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Creativity on command

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Abstract

In the ongoing debate between nature and nurture, between biological determinism and behaviourism, behaviourists maintain that an individual has little control over inspiration and creativity and is a mere helpless recipient, waiting to be shaped and filled by positive or negative socialization. Contemporary social psychologists, on the other hand, build on genetic influences and tell us that a person's social environment can activate potential. Since family socialization is critical to development of the child's core identity, we seem to be condemning a person who fails to receive adequate love and nurturing. The truth lies somewhere in between. However, if we define "creativity" as the ability of a writer-reporter to uniquely configure a person or situation so that elements of the seemingly insignificant stand for the whole, then perhaps creativity can be cultivated by careful, thoughtful instruction and willing self-discipline.

Creativity on command

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Can creativity be taught?

Can students who were required in lower-grade language arts class to flesh out sentences by larding them with parts of speech (“She *brought* her book *down heavily* on the desk *in order* to make a point *with* the noise”) now be un-taught, instructed in journalism writing class to strip their words to the simplest, most graphic elements in order to advance the story? (“She slammed her geography book on the desk.”)

Can students who learned in early school years that writing *creatively* meant writing fiction (the proverbial *story*) now be re-taught in journalism class that writing creatively means making non-fiction come alive for the reader by using literary devices to *recreate* the action, atmosphere, dialogue and narrative of an actual person, place or situation? And to do it without confusing fiction with non-fiction, without resorting to a composite as a crutch and without pirating the printed words of others?

Can students for whom real life is defined by web-site content, reality TV, video games, Facebook, iTunes and the thumbnails of *InStyle* be coaxed to remove their headsets, turn off streaming video and taught that real inspiration comes from within and that finding it takes time, quietude and aloneness? Should we provide students with just such a quiet time and place for thinking and analyzing a story’s approach?

In the ongoing debate between nature and nurture, between biological determinism and behaviourism, behaviourists maintain that an individual has little control over inspiration and creativity and is a mere helpless recipient, waiting to be shaped and filled by positive or negative socialization. Contemporary social psychologists, on the other hand, build on genetic influences and tell us that a person’s social environment can activate potential. Since family socialization is critical to development of the child’s core identity, we seem to be condemning a person who fails to receive adequate love and nurturing. The truth lies somewhere in between. However, if we define “creativity” as the ability of a writer-reporter to uniquely configure a person or situation so that elements of the seemingly insignificant stand for the whole, then perhaps creativity can be cultivated by careful, thoughtful instruction and willing self-discipline.

In the early stage of human development, an individual learns through imitation, through mimicking the behavior of others in particular roles. Behaviorists would say that reward (an *A*) and punishment (a *D* or failure) actually shape performance, if not belief. Thus, journalism professors instruct their students to *act as if*—to study—*imitate*?—the writing styles of such contemporary narrative journalists as Michelle Hiskey (*Atlanta-Journal Constitution*) Anne Hull (*Washington Post*) and David Briggs (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*) or perhaps to study the work of such New Journalists as the late Hunter S. Thompson (“I’m ready for anything, by God! Anything at all. ‘Yeah, what are you drinkin?’ I ordered a Margarita with ice, but he

wouldn't hear of it. 'Naw, naw . . . what the hell kind of drink is that for Kentucky Derby time? What's *wrong* with you boy?'" ("The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved." *Scanlan's Monthly*, June 1970) and Joan Didion, the latter who spoke of the San Bernardino Valley as "a harsher California, haunted by the Mojave just beyond the mountains, devastated by the hot dry Santa Ana winds that comes down through the passes at 100 miles an hour and whines through the eucalyptus windbreaks and works on the nerves . . . It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows." (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*. Powells. 1968) These journalistic, novelistic get-in-your-face pioneers from the 1960s and 1970s nurture today's immersion journalist.

I tell journalism students that good writing is successful communication, that it has to evolve from bad. But does it? We can teach technique, give students examples to read of polished writing, teach them form, enhance their skill levels. But this says nothing about creativity. Years ago, I enrolled in several writing courses at the New School in New York City. My teachers were successful novelists and magazine writers, and if not exactly the literati of Manhattan, at least among the very published. I can still remember some of their names: Selwyn James (*Man of Brittany*, articles published in *The Readers Digest*), juvenile book writer Mina Simon (nee Lewiton). In one class, I was instructed to write a non-fiction piece in the style of a favourite writer. I chose Ernest Hemingway. Unable to imitate his style successfully, I wrote a piece that bombed dreadfully in that class: I simply couldn't imitate. Rather than be inspired, I was cowed.

And then there was author Rhoda de Terra. I met her on a train from New York City to Washington D.C. A storyteller, this 50-something lady with a broad-brimmed, blue picture hat who had gone around the world on a tramp steamer. She invited me to visit her in Washington. The following week, I did. She gave me wine before dinner. I don't drink. But drunk, I believe to this day that I dined not on squab but on the pigeon perched on her windowsill. That is the stuff that fuels my own storytelling. I was inspired by this lady. She invited me not only to her home, but into her circle. She treated me not as a young and barely tried writer but as writing *colleague*. The fact that she had chosen to spend several months attending Congressional sessions – and found them interesting – became inspiring counterpoint to what I would have regarded in those days as merely boring and mundane. I went home, and I wrote. Thus, *how we regard* individual students may be as crucial to creativity as anything else.

