Creativity is a difficult concept to pull apart and examine, much less foster in a student of writing. It is interesting and ironic that we can’t put our collective finger on what is creative, but we seem to recognize it when it comes our way. Creativity, then, is like the rest of the universe: it defies a categorical description, which is what makes it creative in the first place.

The word “creative,” like the word “creator” implies something coming from nothing, something being made, assembled in an original, interesting way. There are competing theories about the generating of creativity, but what if creativity was seen not as a building process, but instead as a tearing away of what’s blocking the inspired kernel of creative energy, letting it flourish into a fully mature flower that grows its own way? From this model, a creative writing workshop would be designed to allow what writer Natalie Goldberg (1990) calls “wild mind” to thrive. The model must foster a continual practice of writing to show and not tell; it must create an environment that brings the ideas from the collective unconscious in a novel, original way.
Creating this environment is much easier said than done, partly because the classroom carries with it a number of real life complexities. How do instructors deal with the vast differences in the “talent” that their students display? What is talent, for that matter? What techniques will allow all students to tap their inner resources for a chance to express who they are? Moreover, is self-discovery even the main concern of creative writing, or is it merely to write something publishable? How do we define something as creative? How do we assess student performance without stifling the very creativity that we are trying to foster? How do we view the purpose of grading? These questions (and many more) make the development of the optimal workshop that operates in the real world, a challenging prospect.

If we are to construct a workshop that allows for the flow of true creativity, we have to attempt to define creativity and see how it best thrives. The definition and nature of creativity has been, and continues to be, a controversial subject. Linda Sarbo and Joseph Moxley realize this in *Creativity Research and Classroom Practice*, stating that:

> The complex process of social judgments by which our society
defines a creative work is fraught with subjective and irrelevant influences, and even experts in a particular field—music critics, art historians, scholars, and scientists—often disagree on the creative value of a work. (133)

Further, Sarbo and Moxley make a salient point in that creativity must be “defined in behavioral terms that can accommodate products as diverse as a preschooler’s drawing and Einstein’s theory of relativity.” (133) What then is the consensual take on the definition of creativity? Sarbo and Moxley say that “there is agreement that a creative act must be seen as valuable or interesting, and that it cannot be accidental.” (134)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book, Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, reinforces this description but articulates it in a deeper way through what he calls the systems model. He argues that the question should not be what is creativity but rather: Where is it? He talks of how creativity can be understood in terms of the domain in which it exists, the domain being “a set of symbolic rules and procedures, knowledge shared by a particular society, or humanity as a whole.” (28) (Writing, of course, is one example of a domain.)

Another aspect of Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of creativity is the field, which is made up of people who decide the value of a new product, and if it should be added to the domain. Critics, curators, editors, foundation administrators and other “gatekeepers” make up this component. Finally, the individual person is the last component in his model, and when that person introduces a new idea or pattern into the domain, creativity has occurred.

Csikszentmihalyi’s definition of creativity is that it is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain. It is important to remember, however, that a domain cannot be changed without the explicit or implicit consent of a field responsible for it. (28)

Thus, in tying all of this to creative writing, our approach to the workshop must encompass all three aspects of creativity: the domain (writing) the field (instructors and administrators) and the creative person (the student). The workshop must honour the domain of
writing, and there is no getting around that there are certain rules and procedures that give it definition. A musician, for example, cannot express him or herself without learning how to play a myriad of notes, and in fact, the freedom to express oneself increases as one learns more aspects of the domain. True also with the writer. The instructors and administrators must strive to provide the best possible conditions for creativity to flourish, and the writer, as alluded to above, must be open to a variety of methods to unleash the creative power that resides in what John Gardner calls “the secret room where dreams prowl.” (120).

