



FAILING TO LEARN

by Zelda Stern

Mathematics professor and Gaudino Scholar Edward Burger wants more Williams students to fail. Not to flunk, of course, but rather to take creative risks that may not pan out.

Hence the unusual course Burger offered last fall, "Exploring Creativity," which brought together 12 students, three majors each in art, philosophy, mathematics and music. By producing original works in each field, Burger says, students were encouraged "to take risks, experiment, push their imagination beyond their limits and explore consequences of failed attempts."

Upending the traditional classroom dynamic, the students—grouped into

teams by major and using criteria set by Burger—took turns teaching from lesson plans developed under the guidance of Burger in math, Mike Glier '75 in art, Will Dudley '89 in philosophy and Ileana Perez Velazquez in music. Burger, meanwhile, did all the homework and projects.

Students' assignments were judged on process rather than final product—something that "goes against the typical Williams grain," Burger says. They also "moved beyond their comfort zone with the attitude that failing and making mistakes is ... a sign of an original thinker."

Before long, "The 13 of us created an environment in which you could say

"WHILE WE CAN DEBATE IF CREATIVITY IS AN ACTUAL 'SKILL,' I STRONGLY BELIEVE WE CAN ALL BE MORE CREATIVE BY INTENT: WE NEED ONLY—JUST AS THESE STUDENTS DID—JOURNEY IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION."

anything you wanted or even sing anything you wanted," he adds. "Everyone was encouraging. Everyone was looking not at the product but at how far the person had traveled."

To judge from their final reflections on the course, the students, selected from more than 50 applicants, seemed to agree. Wrote Harris Paseltiner '09, "It was remarkably liberating to fail and continue powering through without looking back."

Added Beth Links '09, "Creativity is, above all, an exercise of self-trust. ... When I allowed myself to risk failure, to look with my heart, to get naked, to be ridiculous: that was when innovation occurred."



Far left: With self-portraits in the background, “Exploring Creativity” students demonstrate “improv-art.” Photo courtesy of Fiona Worcester ’09 and Jeffrey Kaplan ’09. This page: “What I Didn’t See,” by Edward Burger.

For Burger, “Exploring Creativity” was the realization of a vision he had more than 18 years ago. In fact, when he first came to Williams, he presented a detailed plan for the course to the board overseeing the Robert L. Gaudino Memorial Fund, established by alumni a quarter of a century ago to carry on the legacy of experiential education and “uncomfortable learning” exemplified by one of Williams’ most beloved professors. The Gaudino Board was so impressed with Burger’s proposal that he was asked to teach the course. But Burger didn’t believe he was ready.

“I was just starting my career, and I was way too young, not just in age, but in terms of my own creative work as a scholar,” he says.

In 2008, Burger, by then the author of numerous books, articles and video series and the recipient of many national awards for exceptional teaching, was named Gaudino Scholar. Instead of taking the course release that comes with the position, he decided to offer his interdisciplinary one.

He also organized last semester’s series “The Gaudino Dialogues”—live, unscripted interviews with alumni who shared with Burger their life stories, highlighting their failures as well as their successes. And this spring, Burger is bringing together faculty for lunchtime discussions about the role of creativity in education and how faculty might inspire students to become more creative and original thinkers.

“The hardest question we can ask ourselves as educators is this,” Burger says. “Ten years from today, what are my students going to retain from my class? In my case, it’s not going to be calculus. My goal is to change lives. If you’re in education and you’re not in the business of changing lives, then perhaps it’s time to do something else.” ■

ARE YOU CREATIVE?

For each team of students teaching a unit in “Exploring Creativity,” communicating the core concepts of their subject in language their classmates could understand—and then coming up with assignments that would spark a creative response—became the ultimate task. Here are four challenges drawn from the many each team assigned to the class:

Studio Art

Rachel Ko ’09, Beth Links ’09, Fiona Worcester ’09

Draw 22½ images of any one shoe, from all possible vantage points. Draw the shoe happy and draw it sad. Draw the shoe as if it wishes it were human. Draw the shoe in love with another inanimate object. Draw it with your non-dominant hand. Draw it in an uncomfortable location. Try drawing it using your favorite and least favorite techniques from our class. Think of other permutations—remember you are producing 22½ drawings of the *same* shoe.

Philosophy

Jeff Kaplan ’09, Julian Mesri ’09, Emanuel Yekutieli ’11

Someone was in a car accident and, as a result, all of his higher brain functions cease. That is, his conscious memories, thoughts and personality traits are gone. Is that individual dead? Give a two-sentence answer (and no longer!).

