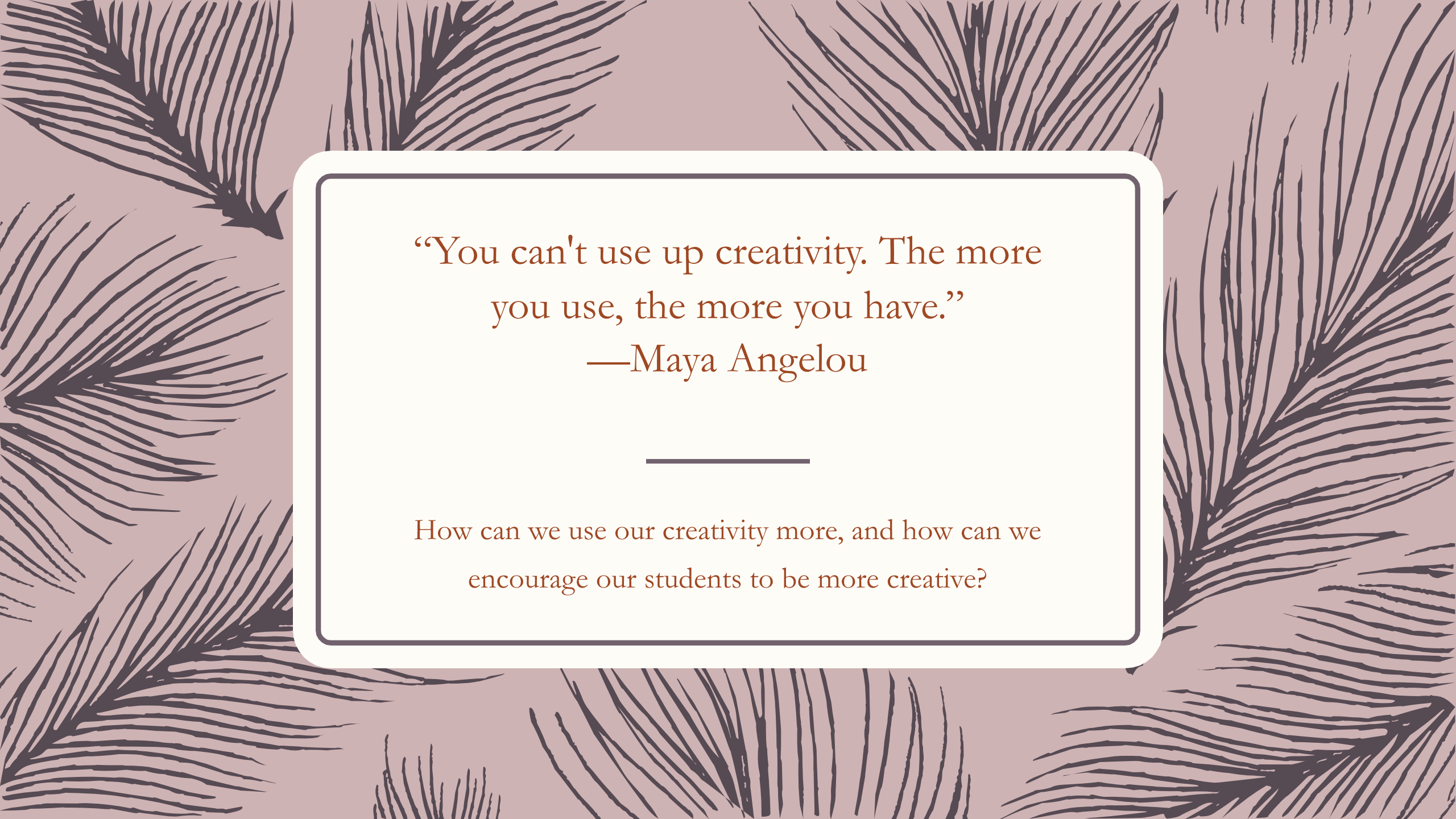


Creativity and Innovation in the Writing Classroom

Session 4: Creativity in
Writing Pedagogy

Theodora Goss



“You can't use up creativity. The more
you use, the more you have.”

—Maya Angelou

How can we use our creativity more, and how can we
encourage our students to be more creative?


Let's start with an exercise . . .



