

## Where's the box? Out of the box thinking in the core curriculum

*AUC pilots creative thinking and problem solving course*

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In Spring 2013, the Core Curriculum, office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the School of Sciences and Engineering joined forces to offer a new course targeting a series of questions that have continually eluded educators and students. What is creativity? Can it be defined? Are we all creative? How can students identify their creativity? Can it be awakened or nurtured just by taking a course?

Frank Bradley (PVA), Hoda Mostafa (SSE/CLT), Magda Mostafa (AENG) and Melanie Carter (RHET) collaboratively designed, developed and taught the four-module course SEMR 199 “Creative Thinking and Problem Solving” using a multidisciplinary approach to teaching creativity in context.

In the first module, students explored their preconceptions about creativity and their own innate creativity, reflecting on TED-talk videos by renowned speakers who examine creativity as a skill and a way of life. Students learned about deliberate creativity and explored models used to enhance creative problem solving skills. Application of these skills was included in course work of the second module, where students worked in groups to generate solution statements and implementation plans for problems on campus leading up to the design and construction of creative solutions to problems observed on Bartlett plaza using recycled materials. Creative Expression was the focus of the third module, where students were guided through a series of creative writing exercises based on the popular book *What a Plant Knows* to ultimately author their own stories. The final module on Acting and the Creative State of Being exposed students to an actor’s perspective at the **Gerhart** Theatre and AUC’s Center for the Arts. Using this multifaceted approach helped set students along the path of discovering their own creativity and applying creative thinking skills to their majors as they continue to move through AUC’s “City of Learning”.

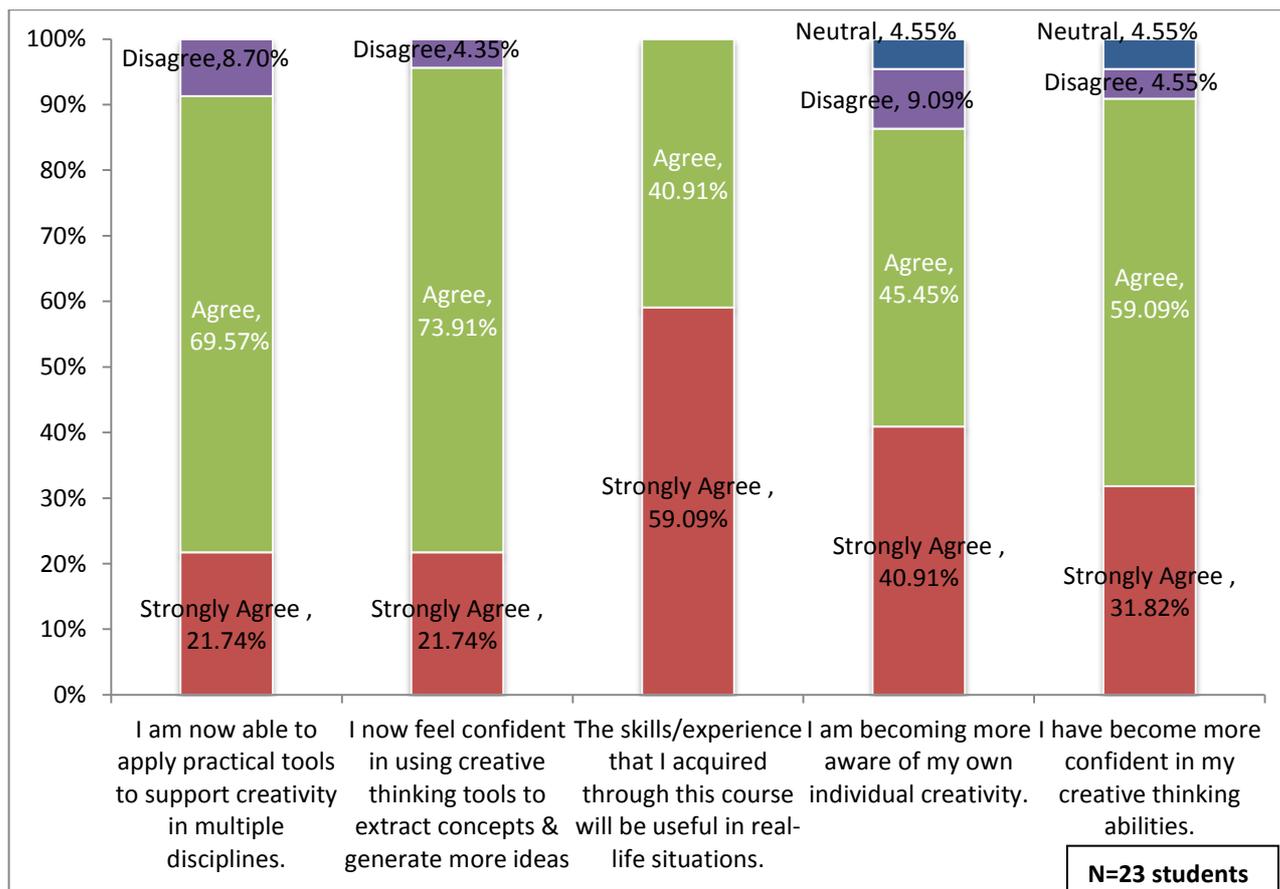
When designing courses for freshman students, engagement and participation is paramount and may elude instructors in many settings. Creative Thinking and Problem Solving required students to complete an E-portfolio documenting their progress, achievements and reflections on the course and their experiences. They also created their own blogs where this personal reflection space encouraged them to share within the class environment their thoughts, assignments and comments on selected videos, readings and posts shared by the instructors and other students.

Hoda Mostafa and the teaching team worked closely with the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) on developing tools for assessing the course and getting students’ feedback on its various aspects. Information was gathered from students through surveys, an in-class facilitated discussion and reflection papers where students reflected on their personal experience in the course. After the first 4 weeks of classes, students took a [survey](#) followed by an in-class discussion to find out how they felt about what they’d been learning, their thoughts, what they liked/disliked about the course and the material they’d been working with, etc. Later towards the end of the semester, students were asked to take another [survey](#) and present their own reflections on the overall experience of the course.

The information gathered from students through the end of semester online survey and individual

reflections conveyed how much students appreciated this “unique” experience. Interestingly enough, when students were asked to talk about their experience in the course after four weeks of classes, 12 out of the 26 said the class was a bit boring because they felt that they didn’t learn anything new. Others thought that it was not as “fun” as they expected, and half of them were not sure what the purpose of the first module was. However, by the end of the semester students expressed how much they had valued the opportunity of taking this course, describing it as a “life time experience” that gave them the chance to discover a lot of things about their abilities, themselves and about life in general. A student explained saying “the course had provided me with a new perspective about life...I now see things differently”.

Below is a graph of students’ responses to a question on the survey they took towards the end of the semester about their level of agreement/disagreement with statements hereunder.



As illustrated, the majority of students indicated their agreement on being able to apply practical tools to support creativity in multiple disciplines and they also felt confident in using creative thinking tools to extract concepts & generate more ideas. All students found that the skills/experience acquired through the course would be useful in real-life situations and many of them agreed that they were becoming more aware of their own individual creativity, in addition to feeling more confident in their creative thinking abilities.

An important part of new course development is that of course assessment; however perhaps the most valuable and rewarding experience was seeing the change in students’ perceptions about themselves. Blogs and portfolios, because of their cumulative and progressive nature allow instructors to “see inside” students heads in a sense, and tailor teaching accordingly. Although many instructors tend to shy away from teaching new freshman students, the energy, commitment and courage of these students was in fact a life changing experience for the instructors as well.

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