

“Finding Inspiration™: A Key to Creativity and Organization”

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Abstract

Inspiration™ 5.0 is a powerful, versatile tool for brainstorming, outlining, and diagramming. It comes with an extensive symbol library for illustration of ideas, and a set of templates to demonstrate its effectiveness in various subject areas. In this hands-on workshop, we will use the webbing or diagram view to generate ideas on a topic of your choice. Then we will switch back and forth between the traditional, hierarchical outline form and the diagram, illustrating project ideas in two powerful formats. At the end of the workshop, you will have a colorful diagram of your project and a formal outline, as well as a tip sheet to refresh your Inspiration™ skills later. If the lab is equipped to access the Web, we will visit the Inspiration™ site.

Wander through your favorite bookstore and you will invariably find the books on organizing and the books on creativity in different sections, as though the two abilities are completely separate in origin and outcome. I know this because books on creativity pile themselves up in disorganized stacks around my house. The organizational books, with their catch titles, “File, Don’t Pile,” are buried somewhere in the stacks as well.

What I needed was a key to both creativity and organization. Teachers must, of necessity, be both organized and creative. Well-structured lessons keep students focused and on task. But if those lessons lack the spark of creativity, then they become simply exercises.

The national rush to standards and lengthy assessment tests, expensive and controversial, makes one wonder when we lost sight of passion for ideas and the power of creativity. Without the individual teacher’s ability to structure learning experiences and to imbue these experiences with the spark of creativity, all the national standards in the land won’t improve public education.

One question, then, which might be asked is “what software tool can put creativity back into the educational process, while at the same time offer a powerful organizational component?” One program does both jobs very well and that is Inspiration™. Of course no one program can work miracles in our educational system, but the software program aptly named “Inspiration™,” provides a powerful tool for teachers from the kindergarten to the senior classroom. It is also a tool which, when properly placed in students’ hands, can give them a way to meet both organizational and cognitive demands.

Inspiration™ was originally brought into the suburban school district where I worked as an aid to assist special education students in creating outlines to guide their writing. The grade six teacher who had requested the program remembers the wonder and excitement her students felt when they saw their ideas, captured by the diagram, become transformed into a clear, hierarchical outline. Success became possible for them where before it had seemed out of reach.

Productivity is an attribute much mentioned in current business writing about the economy and the companies that power it. Productivity is just as important in education, though much less easy to define. I learned this lesson years ago when I discovered the ease of life that a spreadsheet could bring me at grading time. A simple spreadsheet can remove much of the pain associated with grading. An early adopter of technology in my school district, I recognized at once that I had a tool which would give me control of data, give me a foundation to discuss improvement strategies with my students, and a clear representation of a student's level of mastery for parent-teacher conferences.

The spreadsheet tool freed me from the hours of work with a calculator, and I used that time to revise my curriculum and add the creative components that made the classroom an exciting place to be. At the current time, grading packages proliferate, but with their power comes a steeper learning curve. Inspiration™ enhances productivity but its learning curve is uniquely simple in the world of today's software behemoths.

Inspiration™ was a tool with which I could diagram my existing curriculum, analyze its flow, and refine its connections. I could pin the colorful visual representation of the flow of British literature upon my bulletin board and hand in to the department chair a clear, detailed outline of my course from September to June. The creative overview achieved and the bureaucracy satisfied, all with the assistance of one software program.

Along with its power to enhance educational productivity and its simple, user-friendly interface, Inspiration™ also plays a key creative role in project generation and management. Asked to create a workshop that would cover both HyperStudio and PowerPoint, I turned immediately to Inspiration™ and did a preliminary brain-storming session. I then turned the rich idea web that had resulted into a structured two-day workshop. As I was tossing down ideas, the word "rubrics" popped into my mind and found its oval on the web. That addition greatly enriched the workshop proposal, making it more effective in that particular educational environment.

In addition to creating projects, Inspiration™ offers a fine vehicle with which to catch ideas and then structure them for a more targeted writing assignment. Faced with a blank page, many famous writers have confessed to utter terror. Without that opening sentence, a writer can feel adrift. With Inspiration™, one can try out a single idea and brainstorm for ten to fifteen minutes. If nothing of Pulitzer quality emerges from the first web, try another. With the Rapid Fire tool, a creative thinker can easily turn off the infamous "critic" and catch those living ideas that will power the rest of the writing process.

With the advances in technology and communication brought about by the explosion of the Internet, the creation of Web sites has become a new benchmark of productivity and creativity. As a consultant for a school district's attempt to create a teacher-designed Web site to represent the schools and their community, I taught Inspiration™, Claris HomePage, and PhotoShop. But the guiding document for the entire process was the Web site diagram that we drafted during our first work session. More sophisticated tools now exist with which one can draft, design, and maintain web sites. But for busy teachers,

Inspiration™ provides a visual tool of great versatility to keep their Web site in focus for themselves and their students.

In summary, Inspiration™ is a software toolkit which can enhance an educator's performance in several key areas. The software enhances productivity, allows for expression of creativity, and is marked by a simplicity of its interface that makes it a time-saving program as well.

The greatest gift we can give ourselves and our students is the ability to step back from the assignment and give hard thought to conceptualizing, to asking the right question, to finding techniques that will draw on all of our senses, and all our experience to open the doors to creative response.