Music

Ruth Aronoff ’09, Caroline Kan ’09, Sam Kapala ’09

Spend 15 minutes in each of three different locations and consciously and carefully listen to all the sounds around you. Create a short piece of music that captures what you hear.

Mathematics

Mary Feeley ’09, Aroop Mukharji ’09, Harris Pasettiner ’09

What is the fourth dimension? Write a two-sentence definition and then create an artistic representation of a four-dimensional object or of four-dimensional space.

WRITING THE WEST

by Denise DiFulco

While researching the papers of his latest subject, Wallace Stegner, author Philip Fradkin '57 was surprised to come across a file with his own name on it at the University of Utah archives. The two met briefly in the late 1970s when Fradkin, then an editor for *Audubon*, interviewed the legendary Western writer and conservationist for an article in the magazine. They

maintained a correspondence for years afterward.

Inside the folder, Fradkin found some of his own letters along with another written by Stegner—one that Fradkin never knew existed. "I didn't realize he nominated me for a MacArthur Fellowship, what they call a 'genius grant,'" Fradkin says. More than a decade after Stegner's death, Fradkin had received



"I ALWAYS HAVE IDEAS, AND I'LL DIE WITH A NUMBER OF UNCOMPLETED IDEAS—AND THAT'S ALL RIGHT, TOO. AT AGE 73, THAT'S NOT A BAD LIFE: TO STILL BE EXCITED BY IDEAS."

the greatest sort of approbation from the "dean of Western writers"—a man who won both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a National Book Award.

Fradkin himself is an award-winning journalist, author and environmentalist. Unlike Stegner, who lived almost exclusively throughout the Western U.S. and Canada from his birth in 1909 until his death in 1993, Fradkin was born and raised in the East—Montclair, N.J., to be exact. But his passion for the romantic and rugged terrain has been no less intense. When Fradkin was a teen, his father took him on a trip by train, limousine and bus through the American West and Canadian Rockies that sparked a lifelong love affair with the region. After graduating from Williams and serving two years in the Army, he loaded up his Volkswagen Beetle and headed to California in 1960.

Following stints at small newspapers in central and northern California, Fradkin joined the staff of the *Los Angeles Times*, where he shared a Pulitzer Prize with the metropolitan staff for its coverage of the Watts racial conflict. He was later named the newspaper's first environmental writer. He worked briefly as assistant secretary of the California Resources Agency under then-Gov. Jerry Brown before joining *Audubon* magazine as its first Western editor.

Apart from that one interview for *Audubon* at Stegner's Palo Alto Hills home, Fradkin admits he avoided crossing paths with his subject thereafter. In large part, it was because Fradkin didn't want his own writing to be unduly influenced by that of Stegner, who was founder of the Stanford Creative Writing Program.

After Stegner's death, however, Fradkin received a letter from Stegner's son Page, who was compiling a volume of selected letters from his father. Unfortunately, Fradkin had lost about a dozen pieces of their correspondence in a 1988 house fire. Many were written while Fradkin was in Utah conducting research for one of his 11 books, *Sagebrush Country: Land and the American West*, and contained Stegner's lyrical reminiscences of his youth in Salt Lake City.

"I e-mailed [Page] back," Fradkin says, "and the proverbial light bulb went on—what about a biography of Wallace Stegner?"

Only one posthumous biography had been published previously, in 1996, which Fradkin says was "overly praiseful" due to the involvement of Stegner's widow, Mary. Page, Fradkin says, "made it clear he did not want another hagiography. He wanted someone who could perceive his father as a whole person."

Fradkin began to shop the idea around, but publishing houses initially took a pass, telling him repeatedly that literary biographies had limited interest. The book finally sold to Alfred A. Knopf, through an editor Fradkin had pitched the idea to several times. When that editor retired, a fellow Eph, Andrew Miller '96, shepherded the book through the rest of the process.

The biography Fradkin finally published, *Wallace Stegner and the American West* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008; University of California Press, 2009), turned out to be far more than just an overview of a writer's life, since Stegner's influence so greatly transcended his published works. Not only did Stegner give voice to the experience of the American West for his generation and those to follow, but he also fought tirelessly to protect the authenticity of that experience through his environmental advocacy. At times, Fradkin says, Stegner's legacy as a writer and conservationist were one and the same, "especially in his nonfiction, in the sense that it gives a wonderful description of the landscape of the West and the need to preserve it."

