

Have you failed recently?

Gaudino Scholar discusses processes of cultivating creativity

By Edward Burger

Have you ever taken a class in which you had to actively fail in order to pass the course? Twelve very brave, dedicated and talented students here at Williams are doing just that in EXPR 309 – “Exploring Creativity.” Their assignment is to create – the syllabi for the course, a way to articulate their own intellectual focus to others with different focuses and finally to create – within those foreign disciplines. Through studio art, philosophy, music and mathematics, these students are focusing on process rather than final product – they are, in turns, teachers and pupils. But a basic question remains: is creativity a learnable skill?

A wondrous belief is that original ideas magically appear – click, Edison invents the light bulb; puff, J.K. Rowling apparates Harry Potter; snap, the founding fathers resolve the Bill of Rights; eureka, Einstein jostles his hair and relativity falls out. While we can enjoy these romantic visions, we should not be fooled into believing that they’re reality. Essentially every “creative leap” throughout human history was actually only a small step from what was already known. And the way from the known to the unknown, from the old to the new, was found by applying a few simple habits of creative thinking that can be cultivated and honed.

There are many easy-to-state methods for generating new ideas, but often the challenge is to discover how to employ the methods in practice. For example, the world of art teaches us to “see what’s there.” This basic technique invites us to let go of bias and identify precisely what we see and what we don’t. However, as a practical matter, how do we let go of bias? How do we identify what’s missing?

One way to create. Before the invention of color photography, black and white pho-

tographs were referred to as “photographs” rather than “black and white photographs.”

However, suppose we *did* include the phrase “black and white” before the existence of color photography. By highlighting that reality, we would have become conscious of current limitations and thus open our minds to new possibilities. As a result, we would look for color and the vividness that we know exists.

The First World War was only given that name deep in the Second World War. Before that horrific period of the 1940s, the First World War was called “the World War” or “the War to End All Wars.” What if we had called it “the First World War” in 1919?

Such a moniker might have made the possibility of a second worldwide conflict more real and governments more sensitive and cautious as they faced international policy issues. We become conscious of issues when we explicitly identify them.

If we apply this “include the adjective” strategy to the educational system in America today, then we might refer to it as “non-individualized education.” Doesn’t that designation make you immediately wonder what extent education could be tailored to individual differences? Find adjectives to prepend to the issues that surround you and your world. Use them to see what’s truly there and to develop new insights and create new ideas.

The requisite risks. Of course, creating does not come without costs. If we truly want to journey where no person has gone before, we must intellectually trail blaze and take risks. That winding path often leads to dead ends and brick walls – each

one an excellent opportunity for learning if we embrace it.

Recently some great alumni returned to campus to share the risks they’ve taken and failures they’ve survived. Fay Vincent ’60 explained how he did what he thought was best for baseball even though it led to a shortened tenure as the Commissioner of Baseball. Janet Brown ’73, Executive Director of the Commission on Presidential Debates, revealed that there was no “Plan B” if Senator McCain hadn’t shown up for that first debate. On Tuesday, Nov. 11 at 8 p.m., Herbert Allen ’62, who was ranked as the 227th wealthiest person in the U.S. by Forbes Magazine, will sit down for an

interview in the ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance (a gift from Allen himself) where he will reveal his own missteps. Their risks and willingness to fail expose the creative sides of these amazing individuals.

Just as the current EXPR 309 students, these former Williams pupils are also teachers of creativity.

You. Beyond the subject matter contained in the 32 courses you will explore here at Williams, your education centers about the most important creative feat of your life – the creation of yourself. It is about you – creating your effective mind, a mind enlivened by curiosity with the intellectual audacity to take risks and create new ideas, a mind that sees a world of unlimited possibilities. So I ask again: *Have you failed recently?* If not, then what are you waiting for?

Edward Burger is professor of mathematics and the Gaudino Scholar.

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