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Getting Creative

KEY IDEAS

When you create to learn, you make important strategic decisions that are essential for an effective and high-impact project. Digital and media literacy is a process that involves accessing, analyzing, creating, reflecting, and taking action. The creative process starts with discovery. It's a process that can be best supported by providing creative constraints. Educators and employers may structure goals and expectations for your creative work. To develop a plan of action, there's real power in composing a creative brief, a document that helps you prepare what you expect you will be learning when working on a creative multimedia project. Visualize how to begin the creative journey by assembling ideas, information, and evidence that you will eventually synthesize into one of nine different media formats.

When Ginae, Krista, and Ebony decided to create a video about their first semester of college, at Mizzou, the University of Missouri, they wanted to talk about the transition from high school to college. The three girls shot the video in December, right before they went away for winter break, using Ginae's camera in their dorm room. They address the camera directly, offering insight from their experience. It's like they were speaking to their younger selves, or perhaps their younger friends and siblings still in high school. Ginae said, "For me, the time management, roommate issues, studying, and learning to live independently" were the issues that mattered most.

Ebony talked about what to expect from the classes, explaining, "In some classes, one test will determine your grade." Krista shared the positive overall thrill of being independent, noting "You learn more in your first semester of college than you do in all of high school."

At first glance, this video is deceptive: it looks like a trio of girls clowning for the camera. The video opens with Ginae looking at the camera, saying, "Is this recording?" But a more careful look reveals a polished and strategic video production. Within 10 seconds, an opening title sequence with jazzy music begins. The girls interact with each other, using a mixture of serious and playful talk,

like you might hear on a morning talk radio show, mixing informal stories along with more substantial advice and insight on the trials and tribulations of their first semester of college. The girls clearly had a purpose and strategic goal: they knew that they were communicating to a real audience of girls about to head off to college or in their first year like them. Krista noted, “By talking about our experience, we hope others will find it useful and entertaining.”¹ Ginae is 18 years old and already an experienced digital author, and her video about freshman year has received 45,000 views as of November 2016. But so far, at least, she has not created any videos for her college coursework.

Play and Learning in Coursework

College and universities generally frame play and learning in the context of *co-curricular activities*, which are generally defined as activities that extend or complement what students are learning in school. Co-curricular activities may be organized and social, as in the clubs, fraternities and sororities, or other kinds of voluntary student activities. There are plenty of opportunities for these groups to create media that helps them increase visibility for their organization, promote an upcoming service project, or fundraise for a special event. Make no mistake about it: some of the most powerful learning experiences you ever have in college come from co-curricular experiences.

Fortunately, students also sometimes are able to combine play and learning when they create media as part of their coursework. Another college student, Derrick Davis, an undergraduate biology major at Stanford University, created a parody video of Jay Z’s “Money Ain’t a Thang” when he created “Regulatin’ Genes” with his instructor, Tom McFadden, a graduate student instructor. The rap song explains in pretty technical scientific language about the process of cell specialization. How does a cell know to become a neuron or a skin cell? Transcription factors, or proteins which bind to DNA, interact with the cellular machinery to control gene expression, a biological process that explains how a single fertilized egg can turn into a full-fledged organism.²

And lest you think that college students making videos as a way to learn complex scientific concepts is a new thing, know that in 1971, Professor Robert Alan Weiss in the Chemistry department at Stanford University created “Protein Synthesis: An Epic on a Cellular Level,” a free-love style outdoor dance video (that really is the best way to describe it!) to illustrate the process of protein synthesis.³ It’s still shown in biology classes today because it illustrates the scientific concept in a playful and highly memorable way.

