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The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom

There has been a remarkable surge of interest in creativity in a wide variety of disciplines in recent years. Taken in aggregate, this body of work now theorizes creativity as a foundational aspect of human cognition and intelligence. If we theorize creativity as a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition, it must also then be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of the curriculum in the writing classroom.

Creativity is an extraordinarily vital and luminous human capacity that has been largely ignored in recent discussions about college readiness, curricular alignment, and the teaching of composition. Outside of our discipline, however, there appears to be an emerging consensus about its importance and value. It may be time for writing teachers to think carefully about how this radiant and revolutionary human capacity might be nurtured in our composition classrooms, grades 6–13—and not hidden away, its marvelous powers unmainstreamed and segregated in creative writing classes. Lewis Hyde, in his famous book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, suggests that creative expression is a unique and important way of producing knowledge and knowing the world. He positions creativity outside of and often in opposition to

CCC 67:1 / SEPTEMBER 2015

the market economy, suggesting that creativity as a form of human expression and activity offers us something that business models can't. As Hyde notes,

there are categories of human enterprise that are not well organized or supported by market forces. Family life, religious life, public service, pure science, and of course much artistic practice. (370)

An imposing body of scholarship has developed over the last twenty years that confirms Hyde's central premise here—that creative expression is a unique and vitally important human capacity.

In this essay, I invite readers to survey this scholarship with me and to examine ways that this research might help inform our approach to teaching writing—at all levels of instruction and across institutional boundaries. There are a number of questions I would like us to explore together, including perhaps this most essential

one: Might there be some value in embracing creativity as an integral part of how we theorize writing? A number of related questions also call for careful attention from our discipline, which I would also like to examine in this essay:

- How do contemporary scholars and researchers define *creativity*?
- What is the general consensus at the moment about the value of creativity in the marketplace, in the classroom, and in human history?
- Is creativity important?
- Should creativity be taught and nurtured only in art courses and creative writing classes?
- Where, if at all, should we place *creativity* within the hierarchy of traditional academic skills like critical thinking?
- What does current scholarship tell us about how creativity can be nurtured and supported?

After reviewing this research and scholarship, I would like to spend some time discussing what we might have to gain from integrating creativity into our writing classes, with a case study of one such attempt drawn from my own teaching practice.

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At the Heart of What It Means to Be Human

There has been a remarkable surge of interest in creativity from a wide variety of disciplines in recent years. Even a cursory glance through *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity* (2010) and *The International Handbook of Creativity* (2006), both edited by James C. Kaufman and Robert J. Sternberg, suggest the range, depth, and complexity of this work. *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, for example, includes scholarship that examine theories of creativity, the role of creativity in society, cognition and creativity, the function of personality in creativity, how visual artists create artwork, organizational creativity, everyday creativity, the neurobiological foundation of creative cognition, developmental approaches to creativity, functional creativity, cross-cultural perspectives on creativity, creativity and motivation, individual and group creativity, the relationship between creativity and intelligence, and creativity in the classroom. *The International Handbook of Creativity* examines creativity in a variety of very different cultural contexts, including those in Latin America, Spain, Italy, Africa, India, and China. As this research demonstrates, creative individuals are not only good at solving problems but also at “finding” and creating new “problems” and questions to explore and consider, thus driving innovation and change (Runco *Creativity*; Runco *Problem*). As Sternberg notes in his introduction to *The International Handbook of Creativity*, however, for many years work on creativity has been conducted at the margins of mainstream psychology and educational research (3). That has begun to change in some dramatic ways in recent years.

Much of this work, though, originates outside of our discipline and therefore is probably unfamiliar to most writing instructors. Taken in aggregate, this body of work now theorizes creativity as a foundational aspect of cognition and intelligence. Ken Robinson, an educator, writer, and celebrated champion of creativity, is probably the most well-known scholar currently championing the value of creativity. His primary claim has become famous, but it has also been supported by any number of researchers and scholars:

Creativity is the greatest gift of human intelligence. The more complex the world becomes, the more creative we need to be to meet its challenges. (*Out* xiii)

As the title of his important book suggests—*Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*—Robinson believes that everyone has the capacity to be creative, and that creativity is something that can be nurtured and learned. Again, this is a claim that is now widely accepted among scholars and researchers. Robinson

has also gained notoriety for his withering attacks on school systems across the industrialized world and the often regimented, unimaginative, test-driven academic practices that drive so many of them. He has likened the current state of affairs in many educational systems throughout the world (including our own) to an “educational death valley” (“How”). Robinson has famously suggested, for example, that creativity has been “educated out” of most of us: “The dominant forms of education actively stifle the conditions that are essential to creative development” (*Out* 49). The problem, he suggests, is that “current approaches to education and training are hobbled by assumptions about intelligence and creativity that have squandered the talents and stifled the creative confidence of untold numbers of people” (8). The result, alas, is that “most children think they’re highly creative; most adults think they’re not” (1). According to Robinson, modern educators face a twofold challenge: “Our schools have a doubly hard task not just improving reading, writing, and arithmetic, but entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity” (11). The foundational premise that informs all of Robinson’s work is that “we are all born with immense natural talents but that too few people discover what they are and even fewer develop them properly” (7). Robinson has made a sustained and persuasive case for the value of creativity in all human endeavors. Like many other current thinkers, he links creativity to our finest achievements and accomplishments through the ages, and he positions creativity as essential for engaging the many complex economic, social, political, environmental, ethical, and medical challenges we face in the world today.