I think of two former journalism professors. Buddy Davis, a Pulitzer Prize winner and for a time my colleague at the University of Florida, awarded the crown of thorns to the worst student in his advanced news writing and reporting class. As his student, I was afraid of Buddy; so were others. From Buddy, I learned technique and self-discipline. Hugh Cunningham, later to be the University of Florida's publicist, was a raconteur. He was my instructor and some years later also my colleague. Hugh told me stories. Then he encouraged me to find my own journalistic path, to see the *inobvious* in any story as well as the obvious. I can still hear him in class: "Yes, but what do you *see*? What do you *hear*?" Ernie Pyle, observer of the human condition, master of the softer, gentler, rhythmic way of telling a story, saw and felt the horrors and humanity of war: "Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden

pack-saddles, their hands hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked.” (“The Death of Captain Waskow” in *Reporting America at War* PBS.)

Orienting young journalists to the human condition, the rhythm of life, the world of “How do you *feel*?” requires they be encouraged to explore with their senses-- to hear, to see, to feel the rhythm of life-- and be given the freedom to execute creativity in the way they choose. *Choice* is essential to releasing trapped creativity. For an exercise on learning how to write description, one of my students unfortunately faked what she saw during an assigned trip to the county hospital—if indeed she went. She reported that from her nighttime vantage at the rear of the parking lot, she saw at hospital entrance a one-eyed security guard who limped, and a homeless, dark-skinned man who reeked of liquor and tobacco and lurched. See-sawing from the objective to the omniscient (How did you know he was homeless or, for that matter, smelled? Would a security guard limp and have only one eye?), she fabricated both individuals. Her description was poorly written, an abuse of style and poor grammar. Yet focused on one sense—sight—she created a dominant impression of hospital despair and vagrancy, a sort of creative *cinema verite*, albeit fake. On the same assignment to the same hospital, another student, unable to *show* what was happening through sensory observation, instead labeled each activity (“There was the sound of talking.”). Filled with noun-labels and state-of-being verbs, her one-pager focused first on hospital architecture, then, without transition, on the sun glinting off a hospital courtesy-cart driver’s gold tooth. We talked about it. Her rewrite was much better: She was learning how to let go of public-school *form*. She had permission: Mine.

Some social psychologists say that certain teaching practices can dull motivation and as a result, kill creativity. Group collaboration, they say, may ignite it. And as some people suggest, it’s possible that by imposing certain writing assignments and the form and methods to use on them, we may be stifling the creativity of some students, particularly those who haven’t tapped their potential. Yet isn’t it also possible that the student who submits a creative journalism story is simply repeating a pattern that has worked well for him or her in the past--walking in the same shoes time and time again, not taking the time and seclusion to consider other approaches to the material? In effect, isn’t this self-imitation with its limitations? Where is the creative and critical thought we require of journalists?

John (not his real name) is a 19-year-old writing student who comes occasionally to class. He always sits attentively in the front row. Never does he take a note, rarely does he complete an assignment and turn it in for evaluation and grading. This time, he did. With permission, I reprint part of it here exactly as he wrote it:

“I am sitting down relaxing with my eyes close and all of a sudden a smell hits my nose. Sort of like a tap on the shoulder type of thing as I make my way to the kitchen I see my mom in the there cooking up a storm as the steam from the rice hit me in the face my knee’s being to buckle. The sent as if I was getting pampered by the smell as my mom was severing the family my senses was telling that this was good thing. As I being to gorge my face....” “I see my siblings wake up from there naps as the they have this confuse look on there faces. As the day is going down one by by one my family beens to vanish into night as they rest there heads....” The piece exhibits a creative sense— the class clapped when I asked his permission to use this portion

of his description—but this may be as close as he gets to immersion journalism. John has been referred to a learning centre for help.

Immersion journalism—the ability to report by climbing into the skin of the actors, to get inside their heads— requires a certain procedure of discipline and technique. No one tells a newspaper reporter to first find the storyline, then write the article. That takes time. That takes thought. An approaching deadline is built into the mass communications system, and it often forces stereotypical news writing. As students, many of us weren't taught to think critically about what we covered. But as professors, perhaps all of us should be teaching this. For example, I use the storyline technique in teaching magazine writing. It not only gives the story direction and *structure*, it informs the writer where in the situation the story can be found, which details to use in conveying facts, background and action, which details can be ignored and which to choose in order to convey a dominant impression that stands for the whole, one with which the reader can identify. Regardless of actual detail, every story makes a comment on the human condition by dealing with such themes as conflict, death, homelessness, the despair of the mentally ill. Such themes are the common threads that run throughout our writing, that define it and meet the reader's needs to be able to identify, to find himself or herself within the lines.