Another YouTuber, YouArentBenjamin, worked with a small group to create a video for his college statistics class, called “Pivot Tables Make Everything Just Right.” In it, the singer bemoans having too much data until his friend tells him about the pivot table, which “sounds too good to be true, sounds more like a

fable.” The rappers explain then how to condense information with a pivot table in Excel.⁴

When a student in England got the opportunity to create a video as part of a college assignment, his task was to come up with the premise of a movie, based on a book, and create a trailer for it. A *trailer* is a short promotional video that generally advertises key features of a movie plot to inspire viewer interest. Working with a creative team, he created “The Very Hungry Caterpillar – The Trailer,” a hilarious no-budget *spoof* that remixes a children’s picture book with the action adventure and the horror film genre. A father is reading the famous Eric Carle storybook to his son. Cut to a group of military officers talking, and one says, “Gentlemen, we’ve got ourselves a problem.” A series of short shots follows, all communicating the severe danger of the very hungry caterpillar, who (as you may remember from the storybook) eats and eats and eats but is still hungry. From there, it’s an escalating series of action shots remixed from Hollywood movies as the military goes all out after the killing of that bug.⁵ It’s quite silly but very entertaining – and it accomplished the goals of the assignment.

At this point, you are probably wondering: where did these people get their creative ideas? This chapter addresses the process of concept development where authors identify the purpose and aims of their multimedia production and engage in the first stage of the creative process: brainstorming and idea development.

College Students as Digital Media Entrepreneurs

When students create YouTube videos as a way to learn, they can also learn about the economics of the Internet. YouTube video makers can make real money from their creative work. After Ginae uploaded her video to her YouTube site, the video had reached over 27 000 views by the summer of 2015, only eight months after publication. By using the Social Blade web site, we can see that Ginae has uploaded 38 videos and has 8,900 subscribers. Ginae makes between \$100–\$250 each month from the advertising shown on her YouTube videos. And as of August 2015, the pivot table rap has had 27,000 views. So the work of YouTube video producers has some financial benefit to creative entrepreneurs.

Create to Learn: A Five-Step Process

Create to learn is an approach to education that is rooted in an expanded conceptualization of literacy. Sometimes called *digital and media literacy*, this approach owes its inspiration to a variety of scholars and writers whose ideas on learning and creativity were influential in the twentieth century.

They include John Dewey, a philosopher who taught at the University of Chicago. Dewey believed that communication, education, and democracy were fundamentally intertwined and that could not be understood independently from each other. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian communication scholar, noticed how rapid changes in media and technology affected patterns of thought, learning, and action for individuals and society. He recognized that media and technologies are not neutral but each has a bias that encourages people to think and act in certain ways. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian philosopher, educator, scholar, and activist. Freire motivated Brazilian peasants to read by showing them how literacy enacts and reproduces power relationships between elites and working-class people. Reading is not just a cognitive skill – it's a form of cultural power. He observed that when people are learning to read and write, they can heighten their awareness of the social and political world around them and inspire them to take action to improve their conditions of life.

Digital and media literacy can be defined as the lifelong learning process that involves accessing, analyzing, creating, reflecting, and taking action, using the power of communication and information to make a difference in the world.⁶ It includes five learning processes (AACRA) that work together in a spiral (see Figure 2.1):

- **Access.** During this stage, you gather resources that are relevant to the task at hand. This will require a strategic process of search, exploration, and discovery. You may do this through a process of formal and informal information gathering. You're also engaging in listening and deep reading comprehension, organizing information, and taking notes. In this stage, you will be drinking in as much as you can by reading, listening, viewing, and interacting with others.
- **Analyze.** During this stage, you are invested in the process of meaning-making, not just by understanding the content but by examining the motives, assumptions, and worldviews of the authors you encounter. Asking critical

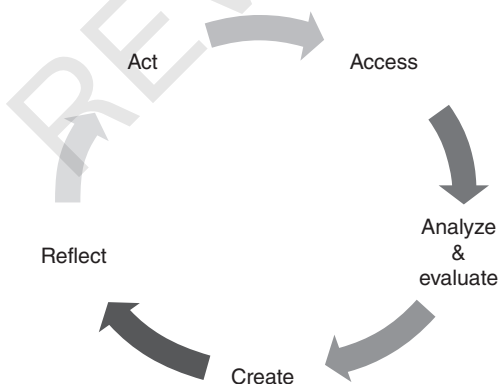


Figure 2.1 The AACRA model of digital and media literacy.

questions about what you watch, see, and read is the essence of this phase of the process.

