

Introduction to the Special Topic Issue on Creativity and Writing Pedagogy

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An issue involving writing and creativity is bound to acknowledge the deep self-doubt that anyone who creates in the face of daily demands must meet. The idea for this issue came at a time in my life when I was juggling the demands of teaching, writing, marriage, and motherhood. As a single woman, I had devoted the majority of my time to writing. As a mother, my life was being taken up with tasks centered around family – tasks which interested me yet zapped my creative energies. That second book of poems I dreamed I would publish became an ever more elusive goal. I didn't know how I would find the time to produce a body of work.

I credit the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Drexel University, Sandy Friedlander, with giving me a way out. Sandy, himself familiar with the struggle of balancing writing with family and teaching, introduced me to a book, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block and the Creative Brain* (Flaherty, 2004), written by a neurologist, Alice Flaherty, whose essay, "Writing and Drugs," appears in this issue. As reported in her book, using brain scans and X-rays, Flaherty analyzed research about the brains of creative people and writers to investigate differences between them and those who do not spend significant time writing or in creative pursuits. Discovering the possibility of a neurological basis of writing recharged my writing practice. Besides spending more time writing, I read everything I could on the topic of creativity, fortunate to be teaching at Drexel University, which hosts the Drexel Torrance Center for Creativity and Innovation. Moreover, one of the leading creativity researchers whose work I had been reading, Robert J. Sternberg, whose essay, "Assessing Creativity in Colleges through Writing," appears in this issue, had recently come to campus to give a public lecture.

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Creativity, long paired with innate talent, has historically been viewed as a mystical process, which is a main reason why it was not thought to be trainable. However, work carried out in the second half of the 20th century by cognitive and educational psychologists on motivation and mastery (see overview in Sternberg, 1999: 302ff) has led to a new view of creativity as something that can be developed in oneself and others. This new view has created a public interest in creativity that may help to explain why a book like Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008) has made such a stir. With *Outliers*, Gladwell popularized the rule of 10,000 hours or 2.2 hours a day for ten years, whichever comes first, required for expertise in a given field – though cognitive psychologists William Chase and Herbert Simon conducted the research on mastery in the early 1970s (Chase and Simon, 1973). Gladwell's popularization of scientific findings has captured the public mind, and its message – just keep at it – is transformative for those who write and those who teach. I have followed this rule for ten years, consciously devoting 2.2 hours of my day to writing. I have seen the results: more confidence, higher levels of performance, and more tendencies toward experimentation. In addition, sharing the 10,000 hour rule with my students has transformed my teaching.

If teachers fully accepted that creativity, like any other way of thinking or doing, grows with consistent practice, classrooms would by definition provide such practice opportunities. Yet schools structure time to meet practical demands. The debate is old. Testing, publishing, and the demands of genre make some information accessible over others. Yet while grades and exams are valued over open-ended tasks, based on studies performed by a number of researchers (as reviewed by Sternberg, 1999: 302), the effect of such extrinsic motivators on creativity can be detrimental. Other studies reviewed by Sternberg (p. 302) have tested the effect of competing for prizes, which has been shown to undermine creativity unless the sought-after prize specifically values originality. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation research showed that *synergistic extrinsic motivators*, which provide information or enable a person to better complete a specific task, enable creativity (*ibid.*, p. 305). Thus classroom practices such as giving students the freedom to choose what to work on and blocks of time to work, often in groups, while offering feedback are suggested by many researchers (*ibid.*, p. 306).

The student-centered classroom, Freirian in its emphasis on the redistribution of power from teacher to student, had reinvigorated American classrooms in previous decades, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of Alternative Schools that provided students opportunities to learn in more experimental ways than were generally offered in the public schools.¹ Yet education in the new millennium finds itself trammled within

the harness of No Child Left Behind. The decline of American education will not be reversed with standardized exams. Instead, I believe that a new paradigm for education in the 21st century must be based on breakthrough practices which the field of Creativity Studies makes available to practitioners and teachers.

Guest Editor's Perspective on Volume 4, Number 2

The overriding questions we as editor and authors asked ourselves in assembling the issue was: How do practicing writers enhance their own creativity, and how successful have they been in helping their students become more creative? Could the very same approaches that writers use for their own creative practice be taught to their students? Could a body of best practices be assembled, or is creativity still an individual response? One thinks of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom, 1997) in trying to account for personal differences to explain innovative writing styles. Bloom's belief that writers "misinterpret" classic works and thus discover new techniques provides a possible explanation that is consistent with cultural conceptions about the idiosyncratic character of creative people. One goal of the issue was to have writer/teacher innovators describe their creative practices, with the hope that the issue leads readers to try out the practices discussed and that in turn the described practices lead to new ones, via interpreting them through individual differences, as suggested by theories such as Bloom's. This goal gains great importance as "it is often believed that creative genius emerges full blown from childhood without the need for systemic preparation in the field; the opposite is closer to the truth" (Sternberg, 1999: 175).