There is a great deal of scholarly work that supports Robinson’s claims. Space does not allow us to engage this material as fully as we might wish, but even a brief survey of major scholars who are driving this work will give us a good sense of how this conversation is developing. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for example, in his highly regarded book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, has suggested that creativity is *at the heart of what it means to be human*:

To achieve the kind of world we consider human, some people had to dare to break the thrall of tradition. Next, they had to find ways of recording those new ideas or procedures that improved on what went before. Finally, they had to find ways of transmitting the new knowledge to the generations to come. Those who were involved in this process we call creative. What we call culture, or those parts of our selves that we internalized from the social environment, is their creation.

There is no question that the human species could not survive, either now or in the years to come, if creativity were to run dry. . . . Whether we like it or not, our species has become dependent on creativity. (317–18)

Csikszentmihalyi calls creativity “the domain of the future” (291–316) because in many important ways, creative thinkers help drive innovation and change.

Robert J. Sternberg, one of our most highly respected experts on intelligence, positions creativity at the very center of his current thinking about human intelligence. As the title of one of his recent books suggests—*Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*—Sternberg seeks to integrate traditional ideas about intelligence (often associated with analytical ability only) with other forms of cognition, especially creativity. For Sternberg, creativity requires the integration of three distinct cognitive abilities--synthetic ability (generating ideas), analytical ability (evaluating ideas/critical thinking), and practical ability (translating ideas into practice and products) (Sternberg *Wisdom*; Sternberg and Lubart). Working in conjunction with the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Sternberg has developed a model for liberal education that would situate creativity squarely at the center of our national collegiate curriculum (“Wisdom”). As Sternberg suggests about this initiative, creativity must be considered one of the key competencies needed for success in the classroom and in the workplace. Please excuse the length of this quotation, but I believe what Sternberg says here is important enough to quote in full:

The skills people need to succeed in their careers do not always closely resemble the skills needed to succeed in college courses, especially introductory courses. Life rarely presents multiple-choice or short-answer problems. As the report *How Should Colleges Assess and Improve Student Learning?* (AAC&U 2008) makes clear, this is not merely my own personal opinion: employers overwhelmingly reject multiple-choice tests and other traditional instruments of assessment. Moreover, the competencies such tests measure are not the ones employers value. What, then, are the skills they value? *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U 2007) identifies a number of such skills, including inquiry and analysis, ethical reasoning and action, and synthesis. In this article, I try to boil down the rather long list of highly valued competencies into a set of key skills needed for school and job success. I argue that these are the principal skills that colleges need to develop in order to produce the active, educated citizenry of the future.

The WICS model

The overall model for liberal education is called WICS, which is an acronym for Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized. The basic idea is that citizens of the world need creativity to form a vision of where they want to go and to cope with change in the environment, analytical intelligence to ascertain whether their creative ideas are good ones, practical intelligence to implement their ideas and to persuade others of the value of those ideas, and wisdom in order to ensure that the ideas will help achieve some ethically based common good, over the long and

short terms, rather than just what is good for them and their families and friends. (Sternberg “Wisdom”)

As we can see, Sternberg has positioned creativity as the very heart of his thinking about curricular reform. (It should be noted here that Howard Gardner’s landmark work on multiple intelligences has helped shape this conversation as well [see *Frames*; *Multiple*].)

Implied in Sternberg’s model, of course, is a critique of the standardized testing regime that has become an often regressive and punishing presence in America’s school systems today. To borrow a phrase from Pope Francis, education in the United States has become defenseless before the interests of “a deified market model” (Carroll 88). A focus on creativity may help us loosen this stranglehold. We now have over ten years of experience and data from this national experiment in accountability and mass testing, and an imposing variety of scholars have suggested that we must move beyond this punitive, mechanical model of teaching and learning (Koretz; Perlstein; Ravitch; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder; Sacks; Zhao). For example, Pasi Sahlberg, in his book *Finnish Lessons* about the highly regarded Finnish educational system, notes that this “accountability” model has been popular internationally for many years. It is characterized by “top-heavy planning, rigid curriculum, fixed measures through audits, external snapshot-inspection and externally judged accountability” (104). The problem with such an approach, he suggests, is that it “often limits the role of national policy development and enhancement of an education’s system own capability to maintain renewal. Perhaps more important, it paralyzes teachers’ and schools’ attempts to learn from the past and to learn from each other” (101). Indeed, as Peter Sacks has suggested, our embrace of this accountability model and the standardized testing that drives it has been very good at producing what he calls “standardized minds.” Many recent books make a similar point, including Diane Ravitch’s acclaimed volume *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. In *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind*, an important book about critical thinking and habits of mind that positions itself in many ways in opposition to the system of standardized testing and traditional outcomes assessment as they are currently practiced in schools, Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick note:

Educational outcomes in traditional settings focus on how many answers a student knows. When we teach the Habits of Mind, we are interested also in how students behave when they *don’t know* an answer. . . . We are interested in enhancing the ways students *produce* knowledge rather than how they merely *reproduce* it. (“Describing” 16)

In fact, the editors of this important book, which seeks to redefine the purpose of public education, position *creativity* at the top of their list of key habits of mind for students. In order to thrive in the twenty-first century, students will “need to be prepared with the following skills”:

- Creativity and innovation
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Communication and collaboration
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Initiative and self-direction
- Social and cross-cultural skills
- Productivity and accountability
- Leadership and responsibility (Costa and Kallick, Preface xxiii)

Creativity is positioned here as an essential twenty-first-century cognitive aptitude. Significantly, the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” produced collaboratively by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project also positions creativity as a central and essential college-level skill, as we will see.