- **Create.** Maybe it's a flash of insight. Or maybe it's just deadline pressure telling you it's time to move forward. Or maybe it's a vague sense that Idea X and Idea Q are related somehow. In this phase, it's an optimistic spark of possibility that motivates you to work towards a solution. Often, when you begin, the full-fledged ideas are not yet there – but stepping into the process of creation and getting started actually helps you discover them. This is the phase where you organize ideas, take a photograph, or start typing.
- **Reflect.** Reflection is a form of external and internal evaluation. Not all ideas are great ideas. In the external phase, you test the validity and quality of your work by giving it a critique. If necessary, in this phase, you modify, revise, or tinker. Sometimes you even throw out the work and start fresh. When the work is completed, then comes the internal phase of reflection, where you consider the implications of your work. How are you adding value to the world with your creation? How will audiences react? What are the consequences of your creative work as it may affect the attitudes and behaviors of others? What have you learned about yourself through the creative process? Great philosophers have noted that human creativity enables us to come to know ourselves better and that self-discovery is a natural outcome of creative work.
- **Act.** When your creative work reaches an authentic audience, what happens? Does the work accomplish its goals? In this phase, we look for evidence that the work had impact and value. Noticing, documenting, and accounting for the impact of a message is a part of using the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world.

Where Creativity Comes From

People believe that creativity comes from inside the human brain. When someone is creative, we think they find ways of translating their life experiences in a novel way. Creative people come up with an idea and act upon it. But this idea can be misleading if it leads you to think that creative people are special, different, unusual, or one of a kind. The truth is: everyone is creative.

People get creative ideas from a rich variety of experiences in the world around them. Let's start with your media experience. We are all swimming in a complex stream – a river of sorts – of cultural products: consider your own daily diet of media and technology use, including the games, movies, television shows, apps, and web sites you used in the last few days. Now some of that stuff is quality and some of that stuff is junk, right? But our choices of what we read, watch, play, and listen to matters because these become the building blocks for what we create.

Then there are your day-to-day experiences. They support the creative process, too. Your interactions with family, friends, and co-workers provide all sorts of fodder for creative thinking. Your sport and leisure activities fertilize your creative mind. Writers, poets, and scientists have long recognized the value of sleep to creative problem solving. Dreaming helps you with the creation of connections between things that didn't seem connected before. And that is the essence of creativity. Researchers have found that generating new insights requires time – and that sleep helps in linking ideas together.⁷

So let's define *lifestyle creativity*, where you take in experiences and think about them, and later, you re-arrange that stuff into ideas that are novel, beautiful, or useful for solving problems. When you're ready (or when you must), you then make something that expresses your understanding. Cognitive psychologists Thomas Ward and colleagues insist that "the capacity for creative thought is the rule rather than the exception of human cognitive functioning."⁷ Every normal person is born ready to be creative.⁸

So now you see why the creative process is so very personal. As W. Glenn Griffin and Deborah Morrison write in *The Creative Process Illustrated*, it's not easy to describe how people come up with new ideas because the attempt to study the creative process changes it. That's why they developed an intriguing way to research the creative process among advertising professionals, who are people who are paid to be creative. They mailed a large 17 × 22 inch blank poster and a black Sharpie pen to participants and asked them to think about the creative process and illustrate the process in a way that creates a visualization that shares an understanding of the process. They then analyzed 75 drawings and interviewed the advertising professionals and their colleagues.⁹ Some of the key insights include advice on the creative process:

