



Stanford eCorner

Connect and Combine

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The re-combination of information is critical to developing new ideas, says STVP Executive Director Tina Seelig. This is the same reason innovation flourishes throughout the world in places where different people and ideas come together, such as ancient Alexandria and modern day San Francisco. But how do you teach this? Seelig shares how metaphors can be a powerful key to unlocking creativity through the combination of ideas.



Transcript

The second rule or tool is to connect and combine things. Now, what do I mean? Well, let's see. Do we have any scientist in the room? Trade is to creativity as sex is to biology. What the heck I am talking about? Well, let's look at this picture. What do we have here? Some chromosomes - what are these chromosomes doing here? They're having sex. OK. You guys are all grown-ups. They're replicating here, right? And what's happening over here? What is it called at this place? Crossing over, right? Look what has happened, the blue chromosome and the red chromosomes are actually swapping information. And this is some of the most interesting things that happen in biology. Because you got this amazing re-combination of the information from the different chromosomes and they combine with each other.

Now think about it. This is like crossing over in the real world. Imagine that you're walking on this path and you're being incredibly observant, paying attention to everything. And then, you come across someone walking down this path. If you talk to them, engage with them, learn what they've seen, learn what they know, all of a sudden, the breath of your knowledge expands exponentially, right? This is why places in the world like ancient Alexandria or San Francisco or London or New York-or pick any major metropolitan area where people come together from all over the world- that's where you see amazing innovation. Because you're getting this incredible connecting and combining of ideas and cultures and thoughts and foods and language, and that's where interesting things take place. Now, how do we teach ourselves to do this in our everyday life? How do we teach it? It's very simple actually. One of my favorite ways is to use metaphors. I am a huge believer that metaphors are the key, a key, to creativity. Let's think about it.

If I ask you, if I say something like, "Ideas are like something." Anything, pick anything. Ideas are like shoes. Why are ideas like shoes? They carry you. They take you places, right? Fabulous. Where else? Another reason? Ideas are like shoes because... What's that? You can own them. OK, cool. Or maybe you can have too many. OK. Maybe you have to walk in them for awhile before you get comfortable.

OK, there are lots of other ways. And it gives you some interesting... OK, we could say, well, ideas are like candy. Or ideas are like light bulbs. Or ideas are like a walk in the park. You can do anything. And that's a wonderful way to get all sorts of new ways of looking at something from a different perspective, is by using metaphors. In fact, there was an article that was in just this week's Stanford Report about some research that was being done in the Psychology Department about using metaphors. Did anyone read it? It was very interesting. It's about how, when you describe something like crime, you say "crime is a beast" or "crime is a virus".

What ends up happening is people come up with very, very different solutions. If then you say, "Crime is a beast" and you

describe it that way, then you start thinking you want to have more police, you want to have more jails, you want to basically keep this beastie criminals contained. But you when you say that crime is a virus, all of the sudden, people come up with all sorts of social reforms. So the answers you come up with are very dependent upon the metaphors you used in the beginning.