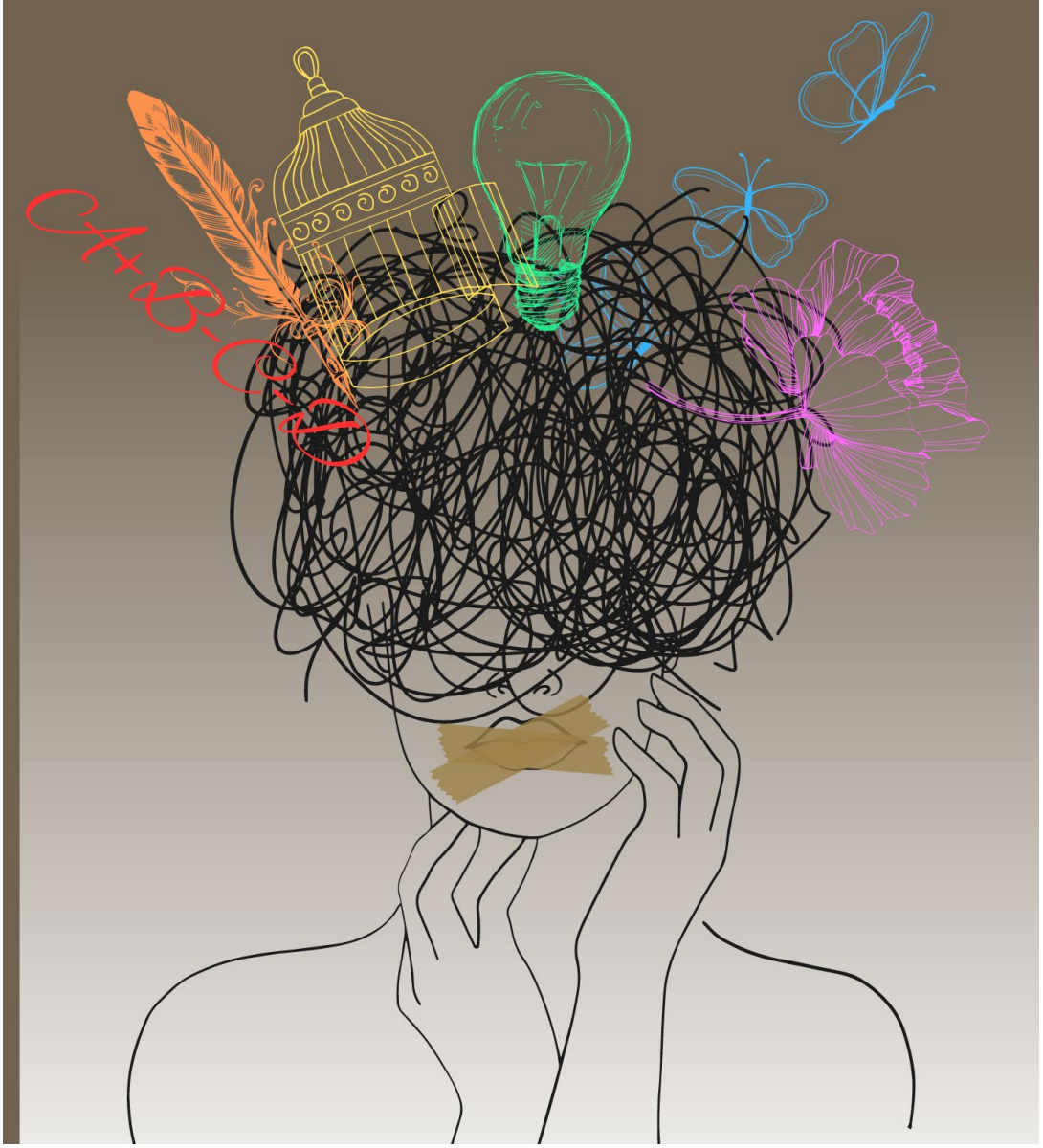
COMPOSITION STUDIES

SPECIAL ISSUE:

CREATIVITY

52.2 | Summer 2024



Composition Studies

Special Issue: Creativity | Volume 52.2 | Summer 2024

Contents

Editorial Introduction: Creativity

Welcome to our special edition of *Composition Studies*. The theme of this edition is creativity, in composition theory and praxis. Creativity is something we need more of within the field of rhetoric and composition. And, more importantly, our students need more of it from us. Most importantly, students need to see our creativity enacted within the classroom to see us leading by example.

Why Creativity?

"Many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment."

(Glenn Lester, et al., 1)

Like Lester et al. we are focusing on improving ourselves as practitioners and theorists, and helping our students become better writers. To start, we're going to sidestep the gnarly definitions of creativity. Instead, here is the Cambridge definition that provides more of a basic understanding: "Creativity is the ability to produce or use original and unusual ideas" (*Creativity*).

In the spirit of creativity, we want to open this edition with a sort of intellectual exercise. This means that a little more participation than usual may be required. We ask that you read the

content of this issue less from the perspective of the accomplished practitioners and theorists that you are, and more from the perspective of the students whom we all serve.

To begin our exercise, imagine yourselves in your classroom. Remember as vividly as you can the way it smells when you first enter it after a long weekend. The pattern of the wood grain of the desks, the shuffle of chairs as students come and go. The whiteboards that are never truly clean, marker residue left behind from years of use. The click of the door when it closes.