It is important to note that scholarly thinking about the nature of creativity has evolved in some surprising ways in recent years. Creativity is no longer considered a capacity that only a few “creative” or “gifted” people mysteriously and magically possess. It is now theorized as a common and shared human intellectual capacity. As Sternberg and Lubart note in *Defying the Crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity*, “People often speak of creativity as though it were a prized possession of only a few. . . . We reject this point of view. We believe that creativity, like intelligence, is something that everyone possesses” (vii). Most scholars now accept this formulation.

“Creativity Should Be as Important as Literacy and Treated with the Same Status”

Internationally, creativity has begun to move its way to the very center of discussions of curriculum design and educational reform. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example, which provides a measurement of student ability and achievement across international borders—and has received a great deal of media attention recently—has put creativity at the

center of what it values and assesses. As Amanda Ripley notes in *The Smartest Kids in the World*, her important book about this test and the students who take it around the world,

Other international tests had come before PISA, each with their own forgettable acronym, but they tended to assess what kids had memorized, or what their teachers had drilled into their heads in the classroom. Those tests usually quantified students' preparedness for more schooling not their preparedness for life. None measures teenagers' ability to think critically and solve new problems in math, reading, and science. The promise of PISA was that it would reveal which countries were teaching kids to think for themselves. (15)

This test was not designed like the standardized tests which so many of us are familiar with in the United States, and which typically focus on memorization, multiple choice, short answer questions, and stored or remembered knowledge. This is a very different kind of exam, as Andreas Schleicher, the scholar at the center of this project, made tellingly clear at a press conference in 2001, as PISA was preparing to roll out the first iteration of this test internationally: "We were not looking for answers to equations or to multiple choice questions," he said. "We were looking for the ability to think creatively" (Ripley 15). This is an important and triumphant moment in our long battle against reductive, simplistic, high-stakes standardized testing. Creativity has been put at the very center of what has become the most highly regarded international test of student achievement. Creativity has now become central to our understanding and measurement of academic ability worldwide.

As we know, Finland has received a great deal of attention from educational reformers because it has consistently scored at the top of international tests of student achievement. Significantly, a pedagogical and curricular focus on creativity has been at the center of this achievement. In fact, Sahlberg suggests that "engagement and creativity" will be continue to be key "pointers of success" if the Finnish educational model is to continue to achieve excellence:

[S]tudents' ability to create something valuable and new in school will be more important than ever—not just for some students, but for most of them. If creativity is defined as coming up with original ideas that have value, then creativity should be as important as literacy and treated with the same status. Finnish schools have traditionally encouraged risk taking, creativity, and innovation. These traditions need to be strengthened. When performance of students or success of schools is measured, the creative aspect of both individual learning and collective behavior should be given high value. (143)

There are two key parts of this formulation that are important for writing teachers to consider: First, the suggestion that teachers need to encourage risk taking, creativity, and innovation in all disciplines and across the curriculum, not just in art and creative writing classes. Secondly, and perhaps most tellingly for teachers of writing, the claim that creativity should be considered “as important as literacy and treated with the same status.”

It’s also important to note that recent work in neuroscience has shown that what students do or don’t do in the classroom helps shape the physical structure of their brains, building or strengthening neural pathways in response to frequent activities, atrophying or severing pathways in response to inactivity and non-use. As Jane Healy famously observed in her book *Endangered Minds*,

Changing brains? Could it be possible? As I went from school classrooms to professional meetings where neuroscientists were excitedly starting to discuss new research on the subtle power of environments to shape growing brains, I began to realize that it is indeed possible.

“Of course, experience—even different kinds of learning—changes children’s brains,” I was told again and again. If children’s experiences change significantly, so will their brains. Part of the brain’s physical structure comes from the way it is used. (15)

Work from a variety of researchers and scholars has confirmed this important claim (Doidge; Kandel et al.; Ramachandran). The discovery of the brain’s “neuroplasticity” has great implications for teachers of writing. Scientists have even discovered, as Norman Doidge notes, that “thinking, learning, and acting can turn our genes on or off, thus shaping our brain anatomy and our behavior—surely one of the most extraordinary discoveries of the twentieth century” (xix). Closer to home, John C. Bean, in his book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, reviews recent work on brain science and concludes that “the value of writing in different genres seems to be supported by brain research” (63–65). According to Kellogg, Zull, and Kolb, it appears that writing in different genres engages different parts of the brain (Bean 63).

Psychologists studying “character” have also embraced creativity. Creativity is featured prominently, for example, in Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman’s book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, a volume that attempts to “reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed social discourse” (3). The first character strength they discuss, in fact, is creativity (109–23), a trait they define as a “constructive human capacity” (110).

