

Teaching How to Think B!G

Creative thinking skills are not a ‘nice to have’ but a core element of education

Background

‘Imagination is only intelligence having fun.’ At The B!G Idea, we couldn’t agree more with critic George Scialabba (a version of the line is often attributed to Albert Einstein). We are big believers in injecting fun into learning – but not fun for the sake of it. When we’re enjoying ourselves and completely immersed in an activity, learning comes more easily and naturally.



Kim Mackenzie-Doyle

Founder and CEO, The B!G Idea

Today’s students, possibly more than ever, will need to channel all their creativity to tackle the pressing issues of life. They will need keen problem-solving abilities – be that in further study, in their careers, or simply in navigating the complexities of life. But how will they know how to use their innate creativity without the skills and knowledge to unlock it?

In 2021, The B!G Idea was born. Inspired by industry methodologies, and using principles of universal design for learning, The B!G Idea is a collaborative, creative-thinking skills programme supported by academia and businesses. It is a 25-workshop programme, facilitated by Transition Year (TY), Leaving Cert Applied (LCA), and Northern Ireland teachers, as well as Youthreach tutors and coordinators, that teaches teens how to think creatively about problems affecting their communities.

It gives students experience working as a team and learning from failure. It nurtures empathetic leadership and the development of ideas into workable solutions to challenges such as hidden poverty, climate change, disability, and artificial intelligence. We connect each student team with industry professionals who mentor and guide them, providing feedback, advice, and encouragement.

Inspiration

For the next generation to truly thrive, Ireland must invest in cultivating creative thinking and innovative skills. The World Economic Forum and Forbes, among others, agree

The B!G Idea programme, launched in 2021, gives students first-hand experience of combining imagination with logic and the messy, nonlinear nature of real-world problem-solving. It supports teachers and mentors through online resources and a free professional development workshop on creative skills. This article outlines its structure, results, and aims for the future.

that creative thinking is the top skill required by businesses by 2025, surpassing even technical skills.

I also know from experience that traditional, formal education techniques don't suit everyone. I learn from doing – I need to get actively involved, and there are many people like me. As a three-year-old, I experienced a trauma that set me back. I lost speech and developed a speech impediment. School was a challenge. I struggled with sitting for long periods of time, I fell behind my peers in all aspects, and there was little expectation of me succeeding academically. My guidance counsellor jokingly told me to 'marry well!'

I eventually found my way, learning a particular set of creative-thinking, problem-solving skills that helped me develop a successful career in product design. They also developed something more crucial: resilience and an awareness of my potential to help others.

From that experience, and a desire for young people to have the chance to develop their own creative-thinking skills, resilience, and empathy, The BIG Idea grew. I imagine a world where every young person in Ireland is equipped to tackle the challenges in their lives, workplaces, and communities, and to make a positive and lasting impact.

Feedback from participating teachers and students has been encouraging and drives us onwards. Students love the programme while learning valuable skills and techniques. For me, one of the initiative's most inspiring impacts is how it has given students confidence and belief in their abilities and uncovered leaders who didn't realise their innate capacity to nurture and encourage others:

'We learned that nothing is impossible and to trust the process.' —Team 'Connection Through Community', Tullamore CTC

'It really helped me to get out of my shell and to understand myself better.' —Sarah, Kilkenny Youthreach

'Being nominated as team leader helped me practise important leadership skills, like listening to others, stepping back a bit, and letting others take control.' —Roise, St Joseph's Grammar School, Tyrone

'We learned that making mistakes along the way can improve your learning.' —Team Miraculous, Mercy Secondary School, Ballymahon

'Students are becoming more independent thinkers, critical thinkers . . . they are using their creativity every single day in class, and they're relying on each other.' —Michele Daly, Teacher, Coláiste Iósaef Community College

'They've completely changed their mindset on their lives and their goals. They now know they can have dreams.' —Michelle Howard, Tutor, Tullamore Community Training Centre

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Thinking differently

We must think differently about the role of education. We need to create an environment for young people to realise their potential and become change-makers, capable of improving their communities and wider society. For them to do that, we need to integrate new ways of learning – not just rote learning, which doesn't accurately reflect the reality of life or work.

Cultivating creative thinking – developing innovative solutions to challenges – makes sense from an economic and business perspective. It's also a critical skill for society and communities, supporting people to navigate life's inevitable challenges. But it is not yet firmly embedded into our education policies.

The B!G Idea is bridging the gap between education and business so that young people learn cutting-edge methodologies to develop solutions to local and global challenges that reflect the UN Sustainable Development Goals. With support and advice from industry professionals across Ireland, students gain experience of combining imagination with logic and the messy, nonlinear nature of real-world problem-solving. The programme supports teachers and mentors through online modules and classroom resources, as well as a free professional development workshop on creative and critical thinking.

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We're proud that our accessible initiative was recently praised in an OECD report for promoting creative-thinking skills in formal education as part of Ireland's strategy to reduce the negative impact of student assessment regimes on the practice of creative thinking.

Since its launch, 10,000 students in 23 counties, with support from more than 1,000 industry mentors, have taken part in The B!G Idea. We want to reach even more. Our vision is a world where our young people, no matter their background, have the creative-thinking ability to tackle and solve the complex challenges they will face. We want to democratise the teaching of creative thinking so that every young person in Ireland is empowered with this critical life skill and nurtured to reach their full potential.

The B!G Idea is a free, all-Ireland programme open to Transition Year, Leaving Cert Applied, and Northern Ireland students, as well as Youthreach and Community Training Centre learners. Visit www.thebigidea.ie for more information. Teachers can register their class or group of students at <https://teachers.thebigidea.ie/>.

'There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns.' — Edward de Bono

Teen-Turn Student Awarded Trane Technologies Thermoking Scholarship to Pursue Engineering at ATU Galway



Orlaith Heaney recipient of Trane Technologies Thermoking Scholarship 2024

Orlaith Heaney, from County Mayo, is the proud winner of a prestigious €24,000 scholarship from Trane Technologies Thermoking.

This scholarship - designated for students in Teen-Turn - will provide Orlaith, a former student at Mount Saint Michael Secondary School, with €6,000 annually over the course of her four-year engineering degree at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Galway.

A friend introduced Orlaith to Teen-Turn's afterschool program and she has been engaged with the organisation since she was in first year. She had many successful projects during her years of attendance at the afterschool programs including participation in Technovation, Scifest and BT Young scientist. Most recently Orlaith was honoured with a National Garda Community Safety Award.

Orlaith progressed to attending Teen-Turn PLUS Saturday clubs, which deliver advanced learning in subjects that are not universally offered in all-girls' secondary schools in Ireland, including foundational skills critical for engineering and technology courses at the university level.

It was through Orlaith's participation in Teen-Turn's PLUS program that she discovered a strong passion for engineering, with a particular interest in robotics, automation and manufacturing engineering. Securing a 'Teen-Turnship', a 2 week summer work placement in Trane Technologies in Galway in the summer of 5th year, further cemented Orlaith's desire to study Engineering.

Orlaith applied to the common engineering programme at ATU Galway City, which will allow her to experience various branches of engineering in her first year before deciding on her specialisation.

"Teen-Turn gave me opportunities I never would have had, from coding to building robots and learning from real engineers," Orlaith said.

"These experiences showed me that engineering is where I want to be and I am excited to bring what I have learned into my studies at ATU. Teen-Turn's programs helped me discover my love for robotics and automation and I am eager to explore all branches of engineering in my first year at ATU. I cannot wait to dive into a career where I can make a real impact."