What is your experience with creativity? Some questions to think about:

- Do you think of yourself as creative?
- Do you do anything creative? If so, what?
- What assumptions do you have about creativity?
- Have you encouraged your students to be creative in the past? If so, how?
- What keeps you from being creative?
- How could you and/or your students be more creative?

(Paris Through the Window by Marc Chagall)



Where have we been? Where are we going?

Here is what we've covered so far:

- What is design thinking and where does it come from?
- How can we incorporate the steps of design thinking into our courses?
- What are some problems and controversies in design thinking?
- How can we use design thinking effectively and equitably ?

Now let's take a step back . . .

The goal is *creativity*.

- So what is *creativity* anyway?
- Why should we focus on *creativity* in composition?
- What are some ways to nurture *creativity*?
- How do we build *creative* confidence in ourselves and our students?



According to Ken Robinson:

What is creativity? “The process of having original ideas that have value.”

- Ideas original to whom? That have value to whom? At least to their creator. Having value means that creativity also involves critical judgment and a process of interrogation (for example, a writer revising a draft to make it “better”).

Robinson distinguishes between three things:

- **Imagination:** the “ability to bring to mind things that aren’t present to our senses.” It lets us visit the past and envision the future. It allows us to empathize with others.
- **Creativity:** draws on imagination to create something of value. That thing usually develops in the making of it. It’s “a conversation between the material and the idea.”
- **Innovation:** the practical application of creativity, putting new ideas into practice.



According to Mihaly Csikszentmihaly:

“Creativity occurs when a person, using the symbols of a given domain . . . , has a new idea or sees a new pattern, and when this novelty is selected by the appropriate field for inclusion into the relevant domain.”

- **The domain:** a set of symbolic rules and procedures. We could also call this a discipline. Biology, music, and fashion design are all domains.
- **The field:** the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. Scholars, critics, and other experts in a domain are the field.
- **The person:** the individual making a contribution to the domain.

In your classroom, the topic of the course becomes the domain. You and your students become the field. Each student tries to learn the domain and do something creative, with input and critical feedback from the field.

Big C and little c . . .




According to Csikszentmihaly:

- Big C creativity changes a domain. It's the work of Vincent Van Gogh, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Billie Holliday, Akira Kurosawa, Katalin Kariko. It depends not just on the individual but also on the domain and field. It occurs within a system or between systems (if you combine domains).
- Little c is the creativity we use in our daily lives. It may not change an entire domain, but it makes our live richer.

If we help our students practice little c, maybe someday they will accomplish big C. But all creativity will make their lives more interesting and fulfilling.

(Wheat Field with Cypresses by Vincent Van Gogh)



Creativity as a system . . .

In order to be creative, you need to “internalize the system.”

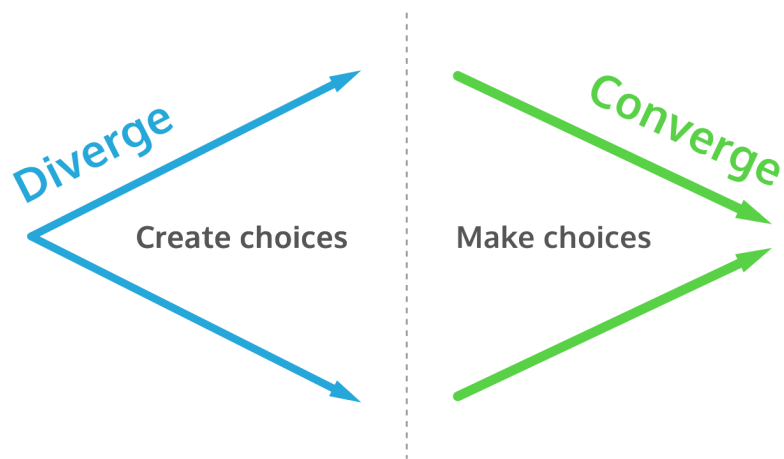
“A person who wants to make a creative contribution not only must work within a creative system but also must reproduce that system within his or her mind. In other words, the person must learn the rules and the content of the domain, as well as the criteria of selection, the preferences of the field.”

For example, “Writers say that you have to read, read, and read some more, and know what the critics’ criteria for good writing are, before you can write creatively yourself.”

- As Ken Robinson says, you need to know how to play the piano before you can be creative on the piano. The more you know, the more creative you can be.
- In our classes, this means creativity depends on content knowledge about both writing and the topic of the course. **This is the understand step.**

Convergent and divergent thinking . . .