Using the senses to approach a news story this way requires skill in organization, else the reader drowns in words of passionate portrayal. The closer such a story approaches traditional New Journalism, the less obvious is the organization and the more organizational skill required. Rather than go overboard, however, many of today's newspaper reporters begin a news story in narrative style but then, unsure how to simultaneously report facts and sustain the narration, fall back into traditional reporting methods that fail to build reader identity.

This ability to identify with the subject, to help the reader *feel in with*, is only possible creatively if the writer can sufficiently identify with his or her subjects. The ability to reach inside and tap something *within yourself* provides the reader with a unique pair of spectacles for viewing any person or situation. As teacher and popular-magazine writer and editor for 30 years, I believe that people who aren't in touch with their feelings have the most difficulty unlocking their creative potential. They can learn the *mechanics* of writing a *good enough* story, one that will *pass*. The story will suit the purpose-- to engage readers, hold their attention and keep them informed. It won't inspire because it lacks passion. It won't ignite action because it lacks the creative spark. It's a personal approach but cut from the same pattern used time and again. I call it practicing cookie-cutter journalism.

Two former students illustrate the difference. Callie, a reserved but popular co-ed from a moneyed family, exhibits very little emotion. I would call her contained rather than restrained. She finds it hard to build reader identification because she herself has trouble identifying with others and feeling in with them. Her personal social circle is small, refined and, well, *contained*. I had to instruct her, show her a typical format, show her where and how to humanize. Callie's final stories were adequate. Acacia, on the other hand, was a somewhat free-spirited coed from the same school who had to work two jobs. Although Acacia had never heard of New Journalism or the modern-day equivalent of immersion, she knew instinctively how to do it and which senses to use in creating a dominant impression. She immersed herself in the heavy-metal band scene, got excited about it, lived it, smelled it, heard it and produced

a piece that, while rough-hewn in first draft, nonetheless conveyed a dominant impression and engaged reader interest. She built identity.

The flip side of that is creativity, a special perception that some people possess and others do not. The creative brain sees more in a situation than what is surface evident. A student described it as the ability to see both the little picture and the big picture of which it's a part, to paint with broad strokes yet choose which details to fill in. From current student Joseph Mabry: "It was a beautiful acoustic instrument, shining black in the sunlight that danced across its body. The guitar looked as if it were begging someone to play it, the strings longing to be fretted and plucked." (Joseph Mabry, Daytona Beach, FL, September 2007, unpublished).

From observation and my own practice and circumstances, I would judge creativity to be indeed that special perception--a matter of genetic degree and only a *potential*. It would be activated by certain love and nurturing and by certain structured and unstructured environmental stimuli. Instruction and learning can encourage it. My own situation informs me: In fourth grade, I wrote my first three-act play, at 20 sold my first magazine article, at 28 saw my first teleplay aired. But I waited until I was 62 to sell my first book. I believe I possessed that special perception at birth. By the time I was four, I was reading newspapers and books in the family's personal library. I would sneak into that library until I graduated from high school, reading the biographies, autobiographies, novels, history and poetry books and some forbidden books as well. There was only a literary *sense* in my family: Three of us read voraciously, but no one at the time wrote to sell although a local newspaper did publish some of my father's poetry once, just as my poetry was once published in an anthology of the same.

I asked my first- and second-year students recently if the public schools breed creativity out of the student. "Yes," said my best student, he of the rhythmic, black guitar and home-schooled. "I had the best teacher possible: My mother." Said another student: "The format for our essays at school was mandatory. We had to write five or six paragraphs, and each one had to contain at least five sentences. Near the end of my senior year," he continued, "one of my teachers told us there were other ways to write. We didn't know that before. You can't really make it flow," he said, "if all you have are a set number of paragraphs and a certain number of sentences to do it all in."

While unlimited space may not guarantee a creative piece, I believe that instructors in our profession bear a responsibility beyond the five steps of creativity—imitation, inspiration, immersion, innovation and instruction. We can and should nurture in students a sort of receptiveness—a quiet willingness to remain open to the creative forces within—in much the manner achieved through the practice of meditation, visualization and the higher-self teachings. Thoughts, after all, have creative power. Our willingness to let go of our preconceived notions of how writing ought to be and to value rather than devalue innovation can help students creatively visualize success.

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Nancy M. Hamilton began her journalism career as a reporter and feature writer for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. In later years, she became an editor at *Audubon Magazine* in New York City and took courses in creative writing at the New School in lower Manhattan. She has taught magazine writing, editing and production, news reporting and feature writing, mass media and popular arts, women in film and novel, photojournalism, and public relations at several universities including the University of Florida, Penn State, Bowling Green State and Humboldt State University. She currently is adjunct professor at Daytona Beach College where she teaches writing and sociology. In 2007, her book on magazine writing was reissued for mass market under the title *Magazine Writing: A Step-by-Step Guide for Success* (Pearson Education).