What of this theory that creative writing comes from the collective unconscious? Why favour this explanation over the others? One place to look is in the descriptions given by writers themselves about their creative process. In Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, Csikszentmihalyi interviews writers about their goals and methods in regards to their craft. He found many similarities among them, one being
the oft-stressed emphasis on the dialectic between the irrational and rational aspects of the craft, between passion and discipline. Whether we want to call it the Freudian unconscious...or the Jungian collective unconscious where the archetypes of the race dwell, or whether we think of it as a space below the threshold of awareness where previous impressions randomly combine until a striking new connection happens by chance, it is quite clear that all the writers place great stock in the sudden voice that arises in the middle of the night to enjoin: “You have to write this.” (263)

Rollo May, in *The Courage to Create*, makes a similar argument for the role of the collective unconscious in the nature of creativity. He relates his own experiences with “out of the blue” thoughts that run contrary to his previously held conscious beliefs and how these thoughts led to an entire change in one of his long held psychological theories.

What was going on at the moment when this breakthrough occurred? Taking this experience of mine as a start, we notice, first of all, that the insight broke into my conscious mind against what I had been trying to think rationally. I had a good, sound thesis and I had been working very hard to prove it. The unconscious, so to speak, *broke through in opposition to the conscious belief to which I was clinging.* (58)

May then explains that Carl Jung believed that there was a polarity between the conscious and the unconscious that was compensatory, and that “consciousness controls the wild, illogical vagaries of the unconscious, while the unconscious keeps consciousness from drying up in banal, empty, arid rationality.” (59) May goes on to explain that these breakthroughs of the conscious into the unconscious can raise fear (hence the title of his book) because the breakthrough also causes anxiety when one’s seemingly solid belief system is at least challenged or perhaps destroyed.

Eckhart Tolle in *The Power of Now* sees great promise in letting the collective unconscious dictate creative vision. By various means, he encourages the stillness of mind for the purpose of creative insight. He surmises that “all true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness.” (24) He goes on to imply that our conscious mind gives form to creative impulse, but the impulse itself comes from non-conscious origins.

Sarbo and Moxley do well in relating all of the above to the creative
writing classroom. They state:

Because May traces the origins of creativity to the unconscious, he assumes that creative acts cannot be voluntarily or involuntarily induced. On the other hand, a logical corollary of this theory offers teachers an indirect means for engendering creativity in their students. Since creative acts are dependent on the intensity of the artist’s commitment to the encounter, we can help our students’ creative opportunities by facilitating their engagement in the writing process. (134)

Thus, we must engage our students while creating opportunities for this muse to make its way through them.

Obviously, the argument here is not to say this is the only approach that can “work” in terms of creating great writing. What is being advocated is a viewpoint that looks at creative writing as a practice, a meditation, and a means by which anyone can get to know themselves better, but also as a method for producing truly fresh, creative work. Therefore, the styles and techniques that follow are aimed at anyone interested in creative writing. The understanding is that writing “talent” exists within anyone. As Gabriele Rico notes in Writing the Natural Way, if one has the ability to “speak, form letters on the page, know the rudiments of sentence structure, take a telephone message, or write a thank-you note, you have sufficient language skills to write the natural way.” (15)

As a veteran teacher in an alternative continuation high school, I interact with students with varying degrees of language and writing skills. Some students are highly articulate and comfortable with creative writing while others have tremendous anxiety and resistance. Additionally, teenagers in general are in an experimental phase in their lives, they are pushing their boundaries, questioning authority, and exploring issues that affect them and society at large. All of these factors coupled with the autonomy that is part and parcel with an alternative school have provided fertile soil for a creative writing workshop, but not one without challenges.
One of the challenging aspects of teaching creative writing is breaking through the anxiety created in trying to “do it right,” the need to please the teacher and get a good grade. Ironically, the want to get it right can very often stand directly in the way of the fresh, naked writing that is the goal of the writer. Rollo May goes to the well-known mathematician Jules Henri Poincare to assert that, in May’s words, “often the mind needs relaxation of inner controls—needs to be freed in reverie or day dreaming—for the unaccustomed ideas to emerge.” (65) May describes the process of the revealing of these breakthroughs by summarizing Poincare’s testimony thusly:

(1) the suddenness of the illumination; (2) that the insight may occur, and to some extent, must occur against what one has clung to consciously in one’s theories; (3) the vividness of the incident and the whole scene that surrounds it; (4) the brevity and conciseness of the insight, along with the experience of immediate certainty. (66)

