

Composition, Cognition, Creativity, and Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersection between and among creativity, cognition, composition, and creativity. Researchers studied hundreds of adult students from several California community colleges and private universities by means of surveys, observations, and interviews to augment an extensive historical literature review. Results show that the majority of students across settings value creativity in composing in various genres, as demonstrated in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. All college writing programs should strive to create and foster community to support students as they develop their writing skills and practice across disciplines and genres. Teaching strategies meant for one genre can easily apply to other genres, so educators should recognize, discuss, and promote experimentation with various devices, strategies and skills across the genres. Educators should liberally encourage composition students to write in various genres, such as the erasure poem rewriting of a term paper. We should recognize, discuss, teach, and promote the connections between cognition, composition, and creativity within community. Educators, therefore, need to return to a liberal arts approach to composition instruction in which we encourage creativity consistent with the latest research in cognitive science as well as the reflections of emerging college writers and the observations of rhetoric and creative writing faculty in order to restore a more creative curriculum and reject the over-emphasis on accountability. Contains three figures.

Keywords: creativity, cognition, composition, community.

Composition, Cognition, Creativity, and Community

The dichotomy between composition and creative writing is well established in higher education, but in reality much less so, even in antiquity with poets such as Sappho, philosophers such as Confucius, and early American politicians such as Jefferson, but also with 21st century persons of letters such as Sandra Cisneros. As an example of the unnaturally forced dichotomy, Creative Writing is a separate department from English, at San Francisco State University, yet much of the underlying theory and andragogy stress community and address cognition and creation in the same way. This is not to mention the undeniable difficulty in categorizing a document such as our *Declaration of Independence*, which is an interesting piece to consider in pondering the forced, if not false, division between composition and creative writing. The document itself is fascinating in how it combines genres: part history, part proclamation, part logic, part treatise, and part legal indictment, all in language that is consistently belletristic, if not poetic. The *Declaration* is widely quoted, widely translated, has served as an exemplar for almost every nation founded or reformed since 1776, and features prominently in contemporary liberal arts education—across the curriculum. So, in what cognitive way is a composition not “creative” writing; in what cognitive way is so-called “creative writing” not “composition,” and doesn’t community serve it all? Interestingly, the discussion of creativity is all but absent in mainstream composition discourse. Our purpose here, therefore, will be to demonstrate the logic and benefits in including creativity in a more direct and prominent manner in the field of composition and the related andragogical¹ practice (Moberg 2).

Sappho, the earliest of the four canonical or celebrated writers considered here, wrote and performed lyric poetry in seventh-century B.C.E Greece to celebrate not only “female beauty but

¹ See Malclom Knowles’ work on adult education for a full definition of andragogy, as opposed to pedagogy.

also the loveliness of nature and all things divine,” and “the emotional rewards deriving from close companionship” (Hallett 131). Whether Sappho was or was not a lesbian may be titillating to ponder, but the relevant points here are that she created and published within a community, and her poems served rhetorical purposes just as *The Declaration of Independence* would later or an essay in a freshman composition class would today. And while it is difficult to measure her cognitive process millennia later, especially given the lack of letters or even a complete set of her works, we see similarities that do carry through to the 21st century that both inform and inspire our own cognition and creativity with respect to our writing and teaching of writing of essays, research papers, poetry, letters, or fiction. To these related processes and issues, contemporary novelist Nina Schuyler¹ recently commented on the importance of reading and writing across genres in her career as an undergraduate at Stanford, a law student at Hastings, and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing student at San Francisco State University. After completing her MFA, Schuyler founded a small group of fellow novelists to create a supportive community for each other’s projects (Schuyler, 2013).

You may ask: what’s the controversy here? Sadly, though, there has been a counter current to community in publishing and academia for decades. Probably the most notable detractor, Joseph Epstein, instead of celebrating the growth of American letters and community through 1988, laments it by entirely failing to see the community that arose around it. Epstein describes the status quo as “poetry...in a vacuum.” Contradicting himself immediately, Epstein notes that “more than 250 universities with creative-writing programs” that both “train aspiring poets” and hire men and women “who have published poetry to teach them” (14). As though this were some sort of conspiracy in need of an investigation, Epstein exposes his finding that “Many of these men and women go from being students in one writing program to being teachers in

