Becoming a Writer in the World: A Student's Perspective on Creativity and Literacy Instruction

JUSTIN IMMERMAN
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The college English classroom has become one of the most highly debated subjects over the last ten years. Literacy instruction in this environment—as well as high school classrooms—has become the main focus and concern for teachers and researchers alike. A long and contentious debate rages on how to administer writing instruction in these settings. Some are concerned that students are no longer being taught *how* to write, but *what* to write. While most would agree that this is true, they disagree on what to do about it. But in order to fully capture the essence of this heated argument, we need to take a closer look at what teachers value in writing instruction. Furthermore, we need to consider creativity and its role in writing instruction.

The general opinion among scholars and teachers is that writing instruction has become too formulaic and too rigid. Many advocate that we strip the system down to its core values. For example, Sharon Gibson lays out a framework that essentially captures the essence of writing instruction. She argues that writing instruction should be guided by the teacher, but also that the teacher must be restricted in the sense that he or she cannot essentially tell the student what to write. The four steps of her framework include: (1) engagement in shared experiences about the topic at hand; (2) discussion of strategic behavior for writing; (3) time for students to write individually with "lean-in" guidance from the teacher; and (4) sharing work produced by students (325). Through the analysis and application of her framework, it is clear that she advocates bridging "the gap between whole-class writing instruction and successful independent writing" (324). Although Gibson devised her system as the result of research carried out in a second-grade class, it is flexible enough to be applied to higher level classroom settings, which in turn can act as stepping stones to writing in the real world.

We can look at Gibson's work and extrapolate what is being valued in primary grade writing instruction (and, in turn, higher level classrooms as well). For one, young writers need guidance to aid them in learning the process of writing. Second, collaboration is highly valued in this framework. Teacher-student interaction is something that is valued in many classrooms. The third—and probably most obvious—value is space. Writing is something that requires a considerable amount of free time in isolation. The teacher should essentially be a guide in this process; he or she isn't telling the student to write about this or that, but is instead interacting with the student through conversation to help the student generate meaning. The fourth value Gibson discusses, and no doubt one of the most important, is the sharing of the finished product by students.

This model is extremely versatile in the sense that it leaves the bulk of the writing to be figured out by the student, with minimal interference from the teacher. However, not all classrooms can apply this model, which in turn leads to different values coming from these dynamic classrooms. A classroom that has teachers with the necessary skills to carry out this framework can do so, but some schools simply cannot afford to hire such teachers. It is here where we see a different set of values emerge, some that are more personal than the framework laid out by Gibson. Urban educators often demonstrate these values.

Urban educators, as revealed through interviews conducted by Jerrie L. Scott and William H. Teale, typically address five core values that are areas for concern in writing instruction. The first one is the need for urban learners (338). In this area, the three urban educators claim that urban learners are just as important as urban educators and are increasingly coming from an eclectic group of races. One respondent stated that there are three needs for urban learners: (1) emotional support from educators, (2) exposure to more positive environments, and (3) changes in attitudes (338-9). The second category that interviewees responded to was principles/theoretical framework for teaching literacy in which respondents identified five subcategories of goals: (1) "Accelerate student achievement to the greatest extent possible"; (2) "Appreciate the critical role of a diverse literacy-rich environment"; (3) "Employ a range of language and literacy teaching and learning strategies…to ensure both confidence and competence";(4) Deliver instruction that is hands on, differentiated, provocative, collaborative…fun, creative, relevant, and meaningful"; and (5) "Employ constructivist principles that see students and teachers as partners" (339).

We now have two sets of values that essentially address the main types of learning environments for students. What remains to be seen, however, is the exact role that creativity plays in writing instruction. Both of these models encourage a high amount of creativity in the classroom, but now let's look at what literacy researchers are saying about creativity and writing instruction.

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At one time, literacy instruction was understood to simply be the teaching of written prose. In the past ten to twenty years, however, technology has revolutionized the ways in which we communicate with one another. Writing is no longer the only form of communication that is used in the real world. And this idea has launched one of the greatest debates in literacy instruction in the past century. Communication has changed, but the classroom negates these changes by making writing the only form of literacy that is present. A growing number of professors and scholars have begun to speak up in defense of different types of literacy, arguing that these other literacies should be present in the classroom as well.

