique problem point, and turn it into your unique selling point.

You might want to use one of the other Creativity Toolbox films to help you in this process, or you might already have a clear understanding of what your unique problem point is. The important thing is to be as specific as you can.

Once you have your unique problem point, arrange its various elements along one side of a piece of paper, whiteboard or flipchart. Then brainstorm or decide what opportunities each of the elements might present.

Elements of your Unique Problem Point	Opportunities these create

For example: a small number of learners might be a challenge, but one that can allow you to offer strong learner led activities; a large number of learners might be a challenge that can allow you to offer an impressive range of specialist after-school clubs – opportunity. A massive range of languages spoken in a school can be an obvious challenge, but one that can lead to all kinds of benefits such as cultural exchange and exciting ways of communicating with parents and the community.

So find your unique problem point and tease out all of the wonderful benefits and opportunities it holds for you.