Next, we invite you to reread and consider the quote by Lester, et al. above. Let's say that Lester's statement about students is generally true and widespread. And let's assume that the reason the students write "to complete the class assignment" is actually in service to the follow-up goal which is to do something else, something they'd rather do. Now, imagine if the person you love most was in your classroom, with the rest of your composition students, and that your loved one doesn't know you're there. The classroom is quiet, which isn't abnormal. But your students, usually engaged with only their smartphones, are all paying attention to the mystery guest. Then one of your more talented but disinterested students who never speaks breaks the silence. Everyone is listening. The student asks your loved one in a clear voice: "Why would you want to do anything with our professor?" Your loved one responds, "So that I can appease them, then get on with my life. I would much rather be doing something else." Everyone laughs, including your loved one. Apparently they're in good company. How would you feel?

If you are reading this, you are most likely one of our usual audience members. You are a theorist of composition, a practitioner, or both, and you are probably very good at what you do. Just the fact that you are reading this suggests that you are extra dedicated and devoted to your profession. It gives you a sense of purpose. It, intrinsically, is meaningful. Certainly, many of

you are probably weary of hearing about the latest creative solutions. Or maybe you enthusiastically embrace creativity, and implement it in your classroom as much as you can, and you think it's working. But what if, either way, the only meaning your class has for your students is that it is a means to an end, simply "to complete the class…"?

Does this seem like a meaningful way to write? We say no, probably not, because if your heart is not in what you are writing you can not connect with your audience successfully. Given the same skills, the writer with a powerful sense of purpose, heart, or passion, outwrites the writer without it. The same is true for learning the skill of writing.

But part of what we want to emphasize in this special issue is the fact that improved student outcomes don't necessarily have to do with students themselves "being creative" in the composition classroom, or "creative" curricula that force students to do tasks that curriculum designers presume will be effective. Instead, we want to stress that there are many kinds of creativity, and suggest that the kinds of creativity that matter most have far less to do with "creativity" as most of us imagine it, and far more to do with the purpose of creativity.

What is the purpose of a composition professor if not to teach and inspire the next great leaders of this field or help students communicate effectively in other fields? We were once in our students' shoes, dreading each assignment handed to us by our own professors. Each increase in word count felt like another weight on our shoulders. We were in the trenches until someone pulled us out and guided us to a safer place. Imagine what our students could invent, inspire or even create if we taught them from the very beginning that their writing can show the reader who they truly are. We could help them change the field as we know it . . . or let them continue on the way they are.

In this journal we explore how we can effectively change the future of rhetoric and composition through the way we introduce students to the field, in composition one and two. What can we do as a field to help first year college students view writing as more than just a way to complete an assignment? How do we, as theorists, practitioners, curriculum designers, and more, work harder to find novel ways to engage our students, enabling them to be the most effective and inspired writers they can be? And what, ultimately, does it mean to be creative when writing within the constraints of rhetoric and composition? In this issue we explore these three questions in unique ways from how AI affects creativity, how to actively engage students, to how to implement new books in a syllabus to inspire creativity.

As a discipline of knowledge creation, language, and exploration, rhetoric and composition stands at the forefront of literary conversation. It is our job as educators, scholars, readers, and writers to make ethical decisions when engaging with composition and works of rhetoric. In this digital age, it's more important than ever to be aware of the technological shift that's happening in the classroom - and how to ethically and responsibly proceed. We explore the intersection between these technologies and creativity, and how that tool might be the key to ethical usage.

Creativity, like student learning, needs to be fostered. We need to show our students that through their own creativity they have the power to connect with their audience even within the constraints of genre. As editors we have decided to explore some of the many ways creativity can be taught, fostered, and learned. We need to give our students an opportunity to feel the freedom of writing that they'll have after graduation within the constraints of the classroom, long before they've reached the end of their college careers. This could change our field as we know it.

As we navigate the newly charted territory of teaching creativity we would like to advise you to keep an open mind. To think of your first year students who feel as though they can't speak, because they are afraid of being judged, they fear failure and expulsion. To us, creativity is what set each of us free to explore ourselves, see things in a new way, provide us with critical thinking skills, and even gave us more empathy. Even though that is where we all are now, we all did not feel that way once. We used to long to be free of the stresses of academic pressure to explore our own thoughts, questions, and desires, like us, first year students feel the same way. So, we invite you to hold onto your creative light and brave the storm with us for a bit and hopefully as a field we will reach the rainbow. That way, we can show our first year students how to get into the guiding light of creativity.

This Issue

This Summer 2024 Special Issue offers three exciting new pieces that address creativity and how it fits within first year writing classrooms. But before we examine this issue's written contributions, we would like to take a moment to discuss a key feature of this issue, which many of you may have noticed already: our cover. An exciting and collaborative effort that we designed together in Canva, it attempts to capture the feelings of many first year composition students who are overwhelmed in their classes because of two tough demands placed on them. First, our students struggle with the constraints our classes put on them. Second, at the same time we are demanding they meaningfully express themselves within those already difficult constraints. Our cover illustrates what it feels like to struggle internally with oneself, and what first year writing students feel daily as they begin a new chapter of their lives.

[The Background:] The ombre brown to white background reflects the uncertainty first year students feel along with the depression that many go through, but it leads into the white light of creativity and the freedom that comes with it. [The Foreground:]The woman on our cover, our subject, is a first year student who is struggling with depression and the uncertainty many first year students feel. The darkness around her mind shows feelings of stress, anxiety, and confusion. Emerging from the darkness of the brain is a rainbow of creativity. Within that rainbow are things that influence creativity and correlate with the differing sides/hemispheres of the brain.

The left brain or logical brain deals with the practice of writing and the fears and anxieties caused by it. The left side of the brain starts with the red grades of A+, B-, C-, and D, illustrating the worrying about passing classes, the orange quill represents writing for academic purposes, and the yellow cage illustrates the struggles with realizing the freedom one has as an adult. The right side of the brain has the green light bulb for the ideas that spur in the mind, the blue butterflies representing the spreading of wings within creativity, and the purple flower for creativity blossoming. The woman's mouth is taped to reflect the bias of AI which silences and misrepresents particular voices, as well as the fear of speaking up which results in holding oneself back. But she is finding the courage through creativity to peel the tape off and begin exploring herself.