Three of these scholars, Dale Jacobs, Cynthia L. Selfe, and John Dawkins, present extremely noble ideas that can potentially change the place of creativity in the classroom. Jacobs and Selfe advocate the use of multimodal literacies in the classroom. Jacobs uses a case study of comic books to convey the importance of multimodal literacies in everyday life while Selfe advocates for students by arguing that it is their right to express their identity in a way that is suitable for them. She uses aural composing as her example to show the importance of multimodal literacy education. Dawkins expresses that the rules of grammar constrain the construction of meaning.

Another scholar, Karen Gallas, an elementary educator, examines the imagination—and thus creativity—and its role in literacy instruction. She argues that imagination is "a missing component in literacy instruction" and that "literacy teaching must begin and end with a focus on the imagination" (457). Gallas concludes that there is a distinct separation between public image and the private world of a child and that interaction between both worlds forms identity, which in turn shapes literacy learning.

These scholars are essentially saying the same thing: a change needs to happen in the classroom. Although it may not look like it on the surface, all of these researchers advocate a more

prominent place for creativity in literacy education. The general consensus is that, as society changes, so must teaching strategies. Writing teachers need to be flexible when it comes to addressing new forms of literacy in a classroom. Gallas' work reveals something much more profound: the education process starts entirely based on the imagination and creativity, but fails to continue in this mode. Therefore, in moving up to higher levels of education, we see less and less of the imagination being utilized. Since imagination and creativity are so closely related, creativity also begins to suffer. What occurs as we advance through school is a result of the diminishing presence of imagination: the increasing perception that creativity is valued, but a lessening sense that this is actually true.

Much has been discussed on the topic of creativity and literacy instruction from a teacher's standpoint. The perception among these teachers (and most teachers, for that matter) is that creativity must be allowed to flourish in a classroom setting. And most teachers are, in fact, applying creative methods in their writing instruction. What is missing from this conversation, however, is the most important voice: the student's. How do students perceive the use of creativity in a classroom setting?

Research Methods

This question regarding creativity is one of vast importance. Since what is taught in a classroom primarily affects the students, it is imperative that we address this matter in a way that provides an in-depth look and understanding of how they feel on the issue. My initial thought was to gather a large sum of data by administering a survey to the student body of the University of Central Florida. While this idea seemed like an extremely efficient way to gather a large amount of information, as I worked through the question and broke it down, another question came about: am I looking for quantity in my research or am I seeking quality? In other words, a survey could have offered me a wealth of information regarding student views on creativity, but would have limited the research to a few answer choices, thus heavily limiting the depth of my research. I decided that it was more important to pursue quality when dealing with this issue.

My focus then shifted from gathering large amounts of information to acquiring more personal, genuine thoughts on the matter from fellow students. This question deals with matters that are particular to the individual, and answers can vary from student to student. Since I was looking for a general voice on the subject, I decided that a conversation on the matter must be held. I created a focus group that had in attendance a first-year college student (Erica), a sophomore (Teddy), a junior (Matt), and a senior (Michael—commonly referred to as Speiser throughout the tapes).

I organized the conversation into three categories that were then discussed throughout the focus group. These categories included: (1) creativity and its use in writing, (2) writing instruction from a student's standpoint, and (3) the relationship between creativity and writing instruction. It is important to note that the first two categories deal with completely different topics; this was done in order to gain a better understanding of each individual topic. The final category puts the topics from the first two categories in perspective. During the focus group, fifteen questions were asked of the participants. Questions were devised in a way that required the participants to think critically on the subject at hand. Furthermore, the focus group provided me with a general consensus on what students are thinking in regards to creativity and the thoughts that were presented to me were, I believe, genuine. The fifteen questions addressed by the focus group can be found in the appendix. A recording of the conversation is also available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzTMV1cC3Qg.

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Addressing this issue was no easy feat. Since my research heavily relies on the opinions of a relatively small group of students, it cannot be expected to provide a definitive answer regarding all student thoughts on creativity. Rather, it should be viewed as an in-depth look into some student perceptions. This paper aims to reveal a fundamental voice on the matter of creativity—that of the students in today's writing classes—and how this voice is being affected by current writing instruction standards. I feel that the research provides a wealth of information regarding the matter.