another” program (14). What is worse than this expanding of community for Epstein is described in his warning that “the course in writing poetry has also become a staple of the community-college and adult-education menu” (14). So, the community was, apparently, becoming too democratic for Epstein, offending his elitist sensibilities that harken back to earlier day when poetry “was available only to a small handful of poets” (14). Epstein punctuates his exposé with the statistic that “6,300 poets and other writers are listed in the most recent edition of the Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers” (14). Somehow, community for poets is only appropriate in Epstein’s universe for those “of the highest stature,” though he never describes how to determine such stature (14). What has followed for the decades since is a vibrant debate on who is worthy of liberal arts education and how best to teach writing across the genres and disciplines. Local literary impresario and columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* Evan Karp responded that this conversation is dead because Epstein’s essay is based on a “bullshit premise” from the start (personal communication, May 6, 2013). The empirical data certainly support Karp’s point. No doubt, there is more poetry published and performed in 2013 than ever before. It is difficult to impossible to describe this accurately as any sort of death. The poetry and literary community or communities in San Francisco are alive and well, as Karp’s monthly column and his web site attest (“Bay Area Literary Calendar”). These events stimulate several cognitive processes as they preserve and further the liberal arts tradition in a wide-range of discourses. Composition instructors and students alike would do well to attend such and later discuss them in class, including the creativity, the rhetoric, and the community of the authors and events so as to preserve the liberal arts tradition.

In James E. Kinneavy’s 1969 article, “The Basic Aims of Discourse,” he expressly pleads for “a preservation of the liberal arts tradition with composition as the foundation stone,” of what

was once referred to as the trivium: grammar, rhetoric, and logic (304). He further urges that college educators should teach each of what he refers to as the “aims of discourse...in conjunction with the others,” rather than what he laments as the educational disaster of neglecting one aim for another, which he claims occurred in the 1960s. Kinneavy compares and contrasts various models for these aims, beginning with those of Aristotle and Aquinas and ending with those of Bühler, Jakobsen, and Kinneavy himself, who, according to Kinneavy, list the following aims of discourse: reference (informative, scientific, exploratory), persuasive, literary, and expressive (299). Kinneavy’s second graphic continues with a four-component triangle, which should probably be a diamond, but Kinneavy fills with one of the components (“signal”) surrounded by corners of “decoder,” “encoder,” and “reality.” It is appropriate that Kinneavy lists expressive and literary modes with persuasive and reference modes of writing in that they are related, require similar skills—including creativity—and employ similar cognitive processes, as our survey below data indicates. Indeed, the liberal arts education Kinneavy describes happens best in community. Some writing, of course, defies classification into neat categories such as reference, persuasive, literary, and expressive; other writing seems to cross all four. What, then, would we have a college composition student do with *The Declaration of Independence*? Thomas Jefferson, reportedly, encoded what was originally a “minority protest” hoping that his fellow American readers would decode the political “signal” and create a new “reality” in their own minds, a reality that included freedom from British rule (Kinneavy 302). Jefferson, like Sappho and Confucius before him and Cisneros after him, created and composed this document after much thought (cognition) and within a community of discourse with peers who occasionally agreed but often disagreed. So, how would we begin to have a college composition student think or write about such texts as Sappho’s lyric poetry, Confucius’

analects, Jefferson's declaration, or Cisneros' fiction? And, what can we learn from these texts, their authors, the methods they employed, and the communities they enjoyed? *The Declaration of Independence* clearly is a reference to history, is persuasive in its intent and language, is considered belletristic throughout academia, and is highly expressive of Jefferson's politics and values. The author employed his cognitive talents here in a most creative way. And of creativity, Vera John-Steiner says that it "requires a *continuity of concern*, an intense awareness of one's active inner life combined with sensitivity to the external world," (111). As John-Steiner suggests, Jefferson's declaration was creative and clearly expressed a continual concern he felt in his inner life as informed by his response to his external world as inspired and mediated by his community—otherwise known as our Founding Fathers and Mother Abigail Adams, who herself wisely admonished women and men of her day that: "If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women" in the world (Belle 55).

The world Blythe and Sweet (2008) seek to create in their new creative writing model classroom is one of pure "community" (319) rather than lecture, discussion, or even workshop. The tenets of this community were, interestingly, true for Sappho, Confucius, Jefferson, and are still true for Cisneros, each during her or his own time. After beginning with a larger group, Blythe and Sweet recommend selecting various mentors and breaking down into smaller groups. Sappho practiced this with her poetry circles, Confucius with his traveling philosophical entourage, Jefferson with his American revolutionaries drafting *The Declaration of Independence*, as did Sandra Cisneros earlier this year in group readings with her New York cohort of literati (Shattuck C21).

