Creativity in composition

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A call for creativity in composition pedagogy

Creativity is not usually an explicit focus of writing pedagogy, other than sometimes for teaching writing to children. Beyond primary school, composition pedagogy typically places a heavy emphasis on structure and language – much heavier an emphasis than is placed on creativity, which is sometimes ignored entirely. In the United States, this is largely the result of the dominance of the field of rhetoric and composition, the home discipline for teachers of writing, in setting the agenda for required university first-year writing (FYW) courses, which inevitably have ‘trickle-down’ effects on the teaching of writing at secondary level. This field has generally been bereft of any focus on creativity or style seen as involving an original voice rather than mere variations in register – a view of style as an aspect of convention (Hesse, 2010: 40). A telling indicator of the lack of focus on creativity in FYW is that the words ‘creativity’ or ‘creative’ do not appear in the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) (2005–10) Outcomes Statement for First-year Writing, nor in the list of the five most important characteristics of good writing in the disciplines identified in a survey of university faculty (Addisson & McGee, 2010: 166–7).

The writing across the curriculum (WAC) (Segal & Smart, 2006) and writing in the disciplines (WID) (Russell, 2002) orientations have evolved as complementary or supplementary orientations to FYW in US higher education, but with a greater recognition of the requirements and properties of writing in specific courses and disciplines. In other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Hong Kong, the teaching of writing is heavily influenced by systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Christie, 2012; Halliday, 1978, 1985), including – especially at (both undergraduate and postgraduate) university level – the English for specific purposes (ESP) orientation (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013), which evolved primarily within the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL).

These two parallel strands for teaching composition – the one dominant in the United States and the other dominant in much of the rest of the world – agree in centring instruction on genre (Hyon, 1996), based on the perceived need to raise learners’ awareness of the structure and language of different types of text as a basis for the students’ own writing. While genre is a logical focus for composition instruction, it needs to be taught in ways that do not overly constrain students’ options for their own writing. Coe (1994: 188) spoke of the ‘tyranny of genre’ to constrain individual creativity. Yet, like other models and categories, a genre is approximate and has fuzzy boundaries. It is, in fact, a living category subject to modification and change over time as a natural result of human processes of creativity.
In spite of the recognition among writing theorists of genre as providing flexible models that can be adapted and challenged (Lillis, 2013) for creative expression, one of the effects of the genre focus in composition pedagogy has been to tie teaching and learning to genre models with a lack of attention to the creative aspects of writing. Attention to creative aspects of writing might involve learning to say things in new and different ways, learning to inject one’s personal perspective, voice, and experience into writing, and learning to adapt or challenge genre conventions for the writer’s own purposes. An important goal for composition is to develop a pedagogy that balances the two goals of ensuring that students have awareness and control of (a) the structural patterns and language of different genres, and (b) the creative options for establishing an original voice and perspective that also connects to the voices and perspectives of others.

An additional reason for the minimal attention paid to creativity in composition pedagogy may be because creativity is often thought of as a high-level achievement of only a select group of talented individuals. Indeed, within creative writing, there is widespread scepticism as to whether creativity can be taught (see, for example, Menand, 2009). This way of thinking about creativity stems from a distinction that has often been made between ‘“big C” Creativity’, or artistic creativity, and ‘“little c” creativity’, or everyday creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010: 23–4; Merrotsy, 2013; Pennington, 2012). ‘“Little c” creativity’ is built into human nature and makes it possible for all of us to understand and deal with new situations, solve daily problems, and respond appropriately in word and deed in the virtually infinite variety of situations with which human beings are faced during a day or a lifetime. This kind of ordinary human creativity is ‘not only universal, but necessary to our very survival’ (Richards, 2010: 190). The fact that creativity is a general and universal human capacity suggests a foundation on which teaching can be built that moves away from an emphasis on ‘“big C” Creativity’ and considers creativity in a new light.