I have no intentions of suggesting that writing instruction is not effective in its methods and delivery. To the contrary, I instead offer basic analysis of how students are viewing current literacy practices and how much they value them as writers of tomorrow. Furthermore, my research delves into what these students think about the matter of creativity, which in turn provides the reader with a thorough look at how literacy instructional methods are—or are not—helping students become better writers. And, when educators hear the student voice on the matter of creativity, they can better tailor their methods to student needs.

The paper is split up into three sections—the heading of each section corresponds to the part of the conversation that is being discussed. In each section, a brief overview of the conversation that played out is provided, followed by an analysis of the conversation. Readers will find it helpful to have a copy of the questions that were addressed in the conversation on hand while they read through the provided research. This paper will only address what was said that had importance to the overall theme of the research conclusions, so it will be useful for reader to listen to the recorded conversation prior to reading each section.

Results
Defining Creativity and Its Place in Writing

One of the first topics discussed in this section of the conversation was how these students defined creativity. The four participants generally agreed on what it essentially means to be creative. They concluded that creativity is "thinking outside of the box" and "looking at a problem from a different perspective." As predicted, answers to this question were very brief and to the point. Their answers to the follow-up questions, however, proved more interesting.

I next asked a series of questions about how these students use their creativity in their writing assignments. When I asked what they think about creativity when it comes to writing, Matt responded that he "has learned to write his papers to earn the grade that he needs," a remark with which Erica agreed. This answer led the group into a conversation about creative writing in which Michael stated that creativity is relative to the class situation. He explained that a creative writing class heavily values creativity in writing more than an entry level English class does. Erica, however, responded, "Even in creative writing classes you have to follow what [the instructors] want, so you can't exactly write the way you want."

Next, I asked the participants to share how they learned whether creativity was or was not valued in writing. Matt was quick to claim the he learned that creativity was not valued in writing after he "got a D on [his] first English paper that was an opinion piece." He claims his grade was based on the fact that his opinion was, according to the comments of his teacher, invalid. Michael then explained that he learned creativity was not valued in general when he was given an assignment in his advertising class to create an ad and the teacher based the grading entirely on the formatting of the piece.

The final question in this section dealt with how these students applied their creativity in their writing. Matt responded with a story about a paper he had just turned in:

> I just turned in this paper in which I had to ask three people to tell me the same fairytale in three different manners, and then I had to analyze it. And we were encouraged to be creative, which prompted me to think this is going to be great, but then when you read the guidelines, your creativity had to follow the guidelines of using other works as references that weren't creative.

The creativity was limited because my creativity doesn't necessarily follow the works in which we had to reference.

I followed up this question by asking the group to think back to high school and when a teacher told them that an assignment should engage their imagination and creativity. Matt claimed, "In high school, it was more of a thing where teachers told you to be creative, and then you were, in fact, creative, and the teacher would say that this is too imaginative and not possible in the realm of reality, which resulted in a bad grade."

Analysis

I was surprised at how adamant the participants were in their opinions. I was beginning to see a major gap between the perceptions of students and their educators. By asking these questions, I had no intention of critiquing the way writing practice takes place; I wanted to simply provide a backdrop for the final section. Yet these students had the urge to vehemently criticize their prior literacy instruction. Teachers and students agree when defining creativity, but their perspectives begin to diverge when creativity is actually applied to writing.

What we can gather from this data are some general conclusions about creativity. For one, students want to be creative in their writing. They feel it offers extensive flexibility and keeps the writing process lively. Students attempt to utilize creativity to their advantage, and are even encouraged by their instructors to do so, such as when a teacher gives a writing assignment and says, "Be creative." However, grading does not reinforce this encouragement, as evidenced in what Matt said about the research paper in which he had to analyze fairytales.

Writing Instruction from a Student's Perspective

(This section of our conversation focused primarily on writing instruction. It is important to recognize and note that the questions were aimed at students' previous experiences with writing instruction and nothing else.)