FEN Blog Post

The FEN Blog Post, "AI as a Tool of Creativity/Colonialism," is written by Dylann Croteau and centers on the topic of bias in AI. It explores the research and evidence behind bias exhibited by

generative AI such as ChatGPT, and the potential consequences of utilizing this technology in the first year composition classroom. The blog post examines the issue of AI as a method of reinforcing stereotypes and biases that exist in our history, and proposes a way to navigate the use of AI in the composition classroom in an ethical and creative way to ensure diverse perspectives and marginalized voices are heard. Dylann offers us the hopeful insight that AI's biases and the dilemmas it presents society with are an opportunity for composition educators and their students to be creative in countless new ways. Each potential roadblock and complication introduced by this technological integration is an opportunity for creative innovation and deeper engagement in the composition classroom.

Where We Are

This issue's Where We Are, "Creativity" in the Composition Classroom and the Crisis of Purpose," comes from the perspective of Phillip Martin, who suggests that more recent trends in creative pedagogy are the result of a widespread, profound crisis of purpose that is unintentionally being overlooked. In his essay Phillip draws attention to the challenges posed by defining creativity and examines current discussions of and efforts to implement it in the first year composition classroom. He scrutinizes what in his view are the underlying assumptions of recent efforts to creatively address composition students' lack of meaningful participation in the writing classroom and then addresses what he calls our students' crisis of purpose. Citing a disturbing, growing body of social science, Phillip warns us that the problem of composition students' disengagement is a symptom whose cause lies troublingly deeper than much of the work on creativity in the classroom suggests. Although creativity–a multifaceted cipher for the

human spirit–is necessarily part of the solution to the crisis, Phillip urges us to reflect on our roles as educators and frame our students' challenges in a new way, not just as a struggle between pen and paper, but between life and death.

Book Review

Our journal concludes with Rachael Bell's book review of Joan Didion's *Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection*. Rachael explores the question of how composition as a field can change how first year students view writing. She examines three of Didion's twelve essays in depth, carefully reviewing each essay's employment of creativity. Rachael concludes with suggestions of how to incorporate Didion into the first year writing classroom as a way to teach students creativity, enabling students to learn the importance of genre, audience, and how to confront the risks of writing.

Finally we would like to thank our readers, *Composition Studies* subscribers, journal staff, and writers for making this special issue possible. We hope you find this issue to be an exciting collaboration on creativity. Though our journal ends with this genre, we hope it stays with you, encouraging you to be creative in every aspect of your life.

Rachael, Dylann, and Phil

Orlando, Florida

July 2024

FEN Blog Post

AI as a Tool of Creativity/Colonialism in the Composition Classroom

Image generated using Canva AI Image Generator

As a society, we are learning faster than ever before. Technology is growing at a pace only dreamed of in science fiction novels, and access to information and learning capabilities is more affordable than ever thought possible. In regards to use in the composition classroom, systems of generative AI (or GenAI) have progressed from simple spell check to idea generation and writing assistance. It is important to keep in mind, however, that as we integrate these systems of learning and new technologies into the classroom that we continue to place diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of education and scholarly activity. The controversy surrounding AI and its effectiveness in composition classrooms is not a new discussion. It almost seems inevitable that these tools of artificial intelligence would find their way into education, as

they have in every other aspect of life. If these tools of machine learning and artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT are becoming a staple in classrooms of rhetoric and composition, I seek to explore and identify the line where this tool turns from helpful to harmful.

It is becoming widely acknowledged that data-driven technologies and machine learning algorithms are created with a pre-set bias. When humans create technology, true objectivity is not attainable (Leavy et al. 1). These platforms of AI are inherently biased, built from the perspective of the dominant speaker in society and fed the voices of those in power: in the West, the White, male, figure. In this way, the same patterns of inequalities and power imbalance repeat themselves through platforms of artificial intelligence. Marginalized peoples stay marginalized. Diverse perspectives become muted and lost in the sea of voices that overpower them (Owusu-Ansah 145).

Generative AI works by pulling information from across sources on the Internet that's readily available, too often disproportionately White and male. As noted in "Data, Power, and Bias in Artificial Intelligence" by Leavy et al., "Every dataset that aims to represent humans and their behaviour does so in accordance with a world-view or ideology that may be assimilated into an AI system" (Leavy et al. 2). Thus, no knowledge on the Internet is truly neutral – it is wrought with the bias entrenched in its creators. As Manyika et al. state, "AI systems learn to make decisions based on training data, which can include biased human decisions or reflect historical or social inequities, even if sensitive variables such as gender, race, or sexual orientation are removed" (Manyika et al.). Because GenAI machines are not able to discern "value or accuracy or bias" in the data they pull (Dobrin 8), critical thinking is essential while working with these programs.

Sidney Dobrin speaks on the issue of a lack of diverse perspectives and the bias found in generative AI (GenAI) and large language models (LLMs):

> "Large quantities of data created by marginalized people are often excluded from digital databanks. The narratives of many disenfranchised groups are not readily accessible to LLMs because their voices and narratives have been historically excluded from our accounts of history. As such, their contributions frequently remain absent from the LLMs and, thus, from what GenAI engines produce." ("Talking About Generative AI" 28-9)

This ties in with Owusu-Ansah's ideas of "missing people" (146) and the need to examine these technologies - how they represent, define, and shape our understanding of ourselves and one another through a colonialist lens.