More philosophically, Ponomarev (2008) describes a theory in which an entity of activity and its object, which is to say "the aspect of the entity with which the cognizing subject

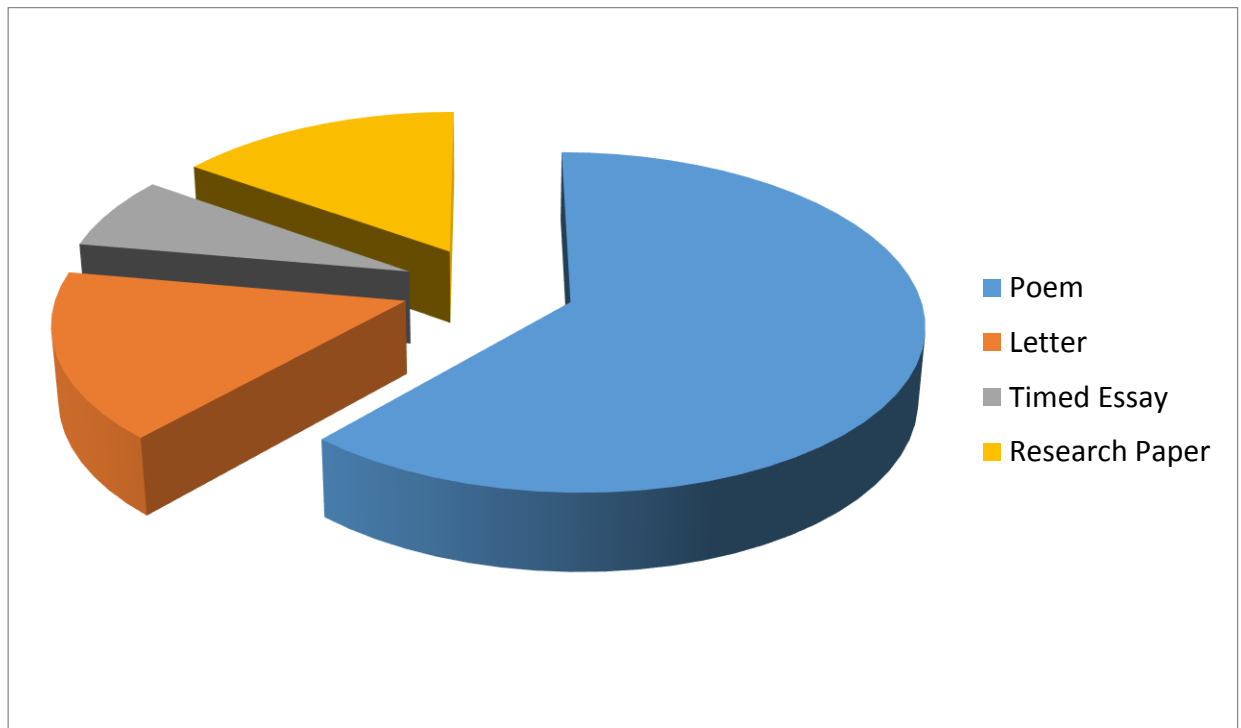
interacts” will eventually join as one and manifest without any substantial shifts of types of goals or assessments of the activity in its worldly manifestations themselves (10). In such a framework both the goals and the assessments remain subjective, and we tend to value most that which leads directly to a practical end or satisfies a need. Cognition controls the means of the activity, and the activity is conceived in accordance with logic that cognition creates within the elements of the activity created (10). So, the cognition and the creativity become one.