Convergent/Divergent thinking




Convergent thinking: “involves solving well-defined, rational problems that have one correct answer.”

Divergent thinking: “leads to no agreed-on solution. It involves fluency, or the ability to generate a great quantity of ideas; flexibility, or the ability to switch from one perspective to another; and originality in picking unusual associations of ideas.”

Most people associate creativity with divergent thinking. BUT “Divergent thinking is not much use without the ability to tell a good idea from a bad one—and this selectivity involves convergent thinking.”

Both of these are necessary for creativity . . . **These are the ideate and define steps.**



Why teach creativity in the writing classroom?

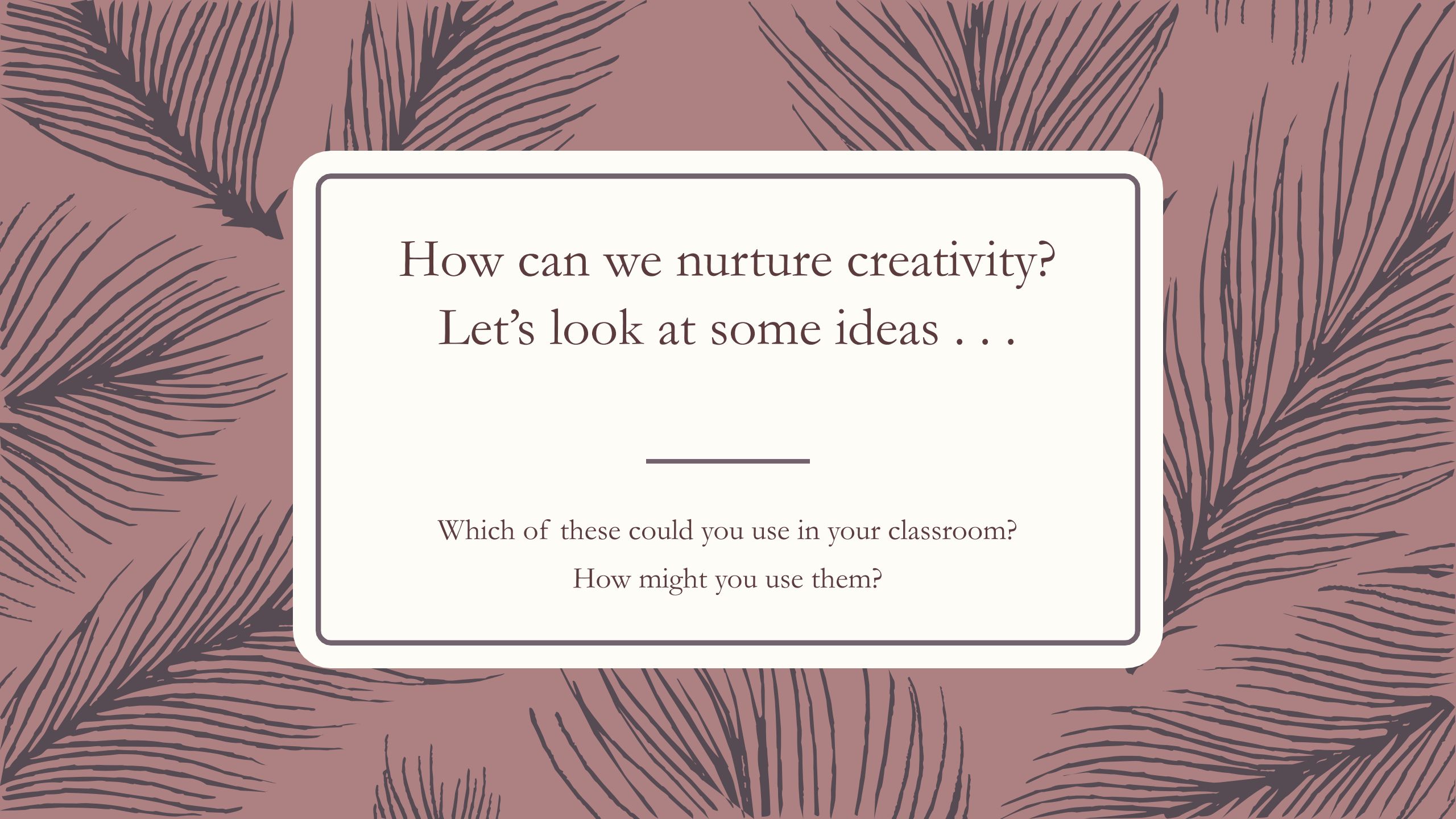
“The UnEssay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom” by Patrick Sullivan, *CCC* 67.1 (2015).