In order to achieve this goal, we asked several pioneers in the field, in addition to some "rising stars," to submit articles to this special issue on Creativity and Writing Pedagogy and are honored to have in this issue articles written by the eminent creativity researcher, Robert J. Sternberg; by the founding director of the University of Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program, Robin Hemley; by the leaders of a new MFA in Creative Writing program at the City University of Hong Kong, writer-in-residence Xu Xi, and acting head of the Department of English Rodney Jones; and by neurologist, Alice Flaherty, just to name a few.

Our **Featured Essay**, **Rebecca Ingalls'** "The Student as Witness: Cultivating Creativity in the Yogic Body of Research," uses yoga as a theoretical lens to consider the possibility of pedagogy foregrounded in contemplative practices. Joining the debate over the value and design of the research paper assignment (Bean, 1996), Ingalls, an assistant professor and director of the freshman writing program at Drexel University, liberates

the research paper assignment from its traditional view in imagining the “embodied” research assignment. Enlivened with technology borrowed from her yoga practice, and working both within the genre of the research paper and from outside it, Ingalls discusses the roles of reflection, stillness, materiality, uncertainty, and practice in research writing. Going beyond ideas such as Bean’s to infuse research writing with critical thinking skills, Ingalls discusses the need for students to articulate themselves as active agents situated within the genre. Including photographs of herself holding different *asana* postures, Ingalls essay offers a vivid example of how “embodied” researched writing might appear. Indeed, in a study on types of creative behaviors, researchers found that while some creators engage in the solution of problems, others prefer to engage in theory building, an activity with which Ingalls’ “embodied” research assignment challenges her students by asking them to find their place within and virtually redefine the genre (Sternberg, 1999: 220).

In the **Research Matters** section, Alice W. Flaherty’s fascinating essay, “Writing and Drugs,” following on from her book mapping the neurology of literary creativity, presents findings on the effects of prescription drugs on the creativity of writers. Flaherty differentiates between motivation and skill in defining creativity, a helpful distinction. Motivation, she tells us, not skill, can be enhanced or inhibited with the use of certain drugs. Describing the effect on creativity of drugs treating conditions ranging from ADHD to migraine, she presents valuable knowledge which doctors rarely consider when prescribing specific medications yet which is of utmost importance to those who write.

Sky Marsen’s empirical approach to exploring creativity in “Detecting the Creative in Written Discourse” seeks to rectify a common misperception about writing, namely, that creativity is irrelevant to writing outside of specifically creative disciplines. This split, observable to anyone who has spent time in English Departments, alienates literary theorists from poetry and prose writers and compositionists from cultural critics. Marsen’s examples take her outside the English Department as well. Using a database of sixty prose extracts, ranging from information technology to literary fiction, Marsen offers a continuum upon which to measure creativity in written works, giving examples of “high” and “low” creative techniques used across disciplines. Broadly, the four categories of creative techniques that Marsen focuses on are metaphor, semantic deviations and word choice, syntactic deviations and sentence structure, and narrativization. The implications of Marsen’s research clearly demonstrate how creative techniques help writers work to get their points across even in technical discourses – information science, for example, is abundant

with metaphor, according to Marsen – and how teachers might enliven discipline specific instruction with such knowledge.

Drexel Torrance Center for Creativity and Innovation Director, **Fredricka K. Reisman**, in “Underlying Factors of Creative Thinking as a Foundation for Creative Writing Pedagogy,” provides a foundational framework for reinforcing creativity in the creative writing classroom. Her research builds upon the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking to further isolate creative features and strengthen them in students. All of these can be applied either directly or with some adaptation to the teaching of writing. The self-reports of students enrolled in an online Master’s class on Creativity and Innovation add to a review of research on teacher perceptions of creativity and of tools and techniques for enhancing creativity, with special attention to writing pedagogy. The article thus offers direction for the integration of activities that promote creative thinking in writing instruction, while also reporting on the experiences of some who have tried out different approaches to enhancing creativity.

