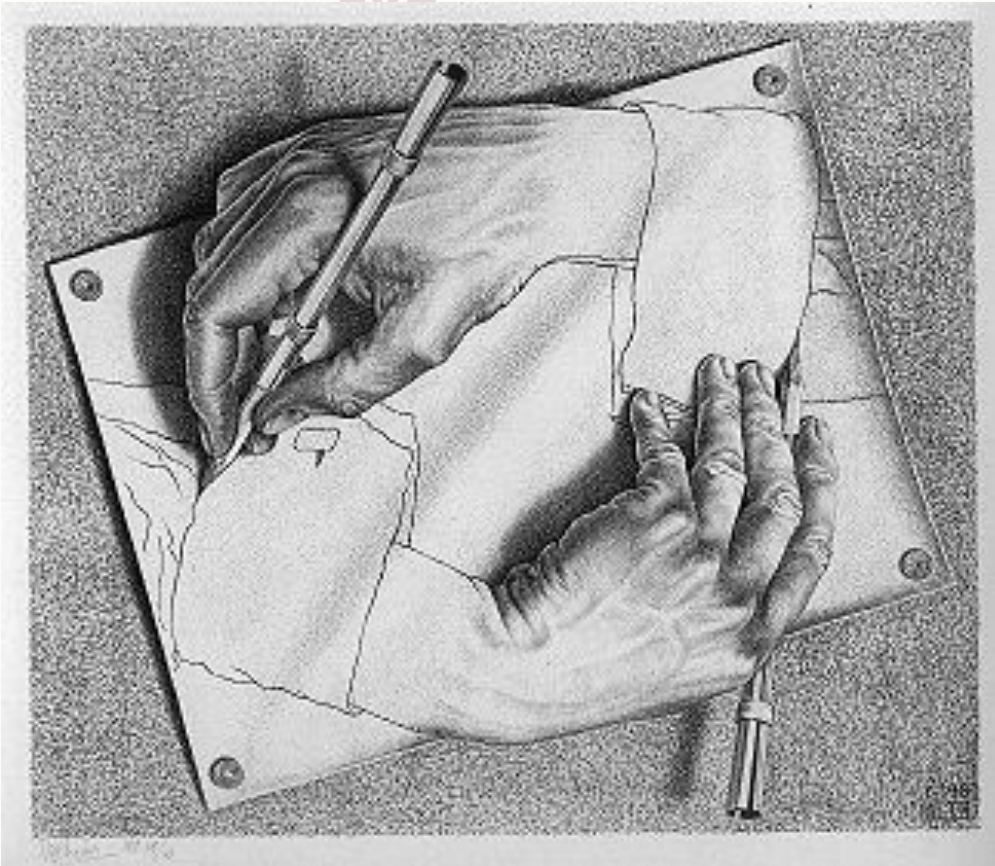# Creativity and Innovation in the Writing Classroom

Session 3: Problems and Controversies in Design Thinking

Theodora Goss

Let's start with an exercise . . .

(*Drawing Hands* by M.C. Escher)

Last time, I asked you to come up with ideas for assignments and/or exercises for your WR153 course. This time, I want you to design a WR153 course. If you already know what course you want to teach, write down some ideas for that course. If not, come up with at least 3 ideas for WR153 courses that you might like to teach. Write down a few ideas for each course.

Where are we now?

We tried to answer these three questions:

- What is design thinking?

- Where does it come from?

- How can we use it in our courses?

Now we will talk about some problems and controversies.

(*Labyrinth* by Leonora Carrington)

Let's talk about the controversies . . .

"At its core, engaging in design thinking means retraining yourself to think differently, to break habits of mind and entertain possibilities you didn't even realize you were shutting off." However, "The more skeptical see it as yet another corporate-culture fad infiltrating academe and taking up time and energy that could be spent on the mission." —Lee Gardner, "Can Design Thinking Redesign Higher Ed?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 10, 2017

This is exactly how Lee Vinsel sees it in "Design Thinking is a Boondoggle," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2018: "Design thinking, in other words, is just a fancy way of talking about consulting." For Vinsel, design thinking is problematic because:

– It teaches a mindset, not the actual skills that lead to innovation.

– It oversimplifies solutions to important social challenges.

The story of the PlayPump . . .

"Earlier this week, PBS's Frontline ran a story about the PlayPump, a technology that was supposed to bring drinking water to thousands of African communities by harnessing the power of children at play. The title of the Frontline story, 'Troubled Water,' indicates that all didn't go as planned with the PlayPump. As Frontline reports, dozens of PlayPumps in Mozambique sit idle, and in many villages, PlayPumps have been removed and hand pumps reinstalled."

https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2010/07/01/the-playpump-what-went-wrong/

- It did not address the problem of underlying water scarcity.

- It required children to play on the pump consistently throughout the day.

- Adults had to make the pumps work by walking around and round.

What went wrong with the PlayPump?

"Water problems are very complex and come in a multitude of flavors. In some very specific situations, PlayPump may be the right type of solution. In most situations, though, it is imperative to first really understand the problem and to then design appropriate, tailored solutions. It's also necessary to focus on the big picture, with an emphasis on water supply."

The Case Foundation, which funded the PlayPumps, issued an apology and studied the situation:

- It announced a grant of funds and technology to Water for People, which has a 20-year history of working with local communities.

- Those communities could choose from a variety of solutions, with PlayPumps as one option for places where they were appropriate.

https://casefoundation.org/blog/painful-acknowledgment-coming-short/

Potential problems with design thinking . . .

