

Creativity and Innovation in the Writing Classroom

Session 2: Design Thinking
in the Writing Classroom

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What were we talking about?

Here are the questions we asked last time:

- What is design thinking?
- Where does it come from?
- How can we use it in our courses?
- What does all of this have to do with creativity?

(Georgia O'Keefe for LOOK by Tony Vaccaro)



Where does design thinking come from?

From “Design Thinking: Past, Present, and Possible Futures” by Ulla Johansson-Sköldberg et al., *Creativity and Innovation Management* 22.2 (2013):

designerly thinking vs. design thinking

- Designerly thinking: the academic construction of design practice, with a history of theoretical reflection that goes back to Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (1969). Takes place in academic journals aimed toward designers.
- Design thinking: a simplified version of designerly thinking for people without a background in design, popularized by IDEO and the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (Stanford d.school). Takes place in popular books and articles that rely heavily on anecdote. Influential in STEM and business/management.

Composition studies draws on both of these discourses. The clearest connection between composition studies and designerly thinking is its focus on *wicked problems*.

What is a wicked problem?

From “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking” by Richard Buchanan, *Design Issues* 8.2 (1992):

The term was first used by design theorist Horst Rittel in the 1960s. “Rittel argued that most of the problems addressed by designers are *wicked problems*,” which he described as “a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.” (Examples would be the problems of climate change or homelessness.)

Buchanan continues, “This is an amusing description of what confronts designers in every new situation.” For Buchanan, design problems are inherently wicked because there is no single or final solution, any solution potentially changes the nature of the problem, and there are multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests.

Writing is a wicked problem!

The first influential connection between design thinking and composition studies was made by Richard Marback in “Embracing Wicked Problems: The Turn to Design in Composition Studies,” *CCC* 61.2 (2009).

According to Purdy, “Marback defines ‘wicked problems’ as problems that lack a single knowable solution but instead are ambiguous, contingent, and recursive. In other words, wicked problems are not just solved once by finding new information: they must be solved over and over again.” Marback implies this is also true of writing.

Marback wants to understand composition as a wicked problem, in which students design a response to a rhetorical situation and an audience. Students become designers of their writing, whether academic essays or magazine articles or web pages.

(Marback uses the example of *Project Runway*: our students are like the designers responding to design prompts. There are many possible responses . . .

Why is writing a wicked problem?



- There is no single right way to do it. Every piece of writing is a problem that has to be solved in a different way.
- You learn how to write by doing it over and over again. You will make mistakes every single time.
- There is no definitive way to tell when you are done, or how good your writing is.
- You can guess about your audience, but in the end, you don't know who will read your writing, or when.
- There is no single right way to teach or assess it. Every student and piece of writing is different.

(The Scholar by Jessie Willcox Smith)

Design thinking in the writing classroom . . .



Marback's essay is probably most important because it's been influential on papers in composition studies that came after it.

- “Design Thinking and the Wicked Problem of Teaching Writing” by Carrie S. Leverenz, *Computers and Composition* 33 (2014)
- “What Can Design Thinking Offer Writing Studies?” by James P. Purdy, *College Composition and Communication* 65.4 (2014)
- “Using Design Thinking to Teach Creative Problem Solving in Writing Courses” by Scott Wible, *College Composition and Communication* 73.3 (2020)