**Historical perspectives on composition pedagogy**

The lack of attention in composition pedagogy to creativity is largely a product of the history of how the study of language, and of English in particular, evolved. English composition has been a required subject for all students entering university in the United States since the late nineteenth century, when it was first implemented by Harvard University (Crowley, 1998: 1, 4). It was conceived as essentially a service course benefiting other disciplines and having no specific subject matter of its own (Johnson, 2005). The purpose of the required composition course was to ensure that students could express themselves clearly in written form using standard English and correct conventions to perform critical analysis and effective argumentation on paper. The values of the composition course centred on clarity, correctness, analytical and critical thinking, and logic, with creativity a limited consideration mainly connected to the requirement of creating a unique analysis and synthesis of ideas from sources.

English literature emerged as a subject around the same time, as an offshoot of the study of languages in philology (Crowley, 1998: 10). Often, teachers of English literature also taught composition, resulting in a curricular emphasis on reading and analysing literary works as a basis for writing. Courses in creative writing, which Myers (1996: 7) says were originally associated with the discipline of education, came later, in the middle of the twentieth century (Myers, 1996: 207). At first, these were often taught by composition instructors, but soon they were staffed mainly by creative writers, which led Myers (1996) to title his book on the
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The history of creative writing The Elephants Teach. This title stems from a remark attributed to the linguist Roman Jakobson, who is said to have responded, when Vladimir Nabokov was being considered for a chair in literature at Harvard: ‘What’s next? Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?’ This remark suggests the long-standing academic differentiation between creative and scholarly practice. The three areas of the English curriculum within universities – composition, literature, and creative writing – continued to diverge and develop as separate fields or academic disciplines (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993).

Like English literature, English composition has strong formalist roots, and from the 1940s to the 1960s, it developed a form-focused rhetorical orientation centred on textual features of writing (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993: 274–8). Composition has largely been taught as analysis of texts read outside of class, transmission of information about the characteristics of model texts and the rules for good writing, and the writing of papers outside of class, which would then be graded – sometimes with a general comment added. The method of learning to write was thus an indirect one in which the student was expected, through a process of induction (or osmosis), to be able to acquire the habits of effective writing. Creative writing went a very different way, developing a workshop approach centred on writing critique. According to Crowley (1998: 207), ‘workshops came into their own as a pedagogical tool during the middle of the twentieth century with the establishment of programs in creative writing’, the first of which – still considered the leader in the field – was established as the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. The Iowa workshop model, which is widespread in creative writing, is based on the idea of critically moulding people who already have shown writing talent. Like the textually focused method for teaching writing in composition classes, the kind of workshop model practised in creative writing teaches writing indirectly and does not serve as a model for teaching creativity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the process writing movement (for example Emig, 1971; Flower, 1979) challenged the adequacy of formalist approaches to rhetoric and influenced composition practice to centre on the writing process rather than on texts. Process models of writing incorporate both the mental and physical processes connected with planning, generating ideas, refining ideas, and drafting a composition through successive stages of development. Writing is then seen as an individual achievement resulting from a series of creative acts performed by each writer. In recognition of writing as creative behaviour, process approach methodology includes activities aimed at generating ideas – such as pre-writing discussion, brainstorming, and free-writing – as an important formative step in the writing process. Process methodology also encourages writing as a form of personal expression, thereby connecting it to creative writing (Myers, 1996: 4). According to Young (1987), the process movement inspired an increased focus on invention in rhetoric and composition that can be connected to an emphasis in the twenty-first century on non-literary aspects of creativity (see, for example, several of the chapters in Donnelly & Harper, 2013; for review, see Pennington, 2014). Process-oriented instruction is still widely applied in schools in the United States (McQuitty, 2014), especially in the collaborative writing workshop method, as practised in elementary and middle schools (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Laminack, 1991), and aspects of process methodology, especially peer review and submission of a non-final draft for formative feedback, now pervade most composition pedagogy.

