

On Teaching Creativity in a Screen-Centric World

We toyed with a number of titles for this essay. We thought about calling it “On Teaching Focus in the Age of Distraction.” We even considered “On Teaching Writing to People Who Don’t Read.” Ultimately, we rejected all titles in this vein because they cast the present as a lesser version of a better past. We want to resist being nostalgic for a time when teaching was easier and students were somehow better because such yearning shuts down the project of teaching creativity and curiosity before it can even get started. We choose instead to accept where we are, teaching in rooms where students are distracted by technology. But this is just one of the constraints of teaching in the present and, as we argue throughout *Habits*, there is no creativity without constraint. Our job as teachers is to cultivate the conditions where focused attention is possible, where reading is intellectually rewarding, where writing is experienced as a technology for thinking new thoughts.

Teaching wasn’t easier before the scene of instruction shifted from being paper-based to screen-centric. In the paper-based world, the constraints were different (information was stored in books and newspapers, both in limited supply, at the nearest library), so the creative solutions were different. Now, almost all of the reading, writing, and thinking students do takes place on screens; virtually all of the research students do takes place online; and it’s not all that uncommon for students to take classes in which the teacher is not a three-dimensional person but rather a digital avatar who delivers assignments, comments on submissions, and gives final grades. Rather than fret over what has been lost in this shift, we think it’s far better to accept the challenges and to explore the opportunities that come with having students who can access more information more easily than any other generation in human history.

What does it mean to accept this? Teaching remains a creative activity, but the forms creativity takes in the screen-centric world differ from the forms it took when the world was paper-based. So, the creative teacher of today says, “Yes, it’s a fact: for virtually all of my students, the amount of time spent gaming, binging on streamed series, posting to social media, and texting each other dwarfs the amount of time spent disconnected from the net, reading thoughtful works of fiction and nonfiction. This is the new reality. So what can we, as creative teachers, do in this new, inescapably mediated environment to help our students cultivate the habits of creative and curious minds?”

Habits is our response to that question. We want our students to learn to use writing as a technology for practicing thoughtfulness in a world in which information is superabundant and the peace and quiet necessary for meaningful reflection is in short supply. We put the instructional emphasis on cultivating the habits of mind that actively make creative thinking possible. (We enumerate and describe these habits of mind below.) This shift toward writerly habits of mind necessarily entails a move away from rhetorical modes and away from a primary focus on argument because such matters can become genuine only *after* one has embarked on the adventure of seeing the world the way writers do. We focus on practicing habits because we see them as the foundation for education and growth. Because education is, at its essence, the ceaseless activity of learning how to think thoughts that are new to the learner, our goal is for students to keep practicing being curious and creative until this way of approaching the world becomes *habitual*.

We are not alone in our belief that writers’ habits matter. The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a document jointly produced and published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project in 2011, also argues that cultivating habits of mind is “essential for success in college writing.” The *Framework* demonstrates how its specified habits help students achieve the results called for in the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. While the habits of mind and writing outcomes in our book differ from those in the *Framework*, we share the *Framework*’s pedagogical premise: practicing writerly habits of

mind puts students in a position to transform how they read, write, and think.

We know our goals are ambitious and we understand why writing teachers often settle for something much more readily achievable—the production of writing that looks polished and correct. But we see the premature focus on formal correctness as inhibiting the fundamentally disordered and inefficient process of thinking new thoughts. And, because our students come to us with a long history of being taught that clarity in writing is the highest value to which one might aspire, the first challenge we face when we enter the classroom is convincing them that, if they are going to use writing to learn, they have to unlearn ways of writing that emphasize correct form over meaningful content. To foster the process of unlearning, we teach students to practice habits of mind, such as paying attention, asking questions, and embracing complexity, that make real learning possible. And once our students begin to practice these activities, everything immediately gets messy.

This mess is inevitable. Our students know how to write papers that look tidy, but they haven't practiced how to ask a good question or how to get an informational question to lead to a foundational question. And when they try for the first time, there's no sudden, miraculous transformation, there are no great thoughts hidden from view that were just waiting to be invited out into the open—not because they aren't good students, but because that's not how thought happens (unless you're Zeus, pulling Athena fully formed from your head).

One learns to think, to focus, to be curious, to be creative, to tolerate states of unknowing not in a flash but with regular, steady, deliberate practice. In our classes, students practice questioning their own patterns of paying attention, reading, writing, thinking, and learning. And they practice formulating genuine questions—big questions, unanswerable questions, questions they feel drawn to or haunted by, questions they want to be sure they've considered deeply before they graduate. When they succeed in formulating such questions, they experience the thrill of intrinsic motivation—that moment when a writing assignment for school morphs from a task imposed from outside to a search that feels important and meaningful in its own right. The call to practice being curious and creative is also a call to experience what it means to be inspired, what it means to be thoughtful, what it means to use writing to think thoughts that are new to the writer.