“If we theorize **creativity as a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition**, it must also, then, be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of the curriculum in the writing classroom.” **Creativity is a way of thinking . . .**

“If part of our goal here is to move the public understanding of composition—and the assessment of writing—away from the kind of reductionism promoted by the Common Core standards and the powerful, entrenched interests of the testing consortia, we must actively begin theorizing and promoting a more deeply rhetorical, cognitive, and creative understanding of writing.” . . . **that can help us expand our definition of writing.**

“Part of what we are trying to accomplish here with a focus on creativity is precisely this liberated, vital, and ‘more robust’ understanding of academic discourse and academic literacies for students in our composition classes.”

In other words, it can help us create better and more exciting writing classes.



How can we nurture creativity?
Let's look at some ideas . . .

Which of these could you use in your classroom?

How might you use them?

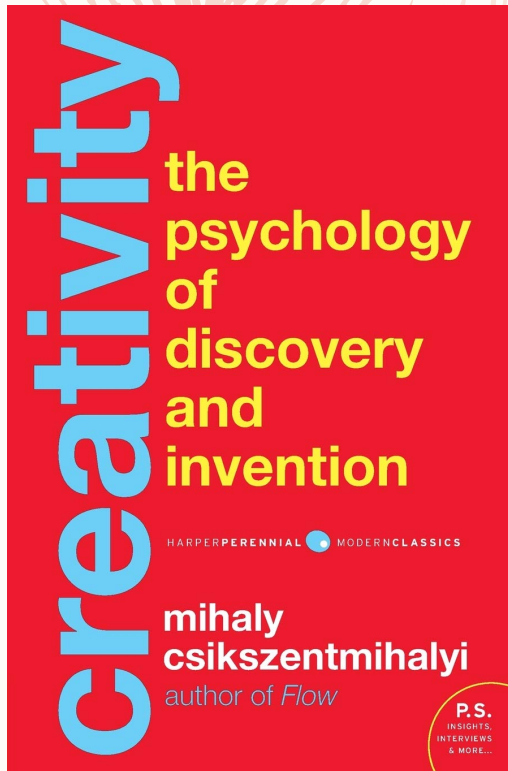
Start with curiosity and interest . . .

“The first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of attention to things for their own sake. . . . How can interest and curiosity be cultivated, assuming that you feel the desire to do so?”

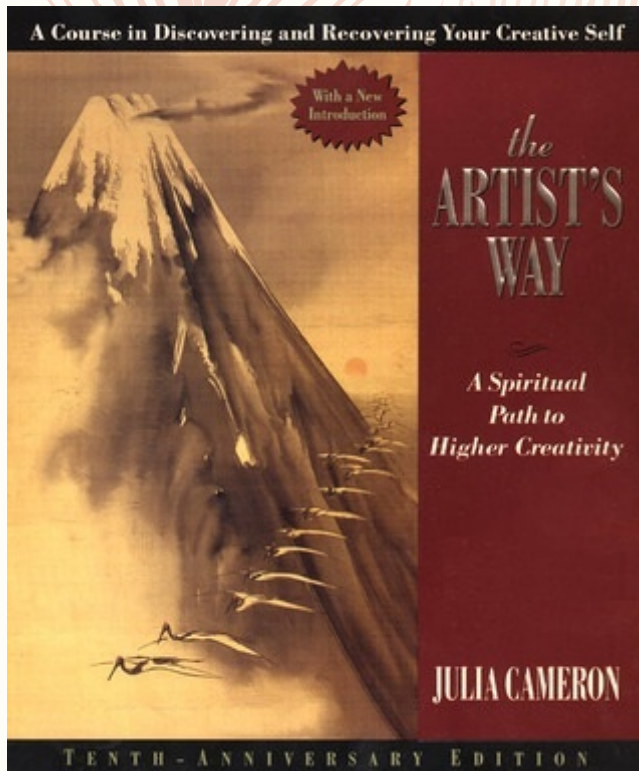
- Try to be surprised by something every day.
- Try to surprise at least one person every day.
- Write down each day what surprised you and how you surprised others.
- When something strikes a spark of interest, follow it.