The 1980s saw a turn to social constructionism (for example Bartholomae, 2005 [1985]; Bazerman, 1988; Brodkey, 1987; Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993: 285–301) in writing studies and functionalism in linguistics (Halliday, 1985), which impacted on views of writing and writing pedagogy. Social constructionism suggests that writing is a social act
through which writers construct meaning and their own identities in interaction with others. Looked at through a social constructionist lens, writing involves the creation and negotiation of meaning in interaction with an audience, which may be specific individuals or larger groups or discourse communities to which the writer wants to belong. It is therefore creative, and yet must adhere to norms of communication with others. From this perspective, a main goal for a writer is to learn the conventions of written language as used in a certain field, area of specialisation, or genre, and how linguistic forms realise its specific functions and purposes. This goal is essentially that of WID, WAC, or the ESP orientation to teaching English, which has a strong writing strand (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). The other main goal for a writer from a social constructionist perspective is to creatively challenge, violate, and recreate the discourse norms and the texts associated with a specific communicative context – whether it be a specific genre, academic discipline, field of employment, or other field of activity. In so doing, a writer learns to balance the linguistic constraints of a specific discourse community – the collective – against her or his entitlement and desire to express individual identity and create something original.

In recent decades, composition instruction has come to be focused on the specific forms of writing needed in different disciplines and for different purposes, an emphasis connected to WAC, WID, and ESP. These emphases challenge the value of an autonomous, general-purpose FYW course; and, increasingly since the 1970s, writing has been offered in the United States in upper division, specialised WAC writing courses (Russell, 2002) and in other countries in ESP writing courses tied to specific disciplines, such as writing for business or writing for engineering. Although these subject-focused writing courses fill a need for specialised genre-focused writing development, they have a potentially undesirable side-effect of giving the writing course a primarily utilitarian orientation that de-emphasises creativity.

Since the 1980s, the rise of SFL growing out of Halliday’s work has ensured a strong place for genre in the teaching of writing. Modern views of genre recognise its flexibility and mutability (for example Lillis, 2013), and the need to teach students to modify and rethink genres in terms of their own purposes (English, 2015). Since the 1990s, writing pedagogy has included more involved and expressive writing within considerations of both process and genre, as can be seen in the National Writing Project (http://www.nwp.org) and the writing workshop approach practised in elementary and middle schools in the United States, which incorporates attention to genre and language through model texts and may also include explicit strategy training (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). At the present time, most writing pedagogy represents a hybrid of process and genre pedagogy, with varying emphases of these two strands and varying emphases on creativity. However, even those approaches to composition pedagogy that recognise its importance to writing often do not include any specific methodology for teaching or enhancing creativity. While some approaches, such as process writing and the collaborative writing workshop, incorporate attention to creativity, any approach to writing can be supplemented by techniques to work on students’ creativity.

**Critical issues surrounding creativity in composition pedagogy**

The first issue involving creativity in composition pedagogy is how to teach creativity – that is, what instructional approaches are available and which approaches can be effectively adapted to the university composition class. It is natural to look first to the techniques used in the teaching of creative writing as possible pedagogical approaches for the FYW, WAC,
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WID, or ESP composition course. Although widely used in creative writing, the ‘workshop model’, in which teacher and peers critique an individual student’s work in a non-interactive, one-way process with the writer ‘in the hot seat’, can, at best, only indirectly enhance creativity and can, at worst, completely discourage a writer. A wide range of other techniques have been developed for enhancing creativity, although systematic investigations of creative approaches to teaching composition at university level are lacking.

A second issue for composition instruction is balancing the requirements of creativity with those of structure and genre, helping students learn to operate within the dynamic of these two foundational elements of good writing. Student writers have often learned to construct a paper without attention to creativity or connections of writing to personal knowledge or identity. Instead, their writing process relies heavily on constructing a paper within vaguely apprehended constraints of organisation and genre, using information drawn from external sources, with little in the way of original analysis or synthesis of other people’s ideas into the writer’s own framework. They also tend to try to write final text as first text, with the aim of reducing the need for revision or rewriting. Thus instruction might assist students to carry out a staged writing process, with specific activities designed to encourage agency, original thinking, and analysis and synthesis of the writer’s own ideas in relation to those of others.