- **Fill Your Head with Stuff.** Researchers and theorists call this the development of your *cultural capital*, a concept first articulated by Pierre Bourdieu that refers to nonfinancial assets that help you be successful in society, including your appearance, speech, education, intellect, and world knowledge.¹⁰ According to Chris Adams, creative director at TBWA\Chiat\Day in Los Angeles, being creative is all about "devouring media – soaking up the world around me – words and images and music and life."¹¹ Being a cultural sponge gives you funds of creative material to recombine and manipulate to create something new. Creative people are voracious readers, viewers, and do-ers. But it's worth thinking about the quality of choices you make. If you want to learn by creating great stuff, seek out and find great stuff. According to Griffin and Morrison, "The world around us offers context. Everything we experience informs and influences creative thinking."¹²
- **Spend Some Time with the Mess.** The process of creativity is disorganized, chaotic, and messy. When it happens in the classroom, David Cooper Moore

and I have called it *messy engagement*, which is when learners struggle work through the first set of decisions about what and how to create.¹³ For some, this is exhilarating but for others this can be terrifying. For this reason, sometimes people want to jump to the first solution they find. But actually, play and informal conversation – and even talk that drifts off course – can help people generate many ideas. Andy Azula, a creative director at the Martin Agency, says it's important to resist the impulse to solve a creative problem too fast. "Spend some time with the problem," he says.¹⁴ Experts agree that out of the chaos of ordinary life, creative ideas appear.

- **Collaborate in Nonjudgmental Brainstorming.** Many creative people generate ideas in conversation with others, working as a member of a team. Some of these ideas will be good, others great, and some will be really mediocre – it's normal. *Brainstorming* is the process of idea generation and it works best as a social and collaborative process. It's a myth that people develop good ideas all by themselves. Whenever a group of people generate a lot of ideas, most of them will be crappy. If someone starts pointing out the flaws in an idea, people stop generating ideas. But when judgment is withheld, a whole pile of ideas will get generated. This inspires people to loosen up. Sometimes an idea that starts out crappy can polish up nice with time, effort, and hard work. It's often in the interplay or the association between ideas where novelty can be found. Ideas evolve through dialogue. According to Griffin and Morrison, "Sometimes the slightest change of perspective offers a new set of conceptual opportunities."¹⁵
- **Don't Fear Fear.** The poet Sylvia Plath is credited with this quote: "The worst enemy of creativity is self-doubt." *Self-doubt* is a lack of confidence in yourself and your abilities; it is a story you tell yourself that undermines the important process of risk taking. The things we create may be seen as extensions of our self: that's why most of us personally identify with the things we create, from the selfies we take to the doodles we scribble. Because of this, many people experience fear and anxiety about what people will think about their work. They worry about whether the work will be good enough. This is actually part of the creative process: "fear of failure helps you work harder to make an idea better," says Mike Heid, an advertising professional from New Orleans. Creative people all struggle with self-doubt.¹⁶ Once you become aware that these feelings are part of the process, you gradually learn to believe in yourself and the ideas flow like water. Reducing self-doubt enables you to engage in *creative risk taking*, which can be defined as doing something that you have not done before. One example is the artist Pablo Picasso, who was asked to create a mural for the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. Angry and shocked by Nazi bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in 1937, Picasso created a giant mural explicitly making a political statement about the horrors of war. At 11 feet tall and

26 feet wide, the painting's mass is overwhelming. It was a significant act of risk taking to create and when it was first exhibited, the response was critical: people didn't like it. Only later was it recognized as modern art's most powerful antiwar statement.¹⁷ It takes courage to be creative. And you have to be confident even when it's not working. Sometimes you need to start over. There are multiple paths to a solution. Discovering these paths is part of the process of creating to learn.

Creative Constraints and Creative Control

It's long been recognized that boundaries or limitations promote creativity. Genres like the short story and the haiku impose very strict limits on the length and the form of the writing. In business, product development teams have to create new products working within very precise cost constraints.

