

NPDL LEADABLES

Creativity Loves Constraints

When teams embrace the constraints, rather than fight them, there can be optimism, empowerment and freedom.



**“I do not like them in a house.
I do not like them with a mouse.
I do not like them here or there.
I do not like them anywhere.
I do not like green eggs and ham.
I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”**

The gifts of Dr Seuss stretch beyond encouraging children to try out new foods. In 1960, the author’s publisher bet that he couldn’t write a whole children’s story with just 50 words. It was this kind of constraint that led to the best seller hit, *Green Eggs and Ham*. And, it is the paradoxical role that constraints play in fostering creativity that we turn our gaze now.

Many of us will throw up our hands and declare, “I’m just not a creative type.” We have all experienced it: feeling stuck in the rut of our own thinking or feeling daunted by a blank canvas. However, we all have creative ability. And tapping it, is actually pretty simple. By defining and constraining the range of choices available, we can explore alternatives differently. Constraints can

force us to make new connections between things not previously connected. They channel our attention. Ironically, constraints can be veiled opportunities.

Imposing restrictions to drive creativity in groups works too. But there is a sweet spot; not all constraints are ‘creativity equal’ (think proximal development here!). Here are a few suggestions for facilitating creativity in groups—whether it’s with adults or youth. Pre-establish norms of collaboration and communication so that interpersonal dynamics are constructive throughout. Create a deadline that is challenging but possible. Limit the number of rules and make sure they are simple and clear enough to generate efficacy. Encourage an enabling culture of curiosity, openness, equity, partnership—and go figure—play! Size matters; to rob a line from Jeff Bezos, if a team can’t be fed with a large pizza, it’s too big. When teams embrace the constraints, rather than fight them, there can be optimism, empowerment and freedom.

As leaders we can create regular opportunities to boost creativity. In one of our NPDL cluster monthly videoconferences, districts present their learning to each other in a Pecha-Kucha power point form (You can only use 20 slides for 20 seconds per slide). These limitations force the presenters to choose content carefully and think differently about the delivery.

To generate a culture of creativity in your school, try these strategies with your staff:

- Capture deep learning in a haiku poem
- Sketch note deep learning on chart paper (or an ipad) in 10 minutes.
- Describe your classroom community using a metaphor
- Recognize staff contributions using candy bar names
- Summarize the school’s challenges using movie titles.
- Using emoji images and only 10 words, describe the next step in your learning journey

Encourage your students and staff to have a healthy disregard for the impossible: get creative with constraints. You might even have fun doing it.



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