The outcome of the Stegner biography was somewhat ironic, considering how Fradkin views Stegner's role as a literary figure. "What he did for all writers in the West was legitimize the West as a worthwhile subject in the eyes of editors, who, for the most part, have been raised and schooled in the East and have never left the narrow edge of the Atlantic Ocean." ■



Williams professors and others weigh in on the issues of the day. For a complete listing of media appearances, visit www.williams.edu/admin/news/inthenews

A Feb. 1 *New York Times Magazine* article on the growing number of **women who choose to be single mothers** includes research by economics professor **Lucie Schmidt**, who says, "What's striking is how fast the birthrate to the college-educated group has increased."

"I think we have come almost full circle," economics professor **Ken Kuttner** says in a Jan. 16 American Public Media *Marketplace* report on a proposal for the U.S. Department of the Treasury to **buy up billions in troubled assets from banks**—an idea that had been rejected last fall.

IN THE NEWS

As **foreign language programs are undergoing serious reviews** of their missions, requirements and offerings, it's important to ask "controversial and difficult" questions, such as whether new media ought to be taken seriously and how to balance language, literature and culture, says chair and Stanfield Professor of Asian Studies **Neil Kubler** in the Dec. 29, 2008, edition of *Inside Higher Education*.

A birdsong is "a behavior frozen in time," says biology professor **Heather Williams** in a Jan. 31 *ScienceDaily* article on how research in that field may lead to **refinements of Darwinian theory**.

"A lot of people arrive in Africa [only] to assume that it's a blank empty space and their goodwill and desire and guilt will fix it," says **Binyavanga Wainaina**, Sterling Brown '22 Visiting Professor of Africana Studies, in the Dec. 4, 2008, broadcast of American Public Media's *Speaking of Faith*, which discussed the **ethics of aid to Africa**.

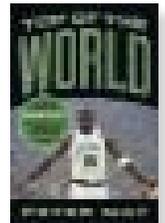
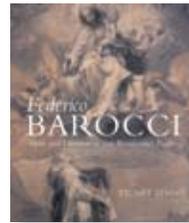
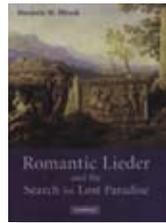
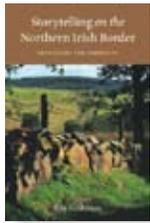
FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Organizing for Good: What it Takes to Achieve Sustainable Excellence. By Michael H. Annisson '65. Outskirts Press Inc., 2008. A summary of what it takes to achieve sustainable success by rethinking the way we approach management.

Amazing Kitchen Chemistry Projects You Can Build Yourself. By Cynthia Light Brown '83. Nomad Press, 2008. The complexities of chemistry are brought to the level of readers ages 9 to 12 through hands-on activities that kids can do at home.

Discover National Monuments: National Parks, Natural Wonders. By Cynthia Light Brown '83. Nomad Press, 2008. Introduces readers ages 8-12 to the history and science behind some of the most amazing natural sites in the U.S. that have been named national monuments.





Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community. By Ray Cashman '93. Indiana University Press, 2008. Everyday storytelling offers new insights into sectarianism, community and identity in Northern Ireland.

Local Mission, Global Vision: Community Foundations in the 21st Century. By Peter deCourcy Hero '64. Foundation Center, 2008. A book of provocative essays on the increasing globalization of philanthropy and the significant new role played by the worldwide growth of community foundations.

Romantic Lieder and the Search for Lost Paradise. By Marjorie W. Hirsch, professor of music. Cambridge University Press, 2008. An exploration of the influence of the lost paradise myth on Lieder by Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Hugo Wolf and other 19th-century composers.

Anytime, Anywhere: A Little Boy's Prayer. By Marcus Hummon '84. Simon & Schuster, 2009. A children's story about the universal act of prayer.

NFLC Guide for Basic Chinese Language Programs, 2nd ed. By Cornelius Kubler, chair and Stanfield Professor of Asian Studies, et al. The National East Asian Languages Research Center at Ohio State University, 2006. A guide for teachers and

administrators involved with teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting. By Stuart Lingo '84. Yale University Press, 2008. A study of how Barocci's art, which combined sensuous allure with religious devotion, helped reconcile art and the church to transform the theory and practice of painting.

Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture. By Eileen Luhr '94. University of California Press, 2009. A cultural analysis of the conservative shift that transformed national politics in the U.S. during the Reagan-Bush era.

Top of the World: The Inside Story of the Boston Celtics' Amazing One-Year Turnaround to Become NBA Champions. By Peter May '73. Da Capo Press, 2008. An account of the Celtics' 2007-08 championship season.