Composition teachers and students must learn how to balance the contrasting requirements of conventionality and standardisation, on the one hand, and originality and personalisation, on the other (Enright, 2014; Hartley, 2007; Pennington, 2011). This is especially challenging in an era of assessment in which teachers are being pushed to anticipate, as well as to structure in advance, everything that a student might do on an assignment, so that marking can be tied to specific measurable features of what is produced. Structuring assignments in such way as to tailor them to pre-specified outcomes values adherence to norms over creative response, and limits students’ independence, autonomy, and initiative in pursuing those ideas and topics that are most original and most challenging, but which may be of greatest interest to them. These are exactly the sorts of writing projects that do not easily fit into highly structured and staged assignments. Over-specification of a writing assignment, as encouraged by the assessment culture, often leads students to focus more on its formal, secondary features (for example formatting, correct mechanics) than its primary purpose and content features (Enright, 2014). As Spitzer (2015: 244) observes about his creative puppet theatre assignments for university writing, some kinds of writing assignments are better ‘half-baked’, because a significant degree of openness and non-specificity leaves room for student writers’ own exploration and discovery process, allowing them to tailor the assignment to fit their own interests and purposes.

Too much direction from the teacher can be stifling of creativity in another sense. Marking correct and incorrect features and giving grades on all writing that is handed in to the teacher encourages students to be dependent on the teachers’ view of their writing rather than their own view. They learn not to trust their own perspectives and do not develop their own values about writing. Students can then lose interest and become uninvolved in their own writing, writing merely to satisfy the demands of an assignment and to get a grade – which means that they are writing essentially for the teacher rather than for themselves or any other audience. Such uninvolved, utilitarian writing lacks motivation or inspiration, bypassing or shortcutting the creative thinking-and-writing process that results in a unique voice and point of view, and instead produces unoriginal, highly derivative, or plagiarised writing (Pennington, 2015). An aspect of writing instruction aiming for creative engagement should therefore be to help students to become invested in, take responsibility for, and learn how to respond to their own work.
A further issue is how to incorporate technology in the teaching of writing in ways that encourage creativity and also help to balance the dual formal and creative goals of composition. Composition students need to learn how to creatively borrow and remix text in print and digital forms through the processes of:

- **mashing**: locating relevant source materials and combining them in effective and appropriate ways;
- **modding**: modifying, altering, or building upon the ideas that have been borrowed from others to create some kind of new idea or perspective; and
- **memeing**: presenting the new idea or perspective in a way that makes it memorable, relevant, useful and/or emotionally compelling for readers.

(Jones, 2015)

In other words, they need to learn how to acceptably (that is, in ways that avoid plagiarism) use and combine (mash), and how to modify and build on (mod) existing resources to create a new and memorable perspective (meme). We might also add, following Manovich (2007), the ability to *sample*, in the sense of students being able to select pieces of text to quote in their own work. In the digital era, the key is for students to learn, using combinations of print text and other multimedia resources, how to sample, mash, mod, and meme combinations of existing resources into their own original creations in ways that give sufficient and appropriate credit to others. (For a discussion of issues, see Jones & Hafner, 2012: 45–7; see also Knobel & Lankshear, Chapter 25.)

**Research perspectives on creativity in composing**

Harper (2013) observes that creative writing is often a kind of research in the sense of being a questioning, or quest, seeking some new understanding or knowledge. The knowledge produced through creative writing research in this sense is individualised and ‘strongly situational, based in the individual creative writer’s needs, desires, feelings and reasons as that writer undertakes creative writing’ (Harper, 2013: 107). Research of different kinds may also ‘explor[e] the actions, artefacts and contexts of creative writing’ (Harper, 2013: 108), including pedagogical and ‘practice-led research’. However, as Hesse (2010: 32) has observed, creative writing ‘is largely disinterested in (and occasionally contemptuous of) systematic research on writing and writers, especially empirical studies, trusting instead authors’ own accounts, in memoir, essay, or interview, as far more valuable than anything in the guise of “scholarly article”’.

