"LITERATIVITY"

Reconceptualizing
Creative Literacy Learning

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What is creativity, and how does it impact literacy learning? In this chapter, I explore the intersection of creativity and literacy, which I call literativity by contextualizing it within a thirddirect framework that allows us a unique view of how to make meaning of creative literacy practices. Next, I explore literativity and the learner and try to understand what motivates learning and how students and tutors might each benefit from literativity-based learning. Finally, I propose that as we adopt creative approaches to literacy and integrate them into our writing center work, we will attract a unique and self-motivated lot of learners who will take ownership over their writing.

CONCEPTUALIZING CREATIVITY

Creativity is a word many people use freely but struggle to define. This is likely attributable to its subjectivity and the lens of the individual who utters the words creativity or creative. Competing definitions tell us that the word creative generally implies uniqueness or something that is unusual (Copley, 1999). In their research that synthesized 18 key studies on creative teachers, Bramwell, Kronish, Dagenais, Reilly, and Lilly (2005) found
that creative teachers were those who esteemed learning, motivation, development, and relationships and who built such characteristics into their teaching. They also found that creative teachers possessed and demonstrated well-developed interpersonal interests and skills and incidentally guided students to be creative. As a whole, creative teachers were sustained in a reciprocal relationship with their environment in which they could both blossom and be shaped by their environment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Such findings beget the question, do teachers, which broadly includes anyone instructing, including writing center directors and tutors, need to first be creative in order to approach literacy learning creatively?

In short, I would suggest, the answer is no. Because we are all learners, what we can do, if we do not consider ourselves to be naturally “creative,” is look to other writing centers (WCs) and individuals who have taken risks by implementing alternative practices into their work. The individuals included in this text are by no means the only people in the WC field experimenting with their work, but they provide approaches anyone can try. Like writing, becoming competent and confident in approaching one’s work creatively takes practice.

As we are already using the word creative we should first look closely at the word creative itself. When I ponder the word creative, or think of someone or something that is creative, what comes to mind is approaching an idea, concept, or material through a lens that is a hybridization of past, current, and even future ideas, concepts, or materials. For instance, murals are often erected in spaces in cities as a way to stamp the importance of a person, event, or idea and are regarded as creative. Likewise, the individuals who put up murals tend to be viewed as creative individuals. But haven’t we seen murals everywhere? Under bridges? Inner-city parks? In the malls? If murals are normalized what then constitutes the mark of their creativity? Creativity has a life span because what is considered as unique and unusual during a space and time may be replaced by something newer and more innovative. In other words, when something that is perceived as creative is codified it can be reified and once reified it may be co-opted by dominant culture for economic purposes and lose its creative prowess and be forced to morph and reinvent itself into something yet even more unusual or unique. I pose then, are murals becoming passe? Are we in the time of the “post-mural”? If so, what then is creative, the artwork, the individual, or their intersection?

Bakhtin (1986) can help us make sense of this question. Bakhtin suggested that what is original is not the creativity or the one who creates, rather it is the space in between the individual and the creation. We may find this intersection or hybrid in the coming together of the tutor and
tutee and the WC and university. Bakhtin would argue that there are no original ideas rather that everything builds on what came prior and that the hybrid is what is original. Bakhtin would refer to our responses to events as an answering, which is essentially how we make meaning of our social and cultural worlds, and the way we author the texts of our lives. These texts can be creative because they are subjective experiences of the author, authoring responses to the world. Bakhtin suggested that languages and genres become available to individuals through the cultures in which individuals participate and become the means by which we interpret the world. When we mix those genres or voices, we create a heteroglossic mix. Our stories or creations then are an act of co-authoring a hybrid, which although not initially our own are created and bound by specific meaning to our social and cultural ties. Thus, our answering may shift from one moment to the next as utterances and answers intersect with other genres and as we engage in new and different contexts and experiences. The individual then who paints the mural may not be creative but how the individual is bound relationally and culturally and how he or she authors a text enters into a space between the act and the individual, which becomes a hybrid and can therefore be considered creative. Placing boundaries on what it means to be creative can help us understand then what isn’t creative.

When we think about creativity, many things may flood our mind. We might think of a mural that was tagged down below the bridge in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty, or we might think of the artwork hanging in the Andy Warhol museum, or we might think of the urban renewal project that grows vegetables for the homeless in the small lot next to Home Depot. Regardless of what comes to mind, creativity is highly subjective in the eye of the viewer or in the utterance. If we build on the idea that creativity is something that is unique and useful we can situate our understanding of its place in our lives.