How could we adapt one or more of these suggestions for our writing classes?

“If you take time to reflect on how best to implement these four suggestions, and then actually start putting them into effect, you should feel a stirring of possibilities under the accustomed surface of daily experiences.”—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



Get unblocked and inspired . . .



Julia Cameron's program for creativity has two foundational tools:

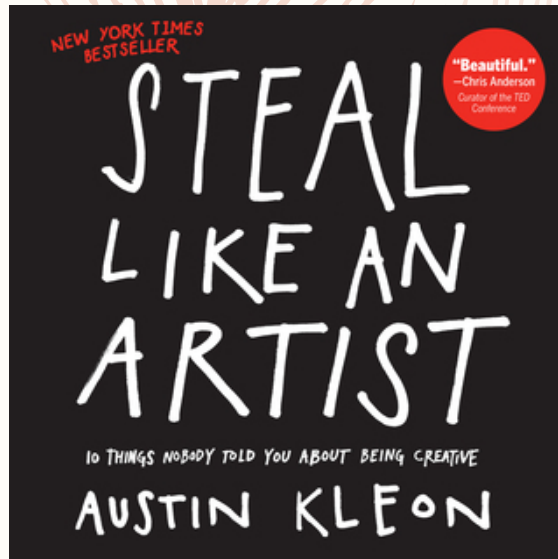
- **Morning pages:** “What are morning pages? Put simply, the morning pages are three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness,” that you do every morning.

How could you adapt this? One paragraph handwritten or typed (since handwriting might not be appropriate for some students) at the beginning of class about anything, not checked or graded?

- **The artist date:** “An artist date is a block of time . . . especially set aside and committed to nurturing your creative consciousness.” It could include reading, a visit to a museum or the theater, a walk in the park, etc.

Could you suggest or require a creativity date? Could your students have a date with their creative genius (from the Gilbert video)?

Collect, swipe, fail to copy . . .



Austin Kleon also has some suggestions:

- **Collect ideas:** “The artist is a collector. . . . Your job is to collect good ideas. The more ideas you collect, the more you can choose to be influenced by.”
- **Keep them in a swipe file:** “Keep a swipe file. It’s just what it sounds like—a file to keep track of the stuff you’ve swiped from others. It can be digital or analog—it doesn’t matter what form it takes, as long as it works. . . . Need a little inspiration? Open up the swipe file.”
- **Copy your heroes:** “In the beginning, we learn by pretending to be our heroes. . . . We’re talking about practice here, not plagiarism—plagiarism is trying to pass someone else’s work off as your own. Copying is about reverse-engineering.” However, you can never copy anyone else exactly—it’s simply not possible. In failing to copy your heroes, you will develop your own style.

Anne Lamott's index cards . . .



Write your ideas down on index cards . . .

“When I get stuck or lost or the jungle drums start beating in my head, proclaiming that the jig is about to be up and I don’t know what I’m doing and the well has run dry, I’ll look through my index cards. I try to see if there’s a short assignment on any of them that will get me writing again, give me a small sense of confidence, help me put down one damn word after another, which is, let’s face it, what writing finally boils down to.” —Anne Lamott

(Image by Austin Kleon from <https://austinkleon.com/tag/anne-lamott/>)



Twyla Tharp's box . . .

Put your ideas in a box . . .

“There are separate boxes for everything I’ve ever done. If you want a glimpse into how I think and work, you could do worse than to start with my boxes.

The box makes me feel organized, that I have my act together even when I don’t know where I’m going yet.

It also represents a commitment. The simple act of writing a project name on the box means I’ve started work.”

The box can also help with metacognition:

“I find the box is most useful at three critical stages: when you’re getting going, when you’re lost, and after you’ve finished”—then, the box can “give you a chance to look back” and “reflect on your performance.”

(Pandora by Odilon Redon)

Find your spine . . . (also from Tharp)



“Spine, to put it bluntly, begins with your first strong idea. You were scratching to come up with an idea, you found one, and through the next stage of creative thinking you nurtured it into the spine of your creation. The idea is the toehold that gets you started. The spine is the statement you make to yourself outlining your intention for the work. You intend to tell this story. You intend to explore this theme. You intend to employ this structure.”

“I believe that a work of art needs a spine—an underlying theme, a motive for coming into existence. It doesn’t have to be apparent to the audience. But you need it at the start of the creative process to guide you and keep you going.”

