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CREATIVE WRITING



Theories and Strategies for Teaching Creative Writing Online



EDITED BY TAMARA GIRARDI AND ABIGAIL G. SCHEG

Theories and Strategies for Teaching Creative Writing Online

As the online world of creative writing teaching, learning, and collaborating grows in popularity and necessity, this book explores the challenges and unique benefits of teaching creative writing online.

This collection highlights expert voices who have taught creative writing effectively in the online environment, to broaden the conversation regarding online education in the discipline, and to provide clarity for English and writing departments interested in expanding their offerings to include online creative writing courses but doing so in a way that serves students and the discipline appropriately.

Interesting as it is useful, *Theories and Strategies for Teaching Creative Writing Online* offers a contribution to creative writing scholarship and begins a vibrant discussion specifically regarding effectiveness of online education in the discipline.

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Tamara Girardi and Abigail G. Scheg

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1 Don't short circuit the muse

Creative writing in the digital age

Amy Withrow

Upon the invention of the printing press, Johannes Trithemius, a German Benedictine abbot, wrote “In Praise of Scribes.” In this tract, he declared: “Printed books will never be the equivalent of handwritten codices....The simple reason is that copying by hand involves more diligence and industry” (Odlyzko, 1997: 153). While there is little doubt this statement is true when it comes to the element of diligence and the painstaking work needed to create handwritten texts, the declaration itself becomes quite ironic with the knowledge that Trithemius’s “In Praise of Scribes” tract was circulated in manuscript format in 1492; it soon owed its wider readership to this printed edition and later reprints (Odlyzko, 1997).

With each new innovation, there have been those who warned of the corruption or degradation of the standard that came before it. Online education has certainly been a modern source of such debate. The hallowed lessons of history are full of stories about change and the people who effected change in their environments. Often, in hindsight, such change agents are celebrated. However, during the first efforts to effect change, many of those individuals face staunch opposition, sometimes to the level of violence in the worst cases. One stark example is the modern-day work of Malala Yousafzia, who was shot on October 9, 2012, for speaking against the Taliban in defense of a girl’s right to be educated. While most change does not escalate into this type of violence, this example demonstrates just how escalated the fear of change can become. Thankfully, Malala Yousafzia survived her wounds and still works as a modern-day change agent for educational and gender equality. History also offers proof that if the change agent persists over time, societal acceptance begins ever slowly to shift. Such shifts in acceptance do not come easily or quickly; yet, the shift, nonetheless, happens. Change is in its truest form a cycle—and a prolonged cycle at that.

Having overseen the operations of a large online unit at a community college in central Pennsylvania for six years, my work and my team’s work has been on the forefront of a paradigm shift in higher education. It will come as no surprise that there are supporters and detractors among faculty and administration in regard to the scaling of online educational options, the quality of online courses, and the unique training needed for faculty and the support staff who educate and assist online students. Each year, as face-to-face enrollments decrease and the online enrollments increase, the clashing of two opposing, yet

equally well-intended, viewpoints become more evident. The “well-intended” phrase bears repeating. Differing opinions on the scale and quality of online educational offerings does not mean one group is entirely right and one group is entirely wrong. Nor does it mean one group is too rooted in older paradigms of the academy or one group is tearing down the academy of old. Instead, one must understand the psychology of change, the neuroscience of change, to appreciate the prolonged cycle that happens once such change is instigated.

This goal of gaining a deeper understanding into the nuances of change started when I was initially hired as one of the first 100 percent full-time online faculty members at the community college, mentioned above, in 2006. At the first division meeting, myself and two other full-time online faculty hires were sitting in the front row excited to start our tenure-track journey. During the meeting, the topic of the new online faculty hires and the college’s plans to increase online offerings arose. At that point, a faculty colleague, whom I grew to respect dearly in the years subsequent to that meeting, stood up and declared the new online faculty were “guns for hire” and expressed deep concern about the college investing in such an endeavor to increase online educational offerings. The excitement of starting a new job quickly shifted into a deep realization of an “us vs. them” paradigm, a bitter criticism that pitted one type of faculty member against another type of faculty member, despite the fact there was full professional equity and commitment in the desire to educate students and to assist them in their educational and career goals.

Why, then, was there such an immediate division? Why was the language used to describe the new online faculty so blunt and fearful? Admittedly, my initial reaction was surprise and a creeping feeling of alienation. However, in the days that progressed, this singular event started a long journey to understanding the “why” answer to those questions.

Higher education has historical roots going back to Plato’s Academy founded in Athens in 387 B.C. after “Plato spent 12 years traveling in southern Italy, Sicily, and Egypt, studying with other philosophers including the followers of the mystic mathematician Pythagoras” (“Plato”). Plato’s Academy was not structured like the colleges in existence today, but it consisted of scholars and intellectuals sharing the educational pursuits of philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. These intellectuals would meet in a public grove near the ancient city of Athens.

According to tradition, a dozen olive trees, scions of the Sacred Tree of Athena on the Acropolis, formed a Sacred Grove at the Academy. In the sixth century BC, one of the three public gymnasia at Athens was founded at the Academy. At the end of the same century, Hipparchus built a wall around the Academy.