So a great deal is at stake here as we think about the kind of reading, writing, and thinking that we want our students to be doing in our writing classes. This work will help determine, of course, the kinds of people our students become and the way they think about the world and engage its problems and challenges.

Creativity and Economic Development

A number of important business writers—along with many leaders in the business community—all note that creativity has become a prized and valuable commodity in the fiercely competitive global marketplace. In *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, for example, Daniel Pink suggests that the future will no longer belong to “knowledge workers” like programmers, lawyers, and MBAs, but to creative and conceptual thinkers. Richard Florida makes much the same claim in his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. As Ken Robinson notes in a recent interview in *Educational Leadership*:

I work a lot with Fortune 500 companies, and they’re always saying, “We need people who can be innovative, who can think differently.” If you look at the mortality rate among companies, it’s massive. America is now facing the biggest challenge it’s ever faced—to maintain its position in the world economies. All these things demand high levels of innovation, creativity, and ingenuity. At the moment, instead of promoting creativity, I think we’re systematically educating it out of our kids. (Azzam 22)

Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum call for a greater focus on teaching creativity in schools in their book about America’s imperiled position in the new global economy, *That Used to Be Us*. Friedman and Mandelbaum view the nurturing of creativity as an essential investment in our economic growth and national security (138; see also 133–52; Association). A focus on creativity would provide our discipline with an important opportunity to embrace common cause with our colleagues in the business community.

Creativity and Composition

Fortunately, our profession appears to be in the first stages of responding to these important discoveries and developments. For example, *creativity* is featured prominently in the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” document—certainly a groundbreaking moment for our discipline. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen creativity mentioned in relation to writing and college readiness like this before. The framers of this document highlight eight “habits of mind”

essential for college writers, and these habits of mind are theorized as “ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines” (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP). Creativity is at the heart of these:

- Curiosity—the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness—the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement—a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- Creativity—the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- Persistence—the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
- Responsibility—the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- Flexibility—the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- Metacognition—the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

It is important to note here that creativity manifests itself in a variety of ways on this list. *Curiosity*, *openness*, *flexibility*, and *metacognition* can all be grouped together within a suite of dispositional characteristics that feed and nurture creativity. These are all vitally important elements of the intellectual work we should be privileging in the composition classroom.

Unfortunately, however, discussions of writing proficiency, college readiness, and teaching writing still often end up focusing only on a narrow range of analytical thinking skills, typically defined as *critical thinking*. As McLaughlin and Moore suggest, *critical thinking* is perhaps best understood as a shorthand term for a very rich and complex cognitive process (146–47). As I hope readers will see, we have much to gain from expanding this important concept to include creativity as well. I would like to see us replace the phrase *critical thinking* in our scholarship and literature with *creative and critical thinking* (Sullivan, “Essential” 548–49). All good thinking, after all, is creative in some way.

Situating my proposal within our ongoing scholarly conversation is rather easily done because there has been little discussion of creativity and traditional

writing classes. There are isolated essays here and there that address this subject (Cain; Graff; Harris; Freisinger), but for the most part, creativity and composition have kept their distance (Lunsford and Lunsford 793). We have a rather substantial body of scholarship devoted to creative writing, creative writing programs, and creative writing studies, of course, including two special issues of *College English* devoted to this subject (the most recent being Ritter and Vanderslice in 2009). Most of our discussions of creativity and creative writing, however, have focused not on theorizing creativity as one part of a student's cognitive, rhetorical, and literacy repertoire, but as a separate and often privileged place within the academy where art is produced. Gerald Graff summarizes this situation well in his essay, "What We Say When We *Don't* Talk about Creative Writing":

I've been teaching for more than forty years and have never heard of an English department meeting to discuss the philosophical relationship between its creative writing program and the "regular" literature program. Are writing stories and poems and writing critical and expository essays about stories and poems fundamentally different, antithetical, or convergent activities? And what in turn is the relationship between the writing that students do in creative writing courses or in conventional literature courses to the writing that they do in composition courses? (271)

These are intriguing and valuable questions—and certainly very timely now, given the new focus on creativity across a broad range of disciplines and stakeholders. I have to admit, I've been teaching for many years (although not as many as Professor Graff), and I have never participated in the kind of discussion he is recommending here. This essay is an attempt to help promote just such conversations.

Douglas Hesse has engaged these questions thoughtfully, and he provides some compelling answers to Graff's questions, suggesting that our discipline has much to gain from welcoming creativity into the composition classroom. Hesse makes a very useful distinction between *composition* (which he suggests has a negative "service" stigma attached to it for teachers and students alike) and *writing* (which is often regarded as a much more capacious and affirmative category and can be seen as practiced by many different kinds of people for many different kinds of reasons). His personal experience as an undergraduate and graduate student suggested to him what might be gained by studying creativity and composition together, as if they might belong quite naturally with each other:

[M]y investment in writing came largely through an education at the University of Iowa, where, as an undergraduate, I took what struck me as a seamless array of courses in “creative” and “expository” writing in which both fiction and nonfiction genres served to make points or furnish practice. Even in my master’s courses, at that peculiar place and time, the focus was on what writers did—or might do—and how teachers might encourage them. It wasn’t until my first teaching position, in 1980 at what was then Findlay College, that I encountered thesis and support. (34)