To make these breakthroughs happen, May outlines conditions that he deems necessary for the experience. He speaks of hard work on the
topic before the breakthrough, leading to a rest in which the “unconscious work’ has been given a chance to proceed on its own.” (66)

May notes that this last point is particularly important. “It is probably something everyone has learned,” he offers. “Professors will lecture with more inspiration if they occasionally alternate the classroom with the beach; authors will write better when...they write for two hours then pitch quotis, and then go back to their writing.” (66) He goes on to echo Eckhart Tolle, by recommending what he calls “the constructive use of solitude.” (66)

My experience with encouraging risk-taking and experimentation with my high school students was directly inspired by implementing many of the techniques outlined in Natalie Goldberg’s books Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within and Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life. Goldberg, a Zen Buddhist, advocates the value of what she calls “first thoughts” (Bones, 9) and feels that they have the “freshness and inspiration” that makes for compelling writing. She holds that:

First thoughts are...unencumbered by ego, by that mechanism in us that tries to be in control, tries to prove the world is permanent and solid, enduring and logical. The world is not permanent, it is ever-changing and full of human suffering. So, if you express something egoless, it is also full of energy because it is expressing the truth of the way things are. You are not carrying the burden of ego in your expression, but are riding for moments the waves of human consciousness and using your personal details to express the ride. (Bones, 9)

She compares writing with Zen meditation and relates that writing and sitting are similar in that we must face great emotions that are tied up with first thoughts, but not shrink at them. They are to be contacted and like a great warrior, one must not stop writing when they come up.

When I implement the above approach at the high school level, the basic unit of the technique is the timed exercise. Students are briefed in the “rules of writing practice.” (Wild Mind, 1) The first rule is to keep the hand moving. Once one begins, they are not to stop until the timed exercise is over. Goldberg believes that if one keeps the creator hand moving, the critical editor within can’t catch up and censor the first thoughts. Secondly she advocates losing control and not worrying if what one is saying is polite. Next, she places importance on being specific, to get below labels of objects and people. Finally, she insists that writers not worry about punctuation, spelling, and grammar and
that they “go for the jugular” especially if something that comes up is scary or risqué, because that’s where the energy is. (Wild Mind, 2-5)

There are many timed exercises that Goldberg recommends, but the one that I have found to be very effective at lowering student anxiety toward creative writing while also paving the way for fresh writing is the “I remember” exercise. (Wild Mind, 10-11) Students (following a briefing on the above rules) are told that they will be required to write for ten minutes, with their prompt being “I remember...” They are told to begin with this phrase and continue writing, without censoring themselves, for ten minutes. If the student gets stuck, they are to write the phrase again until something comes up.

After ten minutes, a break is taken where students are encouraged to go for a short walk, stretch or do some other physical act other than writing. (This links up with Rollo May’s assertion, mentioned earlier, that a rest period between sessions will help to produce the needed breakthrough from unconscious to conscious mind). When the students return, they do a similar timed exercise, the exception being that they now write the phrase “I don’t remember...” as a prompt.
The results of these exercises were fairly astounding, in that many students produced pages of text that told, for the most part, intimate compelling stories from their childhood or from just weeks, days or hours before. As a teacher trying to get students to kick start their writing practice, it was strange to have so much to work with and discuss from such a short exercise. The learning curve climbed quickly as I tried more timed writings and as I was able to reiterate the “rules.” All of the writing improved, mainly in its clarity and attention to specificity. Just as important the students were having fun, there was joy in the seemingly scary, dreadful act of writing and discussing what they had committed to the page. It seemed that a huge hurdle in self-censorship had been crossed, and the possibilities for further growth became real.