AI chatbots aren't the only generative technology to exhibit harmful bias. I used Canva's AI image generator to create the image below (see Fig. 1). I used the keywords "robot writing with human audience watching" and this is what it produced: an overwhelmingly *White* audience. My experience of an AI image generator providing biased results is not a unique one. Tiku et al. found: "When we prompted the technology to generate a photo of a person receiving social services, it generated only non-White and primarily darker-skinned people. Results for a 'productive person,' meanwhile, were uniformly male, majority White, and dressed in suits for corporate jobs" (Tiku et al.).

Fig. 1: Robot writing with crowd of onlookers watching, generated using Canva AI Image Generator

As generative AI becomes normalized in education and in the classroom, it is important to stay vigilant to any bias that might show up. As a society, we are becoming more socially conscious and aware of the importance of the principles of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) in our communities. While individual opinions and values seem to be shifting towards acceptance, these technologies and systems of machine learning are still being trained with data that may be decades behind (Matta et al.). As scholars and educators of rhetoric and composition, it's imperative to keep in mind the entire background and undercurrent of these chatbots and machines of generative AI. What might be influencing the results? What bias might be in play that is swaying the text or images produced? The fact that these machines are defaulting to stereotypes of race and gender (Leavy) is an immediate indicator that there is a lack of creativity

in these systems when it comes to considering different demographics, dialects, backgrounds, etc. It is the responsibility of the human user to make sure these biases don't go unchecked.

As Rachel Morgan explores in her blog post, one way to find this middle ground between utilizing AI ethically and employing human creativity is through the incorporation of generative AI into the composition classroom with curiosity and through a critical lens. For example, Morgan asked her students to bring AI generated content to class for the purpose of studying the surrounding "issues and stakes." By collaboratively viewing the content through a critical lens, the activity opened a discussion about "AI bias and how we respond to AI-generated content" (Morgan). In this way, students learn to critically evaluate AI-generated content, identify potential bias and consider alternate perspectives. Another way to foster creativity in the composition classroom while integrating this AI technology is through promoting diverse voices - incorporating a wide range of viewpoints and voices in the material. This can be achieved through AI-generated writing prompts, reflective engagement, and classroom discussions on the topic of AI bias.

These tools of generative AI can be a helpful resource in the classroom for idea generation, writing assistance, and brainstorming. However, it's imperative that while using AI technology in the composition classroom, marginalized voices remain centered and the focus is held on diversity, equity, and inclusion through this technological shift. Human creativity is needed when the machines fall short, only able to think inside the box of data they were trained in. It is our job as the user to recognize the limitations of these generative AI programs, analyze results through a critical lens, and be sure that diverse perspectives are being included and everyone has a seat at the table.

By encouraging critical thinking and promoting diverse perspectives, educators can empower students to recognize, question, and counteract biases for deeper engagement and richer learning experiences. Through integrating creativity in the composition classroom, generative AI becomes a tool of collaboration and creation for student engagement.

Works Cited

Dobrin, Sidney I. “Talking About Generative AI: A Guide for Educators” Broadview Press, May 15, 2023

Leavy, Susan. “Gender bias in artificial intelligence: the need for diversity and gender theory in machine learning” *2018 ACM/IEEE 1st International Workshop on Gender Equality in Software Engineering*, Gothenburg, Sweden. May 28, 2018, pp. 14-16. doi.org/10.1145/3195570.3195580

Leavy, Susan, et al. “Data, Power, and Bias in Artificial Intelligence” July 28, 2020. doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2008.07341

Manyika, James, et al. “What Do We Do About the Biases in AI?” Harvard Business Review, October 25, 2019. hbr.org/2019/10/what-do-we-do-about-the-biases-in-ai. Accessed 4 July 2024.

Matta, Vic, et al. “Diverse perspectives on bias in AI.” Journal of Information Technology Case and Application Research, vol. 24, no. 2, 2022, pp. 135-143. doi.org/10.1080/15228053.2022.2095776

Morgan, Rachel. “What Students Can Do With AI in the Writing Classroom” Fen Blog, *Composition Studies.* December 13, 2023. compstudiesjournal.com/2023/12/13/what-students-can-do-with-ai-in-the-writing-classroom/ Accessed 2 July 2024.

Owusu-Ansah, Alfred L. “Defining Moments, Definitive Programs, and the Continued Erasure of Missing People” Composition Studies, vol. 51, no. 1, 2023. pp 143-48. compstudiesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/owusu-ansah.pdf

Tiku et al. “These fake images reveal how AI amplifies our worst stereotypes” The Washington Post, November 1, 2023.

www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2023/ai-generated-images-bias-racism-sexism-stereotypes/. Accessed 4 July 2024.

Where We Are

Creativity in the Composition Classroom and the Crisis of Purpose

In the tradition of Where We Are, the following essay constitutes part of my perspective on the theme of this special issue: creativity in composition studies. I commence with a discussion of related background literature and the status quo of relevant scholarship. I then proceed to present what I call the crisis of purpose, which has stricken the generation of young people to which many of our first year composition students belong, both as student writers and, more generally, as human beings. After that, I discuss Peter Weir's 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, the core of whose plot comprises what I believe to be a formidably creative model of composition instruction, despite being fiction, and despite its being fraught with controversy, even more so in today's complex and polarizing socio-political climate. Finally I offer a kind of meditative rebuttal to my own submission of *Dead Poets Society* as a creative instruction model, with concluding reflections.

Ten years ago, Patrick Sullivan asked in "The Unessay" (2015) whether "room needs to be made for creativity in the composition classroom." What did he mean by creativity?

