



Stanford eCorner

Divergent Thinking

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STVP Executive Director Tina Seelig explains the difference between convergent and divergent thinking, and identifies how the latter allows individuals to create an infinite number of answers to a problem. As a real world example, Seelig tells the story of the legendary one-word admission examination used by All Souls College at the University of Oxford.



Transcript

In kindergarten, this would be a typical question. Five plus five equals what? What's the answer? Ten. You guys are so great. You must go to Stanford. OK, why do we all know this is ten? We know this is ten because this problem has one right answer. This requires convergent thinking. We all converge on that one right answer - a five plus five equals ten. But what if I ask the question in a slightly different way, what if I ask X plus Y or two question marks, what two numbers add up to ten? How many answers are there to that? Infinite. And I'm so delighted you say that, because I'm often in rooms where people were going, "Well, one plus nine, two plus eight, three plus seven." And I go, "Whoa, Whoa, whoa, what about negative numbers? What about fractions? What about decimals?" The fact is there is infinite number of answers to this question. Why? Because this requires divergent thinking - we ask the question that doesn't have one right answer.

Now, think about it. It's the same type of math, right? The same principles. And yet when we ask the question one way, we got one answer. When we ask it in a slightly different way, we got an infinite number of answers. This isn't just true in kindergarten. Let's go off to college. Maybe somebody can tell me recognize this place. Anyone know what school this is? It's in the UK. It's very old. Oxford, yes.

Here we are Oxford. And at Oxford, they do something that is totally brilliant. In order to get in to one of the colleges, All Souls College, you have to answer the one word exam. Now, this doesn't mean that the answer is yes or no or black or white. The question is one word. It will be a word like 'integrity', or 'water' or 'bias' or 'innocence' and you were given three hours to write using that one word as a prompt. Now, first of all, how many of you would like to take that type of exam? Great. I actually love that, because most people find that kind of scary and intimidating. What does this type of exam teach the people who read your answer? What does it tell them? It tells them how you think, how you connect and combine ideas, how you can sort of draw a line through all of your experiences and your knowledge to create some integrated story. It's about seeing how creative you are.