Katherine Haake in What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies describes a similar exercise that she calls “burrowing.” She states that “as you dig and dig, things appear, layer after layer, deeper and deeper: words after words after words.”(176) She adds that, “this is how language drives writing, how writing becomes an intransitive act, how not thinking opens out into text, how we as writers disappear into the writing, and the whole concept of pleasure.” (177)

One of her students, Ronald Ortiz, described it thusly:

Unlike a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ exercise that encouraged us to jot down everything that popped into our heads, we were instead directed to associate various free-form ideas into a coherent piece of fiction based on a single random sentence. The goal of this exercise, as I understood it, was to allow language to act upon us, instead of the other way around. (177)

He adds that “burrowing wasn’t necessarily easy, but it bypassed many of the barriers that we’d often felt when we tried to write something.” (177)

Margo McCall another student of Haake’s, reinforces the previous statements when she says that

the...thing that had a major effect was the idea that one should just write, should silence the internal critic and editor, and let meaning metonymically accrue. The notion was a radical departure from the way I’ve come to write...Letting the words accrue and speak for themselves, not having much
idea of what I was even writing, felt tremendously natural.”
(178)

Katherine Haake backs up the researchers previously mentioned when she associates writing as a growth out of language, “its own imperative carried in the weight of each sentence, by which the next sentence is already determined.” (185)

Just as compelling as Haake’s findings is the work done by Gabriele Rico on creative writing and its relationship to the specialized hemispheres of the brain. In Writing the Natural Way, she says that “writing begins with wholeness, specifically with the innate human drive to shape personally meaningful, coherent wholes.” (9) She adds that what she calls “natural” writing “depends on gaining access to a part of your mind we normally do not associate with writing skills. Contacting that part of your mind enables you to discover your own unique and natural voice, which is your primary source of expressive power.” (16)

Rico’s theory is interesting for the purposes of this writing mainly for the fact that she is convinced that all people have access to an innate reservoir of, as she says above, expressive power. She implores that we “begin with the whole, with the fundamental human desire for giving shape to experience...for creating form and structure out of the confusion that constitutes both our inner and outer worlds.” (16) She feels that the first movement toward gaining access to originality and freedom of expression is to “become aware of the two-sided nature of your mental make-up: one thinks in terms of the connectedness of things and events, the other thinks in terms of parts and sequences.” (17)

Rico goes on to say that most teachers of writing and investigators of creativity concur that there are at least two different parts of any creative act (the unconscious or generative phase and the conscious, critical phase that edits and revises) that can have a conflicting relationship. Rico’s goal is to have the two “work harmoniously rather than conflict with one another.” (17) She advocates the use of clustering exercises that allow the unconscious mind to go the way it wants in a non-linear fashion. Rico states that:

we cannot force the birth of an idea, but we can do the next best thing: we can cluster, thus calling on the pattern-seeking Design mind and bypassing the critical censorship of the Sign mind, which relieves the familiar anxiety about what to say and where to start and opens us to the freedom of expression we knew in childhood. (29)
Basically, the method involves a nucleus word that acts as a stimulus for all words having to do with that subject. The words that are associated are written in circles around the nucleus word. The clustering unfolds from the center, and Rico states that if the nucleus word is “allowed to filter through your personal experiential sieve, it will always generate writing expressive of your unique consciousness.” (32) Often, a free write is done in which the words are used to formulate a poem or short story.

My experience of this method with high school students is also positive, especially in the brainstorm stage of writing a short story or an essay. I also find it a great method for group or collaborative writing, and have done clustering with the class as a whole on the chalkboard as a way to kick start the group on a singular subject that I want them all to write about. Often, when a student feels that they know very little about something, I will have them cluster, with the direction to get down what they do know. If I would have asked them to write a paragraph, the page would still be blank after five minutes; after clustering the results are usually much more apparent.

Now that some points have been made about the nature of creativity and its relationship to writing, it is necessary to discuss the controversial subject of how one, as an instructor, approaches evaluation in creative writing. Much has been said about the pitfalls of the standard A through F grading and the nebulous plus and minus added in seems to create more confusion than clarity amongst students. Also, at what rate should instructors grade “talent” and hard work?