Psychometric, neurobiological, and biographical approaches to research have resulted in a wide range of theories of creativity (Boden, 2004; Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Qualitative methods to uncover creative traits and practices include self-reports and interviews with writers and other people recognised as creative (for example Burton, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Doyle, 1998; Florida, 2002), as well as surveying the beliefs and practices of teachers of creative writing and observing their practices (Burton, 2006; Vandermeulen, 2011). Attempts to enhance students’ creativity have spawned research in university and in primary and secondary educational contexts, sometimes with a specific emphasis on writing and sometimes producing other findings which help to elucidate writing processes or which offer teaching approaches that can be applied to composition, although there are few studies of writing pedagogy at university level and an insufficient body of comparative research (Reisman, 2012).
Early research on creativity led to the development of Finke, Ward, and Smith’s (1992) Geneplore model of creative cognition. The model describes creative outcomes as resulting from two interacting phases of thought: a ‘pre-inventive’, generative phase of producing ‘candidate ideas’ with creative potential; and an exploratory phase of selecting some of those ideas to develop further into a creative product. The generate–explore process emphasises divergent, associative thinking to collect and conjoin a diversity of conceptual components, which are then selectively shaped through convergent thinking into novel products. As Ward and Lawson (2009: 197) maintain, ‘it is the recursive nature of the generate–explore process that results in large-scale creative products’.

Waitman and Plucker (2009: 306) note the close parallels of the recursive Geneplore sequence to the processes of creative writing, and parallels can also be noted in descriptions of the composing process (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Perl, 1994; Sharples, 1999). The methods of composing process studies (Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993: 81) were often think-aloud protocols (TAPs) in which writers orally describe and record their thinking and writing processes as they work, or retrospective reflections, in which writers describe their thinking and writing process immediately after they finish drafting, sometimes based on viewing a video recording of their composing process. This body of composing research led to a characterisation of the writing process as incorporating recursive iterations of generation and exploration of ideas through activities such as making notes and lists, outlining, and free-writing, with frequent rereading and micro-level tinkering leading to revision of previously generated text and addition of new text. These activities feed the development of provisional text in the form of draft material, which is then further shaped – through focused attention, critical reflection, and revision with the writer’s purposes in mind – into polished text that is the writer’s creative product. The writing process, which builds ideas and text cumulatively, with frequent revision of already generated text and integration of new text, has been greatly aided since the availability of word processors has made it easy to continually generate, alter, eliminate, and move written text.

Consistent with what is known about the early stages of creative production of all kinds (Boden, 2004; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010), a creative writing process includes a stage in which writing is accomplished in a cognitive mode focused on ideas or mental pictures more than text itself (Kellogg, 1994, 2008: 10) – one that is more intuitive, imagistic, and free-flowing than the more purposeful and critical mode of thought tailored to construction of final text. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) interviewed nine writers, finding that they tended to generate small caches of ideas (fragments of dialogue, descriptions, scenes, or images), and then worked from these to find a mental focus and build text (draft material) around it. Doyle (1998: 30) interviewed five fiction writers, observing that they started with a ‘seed incident’ that was ‘touching, intriguing, puzzling, mysterious, haunting or overwhelming’ as a focal mental point for evolving further ideas. In capturing the seed incident in verbal and/or visual form (for example as a sentence, paragraph, or picture plus caption), the writer moves into a ‘fiction world’ and sets the stage to start working mentally in that world, in which processes such as automatic writing, free-writing, and narrative improvisation occur. In the best case, the writer will be in a ‘flow’ experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), losing track of time and physical surroundings, writing fluently and non-critically, with attention to new viewpoints.

