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'Creativity is a practice, not an astonishing stroke of good luck'

Screenwriter and playwright Stephen Sewell shares practical insights into fostering students' mental flexibility and resilience from research into unlocking creativity

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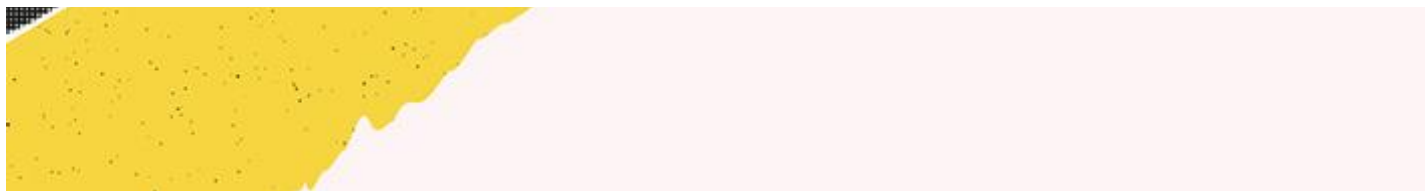


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Creative writing students are there to write, not to read about writing. This was my guiding philosophy during the **15-month MFA writing course I crafted at one of Australia's premier performance schools**. And our students did just that, writing unsupervised, unless they requested mentoring, for a minimum of four hours a day and producing at least one full-length piece of writing, which received a rehearsed reading under their direction as the culmination of their coursework.

One of the subjects, a creativity course run by novelist and creativity lecturer **Sue Woolfe**, gave students opportunities such as an up-to-date account of the neuroscience of creativity. Also, **practical classes in meditation**, for example, complemented a **pedagogical approach that emphasised personal initiative and practical problem-solving as well as writing**.

Over the years I ran the course (which has since been disbanded), I came to believe that the students underwent an increase in their creativity as a result of their studies and determined, with Woolfe, to undertake a proper study into whether this was true. We assembled a team of neuroscientists and psychologists, assisted by an experienced statistician, and our findings were **published** in the peer-reviewed *Thinking Skills and Creativity* journal.

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This is a summary of our results and suggestions about how creativity can be cultivated and encouraged in students.

Although the sample size was small (seven students), the results were startling. Using standard tests of creativity, students were shown to have experienced a 34 per cent increase in their mental flexibility, meaning they could quickly swap between creative ideas, and a 65 per cent rise in the creativity of their ideas. They became more comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, and less frightened of writer's block and of confronting uncomfortable personal experiences in the course of their writing. These, along with many other results, pointed to an overall positive effect of the course on the students' creativity.

The discontinuation of my employment, and disbanding of the course, prevented a follow-up study to ascertain what it was in particular that brought about these results, but at an anecdotal level I'd like to offer the following speculations.

It is easy to suppress creativity, and most people have seen this in operation: one simply reduces learning to a regimented repetition of uncritically asserted claims inflicted with a stern and relentless discipline that reduces students to the status of rote learners. It is almost common knowledge that by doing the exact opposite of all this, you can easily generate an environment within which creativity can flourish, with the whole thing being underwritten by a sense of respect for the students as new learners and cultivating a delight in knowledge. That's probably the easy part – although convincing the punishers that strict obedience isn't necessarily the best way to produce a skilled and engaged workforce can be tricky. But in addition to such elementary lessons in what are basically just good manners within a democratic society, an environment where creativity and its vicissitudes are freely and openly discussed both in class and in guidance and mentoring sessions focusing on their individual work gives students the confidence that whatever challenges there are can and will be overcome through normal practice.

The creative act is frightening because it takes place in darkness, without a net or handrail. There aren't any guarantees other

than failure, and it's the fear of failure and ridicule that is creativity's greatest enemy. The most important lesson we can give is to live with that fear, as we do ourselves. Or, in Samuel Beckett's words, to "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." We sit down, once more, not knowing if anything will happen, while feeling those self-imposed deadlines close in, but to remain there, patiently waiting as we go about the normal business of making. It's a lonely place, but there is comfort knowing others are nearby who understand.

Creativity is a practice. It is not an astonishing stroke of good luck that can only be spoken about in hushed terms, though creativity certainly deserves our respect. The practice of creativity consists of developing habits such as not jumping to the first solution to any problem, but rather allowing it to simmer in the back of your mind. Inspecting it, certainly; poking it and worrying about it, yes, but not regarding it as a threat to our egos that must be beaten into submission, as the punishers might advise. Allow your students to mull the problem, even sleep and dream about it. And tease it out a little, putting yourself in the position of an ignoramus, like Socrates, who isn't even sure *why* it is a problem.

As an Australian writer best known for stage- and screenplays, I have formed over the years an opinion about what was wrong with Australian writing, and as a head of writing, I was given the opportunity to do something about it. My MFA course was based on the assumption that every human being has within them a jewel that we, as teachers, have a duty to help uncover. And the students responded, as the test results of our study showed. Creativity can be nurtured, and the habits of creativity taught, and it is certainly something we as educators need to pursue if what guides us is our love of our students.

Stephen Sewell is a screenwriter and playwright, and an honorary senior lecturer at Australian National University.

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