The way we see it, the biggest challenge to teaching habits of the creative mind is that it requires both teachers and students to accept *as a fact* that thinking is a complicated and messy business and that writing, which is best used as a technology for thinking new thoughts, is also complicated and messy. This means that the challenge of writing about new ideas never goes away, not for beginning writers, or for their more experienced creative teachers, or for those who write professionally. Thinking new thoughts necessarily involves a profound encounter with the unknown. Teachers who choose to cultivate their students' creative potential have to give up both on the idea that there is a single writing process (draft, peer review, revise, submit) suitable to all and on this idea's corollary, that there exists a pedagogy that can lead all students step-by-step from mundane mumblings to creative arias in fifteen weeks.

The Twelve Habits of the Creative Mind

We invite you to think of the twelve habits practiced in this book as habits of attention, curiosity, and thought. While each individual habit appears as an individual item in a table of contents (and we give each habit its own section in our book), the truth is that as soon as one starts to practice any given habit, other connected habits come along for the ride. To practice orienting is to also to practice paying attention, to practice reflecting is also to practice playing . . . and paying attention and orienting, and so on. That's the nature of the activity: it is complexly organized, internally interactive and recursive, and experienced differently according to the practitioner's temperament, native abilities, and interests. And so, although we have teased the habits apart and provided essays that explain and model each habit, seemingly in isolation, we know that once students embark on any of the practice sessions we provide, the exercises themselves will require that the students practice more than one habit at a time.

1. Orienting

Where am I? Starting a new writing project, particularly one that requires stretching beyond what one has done before, can be disorienting. When there's no right answer, writing can feel risky. To begin, students need to be open to new experiences and ideas, to have access to writing materials and the Internet, and to be committed to making

time for cultivating the habits that serve curiosity, creativity, and learning. In other words, they have to be committed to practice and to trust that learning how to learn is a wholly worthwhile endeavor.

2. Beginning

How can you get the creative process going? The history of writing instruction in schools is a history of imposed rules: Write what you know! Be concise! Your introduction should end with a one-sentence thesis! All these rules take the writer from a known starting point to a known end point; there are no discoveries, insights, or surprises. Too often, students infer that the whole purpose of writing is simply to follow the rules. We encourage them instead to think about writing as a creative act. To learn to write like an experienced nonfiction writer, students need to be willing to plunge into the unfamiliar. They need to pay attention and engage deeply with sources, ideas, people, and the worlds in which they live. They need to practice asking questions and being open to new ways of thinking about ideas and problems that are new to them.

3. Paying Attention

In a world filled with digital distractions, how can anyone sustain attention long enough to read an article or write an essay? The result of multitasking—reading while simultaneously listening to music, watching a video, instant messaging, and checking social media—is doing many things poorly at once. (We regularly see people driving on the highway at sixty-plus miles an hour while texting on their phones, sometimes with both hands!) Students need to learn, or relearn, that paying attention takes time and focus; it requires paying attention to how you pay attention. Only through sustained practice attending to reading, thinking, and writing can students begin to see and hear and think and feel in different ways.

4. Questioning

What kind of questions am I drawn to? What kind of questions do I avoid? When is questioning fun? When is it out of bounds? Students often gravitate toward simple questions, questions that can be definitively answered with facts or questions that narrow the scope of possibilities: Agree or disagree? Good or bad? We encourage students to develop genuine and open-ended questions, questions that the student

truly wants to answer and questions that require research and new learning to answer. Michel de Montaigne, widely recognized as the first essayist, asked himself, *What do I know?* We challenge students to ask themselves not only *What do I know?* but *What don't I know?* and *What do I want to know?*

5. Exploring

Where do you want to take your mind today? To think new thoughts, you have to travel beyond what you know and all that's familiar and comforting. None of us needs to practice finding information that supports what we already think or believe. The practice of exploring entails intentionally setting out to find what is unfamiliar to you, what is unexpected, what is surprising. We invite you to envision the research process not as a voyage over already mapped territory but as a trip down the rabbit hole. We want you to set for your students the goal of generating research that is surprising, even extraordinary. For curious and creative thinkers, even reading an assigned text is an invitation to explore—to look up unfamiliar words, to track down mysterious references, to remind oneself of a song lyric, and so on. A commitment to creative exploration is one way that students take ownership of their educations.

6. Connecting

How do you know you're thinking? We maintain that thinking is the act of making connections. So, to think new thoughts, you need to practice making different kinds of connections and you need to have new material to connect with. This habit thus involves two interrelated practices: working outside the binary responses of agree/disagree and, equally important, seeking new resources to think with and about. For students to become independent thinkers, they especially need to practice making connections that focus on differences. The word *but*, we argue, is the passkey into critical thinking, and consciously introducing *but* and *or* into your thoughts is a surefire way to create openings for new ideas.

7. Working Deliberately

What does it mean to work deliberately? Deliberate workers do not just go through the motions. They make conscious choices about how and where they work. They are interested in the project at hand, they are willing to push beyond their comfort zone to be successful, and they

seek regular feedback. To become deliberate writers, students need to practice working the way experienced writers do, which means, reading like a writer, asking questions like a writer, and revising like a writer. Working deliberately doesn't change the existential realities of writing; it doesn't cause frustration or isolation to magically disappear. But it does provide the writer with a set of practices for working through the rough patches, the dry spells, the sense that it's all been said before.