The first question I asked in this section was one that, I think, took the participants by surprise. I asked them to think of what would be valued in written assignments in a "perfect world scenario." I stressed that this question was hypothetical in the sense that I was looking for their perceptions of what they would like an assignment to be graded on in a perfect world. The participants were very hesitant to answer the question at first. After discussing the question a little more, Michael argued that the teacher or assignment giver would have a norm in mind of what he or she is looking for while grading papers, and then see how far the actual paper being graded strays from that norm. Interestingly, he claimed that while teachers should keep this framework intact as they grade, they should reward papers that stray from the norm of the assignment with higher grades. Erica claimed that, in her perfect world, an assignment would be graded on how much effort is conveyed in the final product. She argues, "Sometimes you can work really hard on an assignment, and [don't] give them exactly what they are asking for, but it doesn't make it bad work. [Teachers] should adapt to it."

Next, I wanted to compare these perfect world scenarios with what students perceive as the reality of how writing assignments are graded. In order to attain results that I would consider comparable, I presented the question in the exact same wording as the previous one, only this time I replaced the words "perfect world scenario" with "reality." The students were much less hesitant in their answers this time. Matt immediately responded, "If you follow what the teachers want to see; if you follow the material you've learned in class, the previous material you've learned in other

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classes. It's pretty much whatever you have learned in your English classes up until that point. You're expected to show in that paper."

The third question that I asked the participants was if they felt that they were taught in the best possible way to be a writer in the world. Erica responded with a firm and quick, "Not really." Teddy stated that he believed that that you cannot teach someone to write well because conveying meaning is largely based on opinion and, since everyone has different opinions, there is no right way to tell someone how to convey meaning.

The final subject I inquired about in this section was writing style and how it can change. All of the participants have different majors and are studying completely different subjects. Erica is majoring in psychology, Matt in television production, Michael in political science, and Teddy in business. I asked them if they felt that their past writing instruction was effective in the context of their intended professions. Erica claimed that her instruction was the complete opposite of effective:

> Growing up, we had to write in our English classes in the MLA format. Well, I'm going to be a psychologist and I'm going to have to write in the APA format. So I've been taught my entire life in this certain type of format, and now I'm going to have to change that. I don't think that's fair.

All of the participants were in agreement on this subject. Matt put it best when he said, "There's no one standardized way of writing…everything is specific to the field you choose. So you can't really accredit an English class…up until you get into your major."

Analysis

What we really need to look at when we concern ourselves with writing instruction is what the student wants to get out of an assignment. Based on the answers to the first question, it is clear that students are yearning to get something more than a letter grade out of the written tasks they are assigned. Michael's response to the perfect world scenario question is evidence of this. He argues that teachers should not only create a norm for what is considered a great paper (which most teachers already do), but he also wants teachers to grade assignments based on *how far* the paper deviates from the norm, which is mostly the opposite of what teachers do when they grade assignments. In other words, he claims that instead of teachers taking an assignment at face value, they should ultimately be grading the students for the creativity they bring to the assignment.

These students are clearly stressing that writing instruction should work for them. They want writing instruction to be taught in a way that is tailored to them instead of being forced to change their ways when approaching a particular assignment. Erica stated that she doesn't think it's fair that students are subjected to a certain style of writing that doesn't fit them and might not be useful when they go out and become a writer in the world. When Teddy explained that there was no right way to teach someone to write well, he is also claiming that it is dangerous for writing to become a standardized process since this is not how writing and creativity flourish in the world.

Correlating Creativity and Writing Instruction

(The previous two sections aimed to keep creativity and written instruction in their respective categories. This was done in order to gain a full understanding of how students perceive these two

subjects before moving on to this final section, which integrates these two subjects into one coherent entity.)

The first question I asked the students in this section was whether they thought that creativity is valued in writing instruction. It is important to note that the question discussed in section one of the same nature was asking about *writing,* and had no intention of producing an answer that dealt with writing *instruction.* I was looking to see if the students felt that teachers truly harness the power of creativity in writing. Teddy stated that he felt English classes act in direct opposition to creativity. He argued that grading in English classes is "entirely based on whether or not you can follow directions or not." Matt added to this comment by remarking that classes have become formulaic in the sense that if certain criteria have been met, a passing grade on an assignment is bound to follow. He used an analogy to modern movies to demonstrate this logic:

> If you follow this step, this step, and this step, you're going to make a lot of money. Like *Avatar*—the highest grossing movie of all time—yet the story has been done a million times. Same thing with English class: if you follow this step by step thing, you're going to get a good grade on the paper. The second you deviate from the equation you take a risk.