**LITERATIVITY AS THIRDSPACE**

Creative approaches to teaching literacy have important implications for the learner. By combining literacy with creativity I offer a new term that conceptualizes their hybridization, literativity, which is the space in which literacy and creativity intersect. In order to conceptualize WCs as places where literativity flourishes, we might recognize centers in terms of Soja’s (1996) research on thirspace. Thirspace is the amalgam of both the “real-and-imagined” journeys and the “thirding” of spatial awareness and imagination, an ideal place for creativity to flourish. According to Soja (1996), thirspace is the
Knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power. (Soja, 1996, p. 31)

If we think of WCs as thirdspaces in which literativity occurs, then we open up the possibilities for students to access literacy in ways that can motivate them to learn.

Rosenblatt’s (1990) research on the transactional theory of reading and writing has critical implications for the benefits of teaching literacy creatively. According to Rosenblatt, when an individual reads, the transaction that occurs between the reader and the text contributes to “meaning.” The teacher or tutor can build on an “evocation” that arises from a literacy transaction and help the learner reflect on whatever “meaning” was evoked. The effort to clarify the evocation(s) can be built on creatively, which can enhance individualized meaning-making. Essentially then, the learner and the teacher/tutor are co-collaborators in the process of literativity because what is evoked from one’s experience is built upon as the teacher/tutor recognizes the opportunity to enhance the learning of literacy. In summary then, literativity is the combination of Bakhtin’s hybridization of ideas that leads to creative utterances, Soja’s thirdspace that allows for creativity to flourish, and Rosenblatt’s transactional theory that can enhance individualized learning and meaning-making.

LITERATIVITY AND THE LEARNER

As we know, there is no one, sure-fire way to teach any content matter or even at best, any one way we know that will tap into the interest of the learner. Creativity then, is a subjective way to “hook” the learner and activate excitement about thinking and writing, and hence, literacy. Every individual brings a store of background knowledge and interests into the learning process and the teacher/tutor has the challenging task of trying to understand what works for each pupil at a WC. This means, and this is a great undertaking, taking the time to know the individual interests of the learner so as to build on and generate transactions of contiguous and continuous teachable and learnable moments. The relationship between the tutor and the tutee is then a shared effort whereby students can participate
in the creative co-construction of their worlds (Rejskind & Sydiah, 2002; Sawyer, 2004). As students assume shared responsibility for their learning, they shift the power dynamics between teacher and learner. Such a shift can empower them to become proactive in their learning whether it be through discourse, product, or outcome, and is more likely to lead to risk taking on assignments. Examples of such risks might include making a multimedia project as a response to a text, writing and performing a SLAM poem in response to a writing assignment, or even doing interpretive dance to demonstrate the angst of a character in a text. Teachers who are open to creative responses from their learners can instill in them the confidence to take risks and open up new possibilities for literacy learning in future spaces that they will inhabit.

As such, the relationship between tutor and tutee is interdependent. This relationship is bi-directional and nonbinary and has the capacity to further develop both the tutor’s and tutee’s creativity. Each individual in the relationship can benefit from and expand their repertoires of literativitv, which can lead to increasing their understanding of their own creative processes.

LITERATIVITY IN MOTION

Each of the contributors to this book have approached WCs creatively and have each discovered ways to tap into their learners through unique and purposeful approaches to writing. When we consider how each of these creative approaches both stimulate and activate the writing process, they all share a bond that is generated in between the act and the actor. I turn to Scott L. Miller’s (Chap. 2, this volume) discussion of play to illustrate the hybridity of creative approaches to writing. Miller declares that “the writing center is in fact a magnificent place for play in the institution, and that in fact we are remiss both if we don’t foster such play and if we don’t learn how to come to play’s defense” (pp. 22-23). Miller tells us that his deepest fear is that someone will critique play in the writing center as non-viable and the WC will vaporize. Even as he points to key researchers in the field who, like him, make a call for play to be entwined in the writing process, he raises the concern that because there is a dearth of research on play, others may be reticent to approach teaching writing through play. Miller writes:
Play... can mitigate against the high seriousness, the religious seriousness, of academic labor; play can offer counter-hegemonic potential for destabilizing power structures, knocking over stuffed-shirt (and power-laden) subjectivities, and pointing out the paradoxically ascendant truth (small-f) to all. (p. 26)

I believe that the deeper rationale for the fear that emerges out of those who deviate from traditional practices of teaching writing is that the product will result in something that lacks normalcy and thereby has no exact means for assessment. Our field is often critiqued for not doing work that supports a quantitative agenda because it cannot produce concrete numbers that can be compiled, crunched, and correlated. When we cannot measure or assess something, it cannot be considered viable by agreed upon standards in our field. Isn’t one of the obstacles to change, however, the times when we have no agreed on way to measure or assess the outcome? Do we as a field or even as a country have a tendency to dismiss that which we cannot assess? Do we refrain from creative approaches to WC work because of the inherent difficulty to measure creativity? How can creativity be assessed when it changes every time it is activated through WC work? The concept of play illustrates these concerns because it is difficult to measure. Miller counters this difficulty with, “clearly we can and do play as we work and work as we play” (p. 28).