Perhaps the answers to these questions don’t exist, but some method has to be put in place, for as Suzanne Greenberg points out in An ‘A’ for Effort: Where does Talent Fit in Grading Creative Writing?, “we are not grading in the vacuum of the university. We live in a culture where grades continue well beyond the university.” (172) In other words, saying that the criticism of art and writing is subjective and therefore should not be graded is just not realistic. After much humorous description of her trials and tribulations in the trenches with assessment and her students, Greenberg realized that “the more details I gave about how exactly I planned to grade, the more often I was challenged, and the more time my students and I spent discussing grading instead of writing...I had achieved exactly opposite of what I had intended to achieve.” (165-66)

Greenberg came to see that a different approach was needed; one that gave her and her students the space to focus on writing, a way to assess that charted the growth of the writer during the time period without
stifling creativity or limiting risk-taking. Also, a system that rewarded hard work and allowed for thoughtful revision while encouraging students to document and reflect on their process as a writer.

The portfolio approach in which students highlight work that they deem the best has a good chance of covering all of the concerns listed above, and Greenberg and others sing its praises while noting its drawbacks. The basic concept is to get students to write without the pressure of letter grades during the semester, while being provided with constant written feedback on each of their projects.

Students work toward putting together a packet by the end of the term, with an essay explaining what they chose to include and why. Also, they provide information on the evolution of their writing—how they changed as the semester progressed. Greenberg adds that if they want written commentary on the final packet, she provides a way for it to be mailed to them after the class has ended. (68)

From the packet and by factoring in other aspects i.e. attendance and class participation, a letter grade is given; this method is therefore a meshing of two assessment systems, a hybrid that is much more fitting for creative writing assessment.

The drawbacks for this plan are worth mentioning. Some students will always be more preoccupied with the grade they receive and may tend to be frustrated with only knowing their grade at the very end of the course. Further, the transition from the portfolio to the letter grade can be problematic, and the controversial “talent” word can raise its ambiguous head, as Greenberg notes here:

We can’t grade solely on process. The final product must figure into the semester grade, or we can be left with the untenable situation of awarding a mediocre writer with an A simply because he worked diligently all semester long. How different is this than giving a math student an A because he worked through all the steps in a difficult problem before coming up with the wrong answer?...So talent does ultimately figure into my final grades. (171)

In the end, evaluation, like the rest of the elements of an optimal workshop, has to merge with serving the flow of the muse, and that becomes the most challenging aspect. Creativity doesn’t fit in boxes neatly, so evaluation must be as fluid and nimble as possible.

Risk taking, at first glance, doesn’t seem to have much to do with most assessment tools, but Wendy Bishop, another proponent of
portfolio-based evaluation, feels that she can create a model of evaluation that creates what she calls a “writing-intensive zone.” This concept fits most directly in the earlier supposition that an environment that fosters creativity must allow for creative inspiration to fully flower from the unconscious. Bishop contends that the zone allows

students to take risks: attempt new rhetorical techniques, explore challenging subjects, try hunches and wild guesses, push drafts into dislocation or pull initially fragmented, tangential thinking into a more satisfying whole...As with...any genre, writers improve their craft through practice, and practice entails controlled exploration...” (148)

Bishop adds that proper assessment should reward revision and that education in revision is highly integral to creative writing. (148)

To sum up my thoughts about grading: Our evaluative practices need not be seen as a static, obsolete dinosaur foreign to creative writing. Instructors must work with moulding an amalgamation of styles and be willing to change as one goes, in the manner that Wendy Bishop and Suzanne Greenberg have so eloquently highlighted.

The writing workshop should be fashioned in a way that serves to remove what is blocking the pure original manifestation of the collective unconscious. Every aspect of creative writing pedagogy should keep this mission at the forefront when designing, instructing, and evaluating the process and product of the writer. From the standpoint of the instructor, the following quote, from Stephen Minot (quoted from Greenberg’s article) sums it up nicely. Minot writes, in his essay, “How a Reader Reads” that:

Good teachers of creative writing don’t just teach the techniques; they infect the students with certain enthusiasms simply by being in a closed room with them long enough for the virus to catch.”(171)

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