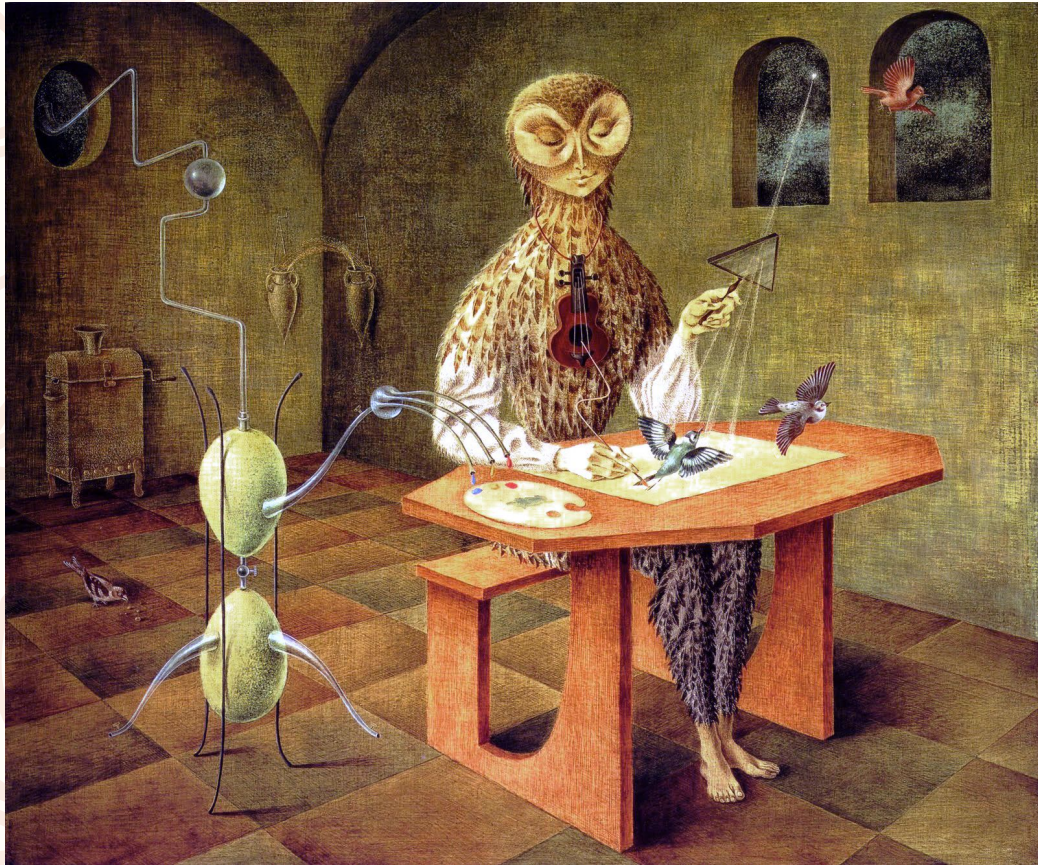
(*Jeune Fille Ecrivain* by Berthe Morisot)

Why should we use design thinking in writing?

From "Design Thinking and the Wicked Problem of Teaching Writing" by Carrie S. Leverenz, *Computers and Composition* 33 (2014). Design thinking can help us address some of the challenges of college writing instruction:

- Increases student engagement because it focuses on creative responses to problems that students care about.
- Gives students a sense of agency because they have greater choice in what to write and how to write about it.
- Encourages risk and rewards failure as a means of learning.
- As an approach to problem-solving, is transferrable to other situations.
- Allows us to teach multimodal writing because it's about solving problems, not creating certain forms.

Design thinking and creativity . . .



Leverenz wants to redefine the problem of writing instruction in this way: “how can we teach writing so that students learn to use words and other language resources to define and respond in creative ways to problems they see as important?”

“If design thinking can indeed help anyone approach problems more creatively, I want to consider how design thinking might help students see writing, even academic writing, as a creative way of making, one in which writers make not only texts, but themselves and their worlds.”

The ultimate goal is creativity.

(Creation of the Birds by Remedios Varo)

Some assignments based on design thinking:

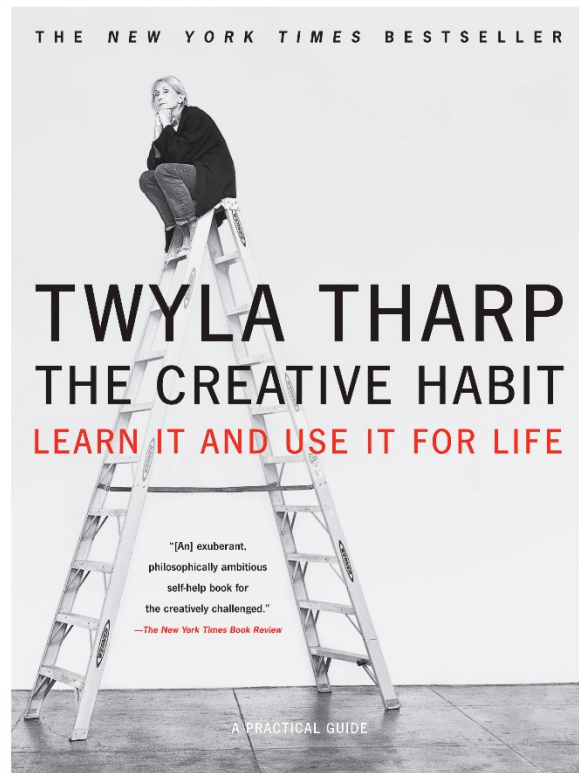
- **Make assignments more like design briefs:** Leverenz writes, “A design brief is the initial description of what the client wants or needs the designer to create, specifying the outcomes of the design” but not the design itself. Constraints should offer students “opportunities for inventiveness” (ex. a slideshow with a time limit).
- **Write in teams to encourage empathy:** Leverenz focuses on the importance of brainstorming in a way that generates many ideas and encourages students to listen to one another. (IDEO’s rules for brainstorming: Defer judgment. Encourage wild ideas. Stay focused on the topic. Build on the ideas of others.)
- **Prototype to fail early and learn:** Leverenz writes, “we must find a way to turn students’ fear of failure into excitement at the chance to experiment.” She recommends thinking of drafting as prototyping. Students create low-stakes prototypes so they can workshop, choose, and discard ideas. Examples include outlines, first paragraphs, storyboards.

