

## **Lighting the Fire. Can Creativity Be Taught?**

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# Lighting the

# FIRE



## Can Creativity Be Taught?

Can a student who's never been outside of Australia produce a screenplay about a foreign country? And what is creativity, exactly? **MARGARET MCVEIGH** surveys the theory and proposes a new model for the creative process that teachers can use to inspire students to turn their wildest ideas into creative works.



*Ideas as such are a little overrated, really. It's the work behind the idea that's the important thing.*

– Nick Cave, *730 Report*, ABC, 26 February 2013

**M**uch has been written about the creative process, from practical 'how-to' screenwriting guides<sup>1</sup> to psychological treatises about 'flow'.<sup>2</sup> There has also been much written about the importance of creativity for education and the economy.<sup>3</sup> But how do teachers implement theories about creativity in the teaching of screenwriting? In particular, how do teachers take students beyond a great idea, as Nick Cave suggests above, and teach them the 'work' needed to make an idea into a story?

This article will consider how teachers can harness creativity and the creative process to inspire students to take ideas, images and what-ifs based on the world they know to tell better stories, and perhaps even stories about worlds they do not know. It will briefly discuss historical and educational ideas about the relevance of creativity to learning and offer a six-stage outline of the creative process based on the work of relevant theorists and screenwriters. The proposed outline will be illustrated by observations that my Advanced Scriptwriting students made in a course-evaluation research interview. This outline and these observations may be applied to classroom screenwriting activities described in the English<sup>4</sup> and Media Arts<sup>5</sup> subject areas within the Australian Curriculum.

## CREATIVITY AND INSPIRATION

As this is an article about writing, I commence with a scenario that addresses the bedrock of the creative process: inspiration or the ignition of the creative spark – the need to tell a story, to share an experience, to ponder possibilities, to cast a net into the unknown. This scenario starts with a child who has to write an essay over the weekend. (This essay can be translated as any assessment item a student must complete in a given timeframe.) The child grew up on a farm in the Darling Downs, on an endless black-soil plain called the Prairie. The farm was called Prairie View, and the view was one from a rambling farmhouse surrounded by lines of scrubby athel pines, to other rambling farmhouses surrounded by lines of scrubby athel pines. Every way this child looked, they saw the same thing.

Given that this is what scriptwriting jargon terms the child's 'reality', how could this child write creatively about what they knew (a scriptwriting tool used to encourage the creative flow of storytelling) if they didn't think they 'knew' anything? And how could they address the biggest what-if creative question each week when asked to write a story about one of these three recurring topics: 'A day at the beach', 'A picnic', 'My pet'? Certainly there were not many instances of reality that would inspire the child to write about a day at the beach, something that occurs for many people living inland just once a year, in the first week of the school year when holiday rates are inexpensive and the beach is deserted.

Why tell this story when writing an article about creativity? It contains a question about inspiration that teachers must address. Do teachers in effect expect students to write the equivalent of a 'day at the beach' story when they have not been inspired by their specific reality? Do they expect students to be creative when the essential element in storytelling – the need to tell a story because it is important, because it is relevant to their reality and must be shared – is missing?

There are a number of answers to these questions. The first answer lies in what authors of screenwriting manuals advise: start with 'what you know'.<sup>6</sup> However, it must be noted that starting with 'what you know' does not limit a student to the here and now; it can also be interpreted as 'what you know to be true', 'what you know to be emotionally true' or 'what you know you want to find out about'. Screenwriter William Froug underlines the importance of taking what writers know and feel strongly about – their 'reality' – as inspiration:

*The single most important gift you must bring to your screenplay is writing what you feel deeply about. Very likely what you are about is what every human on this planet is about [...] You are a bottomless well of experiences and emotions, and as a screenwriter, the place to put them is in your script.*<sup>7</sup>

Once students have been encouraged to write about what they know and feel deeply, teachers may help them uncover ideas and questions about life based on their individual realities by showing them the steps of the creative process. Contrary to what I thought when I was a student, creativity is not an intangible gift that is the province of talented artists and writers – it is something students can learn. If teachers know the stages of the creative process, they can light the fires of their student storytellers.