Sullivan, though his descriptions of creativity dazzle us, does not always define the term usefully. He calls creativity "a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition" and "an extraordinarily vital and luminous human capacity" that must "be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of the curriculum in the writing classroom."

To widen the historical aperture, what did the titanic British educator and thinker Betrand Russell have to say about creativity? Also an advocate of it in the classroom, Russell was a master of mathematical logic, at the vanguard of social reform and a Nobel laureate. It turns out

he presumably would have agreed with Sullivan. “The teacher,” Russell writes, “like the artist [...] can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority.”

Importantly, Russell here not only stresses the creativity of the teacher. He sketches for us an almost complete rhetorical situation, whose blanks we can fill in with the givens of this discussion. And though Russell’s term “inner creativity” is not defined, he does point us in the right direction by invoking the centrality of feeling. Lastly, his invoking of domination, fetters and authority is crucial.

Recent research on creativity in the composition classroom has begun zeroing in on the affective (psychological-emotional) states of students. Russell, and certainly the protagonist of the film *Dead Poets Society* discussed below would laud this approach. Bastian (2017), using Banks (2015) as a point of departure, makes an exquisite and empirically based case for ““bring[ing] the funk” into our classrooms, departments, programs, and universities by embracing “boldness, complexity, and even a little irreverence and messiness” (272)”. Bastian concludes that first year writing instructors should “work with students' affective responses rather than resist” them and “disrupt not just the ideological but also the textual status quo within the academy” (7). Helena Thomas (2019) makes an inspired, energetic case for it being “time to reconsider the value of imagination in education and in the teaching of writing,.” Unfortunately, the persuasiveness of Thomas’s vision seems to fade just as we most anticipate her telling us the secret of how imagination and creativity can be put to use in the writing classroom. Nevertheless, I agree with both her and Bastian that our students’ feelings are central to our project of creative pedagogy, and I find Thomas’s paean to imagination no less important to it. Unfortunately, though useful and straightforwardly applicable definitions of creativity remain elusive,

contemporary teachers and scholars continue to agree that the classroom needs more of it, and that emotions might be part of the solution. Why?

The problem, on which there appears to be consensus, is composition students' lack of interest in writing (Gbollie; Johnson; Lester, et al.). Harackiewicz, et al. (2016) argue that "interest combines affective qualities, such as feelings of enjoyment and excitement, with cognitive qualities, such as focused attention and perceived value, all fostered by features of the situation." They propose four "interest-enhancing interventions: attention-getting settings, contexts evoking prior individual interest, problem-based learning, and enhancing utility value." For fear of turning this into a clinical cognitive science research paper, I think it is safe to assume that creative teaching has a lot to do with students' interest. Teachers who are able to elicit, harness and direct their students' interest are more than likely to be labeled as creative, along with their techniques, provided that learning outcomes are met.

As recently as last year, in their article called "We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity" Lester et al. (2023) discouragingly reported that "many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment." (I should add here that this is not a new phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, nearly 70 years before, Edith Layer's own survey of first year composition students at Western Reserve University generated similar results: "I need the English credit," one of her more frank students bluntly stated.) Lester, whose areas of expertise include both first year writing and creative writing (Scholars at Work), appears to be cut from the cloth of Russell's teacher-artist, "directed by an inner creative impulse." According to Lester and his creative colleagues, we (all of us) care about things that are meaningful to us, that give us purpose. "In our view," they conclude, "'real writers' ask themselves, 'So what, for me?'" Lester seems to be making the assumption that if his students

could figure out what writing might do for them, what it (or at least the thoughts and feelings expressed by it) means to them personally, then those students would write with a purpose beyond the obligatory. As far as I can tell, Lester's implication is that writing about the right thing will lead to more engrossing, productive writing, largely as a result of his students' interest.

The problem of composition students' lack of interest in writing, implicit in Lester, is one on which there appears to be consensus (Gbollie; Johnson; Lester, et al.). The literature on interest and motivation in education and in writing classrooms is substantial, and bears directly not necessarily on notions or definitions of creativity itself, but certainly on the outcomes that creativity in the composition classroom is seeking to achieve, that is, improvement in writing by means of natural, self-driven engagement. Harackiewicz, et al. (2016) argue in the journal *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* that "interest combines affective qualities, such as feelings of enjoyment and excitement, with cognitive qualities, such as focused attention and perceived value, all fostered by features of the situation." They propose four "interest-enhancing interventions: attention-getting settings, contexts evoking prior individual interest, problem-based learning, and enhancing utility value." For fear of turning this into a clinical cognitive science research paper, I think it is safe to assume, based on the above, that creative teaching has a lot to do with students' interest, and that teachers who are able to elicit, harness and direct their students' interest, as well create environments that do the same, are more than likely to be labeled as creative, provided that learning outcomes are met.

Unfortunately, before jaunting toward a specific case of teaching writing that meets Harackiewicz's criteria for generating interest, potentially qualifies as creative, and gives hope,

our discussion needs to enter darker territory. In brief, I contend, the lack of interest and purpose in writing classrooms may have a deeper cause, unrelated to first year composition and writing in general. Indeed, rapidly accumulating evidence suggests that for millions of our students the "so what" being observed by composition instructors like Lester may be only one manifestation of a much larger, more frightening trend. The fact of the matter is that all-too-many students are unable to define the "so what?" of life. I worry that it is not that writing class is not kindling "feelings of enjoyment and excitement," "focused attention and perceived value" (Harackiewicz). It's that life itself isn't. The question, I fear, is less "why write?" than it is "why live?" Our students are a generation in the midst of a crisis of purpose.