(Kalligas et al., 2020: 35)

Plato lectured to students who gathered from around the Greek world, many of whom came from outside Athens. With this advancement in educational

delivery, Plato challenged the philosophy of his own teacher, Socrates, who questioned the ability of a learned scholar to impart knowledge. Yes, Plato in this regard was a change agent. "The abolishment of Plato's Academy (attributed to Emperor Justinian in 529) imposed silence on a school which for more than nine centuries produced ideas that influenced and, to some extent, determined the natural sciences and philosophical and political thought" (Kalligas et al., 2020: 28). However, the foundational philosophy of a scholar physically standing before his students, orally lecturing in a given space at a given time, had taken root.

It is little wonder that the technological advances of the past 50 years, with the invention of the Internet and reality of Moore's Law allowing for more affordable, more functional, and smaller personal computers and smartphones, would send something akin to an earthquake through the 2000-year-old foundation of higher education. Space and time no longer mattered as scholars recording audio podcasts and, eventually, video lectures reached vast amounts of students across the globe. Access to such education used to be available only to people of certain social classes, races, gender, and geography. However, within a mere few decades, all that is needed to access the educational content of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and iTunes U courses and collections is an Internet connection and a compatible technological device. Accredited colleges and universities are now being forced to face this new reality in the briefest of timeframes, considering the long history of academia.

This change to the well-known lecturer model of academia became a threat. It became a threat to the survival of skillful lecturers, some of whom, understandably, have little interest in learning how to teach online. It became a threat to educators who doubted the effectiveness of a student's ability to reach key learning outcomes in an online setting. It became a threat to educational innovators who wanted to embrace online delivery and feared falling behind the curve if their institution did not put enough resources toward creating effective online courses. It became a threat as faculty saw templated online courses rolled out by publishers, taking away one of the greatest joys of teaching: selecting texts, creating assignments, designing materials, and drafting discussions to ensure students achieve the learning outcomes for each course they teach. Thus came into being the collision of those new online faculty hires sitting in the front row of their first division meeting, those who viewed them as "guns for hire," and the many other faculty whose viewpoints rested somewhere between those two diverse views.

One may think such a gap in teaching philosophy is too wide to overcome. However, there is common ground, and that common ground lies with increased understanding of the human brain and the innate reaction to behavior change. Elliot T. Berkman, author of "The Neuroscience of Goal and Behavior Change," states the following:

To understand why new behavior is so hard, it's useful to think about two dimensions that give rise to behaviors. The first dimension captures the

skills, capacities, and knowledge required to engage in a behavior. This includes mapping out the steps to take and having the skill to execute an action, as well as related cognitive processes such as attentional focus, inhibitory control, and working memory capacity. Because it reflects the means used to achieve a goal, I refer to the first dimension as the *way*. The second dimension captures the desire for and importance of a behavior. This includes wanting to achieve a goal and prioritizing it over other goals, as well as related motivational processes such as volition, intention, and the nature and strength of the drive for achievement. Because it relates to the motivation to engage in a behavior, I refer to the second dimension as the *will*.

As shown in [Figure 1.1], these two dimensions give rise to four broad types of action.

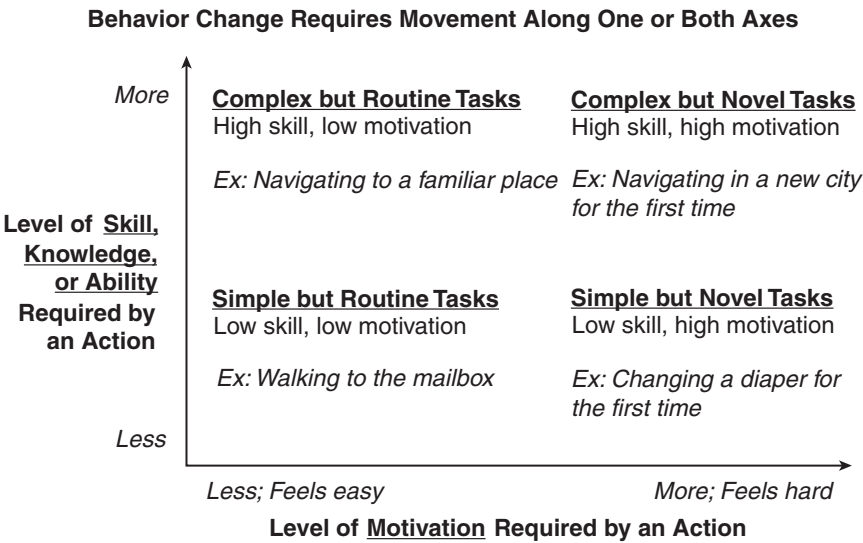


Figure 1.1

(Berkman 2018: 29)

It is important to stop and deeply consider the complexity of behavior change one is asking faculty to make in order to embrace online education. If faculty lack the technological skills of teaching online and the understanding of online pedagogy, and, in addition, they are not motivated to assist in ushering in the paradigm shift toward online education, trying to effect behavior change without actively addressing those areas will result in tension and disagreement. Furthermore, if there are skills yet no motivation, trying to effect behavior change without addressing the lack of motivation will also result in failure. Conversely, if there is motivation but limited skills, trying to effect behavior change without creating a solid, supportive environment to develop those skills will result in failure yet again. Any move to the top or right of the diagram