## CREATIVITY AND THE CURRICULUM

Creativity is considered one of the defining aspects of contemporary education and society. In his seminal book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida asserts that creativity is the 'most highly prized commodity in our economy'. He notes:

*Society is changing [...] That driving force is the rise of human creativity as the key factor in our economy and society [...] we] cultivate it more intensely. The creative impulse – the attribute that distinguishes us, as humans, from other species – is now being let loose on an unprecedented scale.*<sup>8</sup>

Most importantly for those of us tasked with educating future generations to be creative, Florida contends: 'Creativity must be motivated and nurtured in a number of ways.'<sup>9</sup>

Critical and Creative Thinking is one of the general capabilities underpinning the Australian Curriculum. General capabilities encompass the 'knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that, together with curriculum content in each learning area and the cross-curriculum priorities, will assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century'.<sup>10</sup> The Arts learning area of the curriculum aims to develop 'creativity, critical thinking [and] aesthetic knowledge'.<sup>11</sup> Educationalist Leonie McIlvenny underlines the importance of creativity in the curriculum:

*It is now no longer possible, therefore, for schools to merely pay lip service to or ignore the strategic placement of these skills within the curriculum [...] The high-profile placement of Critical and Creative Thinking as a General Capability reflects the importance that is being placed on this learning domain.*<sup>12</sup>

An Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) survey of creativity in the educational domain highlights creative thinking as both an educational process and an outcome:

Critical and creative thinking are variously categorised by theorists as [...] ‘taxonomies of skills’ (Bloom; Anderson, Krathwohl et al.), habits and frames of mind (Costa and Kallick; Gardner; de Bono), thinking strategies (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock), and philosophical inquiry (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan).<sup>13</sup>

The survey also notes Benjamin Bloom’s 1956 taxonomy of essential skills and processes for learning – knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation – but updates them with the overarching importance of creativity:

*In 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl changed Bloom’s cognitive process of ‘synthesis’ to ‘creativity’ and made it the highest level of intellectual functioning. They believed the ability to create required the production of an original idea or a product from a unique synthesis of discrete elements.*<sup>14</sup>

In Australian schools today there is no doubt that the development of creativity and creative thinking is paramount. But to implement creative practice in screenwriting – an exercise that involves both creativity and craft – it is essential to understand the creative process.

## WHERE DOES CREATIVITY COME FROM?

To examine what creativity means and how it aligns with craft, it is useful to consider the contemporary literature. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines creativity as a contribution to a system that recognises the creative output as a tangible cultural, social or economic product. It is ‘any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one’.<sup>15</sup> This is a sentiment echoed by corporate and educational creative-thinking theorist Edward de Bono, who postulates that if a ‘person is successful in expressing and communicating his [sic] own special perception, then we call him or her creative [...] We acknowledge the creativity’.<sup>16</sup> In her seminal 1979 book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, artist and educationalist Betty Edwards also defines creativity as a contribution to culture, but emphasises the importance of left-brain (analytical) and right-brain (creative) thinking as part of the process:

*Creativity is the ability to find new solutions to a problem or new modes of expression [...] My aim is to provide the means for releasing that potential, for gaining access at a conscious level to your inventive, intuitive, imaginative powers that may have been largely untapped by our verbal, technological culture and educational system.*<sup>17</sup>

The Ancient Greeks, including Homer, believed that creativity or inspiration was derived from the Muses.<sup>18</sup> But Aristotle asserted that storytelling encompassed craft as well as inspiration – and it is the rules of Greek tragedy that Aristotle laid down in the *Poetics* that form the basis of contemporary scriptwriting books.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, leading artists of the Renaissance including Michelangelo<sup>20</sup> and da Vinci learnt their craft as apprentices to a master.<sup>21</sup> The English Romantic poets also delved deeply into key aspects of the creative process, including the place of inspiration. Coleridge wrote extensively about craft and the creative process in *Biographia Literaria*. He believed that creativity and imagination could be enhanced by ‘opiates’ real and intangible, which included ‘conversations with friends, metaphysical philosophy, enchanted daydreaming, and meditations on the infinite’.<sup>22</sup>



Do [teachers] expect students to be creative when the essential element in storytelling – the need to tell a story because it is important, because it is relevant to their reality and must be shared – is missing?

Storytelling is a key way of understanding, exploring and enjoying life. If teachers are to ask students to create and tell stories, it is imperative that they encourage students to contemplate what they know.



While these differing observations regarding creativity provide worthy insights in psychological, cultural and intuitive domains, they fail to address the question 'How does one be creative?' The answer to this question is found in knowing about the creative process, which combines both creativity and craft.

## CREATIVITY AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Most models of the creative process address the steps of inspiration, preparation, research, contemplation, craft and editing, and place importance on various stages. In 'Models of the Creative Process: Past, Present and Future', Todd I Lubart outlines the four-stage model of creativity formalised by Graham Wallas in 1926, which consists of the stages *preparation*, *incubation*, *illumination* and *verification*.<sup>23</sup>

Taking into account the above research, and building on Anne Paris' work in *Standing at Water's Edge* and on my work with script-writing students, I propose the following model of creativity. This includes two steps – the first and final steps – that are often absent from the literature. In essence, these are integral parts of finding the reason to create; I term the first step *envisioning*, and the final step *publication* or connection with an audience. The proposed model is as follows:

- Envisioning
- Contemplation and inspiration
- Preparation
- Immersion
- Crafting
- Publication.<sup>24</sup>