It may be counterintuitive to think that *creative constraint* promotes the imagination, but it's a powerful idea whose value is well established in virtually every art form. I love the work of Austin Kleon, a poet whose book, *Newspaper Blackout*, consists of poems created by selectively blacking out words in a newspaper article (see Figure 2.2). Working from the constraints of the words in a newspaper article, Austin uses a black magic marker to black out words, subtracting from the original content until only his own poetic form remains.¹⁸

Damien Correll, a graphic artist who serves as the art director at Tumblr, explains, "I think if you're given a clean, fresh palette, and you do whatever you want, it's almost too much freedom, at least for me." For Correll, one constraint he imposes on himself is short *deadlines*.¹⁹ Many creative people use the Pomodoro Technique, which involves setting a timer for 25 minutes of focused work. The artificial constraint of time unleashes creativity and productivity.

If you're reading this book, it's probably because your instructor wants you to create multimedia as part of the learning process. Multimedia projects and assignments are assigned differently depending on the learning outcomes, content and discipline, and learning environment. Some educators may give students a lot of creative control, allowing students to select the format, genre, or medium. Other educators may be very specific, with precise directions about the creative process and product to be produced. In any case, the idea is that you will demonstrate your learning and creativity through application.

Why Creative Constraints Promote Learning

Assignments and deadlines impose creative constraint upon learners in order to structure and focus students' own creative control. When instructors design assignments, they consider both the learning *process* and the work *product*.

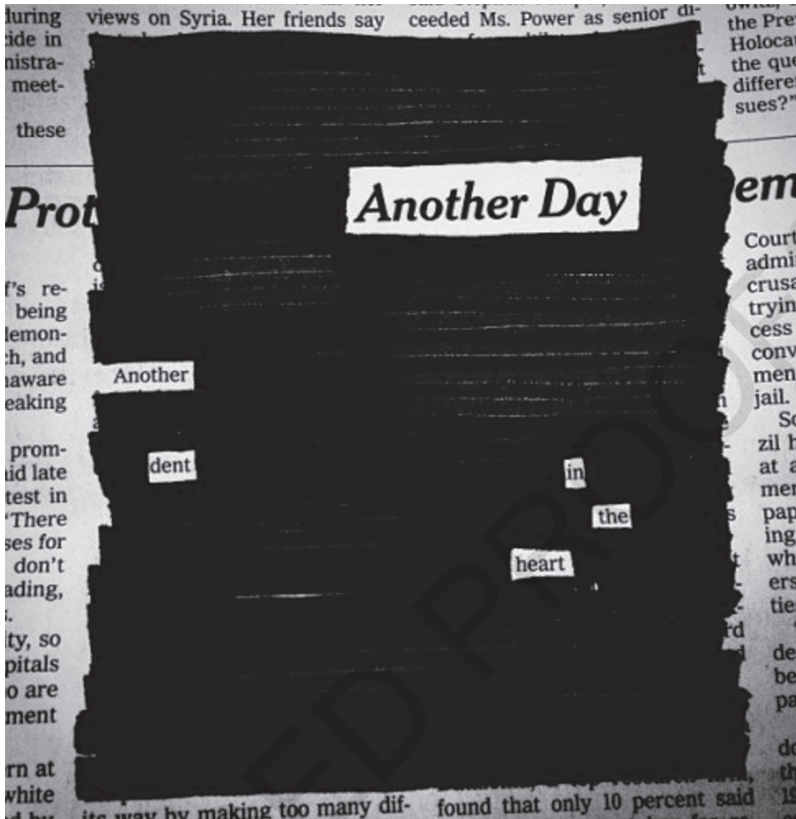


Figure 2.2 Newspaper Blackout by Austin Kleon.

For example, one instructor may value creative collaboration by requiring students to work with a partner or in a small group while another instructor may put emphasis on the construction of an argument. Some teachers may give very specific directions on how to create media (for example, even by specifying what digital tool to use) while the other instructors barely mention the process of creating with digital media. This parallels the kinds of experience you are likely to have later in life, outside of college or university, when as part of your work you receive work assignments that are structured differently depending on the situation and context.