From a theoretical to a much more practical setting and the question of how to use cognition and creativity to begin writing, we should ask: What can community do to aid cognition and creativity in composition? For Wellington, community should help student writers, even doctoral students, to overcome the anxiety caused by the prevailing attitude that mastery of material and content are necessary before any actual writing can occur from a “brain to paper” model that perceives scholarly composition as a “transfer of already conceived ideas” in the mind of the author (148). A writer’s community, better, could help authors to use their writing to shape, organize, and crystallize their own original ideas through writing and peer review (149). Unfortunately, as Wellington notes, universities themselves perpetuate the mastery-before-writing mentality by referring to the writing-up year of a doctoral degree, which comes at the end of the program (149). Wellington instead argues for a start-on-day-one model for students at the beginning of their post-graduate journey that offers guidance on writing in interactions with students, including, the affective domain of each student writer (149). This approach by Wellington is entirely consistent with the writing practices of Sappho, Confucius, Jefferson, and Cisneros, each of whom wrote to learn and put pen to paper before mastering their own material. Sandra Cisneros, particularly, rejected this notion of mastery before writing and what she referred to as being “silent as a child, and silenced as a young woman,” because she,

purportedly, had not yet acquired enough knowledge or authority to write about anything of consequence, though her aunt frequently praised her creativity, especially poetry (Belle). As composition educators, we should and reject the mastery approach and embrace Cisneros' example instead. So called creative writing, such as Cisneros' poetry, allows for a free use of imagination (Temizkan 933). Freshman composition students often perceive it to require more creativity than composition or letter writing (see Figure One below). Yet, readers of essays, letters, and even academic writing appreciate some of the attributes that Temizkan and many others assign to creative writing, such as originality. It is difficult to imagine an academic journal publishing a scholarly paper that did not approach its subject with at least one significantly new perspective or data set. And, the descriptive writing prized in novels is also valuable in an essay, such as Jefferson's enumeration of the several offences of King George that the Colonists cited in the *Declaration* as cause to secede. The evocative writing typically associated with lyric and love poetry such as Sappho's also serves the letter writer when attempting to persuade its recipient to do or not do something, such as J. D. Salinger did when he repeatedly wrote to the Department of Defense, successfully appealing his medical disqualification to serve in World War II. Had Salinger's correspondence not been as skillful, he may never have landed at Normandy and proceeded to Paris, writing *Catcher in the Rye* along the way (Slawenski). But, Salinger was a celebrated American person of letters who is now just another "dead white guy" to many students. So, what do 21st century composition students say about creativity, composition (across several genres), and community? In an April 2015 survey of freshman composition students at two community colleges and three four-year private colleges, 61% of respondents found that a poem required more creativity than a term paper, letter to a friend, or a timed essay. What may surprise, though was that 16% found that the letter

required the most creativity, 15% listed the term paper, and 7% mentioned the timed essay (Figure 1). And, in a separate set of questions, the same students reported widespread use of the cognitive processes and strategies of brainstorming, outlining, diagramming, webbing, and free-writing when starting research paper, timed essay, and poetry writing

Figure 1. Which assignment requires the most creativity?