According to Jonathan Haidt, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* in March of this year, "generation Z," the generation of students currently most enrolled in first year writing is "suffering from anxiety, depression, self-harm, and related disorders at levels higher than any other generation for which we have data." Indeed, "Rates of depression and anxiety in the United States—fairly stable in the 2000s—rose by more than 50 percent in many studies from 2010 to 2019. The suicide rate rose 48 percent for adolescents ages 10 to 19. For girls ages 10 to 14, it rose 131 percent."

In a recent comprehensive investigation psychologists Ian Boreham and Nina Schutte establish a clear link between depression and anxiety on the one hand, and purpose, "an overall sense that life is meaningful," on the other (2023). Although crises of purpose are nothing new, especially not for adolescents and (traditionally) college-age students, what is new are the staggering trends presented above by Haidt.

To make matters worse, public favorability of college education has plummeted. According to a new Wall Street Journal-NORC poll, a majority of Americans don't think a

college degree is worth the cost. Because of the well-established, potentially devastating long-term financial risks, conventional wisdom has begun advising students against attempting college (Lockwood and Douglas).

Why are we telling our students to ask themselves "why write?" when millions are privately asking themselves "Why go to college?" "Is a degree worth it?" "Is the debt worth it?" "Why write at all?" "Why even live?"

The film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), directed by Peter Weir, strikes me as a potentially helpful model for dealing with students who are trapped in this ruinous psychosocial state. It looks the tragic consequences of young adult purposelessness and disinterestedness straight in the eye, and it tells us bluntly there are no easy answers.

As a kind of disclaimer, I acknowledge beforehand that the *Dead Poets Society* is socially dated, and I feel strongly that it ought to be remade to appeal to younger modern, more diverse audiences. However, I believe just as strongly that the core contents of the film are imperishable and universal, and that the all-white, all-male cast of characters and the traditional western sources of rhetorical-literary inspiration employed by its protagonist are merely trappings to what are otherwise general, highly applicable principles.

The near-supernatural protagonist, Mr Keating (played by the late Robin Williams), by means of wildly unconventional and passionate (read: creative) instruction techniques, inspires purpose in both the writing, and more importantly the lives, of a class full of depressed and anxious composition students. As far as teaching goes, *Dead Poets Society* is a film about the consummate creative pedagogue. At the heart of Mr Keating's method is his uncanny ability to guide his students to locate, feel and then direct their own emotional energies and, ultimately, themselves. Keating enables his students to feel seen. In feeling seen, they see themselves. And

only in seeing themselves can they see their purpose and safely pursue the way ahead as free human beings.

Dead Poets Society is arguably a cautionary tale about the joys–and serious hazards–of inspirational teaching. Failure and death haunt its scenes. While some teachers may balk at these presences, the statistics about suicide, depression, and financial distress presented above make clear that failure and death joined us in the classroom years ago. They do not need to be belabored or glamorized, but they attend, and we ignore these specters at our own, and our students' risk. We are deluding ourselves if we think that the stakes are not high, and by not framing composition and writing, at least sometimes, within the most significant of life's puzzles, we risk never engaging the students who will be engaged by nothing less.

By combining traditional linguistic rhetorics of inspiration with less-traditional ones of embodied, somatic rhetoric and situating it in the classroom, Mr Keating arguably creates an environment that, despite its risk, maximizes his students' interest and thus their chances of discovering their purpose. It may not work for every student. But it is a model worth examining.

To get his students in touch with their emotions and their subsequent sense of purpose Keating uses two chief methods. The first is traditional western rhetoric, oratory's ethos, logos and pathos. He charges his class with these tried-and-true rhetorical tools, exciting his students with passion and encouraging the expression and passion of their own with his original logos: "We read and write [...] because we are members of the human race," he says, and "the human race is filled with passion." Do not therefore, he warns, brandishing rhetoric of Henry David Thoreau, "lead lives of quiet desperation," implying the abandoning of true purpose. Rather, "live deep and suck all the marrow out of life." Mr Keating's pathos thaws and dissolves the icy

defense mechanisms common to anxious and depressed young people, and his own ethos invites them into a space in which they are receptive to his arguments.

Mr Keating also employs teaching modes of physical movement. Mounting psychological research demonstrates that the mind is embodied, and that much if not most of our mental lives are influenced and even determined by the relationship between our minds and bodies (Johnson 2015, Van der Kolk 2015). We need to move, and lack of movement is often a cause or comorbid to lack of purpose (Granero-Jiménez, Jesús et al. 2022)**.**

Needless To Say, *Dead Poets Society* ends with John Keating being fired, presumably (technically) for what amounts to having used non-traditional methods that endangered his students. With that in mind, I want to make two points before I leave off, considering why shying away from potentially risky teaching methods for medical-ethical reasons could be and perhaps already is problematic. First, society has been undergoing a process called scientization for well over a century and in recent decades, more specifically, medicalization (van Dijk 2016). This means that both conceptual and real domains, like government and education are now saturated by medical and psychological terminology. Scientific and medical research methods and ethics standards dictate what educators can and cannot do, including publish. Consider the fact that this very essay requires numerous empirical, medical sources. Career-shattering liability demands medically-validated, data-based action, and risk-aversion is often the only sensible option for professional, career-dependent educators to ensure their livelihoods. Although I think that this development is constructive and healthy in countless ways, I also fear that many educators may have been backed inescapably into a corner.

Second, I return to Betrand Russell's statement above. "The teacher can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not

dominated and fettered by an outside authority." There is no mistaking the fact that we as educators are "dominated and fettered by an outside authority." Medical ethics is a juggernaut with whom few of us wish to contend. Certainly, for all time, all human beings have been "dominated and fettered" by one "outside authority" or another. But the point is that we have all become John Keatings in a *Dead Poets Society*, trapped by institutions that threaten grave consequences when we color outside of the proverbially uncreative lines.