Sometimes, students suffer because of the lack of creative constraint, when an assignment is too vague or general. If that happens, then you may need to artificially impose some constraints yourself to stimulate your thinking and creativity. If you are lucky, you will get a wide variety of different types of

assignments while you are in college to prepare you well for the many different challenges you will experience in the world outside the classroom.

When you create to learn, the instructor's learning goals will serve as key elements of creative constraint for the work that you create. But although the instructor (and later on in life, the employer) sets up the parameters of the problem, it's your creativity that must be activated in the process of creating to learn. Instructors may deliberately or inadvertently intensify the creative potential of their students, as Patricia Stokes notes in her book, *Creativity from Constraints*.²⁰ Some constraints promote creativity, while others promote conformity. For example, deadline pressures and due dates generally help creativity while a step-by-step "to do" list may stifle creativity.

The Creative Practice in Action

Creative work actually inspires deep happiness in human beings. In his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi reports on research that demonstrates that people are happiest when they are in a state of *flow* – a state of attention where people are completely absorbed in what they are doing.²¹ Everyone has experienced a flow state: it occurs when people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. People may experience flow when they are sewing, running, ironing, or when playing a video game. They may experience it when editing video, building a bookshelf, or doing hobbies. You enter into a flow state when there is a careful balance between the level of challenge the task requires and your own skills. If the task is too challenging, you experience frustration, not flow. If the task is not challenging enough, you experience boredom.

As you get started with creating to learn, it's good to know what you can expect. When Graham Wallas wrote *The Art of Thought* in 1926, he was trying to understand how new ideas emerged. By interviewing creative people from many different fields, he synthesized their creative process into four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.²² The first stage of the creative process begins by establishing the brief or the scope of the task. By defining the task with precision, you focus your goals and pinpoint the problem that requires solving. This helps you generate potential paths that may lead to a solution. During the *preparation* phase, you are feeding your head with information and ideas from others and critically analyzing those ideas.

In the *incubation* phase, you "push the task out of your immediate attention" as graphic designer David Gill puts it. "Quite simply – forget about it," he says.²³ During the 1920s, when Wallas was writing about creativity, the field of psychology was embracing the work of Sigmund Freud, who was trying to understand human behavior by exploring the concept of the unconscious. As the dominant psychological theory of the time, psychoanalysis was appealing to creative

people because it helped explain how new ideas emerge. Researchers have discovered that multitasking, may contribute to learning and creativity because “adapting to a high input level of varying distractions can increase situational awareness that is beneficial to creativity.”²⁴ In the beginning of the twentieth century, psychologists explored people’s dreams, believing that they were connected to the unconscious or intuitive dimensions of cognition. The idea is that when you disengage your conscious attention – by walking on the beach, driving to Connecticut, or working out at the gym – this allows the unconscious to efficiently process a mass of data. Sounds like magic? People who have tried it say, “It works!”

In the *illumination* phase of the creative process, inspiration comes through some kind of “aha” insight. This phase is where the actual creative product gets built. The way this happens is unique and situational, depending on what form or medium you are working in.

In *verification*, the final phase of the creative process, you analyze your creative produce in relation to your original goals and objectives. You return to your creative brief and see if your work “solved” the problems you identified at the beginning. It’s hard to be impartial about your own creative work; feedback from other people helps us see our own ideas more clearly. Time away from the work also helps us return with fresh eyes, where the revision process bring out true creativity as we transform through perfecting and polishing.

Creativity is an Act of Intellectual Freedom

When people compose stories, write essays, take pictures, make videos, build web sites, or use symbols to solve problems, they are really shaping the world. For example, when you see a photo of a place you have not visited, you take it for granted that the place looks like what’s in the photo. But authors make choices of how to depict places, things, events, and people. So Media consumers depend on media creators to be fair and accurate in how they represent the world. This form of power is tremendous. And of course not all media creators are fair or accurate – and our Bill of Rights makes this legal. That’s why the concept of *intellectual freedom*, which is at the heart of the First Amendment, is so important to the practice of creating to learn. In the United States, freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy. While all people – including children and teens – are free to speak and write freely, with this freedom comes responsibility. Responsible authors value fairness and accuracy, knowing that they are ethically accountable to their audiences. They make sure that what they create and share is true, has value to others, and that it doesn’t do harm.