The last comment that Matt made struck a chord with me. I wanted to know more about this whole "deviating from the equation" idea he was referring to. The next question dealt with this issue of "deviating." I asked if there was a desire to deviate from this so-called equation. All of the participants were in agreement when it came to this—a simple yet resounding "Yes" said a thousand words. Matt elaborated, saying, "There's always a desire to deviate because it's a desire for rebellion. It becomes boring to you as a writer because it becomes a repetitive process." Teddy extended this idea into another realm by stating that deviating from what is normal is what allows us to advance in a society. Erica brought the subject full circle, claiming that deviating is very risky because those that choose to partake in such tactics might not have their works valued.

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The conversation then shifted back to the original question. Teddy stated that teachers are basically wasting their time by teaching subjects such as punctuation and grammar because the way we communicate with one another has changed. Matt added that there are so many different and creative ways of communicating that are not even being recognized and valued in a classroom setting, such as leetspeak and text lingo. Teddy then added that he thinks it's ridiculous that we grow up relying heavily on strict forms of communication. He felt that it was sad that an immigrant could come to the United States and speak broken English and convey meaning and function for the most part in society (though perhaps still not get a high paying job) while students are learning how to punctuate a sentence and use correct grammar.

Matt added that students' creativity is restricted early and that from a young age students are told by instructors and authority figures that "That's impossible" or "That can't be done." He continued, "Who's to say it can't be done? If I want a car that has wings and a tail, that's being creative, but then you're told that can't happen." I asked the participants if they think that society stifles creativity. Matt responded, "Not all of society. I think it's the people that shape you as you are growing up that stifle your creativity, which in turn causes society to become less and less creative as the generations go on."

Erica then added a very interesting thought to the conversation. She remarked that creativity is something that has been identified and given a definition of what it should look like in our society. She argues that we are no longer valuing ideas that are different (and therefore creative), but we value things that fit under this umbrella definition of what being creative is. She then stated that ideas that don't fit under this socially accepted concept of creativity are not considered creative. She used an example of a common school scene: "You see kids in school that other kids will make fun of, just because they are a little bit different, and those kids are just expressing their creativity. It's just not the same creativity the majority of people happen to express."

Next, I wanted to hear about real life examples of creativity—or lack thereof—in the classroom. Matt shared a story with the group about how his creativity was stifled in his 11th grade English class. He was given an assignment based on the reading of a Dr. Seuss book that required the students to display "merit, be creative, and have meaning to it." Matt pondered on the idea of being creative and decided that he would purposely misspell words and use incorrect grammar in the final product of this assignment. The idea behind this was to poke fun at the English language all the while proving that meaning can exist under these conditions. Needless to say, the paper could not be accepted in the form that it was submitted. What's interesting, however, is the reasoning behind this. He explained: "The kids in our class got it—[the teacher] even understood it, but she said that…she couldn't give the paper a good grade and made me redo it. She understood the point I was trying to get across, but she claimed that it wouldn't help me down the road if she accepted that paper." Matt summed up this part of our conversation pretty well: "They all tell you to be creative, but then you get penalized for being creative. Then they tell you, 'It doesn't make sense, I don't understand why I am reading this or why you bothered writing this.'"

The final question I asked the participants dealt with what they believe is the best method for students to express their creativity. Erica said that there are many different ways to express creativity. Michael added:

> Creativity is in and of itself its own language and the way that you express it isn't necessarily the creative aspect; it's what you think and what you do. If you can use the [English] language in a creative way to express your thoughts, that's great. But if [you're] a musician, an artist, a writer, those are just tools to express your creativity.

Analysis

This final part of our conversation resulted in something that goes beyond the classroom. The students, to my surprise, not only developed their perceptions of creativity in the classroom, they managed to equate these perceptions to the real world. Based on the answers that were given to the first question, writing instructors are not incorporating this idea of creativity into writing situations. They are not inspiring the writers of tomorrow to think outside of the box; they are, instead—without ever really admitting to it—presenting a formula for students to follow and apply as they move on to higher grades. This is very dangerous, because writing in the real world is not a formula, and these students immediately realized this when we talked about deviating from the norm.