## A WORKING MODEL OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

### Envisioning

The first step of the creative process requires a writer to experience the need to share a story and what that need leads to, whether it be a carefully orchestrated real-life scenario, an assessment item, or the product of an open-ended script class. In *Writing Great Screenplays for Film and TV*, Dona Cooper terms the impetus for this need the *dramatic center* – 'the internal tool of the writer' that is 'an impassioned insight into your personal values', the internal focus that gives ideas 'clarity and inspiration'. It is when a writer knows what they want to write about, even if they do not know what they want to say.<sup>25</sup> For Cooper:

*One of the ways that I know I've found the real dramatic center of my idea is that I feel a visceral click, a compelling mix of relief, clarity, certainty, and excitement. Another way is that my mind begins to act like a magnet for images, music and ideas [...] and I can see how the dramatic center expresses the connection between them.*<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this compass of clarity, the student must be able to envision the outcome of their work – to make a connection, to feel that their thoughts may be appreciated or understood, or even great. This echoes the power of positive intention that is the tool of elite athletes;<sup>27</sup> it is essential for students to anticipate a sense of success, whether it be getting a great mark, pleasing an admired figure, making a difference, or something as simple and tangible as receiving a gold star.

## Contemplation and inspiration

For the student, this is often the most difficult stage. It may form part of the first stage or the third stage. It is a vital part of the process during which students need guidance and time. For the most part, students may have a limited experience of life simply because of their age. This may result in students thinking that they have nothing to say. Some may think that they have led a fairly average life, some may feel intimidated by those who stand out in class, and some may have deep and painful stories they may be reluctant to uncover. As professionals, we must find a way to ignite their inspiration.

Storytelling is a key way of understanding, exploring and enjoying life. If teachers are to ask students to create and tell stories, it is imperative that they encourage students to contemplate what they know. Krzysztof Piesiewicz, screenwriter for the great Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, says:

*In my scripts there is always a subject I want to discuss with the viewer. I start by asking myself whether this subject is significant and whether I have anything to say about it. The actual themes or subjects arise from my own introspection.*<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, renowned Japanese screenwriter Kaneto Shindo was not afraid to start with his own reality:

*Who does a writer write about? He writes about himself. When I began writing 25 years ago I did not realize this. I wanted to write about subjects that excited my curiosity. But the more I wrote the more I came to realize that I was writing about myself. I do not know what my closest friend is thinking. I do not know anyone else's mind, but I do know who I am.*<sup>29</sup>

The process of journaling or collecting ideas is important at this stage as it helps students to discover their ideas and personal voice. In the first weeks of semester I ask students to keep a journal, on paper, their phone, their computer or in a shoebox, to record anything that interests them – images, lines of songs, snatches of conversation. For scriptwriting student Joey, the journaling process is:

*A wonderful opportunity to reconnect with the reason why I write [...] and the core components of my identity, which compelled my endeavour to create a mirror for my art that I can look through [...] and a mirror that others can look through.*<sup>30</sup>

A powerful exercise to encourage inspiration is to ask students to bring an item from their childhood to school and share why it is important to them. This often leads them to consider the key values of their life, such as the importance of standing up for friends, valuing their own opinions or working hard.<sup>31</sup> All these processes are instrumental in enabling students to find their voice. In the words of screenwriter Hanif Kureishi, 'Your point of view, which is your voice, your person, isn't something you have to get. It's something you uncover.'<sup>32</sup>

## Preparation

Writers work in different ways, but all need to recognise and assemble the tools – both physical and mental – that they need in order to create. Some are driven by deadlines, some are meticulous planners, some work intermittently, some like to listen to music, some like to create in complete silence. I have found that, for my

students, the most important aspect of the creative process is to enable and allow them to work in the way that suits them. Angela, a scriptwriting student, finds:

*Education is more about learning processes that you can use. I find my best writing comes [...] when I have to blank out everything for two days before and the next day I get up at four or five in the morning and I usually just bang it all out in four or five hours.*<sup>33</sup>

Angela's observations about her process have not been derived without deep thought. I spend time with students talking about one of the essential tools of preparation: making a time, place and 'headspace' for creating. I ask students to think about whether they are morning or night people, whether they like to create with music or in silence, and most importantly, I impress on them the need to find what Virginia Woolf has termed a room of one's own.<sup>34</sup> This room may be real or metaphorical. For some, it is in isolation – their bedroom or a secluded place. For others, it is somewhere connected – a train station, the classroom, a coffee shop. It is also important to revisit theories of left-brain / right-brain thinking and the fact that writers may create rituals to access these modes.<sup>35</sup>