When you feel lost in the creative process, finding the spine can remind you of what you’re doing and help you do it.

(Misty Copeland from <http://www.powerinplaceproject.com/news/2020/6/19/misty-copeland-pushing-ballets-boundaries>)



Writing the UnEssay . . .

From Patrick Sullivan's assignment:

The UnEssay should pull together the student's thinking for that particular unit. "But it can't be a traditional essay. It can't be a five-paragraph theme. It has to be something else and it can be whatever you want it to be. Invent a new form! Write the kind of 'paper' or essay you've always wanted to write in an English class. Feel free to include pictures, photos, links, and multimedia if you wish. Most importantly: Have some fun with this!"

The assignment includes a series of metacognitive questions, including "What is valued in this discipline? What counts as knowledge in this discipline?" "What is creativity?"

Many of the writing assignments proposed for WR153 are unessays in one form or another . . .



What about finding your voice and overcoming fear?

These two things are related. Creativity can be scary
because it's about us. It's personal . . .

How can we help students overcome fear?

I have been absolutely terrified every moment of my life- and I have never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do."

-Georgia O' Keefe



“Your fear will always be triggered by your creativity, because creativity asks you to enter into realms of uncertain outcome, and fear hates uncertain outcome. Your fear—programmed by evolution to be hypervigilant and insanely overprotective—will always assume that any uncertain outcome is destined to end in bloody, horrible death.”

—Elizabeth Gilbert

- Acknowledge that creating something is scary. (For me too!)
- Make the workshop a positive space. The goal is to help each other.
- Allow, encourage, and reward productive failure.

Guided mastery: take students through the process so they gain confidence and self-efficacy. Get them used to being creative.

How can we help students find their voice?

“

Do the stuff that only you can do.

The urge, starting out, is to copy. And that's not a bad thing. Most of us only find our own voices after we've sounded like a lot of other people. But the one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision.

neil gaiman

Anne Lamott writes that “the truth of your experience can *only* come through your own voice. If it is wrapped in someone else’s voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else’s clothes. . . . Sometimes wearing someone else’s style is very comforting, warm and pretty and bright, and it can loosen you up, tune you into the joys of language and rhythm and concern. But what you say will be an abstraction because it will not have sprung from direct experience: when you try to capture the truth of your experience in some other person’s voice or on that person’s terms, you are removing yourself one step further from what you have seen or what you know.”

Students want to find their own voice! But it’s very hard to have your own voice in your teens and twenties. Usually it takes years to find your own voice . . .

Our goal should be to help them know a little more about themselves when they leave the class than when they came in. In other words: metacognition!



How can we help students know themselves?

From “Writing in Design Thinking: Deconstructing the Question of Being” by Tassoula Hadjiyanni and Stephanie Zollinger, *International Journal of Architectural Research* 7.1 (2013):

These exercises help students “think and discover who they are and how they belong to the world.” Writing is used as a “medium for self-discovery.”

- **Manifestos:** Students wrote short manifestos about their intentions, motives, and views—in this case, as design students. Writing a manifesto can help students “position their work as well as explain it to others.” They can be used in a variety of ways. For example, what is your manifesto as a writer?
- **Six-word memoirs:** Students were asked to write their memoirs in six words, which made them focus on their core beliefs and values. They compared those memoirs electronically to find which words were used the most to spark discussion.



Self-reflection continued . . .

- **Reflectionnaires:** This portmanteau word combines reflection with questionnaire. Students must answer the questions presented. The distinguishing characteristic of reflectionnaires is that the questions focus on the student. For example, “What am I most committed to in my life? How can I continue to learn and grow?”

The authors propose three kinds of reflectionnaires:

- Based on class lectures.
- Based on field trips. These questions include sensory detail as well as self-reflection.
- Exam questions. An exam would include at least one personal question, such as, “If I were described as a chair during the Renaissance, what would I be? Describe the chair and discuss how it reflects my personality traits.”

What are my goals for our students?



1. Think of themselves as creative.
2. Feel confident in defining their own projects.
3. Find internal rather than external motivation for their work.
4. Practice divergent as well as convergent thinking.
5. Accept ambiguity and uncertainty in the creative process.
6. Redefine failure as a learning opportunity.
7. Know there is a process they can use when they are stuck.
8. Learn about themselves as writers and individuals.

What are your goals for our students?

(Woman Writing at a Secrétaire by James McBey)