Ultimately, Hesse is interested in establishing a richer, more varied sense of *writing* for students in writing classes and for compositionists, a goal I share as well. Hesse is also interested in challenging the “extraordinarily narrow view of writing encapsulated in the [Common Core] standards” (44). He makes a compelling case in his essay for a broader conception of composition and writing:

I interject this long narrative to underscore how creative writing and composition studies are both simultaneously understood by outsiders well beyond our respective realms, including policymakers on campuses or in federal agencies who make decisions that affect not only the teaching but also the perception of writing. It’s completely plausible for them to cast creative writing as a decorative opportunity, with no practical import, serving a few genius students, and composition studies as a training regimen for school and vocational skills. Both fields are better served by a richer view of writing that articulates the values of a creative, productive art, “practical” in much wider terms than would be imagined. I’m not saying we instill this view through strength-in-numbers lobbying. Rather, I think it comes more gradually and incrementally, through the ways we render writing to each other, to our students, and to our colleagues, as a life activity with many interconnected manifestations. (44–45)

This is eloquently stated, and this formulation gives our profession additional justification for beginning to embrace creativity in the composition classroom. We can also follow Mary Ann Cain, who edited a recent symposium in *CCC* on composing and creative writing. Her contributors also support opening up our curriculum to creativity:

One of composition’s most powerful assumptions as a field is that all students deserve an equal chance to learn to write. Yet the boundaries that define what kinds of writing will be taught in composition classes are typically less inclusive, particularly when we consider the boundaries between composition and creative writing. In the following symposium, the authors argue that composition’s spirit of inclusiveness should inform not only who is to be taught but also what, namely the diverse forms and genres of writing, including those of creative writing. (70)

There is much to admire about this formulation. As Ken Robinson notes, “Cultivating the full range of students’ talents calls for a broader curriculum and a flexible range of teaching styles” (*Out* 250).

We can see that for a wide variety of thinkers, scholars, teachers, researchers, and stakeholders, creativity has become an important and valued intellectual capacity, habit of mind, and character strength.

A Way of Constructing Knowledge and Meaning

I would like to see us establish for creativity an even more ambitious and foundational role in our discipline and our teaching practice. If we theorize creativity as a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition, it must also, then, by definition, be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of any curriculum in a writing classroom. This understanding of creativity in scholarly and research communities is relatively new, and a useful and perhaps paradigmatic instance of this newly embraced cognitive model is reflected in the revision of Bloom’s taxonomy in 2001. This revised taxonomy now positions creativity at the top of its hierarchy of cognitive processes (Anderson and Krathwohl 66–92). As most readers know, the original taxonomy, completed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom and his team of educational psychologists, began with *knowledge* (the ability to recall data or information), then moved through *comprehension*, *application*, and *analysis*, and culminated in *synthesis* and *evaluation* (the ability to make judgments about the value of ideas or materials). The revised model developed by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl and their team makes some significant modifications to this sequence. The revised taxonomy begins with *remembering* and *understanding*, moves through *applying*, *analyzing*, and *evaluating*, but then culminates in *creating*. *Creating* is defined as “putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or to make an original product” (Anderson and Krathwohl 30). Anderson and Krathwohl also specifically mention writing in their discussion of creativity:

We recognize that composition (including writing) often, but not always, requires the cognitive processes associated with *Create*. For example, *Create* is not involved in writing that represents the remembering of ideas or the interpretation of materials. We also recognize that deep understanding that goes beyond basic understanding can require the cognitive processes associated with *Create*. To the

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extent that deep understanding is an act of construction or insight, the cognitive processes of *Create* are involved. (85)

This focus on “deep understanding” is central to our work in the writing classroom, and its connection here to creativity links this luminous human capacity to our students’ cognitive development (Baxter Magolda; Kegan; King and Kitchener; Perry; Sullivan *New*).

Anderson and her team suggest creativity is among the “more complex cognitive processes in learning” (Anderson and Krathwohl 235). Nurturing these processes, they suggest, is likely to help aid in transfer of learning—a key concern at the moment in our profession: “because of the wide applicability of these more complex cognitive processes [analyze, evaluate, and create], they hold the keys to transfer of learning and problem solving . . . students are increasingly likely to make connections between and among elements of knowledge when activities are used that involved more complex processes such as *Analyze*, *Evaluate*, and *Create*” (235). Anderson and her team also note that these more complex cognitive processes are linked in powerful ways to metacognition—a key learning outcome noted in many recent reports and documents, including the CWPA, NCTE, and NWP’s “Framework” statement. Anderson and Krathwohl note, for example, that “*Metacognitive knowledge* is more strategic than the other types of knowledge. At the heart of *Metacognitive knowledge* lie analytic strategies, evaluative strategies, and creative strategies” (235). This combination of strategies might serve as a worthy shorthand description of the cognitive pedagogical core of any composition course, grades 6–13.