Play takes on the experience of the player(s) and is an act that is fluid, constantly changing and shifting, as the experience of those playing shift. The act of play and the play that is acted is what is generated in that hybrid space, or that space that Bakhtin would say is creative. Play is therefore, as I suggest, always creative because one can never play the same way over and over for there is always a change of time, place, people, and events. Play then is literativity actualized by the players who co-create the space in which they play. But because play is fluid and subjective to the players, assessing it as play without agreed upon standards of what play is leaves it in a hybrid disjunction. Although we cannot measure play, we can have fun while we learn and continue to forge ahead.

**BENEFITS OF LITERATIVITY IN A WRITING CENTER ENVIRONMENT**

Studies about constructivism have shown that when students have ownership over their learning they are more likely to not only enjoy it more but are likely more willing to go the extra mile to make the work worthwhile (Bomer & Bomer, 1999; Lewinson, Hint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Shannon,
There are several benefits to the student who can work on writing through a literativity approach. First, a student who can better conceptualize working on writing through a learning style that best suits the process is likely to internalize the event and draw from it at a later time. Next, a student is likely to have a high level of interest in the writing process and the outcome. Furthermore, there may be an increased opportunity for small writing groups to form and for community building to occur either within or outside of the WC. This process of socialization, therefore, generates interest in possibly extending writing to other aspects of one's life. There may also be a general buzz of excitement about creative approaches to writing and as a result, more learners may seek the support of WC tutors. There may be increased confidence in writing, which may lead to greater productivity. Learners may gain the tools to take ownership over their writing and be able to more effectively problem solve how to work through complex moves in their writing. Finally, learners may begin to think of writing as something pleasurable and fun and which may continue into a life-long love affair of writing.

THE FUTURE OF LITERATIVITY
AND WRITING CENTERS

We pause now to reflect on how writing will continue to change well into the future. There is no doubt that with the advent of technology and the increased access to media in all of its forms, that writing may be supplanted with yet different forms of writing from what we now know and understand to be writing. Although some of us may grieve its loss, others may celebrate the birthing of its change. Change opens us up to the possibilities for places wherein creativity can blossom beyond what we now know it to be and its relationship to writing can grow interdependently. No matter how writing emerges and morphs in time, we must be open to the possibilities of its craft and the one who crafts. When a writer crafts words into ideas, he or she is dipping into a reservoir of cumulative knowledge and the history of his or her human experience. For the writer, his or her past experiences serve as templates and material from which to draw on and construct into new verbal signs. New meanings in a postmodern era can evolve out of new ways of restructuring past experiences as they interact with new experiences. These meanings and ideas if framed into and by a genre of creativity in thirspace can lead to new understandings of creativity and their meanings. If we add onto Bazerman's (1997) research on genre studies, which suggests that genre in literary study can frame social relations and social action, creativity as a genre might evolve into a viable component of teaching across all disciplines and content areas.
Several questions come to mind about the future of literativity. I ask, how can we encourage literativity approaches to WCs if creativity has yet to become normalized in research studies and is yet to be germane in our understanding of what it means to tap into learners' needs? A first step toward a call for such a genre is to ask ourselves how we can push educators to be more creative in their teaching approaches to literacy. The next question to ask is how we can support the educator who takes such risks prior to the normalizing of literativity. Third, we need research on the benefits to those who are being taught through literativity practices. Fourth, we need to find out what other hybrid spaces there are and how they differ by discipline. It is my belief that creativity should become normalized and an inherent component of education because it adds to the multitude of pedagogical approaches that have the potential to reach a constantly expanding landscape of students who are influenced by an ephemeral matrix of stimuli.

Creativity is a way to help students walk the tightrope between participating in dominant culture while also allowing them to experience the world through their own eyes. As we open ourselves up to new and more innovative approaches to literacy teaching, we inevitably expand what it means to be creative and what creativity can come to mean in hybrid spaces. Most importantly, is that creativity is interdependent on the relationship and the transaction between the tutor and the tutee. Ultimately, teachers and tutors must strive to nurture and continue to develop the correlational aspects of the effectiveness of teaching creatively alongside one another. As we continue to open up dialogue about how we teach and ways to teach with other faculty and WC directors, we can ultimately expand our approaches to teaching literacy creatively. Collectively, our imaginations can elucidate and generate creative approaches to teaching in WCs and activate and excite our students to write in whatever way that best suits their needs. Literativity can liberate and open doors to new possibilities that over time may lead us to subvert traditional paradigms that were once used to keep people silenced and marginalized.

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