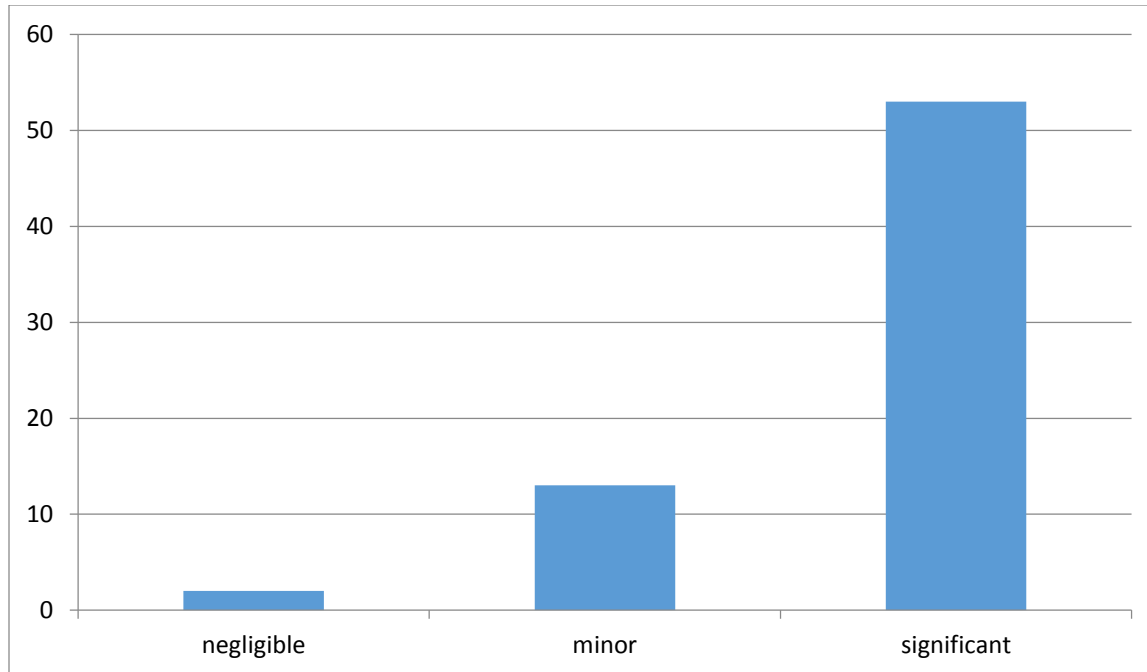


Source: Authors' survey of 178 freshman composition students in April 2015.

assignments. While the data shows statistically significant differences in cognitive strategies when approaching the different assignments, what is perhaps more interesting is that while some students used diagramming and webbing when writing poetry, just as many students chose to free write term papers and timed essays, although this single draft writing may not be an ideal method. The most striking statistic, however, and entirely consistent with our hypothesis and the

praxis of Sappho, Confucius, Jefferson, Cisneros, and all of the contemporary authors mentioned herein, is that 21st century composition students almost unanimously assigned a significant value to community of peers and mentors to foster their own writing development. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: To what degree do you value community in developing your own writing?



Source: Authors' survey of 178 freshman composition students in April 2015.

Conclusions

We can logically conclude from above the following:

- A. Writers from antiquity to today use and value community as a way to nurture their own writing.
- B. 21st century college composition students, as represented by the 78 Northern California students in the convenient sample above, use various cognitive processes to begin different writing assignments, yet there is much overlap across genres.

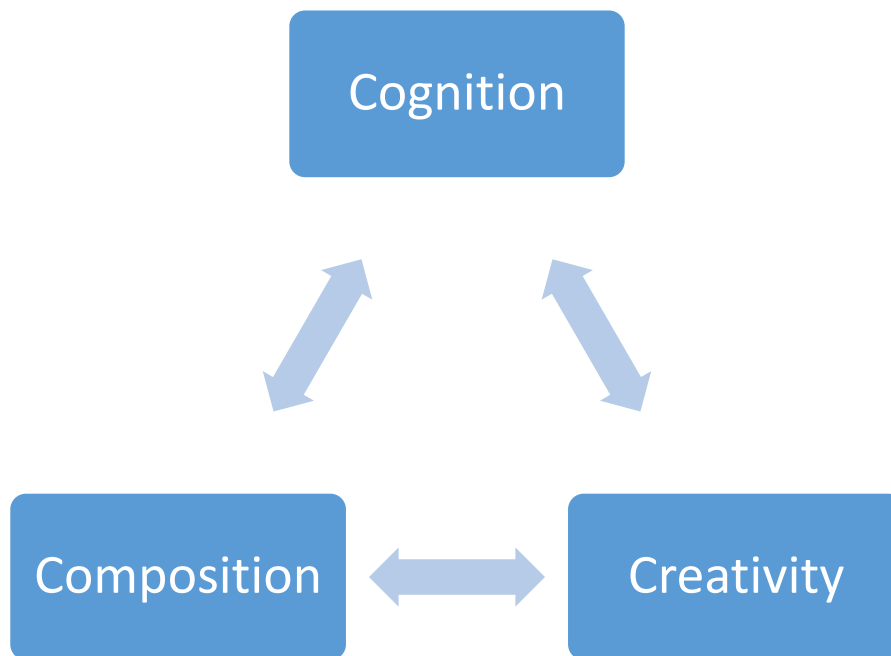
C. Writing skills, devices, and strategies cross genres, and celebrated writers over the centuries have demonstrated this time and again.

Recommendations

Upon the above conclusion we recommend the following:

1. All college writing programs should strive to create and foster community to support students as they develop their writing skills and practice across disciplines and genres.
2. Teaching strategies meant for one genre can easily apply to other genres, so educators should recognize, discuss, and promote experimentation with various devices, strategies and skills across the genres.
3. Educators should liberally encourage composition students to write in various genres, such as the erasure poem rewriting of a term paper.
4. We should recognize, discuss, teach, and promote the connections between cognition, composition, and creativity within community, as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The Cognition, Creativity, Composition Triangle (within a Community)



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