More assignments based on design thinking:

Wible asks students to design a solution for specific users. This involves understanding those users. Students must conduct “empathy research” (interviews, observations).

- **Empathy exercises:** User Empathy Cards that ask specific questions, Empathy Maps that aggregate and compare responses, Point of View Statements that articulate the user’s wants/needs to help define the central problem.
- **Ideation exercises:** HMW (How Might We) questions as brainstorming prompts, putting sticky notes with ideas on the board, Idea Selection based on various criteria (most likely to succeed, most likely to delight the user, biggest breakthrough).
- **Prototyping exercises:** annotated sketches, storyboards, role-play, physical objects to demonstrate concept. (One mantra of design thinking is “Thinking with Things.”)
- **Assessment exercises:** Innovation Story (what students created), Learning Story (what students learned). Notice the use of storytelling!

Scratching (as a way of ideating) . . .



Tharp describes “scratching” as a way of constantly ideating or gathering inspiration for creative work.

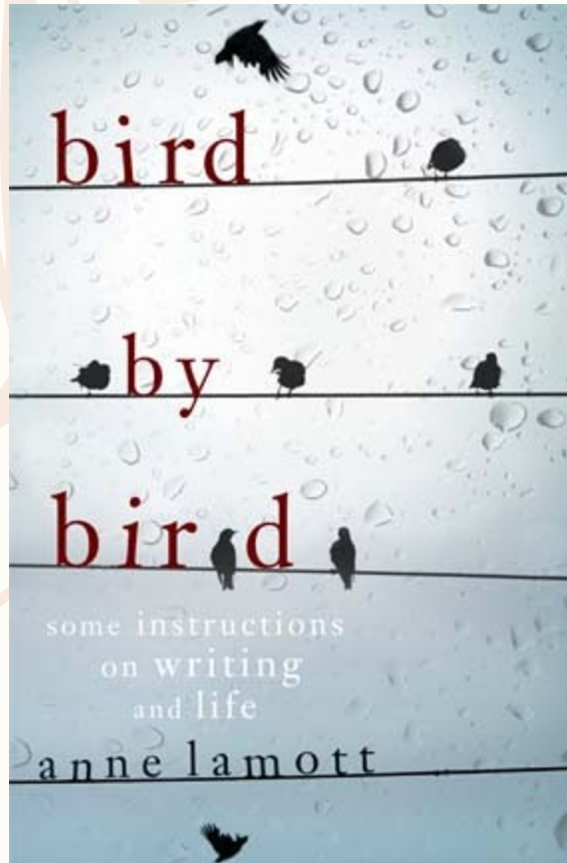
“You know how you scratch away at a lottery ticket to see if you’ve won? That’s what I’m doing when I begin a piece. I’m digging through everything to find something. It’s like clawing at the side of a mountain to get a toehold, a grip, some sort of traction to keep moving upward and onward.”

Where students can scratch for ideas:

- **Everyday life** (listen to conversations, walk in nature, etc.)
- **Other works of art** (books, the museum, the theater, etc.)
- **Their mentors and heroes** (but don’t just imitate)

How can they retain their ideas, combine them, transform them? All these things could be written into an assignment . . .

Short assignments and sh*tty first drafts . . .



Lamott's short assignments and sh*tty first drafts are both ways of prototyping written work.

Short assignments: To get students started, set them a short assignment. What sorts of constraints can you create that will make the assignment low-stakes?

- Write on an index card, write only the introduction, write only 250 words, etc.

Sh*tty first drafts: “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts.” How can you give students permission to write a bad (exploratory) first draft?

- Ask for a half draft/half outline instead of a full draft, explicitly focus on content and organization rather than line editing on first drafts, etc.

Let's generate some ideas about
your WR153 course.

What sorts of ideas do you have for assignments and
exercises? How many can you come up with?