Rhetorical Dexterity

Part of what we are discussing here can also be theorized simply in terms of twenty-first-century literacy, rhetorical knowledge, and the public function and situatedness of writing. Here we would be championing *rhetorical dexterity*, to borrow a phrase from Shannon Carter. In fact, this kind of *rhetorical adaptability* may be especially crucial for writers with only an emerging understanding of academic writing, precisely the kinds of students we often encounter in first-year composition (FYC) classes (Hassel and Giordano). As Elizabeth Wardle notes in a recent review essay about multimodal composition,

If our field’s task, and the task of composition courses, are understood as broadening our sense of writing, seeing writing as flexible and not static, and recognizing the many ways that writing is already multimodal, then connections between traditional “print” compositions and “multimodal composing” are clear. In this view,

we are not innovating or using technology or employing innovative genres simply for the sake of doing so, but instead we are acknowledging the already-existing complexities of writing in the twenty-first century and encouraging our students to gain the rhetorical dexterity championed by Shannon Carter. (“Considering” 662)

Like Peter Elbow, Carter has an interest in “vernacular literacies” (14). Her primary focus, however, is rhetorical. Her pedagogical approach seeks to develop in students “the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice” (15); the new world of digital literacies. As Jody Shipka suggests, we need to “begin creating opportunities for students to attend to the highly distributed and fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice, to treat . . . communicative practice—whether the end result is a digital text, a print-based essay, an object-as-argument, or a performance—as multimodal accomplishment” (76; see also Alexander and Rhodes).

If part of our goal here is to move the public understanding of composition—and the assessment of writing—away from the kind of reductionism promoted by the Common Core standards and the powerful, entrenched interests of the testing consortia, we must actively begin theorizing and promoting a more deeply rhetorical, cognitive, and creative understanding of writing. A key question for our profession, then, is this: How might we design assignments and develop pedagogical practices that integrate these various domains?

One way to do this is to desegregate creative writing in our curriculum and to actively expand our definition of academic writing. There is already a considerable body of scholarship suggesting that we develop a more capacious and inclusive model of academic writing (Heard; Nicotra; Petraglia; Rankins-Robertson et al.; Summerfield and Anderson; Wardle “Mutt”; Yancey). Following Rankins-Robertson et al., we can theorize the first-year composition classroom as a site that offers “a starting place for helping students to develop a more robust understanding of academic discourse and academic literacies” (58). Part of what we are trying to accomplish here with a focus on creativity is precisely this liberated, vital, and “more robust” understanding of academic discourse and academic literacies for students in our composition classes. Such an approach will require, following Matthew Heard’s important work on

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curriculum design, that we begin working from “a more complex relationship between the tensions that sustain intellectual inquiry and the contingencies of practice that concern teachers and designers” (317). Here we would also be resisting—and actively subverting—“the current ‘P-16’ political movement” that “seems to be focused on limiting the literacies of American citizens in the name of ‘accountability’” (Summerfield and Anderson 546).

Classroom Applications

So how might we design assignments and develop pedagogical practices that integrate these various domains? There are many ways that we might do this—adding creative elements or options to existing assignments or sequences; beginning or ending units with exploratory or summative creative activities; assigning readings that provide students with a scholarly perspective on this subject; adding creative activities over the course of a semester; designing special units focused on creativity; and, of course, providing students with the opportunity to write poems, plays, songs, raps, shorts stories, memoirs, profiles, interviews, and slam poems. Here we would be following the advice of Alfredo Lujan, who recommends that students “write and write often in multigenres: stories, personal essays, critical essays, parodies, poems, freewrites, letters to teachers, journals, jingles, reader responses, lists” (56). There are probably a million different ways that we might accomplish this important task. For the remainder of this essay, I would like to share with you a unit on creativity that I have developed and taught now for a number of years in my FYC class. This unit is designed to provide structural and theoretical support for treating creativity as a serious academic subject and for welcoming creative expression in the writing classroom.

Knowledge Domains

I theorize the FYC class that I teach not just as a writing course but also as a class with additional, larger ambitions and goals. I seek to introduce students to the idea of an intellectual community and to Bruffee’s ideas about collaboration and the “conversation of mankind.” I focus my curriculum on what Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins call *essential questions*—that is, questions that are “open-ended,” “thought-provoking,” and “intellectually engaging,” that call for “higher order thinking,” point toward “important, transferable ideas,” raise “additional questions,” require “support and justification,” and “recur over time” (the question can and should be revisited) (3; Stewart). I also seek to provide students with an authentic experience of the joys, challenges, and rewards

of college-level reading, writing, and thinking. Providing students with real intellectual content is a vitally important aspect of my approach to this class, and a focus on “knowledge domains” allows me to offer students a variety of important intellectual challenges and experiences, a deeper appreciation of the history of liberal arts education, and at least a preliminary examination of the theory that informs this approach to education. We take as our primary text excerpts from Paul Hirst’s foundational essay, “Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge.” I frame the semester using these excerpts, and we spend our time together during the semester testing Hirst’s hypothesis by exploring three knowledge domains in detail—history, the fine arts (where our focus is on creativity), and the human and social sciences. In this essay, Hirst famously identifies what he calls essential “knowledge domains.” Each of these knowledge domains, he suggests, offers us a unique and valuable way of looking at the world and creating knowledge. He identifies the following seven domains:

- Mathematics
- Physical sciences
- Human sciences
- History
- Religion
- Literature and the fine arts
- Philosophy (104)

Each of these “forms of knowledge,” he goes on to say, is “distinguished by their dependence on some particular kind of test against experience for their distinctive expressions. . . . The sciences depend crucially on empirical experiment and observational tests, mathematics depends on deductive demonstrations from certain sets of axioms” (103). Most essentially, these forms of knowledge “involve our coming to look at experience in particular ways” (103). Studying these forms of knowledge helps us “become aware of experience as structured, organized, and made meaningful in some quite specific way, and the varieties of human knowledge constitute the highly developed forms in which man has found this possible” (98).