From Peter N. Miller, "Is 'Design Thinking' the New Liberal Arts?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 26, 2015:

Design thinking has two fundamental problems:

– It does not take research seriously enough. "Libraries, archives, museums, the great repositories of the human past are rarely called upon for help." However, "A truly human-centered design, if it takes culture at all seriously, would have to take pastness seriously." Design thinking needs to understand as well as empathize.

– It focuses too much on finding solutions. "Where the liberal arts are about problems—they take the familiar aspects of life and defamiliarize them in the interest of interpretation—design thinking is about solutions. It's about taking the complexities of life and simplifying them in the interest of problem-solving." Sometimes what we're looking for is a more interesting question . . .

The good and bad of design thinking . . .

From "Dissensus, Resistance, and Ideology: Design Thinking as a Rhetorical Methodology" by April Greenwood et al., *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 33.4 (2019).

"We argue that design thinking is effective at (a) providing a playbook for people to approach wicked problems, (b) creating a participatory approach to managing change in organizations and institutions, (c) building empathy in cross-functional collaboration, and (d) serving as a lens for approaching creativity and innovation."

(*Women Reading and Writing* by Katsukawa Shunsho)

More problems and solutions . . .

– Design thinking should not be applied in a rigid, linear way. It is not a roadmap but a playbook from which we should take what we need depending on the situation. "We saw design thinking as a Swiss army knife rather than a hammer."

– Design thinking should be an inclusive approach. Good teamwork takes preparation and practice. Teams should not be dominated by the loudest voices, and students should not rush to a solution by silencing dissent. Disagreements should be part of the process, and all participants should feel heard and valued. Differences in backgrounds, approaches, and learning styles should be recognized and validated.

"My specific goal is for students to learn that innovation relies on finding pathways for including structurally silenced voices and supporting divergence and dissensus."

The importance of metacognition . . .

- Design thinking should include thinking about the designer (metacognition). Students need to understand their own positions as designers—their backgrounds and biases are part of the design process. They should think about what they do not know and what they bring to the classroom.

- Design thinking requires thoughtful, empathetic facilitation. Teachers should also recognize their own situatedness. What assumptions are they bringing to the classroom about what students should know, how they learn, and what they can accomplish? Are their expectations clear, fair, and equitable? We should engage in "empathetic teaching."

"A truly empathetic approach, however, might prompt facilitators to encourage modifications so that participants design their own design thinking."

The design thinking classroom . . .

(Woman with a stylus in a fresco at Pompei)

– Teachers should create an environment in which everyone is heard and disagreements are part of the process.

"It is not easy to create an environment in which multiple voices are heard and dissensus is engaged and facilitated as a tactic, but we argue that such an environment is critical for deploying design thinking in order to facilitate the multitude of possibilities that generate productive action."

– Students should feel comfortable embracing ambiguity and productive failure.

Teachers should "create a classroom that values and rewards such approaches as inherent to the learning process itself."

Why should we teach productive failure?

From "Next Time, Fail Better" by Paula M. Krebs, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 11, 2012.

"Humanities students are not used to failure. They want to get it right the first time. When they are new to the game, they want to get good grades on what are essentially first drafts. Once they learn how much work it is to write and edit a really good essay, their goals shift—from getting A's on papers written the night before to getting A's and making the difficult process look effortless. Because it's embarrassing to have to admit that you had to throw away two drafts before you got to your thesis."

"I had a colleague who had a poster in his dining room with Samuel Beckett's 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' We may tell ourselves that, but we don't tell our students. Maybe we should post it in our classrooms, not our dining rooms."

Why learning to fail is important . . .

From "Essay on the Importance of Teaching Failure" by Edward Burger, *Inside Higher Ed*, August 21, 2021.

"In reality, every idea from every discipline is a human idea that comes from a natural, thoughtful, and (ideally) unending journey in which thinkers deeply understand the current state of knowledge, take a tiny step in a new direction, almost immediately hit a dead end, learn from that misstep, and, through iteration, inevitably move forward. That recipe for success is not just the secret formula for original scholarly discovery, but also for wise, everyday thinking for the entire population. Hence, it is important to explicitly highlight how essential these dead ends and mistakes are—that is, to teach students the power of failure and how to fail effectively."

"Individuals need to embrace the realization that taking risks and failing are often the essential moves necessary to bring clarity, understanding, and innovation."

Allowing and rewarding failure . . .

How does Burger allow and reward failure?

– Require it: Students are asked to write quick first drafts (prototypes), then submit the heavily marked-up first draft with the final draft to show progress.

– Validate it: After assignments are returned, students are asked to share their errors, which are treated as valuable learning moments. Students are praised for making mistakes and providing opportunities to learn. "Congratulations, Aaron—that's wrong! Now what lesson or insight is Aaron offering us?"

– Assess it: 5% of the grade is based on "quality of failure." Students submit a final reflective essay describing their productive failure and how they have grown. They give themselves a "quality of failure" grade, which Burger usually agrees with.

Failing as a creative act . . .

"Beyond the subject matter contained in the 32 to 48 courses that typical undergraduates fleetingly encounter, our students' education centers about the most important creative feat of their lives—the creation of themselves: Creating a mind enlivened by curiosity and the intellectual audacity to take risks and create new ideas, a mind that sees the world of unlimited possibility. So we as educators and scholars should constantly be asking ourselves: Have I taught my students how to successfully fail?"

(*Clairvoyance* by Rene Magritte)

Let's create a prototype for a WR153 course.

(Pick one from your brainstorming.)

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Create something short that starts to define your course: a proposal, a reading list, an assignment sequence, etc.