Teacher demands in extending or hampering creativity is also the topic of **Dorothea Lasky’s** “Examining ‘Small c’ Creativity in the Writing Classroom,” which is Lasky’s first published academic article. Lasky, a renowned contemporary American poet who recently received her Ph.D. in Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, is well-positioned to explore the juncture at which academic and creative expectations meet, and whether one set of expectations hinders the other. Her findings, that students were most creative when permitted off-task behaviors, has real relevance for institutions seeking to develop across disciplines. The silo tradition of most university departments does not promote the exchange of ideas among individuals from different fields. Collaboration, Lasky points out, supports divergent thinking. Although her interviews with poet/teachers shows they too hold the notion that the “talent” for writing poetry is mystical, they nonetheless often tried to foster creativity by offering alternatives for assignments, encouraging collaboration, expecting and encouraging creativity, and allowing students to discover creativity at their own pace.

The **Reflections on Practice** section of the issue begins with two articles focused on writers’ creative practices. The first of these, by **Martha Silano** (“Keeping the Pipes from Freezing: An Essay on Creativity”), describes the dilemma of the working writer, particularly, a woman writer, in trying to juggle family, professional, and artistic demands. Silano’s solution – “the slow drip” – her metaphor for writing in spurts and looking for actual physical opportunities for writing throughout the day, clarifies a salient point about the process of creativity. If, to use Silano’s metaphor, the creative pipes freeze, no further creative ideas will flow through. Yet, if

the creative artist remains open to inspiration, even in the very midst of her day-to-day activities, she will find the impetus to produce more work. I think Silano's practice rejects the perfectionism of the "Room of One's Own" rule, a notion that has paralyzed some writers who just don't have the resources, financial or otherwise, to seclude themselves in a private space for prolonged periods. Although having a room of one's own might contribute toward women's creative output, and public spaces for women writers such as in academia and publishing have yet to equal men's, restricting creative energies to an idealized place and time keeps women writers situated in relation to a context, which is in itself limiting.

The second of the articles focusing on writers' creative processes is that of **Laura Valeri** ("Beating the Drums in the Caves of the Underworld: The Creative Process as a Journey into the Spirit World"). Like Silano, Valeri shares her concern over her anxiety at not finding enough time to write. Valeri investigates world myths as a postmodern model of negotiation. For Valeri, bringing a story to the page is much like the mythic hero's triumph over forces of destruction. Fraught with demons – those destructive impulses brought on by psychic insecurities and the press of worldly demands of anxiety, self-doubt, and daily obligations – fiction writing more often than not involves failure. Valeri's reflection will help teachers of writing, first, understand the difficulties facing the creative writer and, second, structure supportive environments in which students are given enough time and enough safety to investigate their raw ideas.

Following on from these two writers' reflections and bridging to the remaining more educationally oriented articles in the Reflections on Practice Section, **Ravi Shankar** ("Using Fractals to Undermine Familiarity: Implementing Writing Pedagogy through the Operations of Shape and Chance") takes us into the writing classroom, where he applies notions from chaos theory and fractal mathematics to the teaching of writing. If, as many researchers have shown, the quality of one's involvement in the work determines its creative outcome, then being privy to the mind games and problem sets which writers undertake may have the greatest yield toward increasing the creativity of our students. For Shankar, it is the meanings and associations of the word *fractal* in mathematics and in its etymological closeness to the word *fracture* which are most enlightening. Using examples from his own writing practice and classroom exercises aimed at disrupting the familiar, Shankar's goal is to shift perspectives so that the writing students produce contains new perceptions.

Lisa Sewell, in "Inspiring Each Other: Collaboration in the Poetry Writing Workshop," describes her unique approach to the creative writing workshop. Instead of critiquing workshop poems as a supplementary exercise, Sewell asks her students to produce their original poetry in

response to their classmates' poems. These creative responses serve the dual purpose of giving her students practice in close reading and in using each other's work as springboards, helping them to understand the role of collaboration and to overcome romantic notions of inspiration.

Robin Hemley's "The Creative Process and Travel" describes a study abroad program attached to the MFA in Creative Nonfiction Program which Hemley directs at the University of Iowa. Hemley considers travel and international experiences as important conditions for enhancing creativity in students of writing. He argues that travel challenges commonplace knowledge and in his article focuses on the benefits of programs such as Summer Literary Seminars that sponsor writing workshops in Kenya, Lithuania, Canada, and other countries. Theorists have shown that holding cultural values toward an activity often increases the likelihood of individuals developing great creativity in certain fields, such as the high value placed on chess in Iceland (Sternberg, 1999: 180). If American students experience the creative writing class abroad, Hemley argues, it is quite possible that they will then continue to build associations with the countries and cultures to which they've traveled. Such associations can serve as a trigger for future writing. Surely anyone who has traveled understands how immersion in a foreign culture feeds observation, thus increasing the likelihood for new ideas to write about.