Fiction writers move back and forth between the world of the imagination and flow experience and the world of communicative meaning and intention in which they must evaluate the linguistic construction generated in that free-flowing imaginative state with a
critical eye. In so doing, they cycle between the creative mind working at the imaginative edge of idea processing and the rational mind needed to shape language in consideration of how words and successive levels of linguistic structure – from phrases, to sentences, to paragraphs, to whole genres – are shaped to meet writer intentions and audience needs. One successful fiction writer describes the process as follows:

For a creative writer, the negotiation between the focused awareness required for language manipulation and the relaxation state required for image and fantasy formation is a difficult juggle. Writing fiction demands a moment-by-moment journey to and from the inner paths of the brain and the outer regions of the attention network, as the writer has to remain in a state of focused alertness while engaged in working memory retrieval and task-completion for each word written, each carefully sculpted sentence, each structurally managed paragraph; and yet the writer must also be ready to drop that alertness from moment to moment, in order to re-enter the anxiety-free, relaxed mind-state from where the writer will purloin spontaneously arising daydreams, or empathize with a character’s plight, and envision plot possibilities.

(Valeri, 2014: 188–9)

Creativity requires ‘a mental state where attention is defocused, when thought is associative, and when a large number of mental representations are simultaneously activated’ (Kaufman et al., 2010: 218). Each of these psychological conditions (defocused attention, associative thought, and simultaneous activation of a large number of mental representations) is antithetical to genre requirements in writing – that is, for selection of words and grammatical structures that precisely convey the author’s intended meaning within rhetorical considerations of audience and purpose. Such selection and construction of sentences, and more generally of a logically sequenced and both cohesive (grammatically well-structured) and coherent (semantically well-structured – that is, meaningful) text that speaks to a certain audience, requires highly focused attention and critical, convergent thinking. It also requires controlled activation of a global mental representation of the target for which the writer is aiming, in terms of the overall purpose and goal of the writing, as well as a related set of mental representations – of audience, tone, relevant facts, organisational options, etc. Generating novel ideas, and then tying those to coherent language and rhetorical patterns, invokes the sequential and interactive engagement of ‘traditionally “left-brain” processes of information acquisition and storage . . . with processes associated with the “right brain”, such as abstract and novel integration’ (Kaufman et al., 2010: 221). Through these different kinds of brain activity, ‘the primordial chaos of the writer’s mind’ is transfigured into an embodiment of mental phenomena forming a coherent linear sequence of words, a written text, which is tailored to a certain rhetorical purpose and represents the writer’s ‘version of things’ (Gammarino, 2009: 20).

Balancing the different mental states during writing is a challenge given that creative thinking seems to involve ‘cognitive disinhibition, or the ability to shed the schematic constraints and biases that impede creative thought’ (Kaufman et al., 2010: 222), while operating within specific schematic constraints is essential for producing any text intended to be read and understood by another. This is especially obvious for scholarly writing, which has relatively strict requirements for transparency, clarity, and conventionality, while also valuing originality. Thus scholarly writers, in order to satisfy needs for originality and individual expression, while also meeting genre requirements, must learn how to operate within these different states of cognitive activation: one intuitive and imaginative (abstract, holistic, multidirectional); the other controlled and rational (analytical, critical, sequential). Since the pursuit of a creative goal in writing requires different
kinds of brain activation from composing focused on schematic structure, and since these cannot be maintained simultaneously, but require different mental states at different times during the writing process, creativity and genre can be taught as separate facets of composition pedagogy. Separating out the various processes of composing is of value for novice writers, who cannot juggle them all simultaneously owing to the complexity of writing (McCutcheon, 1996), which Kellogg (2008) suggests takes at twenty or more years to master. The challenge for teaching is to help students learn to write in both of these different states and to integrate the products of the creativity-focused state with those of the information-focused state.