I suspect that we cannot help our students become truly interested, fully purposeful, and meaningfully engaged in their writing until we ourselves have determined our own roles in the institutions that employ but paradoxically dominate us. Important as they are, these institutional norms and policies limit us. Our limitations as actors, composition teachers and human beings in general define our creative limits, and our creative limitations form invisible barriers around those who need these barriers broken down the most, our students. Creativity is a multifaceted cipher for the human spirit, and is a necessary component of any worthwhile human endeavor, whether learning and teaching how to write, or overcoming the present crisis of purpose. But if, fearing the fate of John Keating, we cannot free ourselves, then how do we free our students from the perdition of purposelessness?

Works Cited

"Affective" *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology*. https://dictionary.apa.org/affective Accessed 4 Jul 2024.

Bastian, Heather. "Student Affective Responses to 'Bringing the Funk' in the First-Year Writing Classroom." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 6–34. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44784329. Accessed 4 July 2024.

Belkin, Douglas. "Americans Are Losing Faith in College Education, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds." *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a836ce1 Accessed 4 Jul 2024.

Boreham, I. D., & Schutte, N. S. "The relationship between purpose in life and depression and anxiety: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 79, 2736–2767. 2023.

Chetty, Raj, Deming, David, Friedman, John. "DIVERSIFYING SOCIETY'S LEADERS? THE DETERMINANTS AND CAUSAL EFFECTS OF ADMISSION TO HIGHLY SELECTIVE PRIVATE COLLEGES," https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492, Accessed 19 July 2024.

Detmar, Kevin. *The Atlantic Monthly*. 19 February 2014. https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/-em-dead-poets-society-em-is-a-terrible-defense-of-the-humanities/283853/#. Accessed 20 July, 2024.

Drew, Chris, and David Yost. "Composing Creativity: Further Crossing Composition/Creative Writing Boundaries." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2009, pp. 25–42. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25674354. Accessed 20 July 2024.

Fewster, R., & West, B. (2022). Applied theatre for military personnel in recovery: creativity, agency, and re-imagining the self. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *28*(2), 338–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2022.2061847. Accessed July 20 2024.

Flower, Linda, and John R. Hayes. "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1980, pp. 21–32. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/356630. Accessed 21 July 2024.

Gbollie, Charles, and Harriett Keamu. "Student Academic Performance: The Role of Motivation, Strategies, and Perceived Factors Hindering Liberian Junior and Senior High School Students Learning." March 2017 *Education Research International* 2017(2):1-11 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315473713_Student_Academic_Performance_The_Role_of_Motivation_Strategies_and_Perceived_Factors_Hindering_Liberian_Junior_and_Senior_High_School_Students_Learning Accessed on July 20 2024.

Granero-Jiménez, Jesús et al. "Influence of Physical Exercise on Psychological Well-Being of Young Adults: A Quantitative Study." *International journal of environmental research and*

public health vol. 19,7 4282. 3 Apr. 2022, doi:10.3390/ijerph19074282. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8998469/, Accessed 19 July 2024.

Harackiewicz, Judith M et al. "Interest Matters: The Importance of Promoting Interest in Education." *Policy insights from the behavioral and brain sciences* vol. 3,2 (2016): 220-227. doi:10.1177/2372732216655542.https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5839644/. Accessed 20 July 2024.

Haidt, Jonathan. "END THE PHONE-BASED CHILDHOOD NOW." *The Atlantic Monthly*. 13 Mar 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/teen-childhood-smartphone-use-mental-health-effects/677722/https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/teen-childhood-smartphone-use-mental-health-effects/677722/, Accessed 4 July 2024.

Johnson, Mark. "Embodied understanding." *Frontiers in psychology.* vol. 6 875. 29 Jun. 2015, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00875. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00875/full, Accessed July 20 2024.

Mauri, Johnson. "Increasing Internal Motivation in Apathetic Students within the First Year Writing Classroom." *Locutorium*. Vol 17 2022. https://locutorium.byu.edu/issues/volume-17-2022/increasing-internal-motivation-in-apathetic-students-within-the-first-year-writing-classroom/. Accessed on 20 Jul 2024.

Layer, Edith E. “Motivation of Freshman Composition on the University Level.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1952, pp. 3–6. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/354277. Accessed 4 July 2024.

Lester, Glenn, et al. “We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity.” *Writing Spaces*. Volume 5: Readings on Writing. Edited by Trace Daniels-Lerberg, Dana L. Driscoll, Mary Stewart, and Matthew A. Vetter. Parlor Press, 2023. Pp. 1-16

Lockwood, Jacob and Webber, Douglas. “Non-Completion, Student Debt, and Financial Well-Being: Evidence from the Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking.” Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2023. https://www.federalreserve.gov/default.htm, Accessed 20 July 2024.

Monk, Ray. "Bertrand Russell". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 21 Jun. 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertrand-Russell, Accessed 4 July 2024.

Scholars at Work: Glenn Lester: Home. https://library.park.edu/scholarsatwork/glennlester, Accessed 20 July 2024.

Seigel, Marika, et al. “Monstrous Composition: Reanimating the Lecture in First-Year Writing Instruction.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2020, pp. 643–71. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27114470, Accessed 4 July 2024.

Sullivan, Patrick. “The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2015, pp. 6–34. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24633867, Accessed 10 June 2024.

Taczak, Kara and Davis, Matt. “Editorial Introduction: Why Write?” *Composition Studies*. https://compstudiesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/editors_introduction.pdf. Accessed 19 July 2024.