8. Reflecting

What do I think about what I've read or heard or seen? How does my word choice shape what I'm able to say about what I think? How is my perspective shaping what I can see? A reflective writer might ask such questions as a way to step back from the details of whatever the writer is reading or observing and to think instead about its meaning. And during the process of writing, a reflective writer keeps an eye on how the project is unfolding. Is something missing? Does an idea or assertion need to be examined from an alternative perspective? For reflective writers, the practice of reflecting isn't time devoted to admiring their image in the mirror; it's the ongoing act of assessing and reassessing how one represents the world to oneself and to others.

9. Persisting

What do experienced writers do when their initial attempt to embark on a project to think new thoughts fails? When the material just seems too difficult, the issue too convoluted, the challenge too steep? Inexperienced writers respond to these difficulties by simplifying the issue, ignoring conflicting information, or choosing an easier, safer project. Experienced writers learn how to persist in the face of such frustration by reorienting themselves or beginning anew. They acquire an appreciation for difficulty, for complexity, and for practice itself. They know that working on the edge of one's understanding is always challenging and that the struggle could well be a sign of successful engagement with what the writer does not yet know.

10. Organizing

How does a writer know what goes where? Writing is all about placement: where one begins, when one introduces complicating

information, whether one considers conflicting material or leaves it unmentioned. Students in traditional writing classes are given a structure—the five-paragraph theme, for example—and then told that writing is the act of filling that structure. Practiced writers, by contrast, don't start out knowing how their work is going to be organized. They gather their material and think about what it means. They let the material pull itself out of trim and connect to unanticipated issues and ideas. They write informally to see where their brainstorming leads and organize the results in ways that highlight and correspond with the emergent project. And then, with a specific audience in mind, they define a path through the material that will take readers on a journey to new thoughts.

11. Speculating

Can writing for school be creative? The most common genre of writing assigned in college classes is the argument, but asking students to generate thesis-driven arguments leads more often than not to the production of empty prose. To emphasize that we want to see students' minds at work, thinking on the page, we encourage the habit of speculating. To speculate is “to observe or view mentally; to consider, examine, or reflect upon with close attention; to contemplate; to theorize upon.” (*O.E.D.*) We encourage students to read essays that take readers on an intellectual journey so that they see how serious nonfiction, even academic writing, is driven forward by the practice of the curious and creative mind.

12. Playing

Can writing for school be fun? It depends, of course, on the class and the teacher, but we imagine most students would say no. Their job, as they see it, is to produce drab, convoluted prose that approximates their sense of academic prose for the required number of pages. Curious and creative writers by contrast, play with words and conventions. Such play can take many forms, but the goal remains constant—teasing a new idea to the surface for consideration.

The Essays

We've written thirty-six reflective essays to breathe life into the habits listed above. Our imagined audience is readers who are interested in

learning to use their writing to see the world in new ways. The essays, which we hope reward reading and rereading, are meant to engage readers' minds and to present the act of learning to write as centrally concerned with cognition and consciousness.

The Practice Sessions

We have designed close to one hundred writing prompts to help our readers acquire creative habits of mind. In the beginning, readers are likely to take time getting used to the assignments because our focus is on practicing shifting perspectives and because we place a high premium on writing that explores complexity, shades of meaning, and the unknown. Because inexperienced writers aren't accustomed to using their writing for anything other than short answers and proto-arguments, their initial attempts at the practice sessions are likely to be muddled. And because the intent of the practice exercises doesn't vary, we can assure you that the disorder of their drafts and their revisions won't suddenly disappear once they get used to being asked, all semester long, to use their writing to think new thoughts. With more practice, however, your students will see that taking up the invitation to explore, to try something new, to write about an idea just beyond reach, is the work of the course. The goal isn't perfect clarity; it's insight.

The Included Readings

We've selected a diverse set of shared readings for you to work on with your students. We invite you to use these not as models for your students to emulate, but rather as examples of how writing can capture the work of a mind on a problem.

Sample Syllabi

We hope you will create your own itinerary through these materials and supplement them as you see fit. Because we know there is not one writing process, we have not imagined an ideal linear path through the book that starts with orienting and then moves habit by habit up to playing. We have included a sample syllabus of our own, complete with draft and revision dates and policies for attendance, class participation, plagiarism, etc. And we have three wonderful essays by teachers who have adopted *Habits* at very different schools. Each essay is accompanied by a sample assignment the teacher created and

a syllabus demonstrating how the assignment fit into the overarching structure of the course. (These teacher essays are our favorite section of the Instructors' Manual.)

Envoi

We feel the draw that all writers feel—for our writing to have the power to bring about the changes we feel are urgently needed, to create the foundation for addressing the most pressing challenges not of our time but of all time. We feel the draw of this vision of writing's power, but we know that this book, like all books, can only be brought to life only by its readers—and their teachers. We are eager to hear about your experience teaching with *Habits of the Creative Mind* and invite you to write us at: teachersofthecreativemind@gmail.com.