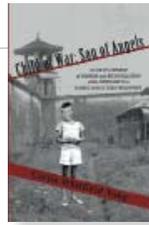
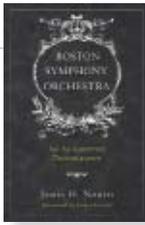
Boston Symphony Orchestra: An Augmented Discography. By James H. North '52. Scarecrow Press, 2008. A collection of all the information surrounding 90 years' worth of Boston Symphony musical recordings.

Eating Well. Comfort Foods Made Healthy: The Classic Makeover Cookbook. By Jessie Price '95 et al. The Countryman Press, 2009. A cookbook introduces nutritious ways to enjoy favorite comfort foods.

Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe. By Mary-Jane Rubenstein '99. Columbia University Press, 2009. A confrontation of Western philosophy's ambivalent relationship to the Platonic "wonder" shows that wonder reveals the extraordinary in and through the ordinary and is therefore crucial to reimagining political, religious and ethical terrain.

The Forest of Hands and Teeth. By Carrie Ryan '00. Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2009. A post-apocalyptic love story about a young girl struggling against the strictures of her village and hoping for a world beyond the fences.

Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860-1960. By Eiko Maruko Siniawer '97, professor of history. Cornell University Press, 2008. A history of modern institutionalized practices of political violence in Japan demonstrates how "violence specialists" have been integral to the conduct of politics since the beginning of Japanese democracy.



LIFE OF THE MIND ■

Child of War: Son of Angels. By Curtis Whitfield Tong, former assistant professor and coordinator of physical education and coach of basketball and women’s tennis. iUniverse, 2009. A child’s memoir of horror and reconciliation while imprisoned in World War II-torn Philippines.

Casting Out Fear: Shedding Your Fictional Self, Awakening Your Authentic Self. By Victor Van Valin '59. Outskirts Press, 2008. An inspirational story detailing the twists and turns of the author’s efforts to discover himself and find a meaningful place in the world.

ON CD

Gaga. By Denman Maroney '71 et al. Nuscope Records, 2008. Maroney plays hyperpiano in this quartet of reeds, piano, bass and drums.

Sonogram. By Gamelan Son of Lion, including Denman Maroney '71. Innova, 2008. Contemporary compositions written for instruments of the Javanese gamelan.

Mark Dresser & Denman Maroney Live in Concert. By Denman Maroney '71 et al. Kadima Collective, 2009. A recording of live performances at Vision Festival XIII in New York City and Storefront Theater in Chicago.

Udentity. By the Denman Maroney Quartet, including Denman Maroney '71. Clean Feed, 2009. A composition in seven parts for a quintet in which Maroney plays hyperpiano.

HELP FILL THE BOOKSHELF!

To have your work listed in Life of the Mind, please send relevant information to the *Alumni Review*, P.O. Box 676, Williamstown, MA 01267-0676
fax: 413.597.4158
e-mail: alumni.review@williams.edu

ART BEHIND THE SCENES



Maurice Prendergast (American, 1858-1924)
Grand Canal, Venice, ca. 1898-99
watercolor and pencil on paper
Williams College Museum of Art,
Gift of Mrs. Charles Prendergast
(91.18.6)

Ever wonder what it would be like to examine a Rembrandt etching through a magnifying glass? Or analyze different states of a Whistler print? Or pore over sketchbooks that reveal the creative process of Maurice Prendergast? This summer, you can, thanks to “Behind the Scenes at the Museum,” a series of workshops presented by the Williams College Museum of Art. Workshops are held in the Rose Study Gallery, which is the museum’s classroom, and are led by experts who teach with artworks from the permanent collection and exhibitions. While this year’s schedule is still being finalized, it’s likely to incorporate the exhibition “Prendergast in Italy,” which is expected to draw some 50,000 visitors and will tour internationally. Last year’s “Behind the Scenes” program included:

Visions of the Past: A discussion of antiquities including Cuneiform tablets from circa 2500-2100 BC, vases from ancient Greece and a Roman brick with a stamp giving the date and location of its creation—a clue as to how monuments such as the Pantheon have been dated.

The Political Landscape in Contemporary Art: An exploration of the questions that contemporary artists raise about cultural identity through artworks focused on landscape and environments.

Drawing out the Story: Literary Connections: An investigation of works that use image and text to tell stories or have fascinating stories behind them.

To find out this summer’s schedule visit www.wcma.org