We should be grateful to be alive at a time when the Internet has contributed to a blossoming of human creativity because there are no editors, no censors or gatekeepers. But undoubtedly, there’s plenty of “awful” in the variety of creative

products that people create. Because of intellectual freedom, people are free to create anything. It may be sublime, inane, or simply evil, or anywhere in between. Today the burden of responsibility is on the consumer to sort out and evaluate the quality of human creativity in all its many forms. But if everyone tries hard to create and share what is true, what is beautiful, and what has value to others, and if we all avoided creating content that harms people, the world really would be a better place. Human creative expression has the potential to transform the world, by enabling people to construct and share work that has meaning and value.

The Creative Process in Stages

Preparation. The problem to be solved is carefully considered and resources are gathered in order to confront the task. The conscious mind is focused on the problem.

Incubation. Drawing upon these resources, consideration of the problem is internalized and becomes a largely subconscious activity. The mind makes connections more freely and abundantly.

Illumination. Possible solutions to the problem transition from subconscious to conscious thought. This is a moment of insight and optimism.


Verification. Solutions are tested and may be modified if shown to be viable.

Source: Wallas, Graham (2014/1926). *The Art of Thought*. Kent, England: Solis Press.

Students and Teachers Create to Learn

In the create to learn process, obviously, teachers may provide some (but not all) of the guidance for your multimedia project. For that reason, your multimedia project may depend upon the guidance and specifications set out by your instructor. It's likely that you will face constraints and limitations that will shape what you create. Before your creative process can truly begin, you must have a firm idea of what you need to do to be successful. It's also important to practice experimenting with digital texts, tools, and technologies in the spirit of creating to learn.

You may want to develop your own creative brief by using a digital bulletin board, where you can post your creative brief online. In the example shown in Figure 2.3, students enrolled in a class on library and information services wanted to demonstrate what they were learning by creating a short video depicting a special workshop on animation that was offered to children in a local library.



Library Programs for Youth - Our Creative Brief

What is the problem or opportunity?
 Librarians and filmmakers are working together to create a learning experience for kids in the library .

Who will become engaged with it directly and indirectly?
 The kids, parents and teachers who participated might enjoy seeing themselves in this video. The librarians and filmmakers who organized it will certainly watch it carefully.

Who is it really for? And why should they care?
 The target audience for this is librarians who do not yet have many programs for teens. They probably don't realize that it's relatively easy to develop this kinds of program and that it's very appealing and valuable for teens to have this kind of experience.

What needs to be done? By whom? By when?
 We have already observed the program and taken photos and videos to document it. Now we need to interview the organizers, write a script, sequence the images and videos, select music, perform the voiceover, and put it together using iMovie.

Where and how will it be used?
 We'll submit it to our professor and send a copy to the library for them to use on their website.

How will it be remembered?
 The cute kids having fun and learning are the part of the story most likely to be remembered.




Figure 2.3 Students compose a creative brief on Padlet.

Activity: Build a Creative Brief

A *creative brief* is a kind of mind map that serves as the framework or foundation for your work. Here you put together your evolving understanding of the project by identifying the target audience, message purpose, key ideas, tone/voice, and point of view. A creative brief is used at the beginning of the creative process to jumpstart your thinking: it's not the complete plan.

A creative brief can be constructed by reflecting on the specifications of the assignment as your instructor has offered specifications and criteria for evaluation. Synthesize and capture your ideas about your work by answering the questions below:

- 1) What is this project? What form will it take? What's the task at hand?
- 2) Why are we doing it? What is the problem or opportunity?
- 3) Who is it really for? And why should they care?
- 4) Where and how will it be used? When?
- 5) Who will become engaged with it directly and indirectly?
- 6) How will it be remembered and retold?
- 7) What needs to be done? By whom? By when?