Disciplines such as history, art, and the human sciences offer us very different, unique, and valuable ways of looking at the world. Because we examine three knowledge domains in detail, the course is designed to provide students with opportunities for metacognitive thinking, nurturing a key habit of mind—“the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge” (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP).

As Jerome Bruner has noted, “Thinking about thinking’ has to be a principal ingredient of any empowering practice of education” (19).

Assignment Design

My unit devoted to the fine arts and creativity is one of three major writing units we complete over the course of the semester. The first unit is devoted to history as a knowledge domain, built around two essays by Sam Wineburg from *Historical Thinking* (“Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts” and “The Psychology of Teaching and Learning History”) and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The third unit is devoted to the human sciences and is built around the first chapter of Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (“The Science of Custom”) and selected chapters from Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas’s *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (introduction, chapters 1, 2, and 6, and conclusion). These are traditional assignments with important readings and plenty of challenging material and abstract content for students to consider and discuss.

Sandwiched between these very traditional academic activities is our unit on creativity, which explores the fine arts as a knowledge domain. I must acknowledge here that creativity is an integral component in any kind of sophisticated thinking regardless of discipline, and the fine arts do not have an exclusive monopoly on creativity. In fact, most great art is certainly also a function of technique, discipline, and analytic strategies, evaluative strategies, and creative strategies, among other things (just as strong writing typically is). Nonetheless, the fine arts as a knowledge domain provide a fascinating and vital pathway for students to examine creativity. Space does not allow me to provide full detail here about our progression of assignments, but we begin by discussing a variety of quotations about creativity (among them, “Imagination is more important than knowledge,” by Albert Einstein; “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea,” by Antoine De Saint Exupery). I also have students begin reading chapters from Ken Robinson’s book *Out of Our Minds*, which we discuss in detail toward the end of this unit.

We then move on to write poems and short stories. I also assign a creative activity that requires students to move beyond language to create their own work of art. For this assignment, students can choose to create a sculpture, a painting, a drawing, a photograph, a collage, or a song. My goal here is to give them a lived and authentic fine arts experience. Space precludes me from sharing samples of this work here, but let me assure you that it has been quite

wonderful. I do want to provide one example from among many I might share, created by my student, Robert. This is a photograph of his young son at a local farm where his family went to pick pumpkins just before Halloween (see Figure 1).

Robert had some thoughtful things to say about this assignment that illustrate the kind of metacognitive thinking I am seeking to promote. Robert was delighted with the picture he created—and he was moved by the experience of working creatively and having the chance to live in the world like an artist:

The ability to convey emotion in your work is what pulls in your audience and makes them understand what you are trying to tell them. These connections that can be formed through the expression of emotion are so powerful that often words are not even necessary. There is a certain human element in art that I think gets lost in the search for reason.

Robert appears to be suggesting here, following Hirst (and others), that creativity, and the fine arts in particular, provide a unique and important way of looking at the world and producing knowledge. Studying this form of knowledge appears to have helped him “become aware of experience as structured, organized, and made meaningful in some quite specific ways” (Hirst 98). Such work in our classrooms can help students begin to appreciate how knowledge domains operate as “forms of knowledge” that are “distinguished by their dependence on some particular kind of test against experience for their distinctive expressions” (103).

Once this assignment is complete, we then move on to discuss Ken Robinson’s book.



Figure 1. Robert’s picture of his son at a local apple orchard, pumpkin patch, and Halloween maze of hay bales in Connecticut.

The UnEssay

This unit culminates with the “UnEssay” assignment, which asks students to reflect on and summarize what they’ve learned about the fine arts and creativity. The only caveat for this assignment is that they can’t write a traditional academic essay:

The UnEssay! I would like you to think about all that we’ve done in this unit and then construct an “UnEssay” that pulls together your thinking about the fine arts and creativity! But it can’t be a traditional essay. It can’t be a five-paragraph theme. It has to be something else and it can be whatever you want it to be. Invent a new form! Write the kind of “paper” or essay you’ve always wanted to write in an English class. Feel free to include pictures, photos, links, and multimedia if you wish. Most importantly: Have some fun with this!

Some questions I’d like to see you consider addressing in your unessay:

1. How do fine artists look at the world? How is this different than the way, say, that scientists or mathematicians or psychologists or historians look at the world?
2. What are writers and artists most interested in?
3. What is valued in this discipline? What counts as knowledge in this discipline?
4. A very pragmatic question: Should students be required to study art and literature? What might the study of art and literature be good for? And what about the claim that this knowledge domain gives us something that no other discipline or knowledge area can? Is this true?
5. Did you learn anything that was of personal value to you from this unit and this group of readings?
6. What is creativity?

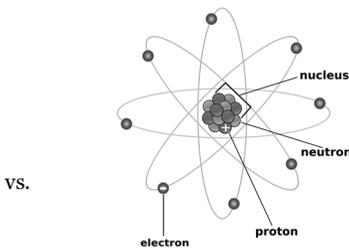
Space is limited, of course, but I would like to share at least a few interesting moments from these UnEssays, so that readers can get a sense of how students respond to this assignment and to show what a modest investment in creativity might yield in our classrooms. Some of the UnEssays I have received for this assignment have used multimodal compositional strategies in very effective ways. For example, one of my students, Yanira, created an UnEssay website for this assignment (see Figure 2). On the website’s homepage she used image, line, color, and composition to communicate her ideas about the vitality of creativity and the power of the creative process.