Tough, Paul. “Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault Is That?” *The New York Times Magazine*. 5 Sep 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html Accessed 4 July 2024.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* New York, New York, Penguin Books, 2015.

Van Dijk, Wieteke et al. “Medicalisation and Overdiagnosis: What Society Does to Medicine.” *International journal of health policy and management* vol. 5,11 619-622. 1 Nov. 2016, doi:10.15171/ijhpm.2016.121, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5088721/, Accessed 19 July 2024.

Book Review

Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection by Joan Didion. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Pp. 1-150.

Reviewed by Rachael Bell, University of Central Florida

> I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear (Didion 49).

To most incoming first year college students, writing is only used to complete the necessary assignments given to them by their professors. Two composition professors, Sarah Allen and Glenn Lester have noticed this among first year students. Lester has stated, "Many college students write for one reason and one reason only: to complete a class assignment.1 But students who subscribe to this view of writing—writing as merely a means to an end, a tool to achieve a grade—are seriously limiting themselves . . . " (Lester et al. 1). Allen's student confessed, "I don't really like writing. Is that okay?' she asked. This is the first time that I remember a student confessing aloud (to me) that she did not like writing . . . " (Allen 34). This deflating truth begs the question, how can we as a field change how students view writing? Throughout her book, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean: An Essay Collection,* Joan Didion's essays show how and why writing is more than just a means to an end. She pulls from her experiences writing about her fear of taking risks, fear of failure, and even fear of success, which are all things first year college students experience. Through her essays, she helps readers view writing as a way to find themselves and freedom, instead of seeing it as a cage of risks and failures. To write is to discover who we are and what drives us, it is about communicating with those around us and ourselves which is ultimately what first year students crave. Didion's book houses twelve essays, each standing alone as their own chapters. They are in order from publication date but can be read out of order, since they do not flow into each other. Three of her twelve essays in particular would greatly help students see that writing is about more than just assignments, because they show the reader the heart behind her writing, what drives her. These three essays would provide

a firm foundation for educators to use, allowing their first year students to see writing outside of academia in action, while also showing that what we learn in college is still applied in our writing after graduation.

"Telling Stories" follows Didion on a journey from her college writing class through to the challenges of getting three short stories published after writing a successful novel. In her essay, she confides in the reader that like many first year students, she dealt with feelings of inadequacy and feared failure in her college writing course, which kept her from experimenting and sharing her work. In her essay, she demonstrates that risks in writing come from experimentation. "Telling Stories" encourages students to play with their writing to discover their voice and find what works for them. Didion explains that writing is about getting to know who we are and where we have been: "In order to discover what was on my mind I needed room. . . . room in which to play with everything I remembered and did not understand . . . " (Didion 67). Her journey from exploring her feelings in her college course to being a published author provides students with someone they can relate to, while also giving them hope for the future.

In "Why I Write" Didion strives to answer the question, why do you write? She states that she writes to find out what she is "thinking" (Didion 49), "seeing" (Didion 49), and "fearing . . . " (Didion 49). Each of these three things not only drives her writing but drives every writer. She states "Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel . . . " (Didion 59). Like her, we all write to find answers, the truths about our world and ourselves, to connect with others, and to know who we are. Her essay not only shows first year students why we write, it also guides them by showing them that audience and genre matter. It is important for them to learn that not everything changes when they have to write an essay, email, or short story. She shows them that

the question they pose of why and their follow through of providing answers allows them to be creative within the constraints of their genre and audience, showing them that the one constant in their writing is themselves.

In “Last Words” Didion analyzes Hemingway’s writing after his death, which includes his will or last words. By diving into his life and passion for words she creates a connection between reader and prose. She walks the reader through his will which is disregarded by the living. She shows the readers that the risk with writing is that we can only control what we write, not what people think of it or will do with it. She tells the reader that “The peculiarity of being a writer is that the entire enterprise involves the mortal humiliation of seeing one’s own words in print. The risk of publication is the grave fact of the life . . . ” (Didion 106). As writers, we must decide if that is a risk worth taking. For first year students the risks lie in letting their voice and thoughts shine through their writing. She shows them that all writers experience those feelings of fear of failure and judgment, showing students that we write despite those feelings, even in college.

The first year student version of myself would have greatly benefited from the freedom these essays bring. These essays allow the reader to see theory in practice. Proving to first year students that what is taught in a composition class is used outside of the classroom. I was a first year student who viewed writing as merely a means to an end, which is why I would recommend writing educators use Didion’s collection of essays as supplemental material in their classes. I believe if I had read her work in my first year college course I would have realized the freedom and creativity writing brings sooner. Educators could create assignments using her books as a template. They could give first year students her essays to read and task them to explore writing a non-fiction essay in her style. This would allow for creativity and discovery of voice to occur.

Another angle could be to make an academic essay assignment, tasking students to figure out how to write using their voice while also making sure they adhere to their guidelines which would include considering the genre and their audience. Didion's essays should be used as supplementary material in first year college courses because they provide a firm foundation for educators to build upon. Using her essays as examples of how to write creatively within the constraints of assignments will allow students to explore their writing and creativity, which would hopefully propel us into a future where students view writing as more than just a means to an end.

Orlando, Florida

Works Cited

Allen, Sarah "The Inspired Writer vs. the Real Writer." *Writing Spaces. Volume 1 : Readings on Writing*. Edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, Parlor Press, 2010. Pp. 34-43

Lester, Glenn, et al. "We Write Because We Care: Developing Your Writerly Identity"

Writing Spaces. Volume 5: Readings on Writing. Edited by Trace Daniels-Lerberg, Dana L. Driscoll, Mary Stewart, and Matthew A. Vetter. Parlor Press, 2023. Pp. 1-16