Recommendations for enhancing creativity in composition instruction

At a minimum, it is recommended that university-level composition instruction inject creative elements into a controlled and rational, purpose-driven writing process. Composition teachers can set up facilitating conditions for creativity by making time for students to write in class under conditions in which their work will not be graded, in which they are encouraged to express themselves freely and uncritically, and in which they can carry out ‘internal research’ (Pennington & Welford, 2014) to explore their personal knowledge and connections to a topic. In addition, techniques to stimulate creative thinking and expression can be borrowed from the creativity literature (Reisman, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) and used to stimulate creativity at the pre-writing stage – and also at middle stages of writing, during composing and revising. A goal for the writing class can be for students to develop a self-directed writing process in which they use creativity techniques to get started on a topic, as well as to help them when they get blocked at a later stage.

As Waitman and Plucker (2009: 302) observe: ‘The beginning writer must become familiar with the successive experience of initially producing a malleable text and then cultivating the analytic prowess to successfully review this text.’ The generate–explore process of drafting, which results in the production of candidate ideas and a malleable text for potential further consideration, exploration, and development, can be seen as a crucial part of a larger process aimed at producing an original written work for a specific audience and purpose. By learning to begin their writing with a creativity-oriented generate–explore phase, in which they evolve a significant amount of draft material and a direction and purpose for their writing, followed by a genre-oriented reflect–revise phase, in which they critically assess and further develop text to achieve their purposes, student writers will become more engaged in their writing and will have more control over their own writing process and outcomes. The predictable result is more original and well-developed compositions.

Recommended generate–explore activities involve a repeating cycle of:

1. expansive, divergent thinking – such as through free-writing and free-associating or newly associating ideas – that can produce new connections, such as through metaphor, analogy, and comparison;

followed by

2. critical, convergent thinking and writing to narrow down the options and select the best ideas and language in which to express them.

These creativity-focused activities can be connected to methodologies for implementing genre-oriented reflection, critique, and revision, such as adaptations of the strategy development and collaborative workshop methods used in primary and secondary education, in addition to
Vandermeulen’s (2011) proposed adaptations of creative writing workshopping methodology, which involve restricting the type of feedback allowed in an attempt to reduce its often highly critical nature, using the writer’s own reflections and questions as a starting point for critique by others, and supplementing or complementing whole-class critique by a more collegial form of interaction among novice writers in small writing groups.

In addition, at university level, creativity-oriented activities need to be integrated with materials and activities to focus student writers’ attention on:

3. the structural patterns and language of different genres, the knowledge and expectations of the intended audience, and how individual writers wish to represent or challenge these to achieve their own purposes in writing; and
4. the processes of searching, assessing, and integrating textual and non-textual sources into their writing in both appropriate and original ways, and of developing information in alternate modes using digital tools.

Not only genre models, but also specific linguistic techniques of creative expression that are applicable to writing in a range of genres can be taught as part of fulfilling the knowledge requirements of (3), such as:

- associations between different domains;
- semantic deviations and surprising lexical choices;
- syntactic deviations and unconventional sentence structures; and
- narrativization of agents and actions.

(Marsen, 2012)

As an aspect of (3), students can be asked to consider the novel concepts and language in model texts, and as an aspect of (4), their intentions in terms of developing and presenting new concepts or perspectives on others’ work and how they plan to do this.

The recommendations of Kim (2010) for the digital competencies that all university graduates need include being able to individually and collaboratively create wikis, blogs, websites, and other kinds of digital objects – such as audio, podcasts, photos, and video – and then to integrate these within a wiki, blog, or website. Other useful creative media skills suggested by Kim are creating voice-over presentations to enhance online texts, and using images and sound to tell a good story. In addition, the ability to create various types of graphical representation of information, such as infographics and digital timelines (Gruber, 2015), using online tools for creating these and for building on previously created graphics, can add new creative dimensions to composition. The abilities both to create and to creatively embed, alter, and animate such digital objects are highly valuable skills for creatively developing new kinds of multimedia texts. This means being familiar with the available websites and tools, and, in the best case, having some facility with computer code as well.