This stage also incorporates research, which may be intense library or internet research, the canvassing of friends and family for ideas, or observations made from sitting and watching the world go by. An important part of this preparatory phase, according to Paris, is to acknowledge that 'immersing [...] in other realms' or 'completing tasks extraneous to the project'<sup>36</sup> – spring-cleaning, listening to music, Facebooking, or doing anything but writing – is an essential part of preparation. For everyone and every project, this stage can be different. For scriptwriting student Stafford, it is the research into the historical figures on which he bases his characters that is most important in his creative process:

*For me I need to do the research. I get really focused on the research until I am actually satisfied that I have exhausted all avenues as to who these people really were.*<sup>37</sup>

Once the preparation stage has been enacted (and not necessarily completed), more contemplation is essential. Again, this may occur alongside preparation, or indeed even as students create. It is at this stage that students may use their journals to record new insights into, or even dreams about, the ideas they have collected.

## Immersion

The stages of inspiration, contemplation and preparation prepare the student for what Csikszentmihalyi terms 'flow'.<sup>38</sup> The best advice is to 'go with the flow' and write. This may be a long and laborious process, or ideas may seemingly 'flow' onto the page.

Again, it is important for the teacher to acknowledge that all students have different processes. The intense planning of a beginning, middle and end seemingly pouring from the pen in that order is not everyone's process. Planning can start at any point. For some it is with the three-act structure where the beginning, the middle and the end are known. For scriptwriting student Sam:

*It was important for me to actually lay out the key points in the story to set the baseline [...] so the creative process can actually go on top of that.*<sup>39</sup>

For others, brainstorming, creating mind maps or using the story structure of a Greek myth may be the key to getting the story on

paper. Or building clearly defined characters that will impel the story by the choices they make when confronted with the events of the story. Or just starting by writing the scenes that they can see in their head. Or starting with the ending or snatches of dialogue. What is most important in this process is for students to start writing.

## Crafting

In discussing why he writes, screenwriter Paul Schrader says, 'Art is [...] a functional device to expose and illuminate one's own problems and put them in perspective and learn more about yourself and others [...] It is the work of a craftsman'.<sup>40</sup> The craft students use is reliant on what they have been taught by their teacher. Building strong characters with backstories, creating visually powerful and emotional treatments and then writing a script that comes out of this is the work of craft. However, it is also important that students are not overwhelmed by strict draft plans – that they know the tools of their trade and feel free to use them to suit their work-in-progress.

While writing the first drafts of their scripts, it is imperative for students not to edit; the creative process must unfold without fear of judgement by themselves or by others. They must be aware that there are times when one generates new material and times when one edits. It is also helpful to let them know that they will be going through another, subsequent process of crafting: redrafting, or conducting a separate reading and editing 'pass' for each of the elements of structure, character, action, dialogue, etc. This can also be a difficult stage, as the writing can be derailed by too many voices and too many comments. Here it is useful to remind students to revisit their original inspiration – the 'dramatic center'.

## Publication

In the real world, this is the most important part of the process because this is the goal, and its achievement should be celebrated. Publication in the learning environment is often something that gets lost with assessment deadlines and competing interests, but it is important that there is some sort of 'publication' – it can be as simple as reading to a trusted friend, reading to the entire class or posting on social media. The most important element is for the output of the creative process to connect with an audience.

## THE TEACHER AND CREATIVITY

The above model of the creative process takes as its starting point the inspirations a student can bring from their reality; as Jed Dannenbaum et al. note, 'developing our creativity is to look for what is unique about our own way of seeing and then strengthen its expression'.<sup>41</sup> The meta-thinking about 'strengthening its expression', or how teachers may encourage students to enact the creative process, has been the focus of this article.

In conclusion, it must be noted that many models of writing share the idea that students require a plan to use as an exact road-map. But teachers do students a great disservice if this is how they are told they must create. Froug asserts, 'rigid outlines are the kiss of death of creativity',<sup>42</sup> and my research and experience attests to the idea that the creative process does not unfold according to a rigid outline. Yes, for some personality types it may. But very few of these personalities have ever been present in my classes.

Furthermore, there is the matter of talent. One may say, 'Talent can't be taught.' But studies show that perseverance and process



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are as important as talent in achieving goals.<sup>43</sup> Michelangelo was talented, but he did not enter the world fully formed as an artist. He learned from his teachers, who knew and practised their craft. I urge you as ‘masters’ to ‘practise what you teach’. Inspire students with the need to tell a story. Share your work with them. Share your creative process with them. Show them there are many ways of being creative. Show them that, even on never-ending black-soil plains, there are ways of tapping into creativity. It starts with a student envisioning what they want to explore and sharing from the reality they know; whether on a seemingly dull, endless horizon or a seemingly exciting nonexistent horizon, the stories that we want to hear are about the things that matter: deep and enduring friendships, the importance of identity, the value of a good laugh, or the desire to escape to somewhere unknown.

*This article has been refereed.*

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