This assignment also encourages students to reflect on important meta-cognitive questions, and many students have responded to this invitation in productive ways. Lindsay, for example, in an excerpt from her UnEssay (see Figure 3), asks a fundamental question about creativity and knowledge domains.



Figure 2. Yanira's UnEssay homepage, "Creativity Un-leashed: Imagination without Boundaries."

What is creativity?



Which one is creative?

Looking at the two pictures above you may think they have nothing in common, but now I see that they do. They both are showing creativity. We all have always thought of the picture on the left as being creative, but we may not have seen the one on the right as creative. At one point in time atoms weren't something we knew about it, it took someone to question life and our existence, to think about something that was not known about. Imagining something that does not exist. This is also part of being creative.

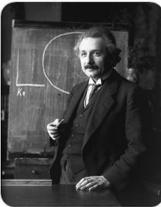
Figure 3. An excerpt from Lindsay's UnEssay on creativity.

Another student, Christine, created a PowerPoint presentation that skillfully examined disciplinarity, received wisdom about critical and creative thinking, and her new thinking about these subjects. Figure 4 is one of the slides from her PowerPoint presentation.

I think what we see here are students engaged in authentic and worthwhile intellectual activity. Students complete a great deal of traditional academic and intellectual work in this class, but creative assignments like this also help normalize a multimodal approach to composing—acknowledging, following Kathleen Blake Yancey, what our students already “know as writing” (298; Yancey asks, “How is it that what we teach and what we test can be so different from what our students know as writing?”). This provides us with an opportunity to introduce students to “composition in a new key.” According to Yancey, “Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition” (298). Embracing creativity in our classrooms is one way we can encourage this kind of twenty-first-century literacy.

Scientists/Psychologists

Scientists=explanation



Albert Einstein lecturing in Vienna in 1921
Photo: Ferdinand Schmalzer

“Scientists are pictured as methodical, clinical and objective”
(Robinson, pg. 185)

Artist or not?

RULES OF A SCIENTIST'S LIFE

1. SEE FAILURE AS A BEGINNING, NOT AN END.
2. NEVER STOP LEARNING.
3. ASSUME NOTHING, QUESTION EVERYTHING.
4. TEACH OTHERS WHAT YOU KNOW.
5. ANALYZE OBJECTIVELY.
6. PRACTICE HUMILITY.
7. RESPECT CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM.
8. GIVE CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE.
9. TAKE INITIATIVE.
10. ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS EARLY.
11. LOVE WHAT YOU DO, OR LEAVE.

“Scientists do not always move along a logical path. They may sense a solution or discovery intuitively before an experiment has been done.”
(Robinson, pg 190)



Carl Jung
Liam Isahay/Nancy Palmer Agency

$E=mc^2$

Figure 4. A slide from Christine's PowerPoint UnEssay.

Conclusion

Understanding something in one way does not preclude understanding it in other ways.

—Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*

As Kristine Johnson has suggested in a recent *CCC* essay, the crucial question we need to ask ourselves as teachers of writing is a simple one—but one that involves a careful consideration of student agency as well as the ethical aims and moral purpose of our work. As writing teachers, we must ask ourselves “*who* writers should become and *why* they should become that way” (527). Creativity can play a central role in our answers to these important questions. Perhaps most basically and pragmatically, we want student writers to be strong critical and creative thinkers. We can join in common purpose with Hyde, Kaufman and Sternberg, Robinson, Csikszentmihalyi, Sahlberg, Gardener, Sacks, Ravitch, Costa and Kallick, the WPA, NCTE, the NWP, Peterson and Seligman, Friedman and Mandelbaum, Graff, Hesse, Cain, Carter, Lujan, and our colleagues in the business community by embracing creativity as an integral part of cognition and a legitimate learning goal and outcome.

Embracing creativity also helps us demonstrate to students the rich variety of ways people communicate with one another. One primary rationale for embracing creativity in the writing classroom can be theorized as a way to acknowledge and honor “the human desire to speak in a variety of ways,” to borrow a memorable phrase from an anonymous essay about creative writing originally published in the 1950s in *CCC* (“Creative” 137). This is an issue of significant concern to teachers of writing at the moment because, as Johnson has noted, “the Common Core standards largely restrict writing to two modes, imposing a narrow definition of writing and writing instruction on American teachers and students” (520). In some ways, what we are talking about here is the difference, theoretically, following David Russell, between seeing writing as “a single elementary skill” versus “writing as a complex rhetorical activity, embedded in the differentiated practices of academic discourse communities” (9). Including creative assignments in our classes can help students resist this reductive view of writing and help them begin to develop a more comprehensive and integrative understanding of writing as a situated, context- and discipline-driven activity (Beaufort).

I share this case study as only one example of how we might accomplish this important work. There are no doubt many others. I humbly and respectfully encourage our profession to embrace creativity as an essential aspect of

cognition and to begin helping students discover and nurture this luminous human capacity.

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