These participants are not fooled by what goes on in a classroom that teaches writing. They recognized that creativity, unfortunately, has been defined in the classroom and that this definition is what instructors are using to grading student work. Erica then presented the group with something that is extremely frightening to think about: this definition of creativity that has been accepted in a classroom environment is now being applied in the real world, and there is now this norm that has been established regarding what is accepted as creative. It's also concerning to think that, while students desire to deviate from the norm, they are being restricted in the classroom, and thus stripped of any creativity that might be applied to the real world.

After I asked the focus group whether they thought society stifles creativity, it was clear to me that this was not their perception. Matt instead blamed those that shape us (our instructors) as we grow up and learn how to write. Unfortunately, instructors have become too fixated on ensuring that students can write at such a young age that writing creatively has suffered. It may be the case that lower level grades are promoting the use of creativity, but as students advance through school, somewhere along the way creativity is no longer valued in their writing. This is because educational systems have defined exactly what being "creative" means. And because creativity has been defined in such a rigid manner, students have learned to fake it. They look at this definition of creativity and they take a backwards approach to writing. And now what we have is a system that accepts this backwards approach to writing, as is evident when Matt told us about his written piece that purposely included misspelled words and incorrect grammar, and how the teacher could not accept it as final work.

I found these students' perception of written instruction and creativity in a classroom interesting. I realize now that they aren't going to accept it. Yes, they are being forced to play the game at this point in time, but the simple fact is that they realize that this isn't how writing gets done in the real world. It was promising when Michael defined creativity the way he did, as coming from within and being conveyed in a way that is suitable for the individual.

Conclusion

Creativity, according to the students that participated in the focus group, is no longer coming from the extensive imaginations of students, but has instead been defined and laid out by teachers for the students to exploit. This form of creativity does not provide students with a way to express their specific type of creativity, and when students attempt to do so, they are penalized through harsh grading. It is time that teachers and instructors lift the restraints that this rigid definition of creativity has established, allowing students to think critically about writing assignments through the lenses of their own, individualized versions of creativity.

My research has, I hope, provided you with an in-depth look at what our writers of tomorrow are concerned about when it comes to writing instruction and creativity. My hope is that this paper provides readers with the answers to some critical questions that may have been raised in their own writing instruction practices. It is time that instructors re-evaluate themselves and their practices to better suit student needs.

Some readers may argue that the research presented in this piece is somewhat skewed in the sense that it only concerns a few student perspectives on writing instruction. Such skeptics forget that my aim was not to gather a consensus among all students; rather, it was conducted to reveal that student perspectives matter when we concern ourselves with writing instruction. Instructors must take this into consideration when teaching writing, not only to better help the students and prepare them for writing in the real world, but to improve as teachers, too.

As for creativity, I am advocating that instructors lift the restraints of the current standards in today's classroom by simply allowing creativity to be expressed in a way that is suitable to each individual student and not standardized. It is important to remember that each student is different, and each student can bring something mind-blowing and unique to the table if he or she is simply allowed to do so. Creativity is in the eyes of the beholder, and it is the responsibility of teachers to recognize and take this into account in their classrooms.

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APPENDIX
Focus Group Questions

Part One—Creativity and its use in writing
1. What is creativity?
2. Do you think that creativity is valued in writing?
3. How did you learn that creativity was/was not valuable in writing?
4. When you were told that an assignment should engage your creativity, what did this mean to you?

Part Two—Writing Instruction from a Student's standpoint
5. What do you think (in a perfect world scenario) is valued in a writing assignment? In other words (and remember this is a perfect world) what should the assignment be graded on?
6. Same question as before, but in reality?
7. Do you feel that you were taught in the best possible way to be a writer in the world?
8. Knowing what you want to choose as a career, do you feel that your past writing instruction was effective? Why/Why not?

Part Three—Creativity and Writing Instruction and their Relationship
9. Do you feel that creativity is something that is valued in writing instruction?
10. Is there a desire to deviate from what is considered normal?
11. Creativity is something that has been defined? (clarification of Erica's comment)
12. What are some life examples of creativity (or lack thereof) in your classes?
13. Did the paper convey meaning? (Referring to Matt's story on his essay with misspelled words and improper grammar)
14. Do you feel that the system of writing instruction that you were taught under preaches the use of creativity, but in reality creativity cannot exist under this system?
15. Do you feel that writing is the best method to express your creativity?