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Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques

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In Review

Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques

Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative-Thinking Techniques*. (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press. 394 pp. ISBN 978-1-58008-773-5. \$19.95. See also author website at <http://www.creativethinking.net>.

Michael Michalko defines creativity as the learned ability to see things in new and different ways and, in *Thinkertoys*, he assembles an impressive array of techniques to jump start the flow of ideas. He divides the techniques into *linear*, left-brain techniques which manipulate existing information using words and symbols and *intuitive*, right-brain techniques which tap into the unconscious to find ideas, using image and insight (36). Since the formulation of the problem to be addressed is always the first step in the creative process, Michalko devotes an introductory chapter to “challenges” and how to state them as useful questions. Each chapter in Part 2, the main body of the book, then addresses a single method, providing step-by-step instructions (the “blueprint”), psychological background, copious examples, illustrations, tips, and encouragement. Part 3 addresses methods for group development of creative ideas, including a section on group-brainstorming new to this second edition. The final Thinkertoy, called “Murder Board,” is a way to get feedback from others who are creative, knowledgeable in the field, and unafraid, if necessary, to kill an idea.

This book is easy, indeed fun, to read. It is full of puzzles and stories, rich in similes, upbeat and optimistic. But, as Michalko himself points out, “it is not enough to read the book—to create your own ideas, you have to *use* the techniques” (xix). In practice, using the techniques promises to be more difficult than the book lets on. To begin with, the focus of the work lies in the generation of ideas to deal with problems, but the very challenge of stating the problem is underemphasized. Almost all the problems are drawn from the business world and while the techniques can certainly be adapted to, say, library issues, examples from a wider variety of fields would have been welcome. In the real-life success stories that illustrate almost every chapter, the link between the technique under study and the ideas it generates is often unclear. However, Michalko argues—plausibly—that the very act of generating a multitude of ideas causes solutions to problems simply to “pop up.” He convinces the reader that the effort is well worth the try.

Michalko obviously draws from wide experience and research but he documents none of the psychological theories, business examples, quotations, or puzzles in his book. A bibliography would have added great value for the would-be creative thinker. In addition, the book is marred by some editing errors, chiefly dead references to items in the first edition. In spite of these weaknesses,

Thinkertoys is worthy of its classic namesake, the wooden spoke and spool toy designed to give children the opportunity to exercise their creative imaginations.

Reviewer: Louise Fluk
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