To encourage creativity, the teacher must make it a priority in course activities, feedback, and grading. Rhetorical analysis can consider the types and the overall level of linguistic and conceptual creativity evident in different exemplars of academic and non-academic writing. Matters of style can also be addressed and included in assessment criteria, and students can perform a stylistic analysis of their own writing and the functions and purposes that it accomplishes (Carpenter, 2005), as a basis for drawing their attention to their own voice and creative options in writing. In addition, students might be allowed or encouraged to write assignments not only in the classic, ‘objective’ or detached thesis-centred argumentative style, but
also in a more contemplative, ‘subjective’ and involved style that allows for more personal reflection and less definitive conclusions. In recognition of the value of creative assignments for motivating student interest and engagement, and of the value for university graduates of both critical and creative thinking and communication, teachers might consider including one or more creative writing assignments, as Gammarino (2009) advocates, in their FYW or other academic writing syllabi. They might also allow or encourage students to submit hybrid works combining, for instance, poetic expression and critical essay or autobiography and research (Pennington & Welford, 2014; Welford, 2015).

Lim (2015: 255–6) suggests the possibility of:

useful crossovers from creative writing features to academic writing practices. Some examples are the occasional deployment of a personal voice/subjective narrator; the use of different points of view and of narrative to dramatize an argument; and the appeal to human interest, in the portrayal of characters and particularities. Shared stylistic concerns include the function of economy and the judicious use of figurative language; and the deployment of narrative, description – setting – and dialogue for greater clarity and illumination. That is, academic writing is never without the resources that mark the creative writing text in vivifying the argument paper.

Composition teachers can raise students’ awareness of these creative possibilities for academic writing and give students credit for them in their own writing.

**Future directions for creativity in composition**

More research is needed on the ways in which creativity can be enhanced in writing at all levels, and on the effects of creativity-oriented instruction within a standardised curriculum and a regime of outcomes assessment and high-stakes testing of writing. Studies examining approaches that attempt to ensure creativity within a genre emphasis would be especially welcome, as would studies seeking to show the value of creative orientations to university writing at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Research orientations to studying writing processes could be adapted to incorporate attention to creativity, and some data from classic process studies could be reanalysed in creativity terms, such as how writers have balanced the two goals of producing creative vs conventional language and ideas, and the two broad types of thinking-and-writing processes involved. Data from future research on student writers, as well as professional literary and non-literary writers, might also explicitly examine how they balance these different demands of writing, such as through interview, TAP, or post-writing reflection questions that specifically contrast these two aspects of writing.

Matters of style, often within genre concerns (Johnson & Pace, 2005), will continue as a topic in university composition, and the centrality of the research report and the ‘objective’, thesis-driven essay will increasingly be problematised (Archibald, 2015; Huber, 2015; Welford, 2015) as the demand grows for students to be able to compose in multiple genres and media. A focus on creativity would seem to be required to fill the new audience requirements of online contexts: ‘Unlike the old composition, the new composition includes textmaking for situations in which readerships are neither compelled nor circumscribed. One of its main challenges is how writers make readers pay attention’ (Hesse, 2010: 45).

A focus on creativity may also be required to meet the needs of writing in the disciplines. Bizzaro (2013: 172) predicts that ‘the rhetorician and the poet will soon need to help those
in the professions who are working at the cutting edge with difficult concepts generally unavailable through language to lay persons’. The many potentials for cross-fertilisation and alignments of composition, creative writing, and writing in the disciplines, in the context of the ongoing evolution of creative uses of digital media, are predicted to be the dynamic elements out of which the future of creativity in composition will be constructed.

**Related topics**

language, creativity, and remix culture; literature and language teaching; teaching creative writing

**Further reading**


A practice-oriented collection contributed to by creative writers and composition specialists, proposing creative and discovery-oriented approaches to teaching writing at university level.


A historical, theoretical, and practical review of style, as applied to the teaching of composition.


An edited volume examining the topic of creativity in writing from theoretical, practical, and research perspectives, and showcasing creative pedagogy.


A comprehensive guide to creative writing practices and techniques.


Sharples presents an original view of writing as involving creative design and an in-depth examination of writing processes.

**References**


Creativity in composition


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