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How to boost creativity in academe (essay)

Submitted by Janelle Ward on October 24, 2017 - 3:00am

I'm going to teach the same class and write the same paper for the rest of my career.

I realized this about six years ago, as a tenure-track assistant professor. It was a morbid insight, considering I was just getting into the groove of the academic lifestyle, defined by a 60 percent teaching, 40 percent research contract.

The thought first came to me in a moment of teaching burnout. As lecturers, we know that the prep involved with teaching a class for the first time means exponentially more work. But if we continue to teach that class and claim it as “ours,” we can ease up. We can cover the same material and grade the same papers year after year. I'd already reached the fifth repetition of a course that I'd developed during my Ph.D. days. I was bored but didn't feel the incentive to shake things up. I was overworked -- why add to my labor?

Around the same time, a research project I had recently completed was stuck in peer-review purgatory. I watched the months tick by as my socially relevant project sat unpublished and thought reckless thoughts about blogging it out. I'd started working on another article, but I found my initial enthusiasm damped as I applied the necessary academic filters to the idea. It struck me: whatever the topic, whatever insights they inspire or intellectual breakthroughs they provide, such an article always ends up spat out in precisely the same format: introduction, theory, method, results and conclusion.

Doing the same thing every day for the rest of my professional life? The thought was dark enough to spur a crisis. I had not been attracted to this career only to become an academic Sisyphus. Freshly back from maternity leave, full of grand thoughts about how to find meaningful work, I was ready to leave academe. I found [Hillary Hutchinson](#) ^[1], a career coach who specialized in angst-ridden academics, and began a search to find purpose that nearly led to the end of my academic aspirations.

What I've learned in the years since then, and what I will argue in this article, is that creativity is an essential part of academe. On the chance that I make my case, I'll provide suggestions of how you can apply techniques to rediscover and boost your creativity.

The Standardization of Academic Work

An academic is a scholar and a teacher who works in an institution of higher education. We scale the highest levels of study and complete Ph.D.s. If we are lucky enough to get jobs with research contracts, we pursue our own research agendas, seek funding and publish them in academic journals. We take on the task of teaching university students and use our research insights to educate them. We acquire knowledge and disseminate it to others, and we never have enough hours in the day to get it all done.

Due to increasingly intense demands on our time, academic culture encourages us to standardize. That has its benefits. Our students get template syllabi and know exactly what a course entails and how it is evaluated. They know every page they will read and receive detailed instructions on every assignment. They are viewed as consumers [2] who need to know exactly what they're paying for.

The same holds for research. When we're keeping up with developments in our field or researching a new topic, we know which journals to check. When we've completed a project, we have an outline to follow to get credit for our newly acquired knowledge. But this standardization, which in many cases saves our sanity and allows us to keep our heads above water, is also killing our creativity. [3].

A New Approach

What if we approached teaching and research in totally different ways? Author Peter Monaghan recently argued [4] that academics need time "to choose which direction to take: for example, to pursue full professorhood, or to specialize in course restructuring, pedagogical reform or public scholarship, or even to switch to a new research specialization or department. Or to leave academe altogether." I would take this argument a step further: we don't just need to explore what kind of work we do within academe, but how we do the work. As Todd Henry, the host of the Accidental Creative podcast [5], has said, it's how you do your work -- not just the work you do -- that is an expression of your identity.

I am not an expert in creativity. But I've spent the last few years listening to the experts and incorporating their techniques, enough that I can now enthusiastically share some of their knowledge. I also see that it is possible to incorporate these techniques into any profession, even one as standardized as academe.

Incorporating creative outlets into the academic world is not new, but it is still uncommon. Shelley Berc and Alejandro Fogel have been doing so since 1993. With the aim of helping people reach their creative potential, they run the Creativity Workshop [6], based in New York, and hold workshops all over the globe. Before this, they both worked at the University of Iowa and were the first to structure a creativity workshop within the confines of higher education. They advertised the workshop for students from all different disciplines, from playwrights to biologists. And they were encouraged by the response: Ph.D. students, in particular, raved about the techniques they learned and how those techniques helped them explore their research in new ways.