Supplementing the other Reflections on Practice articles written by established poet or fiction writer-teachers who report on their current writing and pedagogical practices are two articles focused on testing and curriculum development. **Robert J. Sternberg's** "Assessing Creativity in College through Writing" speaks to the current debate over the role of the SAT or ACT as a significant measure of college performance. The promise of using writing tasks that emphasize creativity not only lowers the amount of emphasis admission officers place on standardized exams, but also constructs creativity as a viable form of selection of promising students. Sternberg draws on his participation in several projects in which creative writing assessments were used along with standardized exams to screen applicants for college admission, resulting in greater predictive value than when the SAT or ACT were used alone. Sternberg's essay gives us a glimpse into a much desired future in which creativity becomes a consideration in college admissions.

The final article in this section, **Rodney H. Jones and Xu Xi's** "Internationalizing the MFA in Creative Writing," describes the establishment of the first MFA program in writing in Asia. Responding to the proliferation of new writing in English throughout the world, the authors describe how they set up the first low-residency MFA program in Asia. The low-residency model combined with a focus on regional writing has

succeeded in attracting an international community of students from Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. In spite of the mixed provenance of its participants, some of the challenges in establishing a program in Asia that adheres to the workshop model are culture bound, such as issues related to democratization of authority. While the City University of Hong Kong's MFA program is described as a success, Jones and Xu Xi find a continuing need for dialogue on cultural assumptions. Thus in a broader sense, this MFA Program does the work of cultural ambassador, which historically literature at its best also fulfills.

The first of two related **From the e-Sphere** articles, **Emma Bolden's** "Permanent Evolution: E-Literature and (R)evolutions of Authorship," historicizes the present moment in the development of e-literature. This essay foregrounds the work of Stephanie Strickland, an early e-literature pioneer. Bolden credits Strickland as being among the first to use technology to create a new literature. Positioned to follow Bolden's article is a piece by **Stephanie Strickland** and **M. D. Coverley**, whom we are also fortunate to have as contributors to this special issue. Strickland and Coverley's article, "Creativity and Writing: New Technologies," catalogs how technology is changing the ways that literature gets created, as online workshops replace face-to-face workshops, and coded elements such as images and links expand linear text. This in turn recreates the kind of attention readers bring to a text in that e-texts demand mobilized as opposed to deeply focused attention. The complementary articles of Bolden and Strickland and Coverley help forward the possibilities of using technology to realize a fully creative literature which uses humor, games, visuals, and, through reader participation in creating code, "endlessly generative" combinations.

In the **New Books** section, **Sonya Huber** reviews Beaudelaine Pierre and Nataša Đurovičová's *How to Write an Earthquake*, a trilingual anthology gathering the work of Haitian writers in response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Huber distinguishes the writing in this anthology, published by an affiliate of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program, from the popular current genres of memoir, immersion fiction, and literary reportage to show how the works in the anthology excel at the highest levels. Huber points out that the writing in this anthology has occurred organically out of its authors' very survival. It has long been acknowledged that particular historical periods provide the elements for high creativity, such as 19th century Russian literature. Huber's review suggests that these criteria occurred in Haiti during the period surrounding the 2010 earthquake. Huber sees this as hopeful, as writing has an important function in the quest for ways to cope with inestimable loss.

In the classroom, this special issue will go some way towards demystifying talent and inspiration. It will also help resituate creativity in practice

and mentorship. As a writer these goals are of paramount importance. “You write and write and write,” said my MFA advisor, the poet Marvin Bell (personal communication), “and one day you wake up and you’re Randall Jarrell.” Although it now seems obvious, steeped in thinking of creativity as a mysterious process, I did not, at the time, understand the relation of Bell’s advice to my own practice. As a result, I wasted much time feeling uninspired, waiting for the muse to strike me. The research and information in this issue lays much needed groundwork for sustaining motivation and enhancing creativity in writers and students.

About the Author

Harriet Levin Millan (MFA, University of Iowa Writers Workshop) is an associate teaching professor in the Department of English and Philosophy and director of the Certificate Program in Writing and Publishing at Drexel University. Her books include *Girl in Cap and Gown* (Mammoth Books) and *The Christmas Show* (Beacon Press), which was chosen by Eavan Boland for the Barnard New Women Poets Prize and also awarded the Poetry Society of America’s Alice Fay di Castagnola Award. A former New York State Poet in the Schools, she has received grants from The Vermont Studio Center and from Summer Literary Seminars for travel to Kenya. She is currently writing a novel set in Kenya, Sudan, and Philadelphia. The first chapter can be found in the January 2011 Issue of *The Kenyon Review*.

Note

- 1 I was fortunate to attend one of these (The Parkway Program, a School-Without-Walls), as a high school student in Philadelphia.

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