How can we do this? Research innovation begins with a creative mind. But how can we tap into our creative instincts? How can we seek innovation if we're always following the same formula? Teaching and research *do* provide us with creative challenges. How can we encourage ourselves and our students to see things in different ways?

How We Can Help Ourselves

First, approach your writing in a completely different way. Develop a daily writing practice that involves no explicit connection to the academic world. One way is to write morning pages [7]: three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing first thing in the morning. Berc is a firm believer in fragmented writing. She says, "We learn from images, ideas and pieces of things if we know how to value them." Writing without thinking will result in these fragments, and the more you do it, the more you will learn how to put those fragments together to form new insights.

Second, if you enjoy a creative endeavor like painting, playing an instrument or sketching, pick it up again. Keep in mind that writing, or making art or music, is a byproduct of creativity. Pursing such artistic skills will help the brain draw new connections. A brushstroke could lead to a new research insight, a short story to a new idea for teaching students. Einstein turned to his violin [8] to get his ideas. (As a side note, Elsa Einstein confessed it was his playing, not his theoretical genius, that made her fall in love with him.) Leonard Shlain wrote a whole book on this topic, called Art and

Physics [9], in which he argues that the visionary artist is often the first to view the world in an innovative way, followed shortly by accompanying scientific discoveries.

Third, look for inspiration outside your field. We are taught to be experts in our fields, and to present ourselves as all knowing. But certainty kills creativity. Your field is almost certainly not going to be the place you have your next insight. Read widely, and mingle with those from other disciplines for inspiration.

Berc and Fogel's creativity workshop attracts people from all different professions, who learn from each other. I can attest to this, having taken the workshop several times. Check the glowing testimonials [10] from academics, who point to this diversity among other strengths that left them reconnected and inspired in their professional lives.

Even better, seek inspiration in your daily life. Fogel says [11], "Be aware of the texture of a tree, the shape of a window, the colors of the doors on your street ... No one else will experience these impressions the way you do, and you won't experience them the same way from day to day."

Fourth, don't be afraid to incorporate these techniques into your classrooms. Such tweaks to our own creative lives can also benefit our students. For me, using these techniques has given me a much-needed enthusiasm boost. I coordinate a research seminar called Interpersonal Relations Online, which focuses on how people manage impressions on dating apps. Last year, I asked my students to spend 20 minutes writing a short story, fiction or nonfiction, about a notable online dating experience. An unintended outcome of those creative short stories was that most students used them as inspiration for research topics.

Next year, I plan to send my students out of the classroom to explore and be inspired. Barbara McClintock [12] won the Nobel Prize in 1983 for her discovery of mobile genetic elements. She credits corn [13] rather than theory for her ideas: "It might seem unfair, however, to reward a person for having so much pleasure over the years, asking the maize plant to solve specific problems and then watching its responses."

Fifth and finally, have fun. Creativity is play, and play isn't pointless leisure. Some of the most incredible human inventions have come from great minds who took time away from work to play. As Steven Johnson points out in his TED talk [14], "Necessity isn't always the mother of invention. The playful state of mind is fundamentally exploratory, seeking out new possibilities in the world around us. And that seeking is why so many experiences that started with simple delight and amusement eventually led us to profound breakthroughs."

Embracing creativity can allow academics, whether at the beginning or the more advanced stages of their careers, to find new meaning and purpose in their work. It can help us craft a playful, creative, inspiring persona [15] both as a teacher and a writer. It's also essential for those with insecure futures in the academy: we know what a rough road it can be. Many of us won't stay -- not by choice, but because we see no chance of securing a stable career. Reconnecting with our innate creativity can also make a career transition easier.

Embracing creativity in my academic work has changed my life. Within academe I have turned to arts-based research and autoethnography to explore my research interests in more creative ways. My teaching is more inspiring with the adoption of these techniques. Outside of my work, I have prioritized creative writing and become a regular student at the Amsterdam-based International Writer's Collective [16]. And I've also published a number of fictional short stories in the past few years, which makes me the happiest of all.

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- [1] <https://www.transitioningyourlife.com/>
- [2] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jul/11/the-party-s-over-how-tuition-fees-ruined-university-life?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- [3] <http://www.upliftedlife.com/how-society-kills-our-creativity-in-a-breathtaking-award-winning-short-film/>
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