

## Creating Innovators through Creative Writing

John Lando Carter, Middle Tennessee State University

*Abstract:* Carter argues that the creative writing classroom is a haven for honing Wagner's (2008) seven survival skills, skills students need to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, innovation driven economy.

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Innovation has dominated the curriculum conversation over recent years in American K-12 circles. In fact, Wagner (2012), Robinson (2015), and Bellanca and Brandt (2010) have spent the last decade addressing the dire issue of not only equipping students with the necessary 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills to compete in the global economy, but also designing an innovative curriculum to match. Innovation, according to Wagner (2008), will be the key to success for students who will soon enter the highly competitive global economy. Furthermore, Wagner (2008) uncovered seven key survival skills that students must master in order to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. Table 1 displays and operationalizes each of Wagner's seven skills.

Table 1. *Wagner's Survival Skills Operationalized*

<b>Survival Skill</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	Thinking widely and deeply in nonlinear ways to see not only <i>what is</i> but also <i>what could be</i> ; challenging face value ideas and the status quo while actively pursuing answers to how and why things are constructed and designed and how and why things can be redesigned and reengineered in new ways.

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Collaboration & Leadership	Readiness to lead and participate in traditional and virtual teams across diverse settings and populations while also developing and sustaining mutual respect and openness.
Agility and Adaptability	Developing the mindset of life-long learning and risk-taking; consistently and actively navigating ambiguities, disruptions, and multiple ways to solve problems.
Initiative and Entrepreneurialism	A sense of self-direction regarding seeking answers and solving problems while also actively seeking opportunities to learn, relearn, and unlearn with agility and adaptability.
Effective Written & Oral Communication	Communicating innovative ideas through writing, speaking, and presenting that challenge the status quo, coupled with an authentic voice, one driven by focus, energy, and passion.
Accessing and Analyzing Information	Managing, navigating, interpreting, evaluating, and synthesizing information and data across different types and sources with agility and adaptability.
Curiosity and Imagination	The natural extension of critical thinking; a state of inquisitiveness and willingness to take risks, challenge the status quo, and a passion to ask <i>what if?</i>

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Ironically, the creative writing classroom is a natural haven for honing Wagner's survival skills, and teachers can help students develop and sharpen these skills through the freedoms often found in the safety and flexibility of the creative writing classroom.

### **The Innovative Mindset of the Creative Writing Classroom**

Creative writing is traditionally an elective class offered at the high school level, meaning that the course automatically comes with more curricular and assessment freedom. In fact, many creative writing classes operate outside of state and local curriculum guidelines. This unique curricular malleability provides the liberty for the teacher and the students to take risks in a safe and positive learning environment. Hierck (2017) and Hattie (2012) note that positive teacher-student relationships are fundamental to establishing a safe learning environment, one that allows for mistakes and risk-taking from both teacher and students in order to ensure growth in learning. Wagner (2012) argues that "our education system does not encourage risk-taking and penalizes failure" (p. 113), which is why the creative writing classroom serves as a model for positivity and support. Robinson (2015) also claims that if educators can build a positive learning environment, they can then unlock, enable, and foster the conditions for imagination and innovation: "Imagination is the root of creativity. It's the ability to bring to mind things that aren't present to our senses. Creativity is putting your imagination to work. It is applied imagination. Innovation is putting new ideas into practice" (p. 118). With the curricular and assessment freedoms often found in creative writing classrooms, innovative thinking and learning can occur.

### **Fostering Innovation Through Democratization**

Over the past five years of teaching creative writing at both suburban and magnet schools in middle Tennessee, one panoramic strategy has helped foster innovation and creativity more than any other: democratizing the creative writing classroom. Because of the unbound nature of a creative writing class, I've been able to share power and control over curriculum and assessment, which has resulted in lasting victories because my

students were always governing their own learning while also stretching beyond their comfort zones as writers. As Robinson (2015) notes, “we must empower students to learn for themselves” (p. 110).

*Student Governance of Curriculum.* At the beginning of each semester, my students use the classroom whiteboards to write down everything they want to study and create during our time together. The results are wildly different each semester, which forces me to practice Wagner’s survival skill of agility and adaptability and stretch as a writer as well because I participate in each project alongside them. As a result, I become a teammate instead of an authority.

During the first week of class, my students design the core components of our class by listing writing projects they want to attempt. Each class produces different results, and in the spring of 2017, their ideas were distilled down into the following major genres: Children’s Literature, Coming of Age Stories, One Act Plays, and Sci-Fi/Horror/Post-Apocalyptic Stories. They then voted for the genre they wanted to attempt first. Letting them both develop the units we will study and vote for the order in which to study the units causes a dynamic shift in the power balance of the creative writing classroom. The excerpt below reveals a student response to this process:

I was honestly kind of taken aback by the process. Not because I didn’t appreciate it, but because I wasn’t used to the choice the process afforded the students. As a high school sophomore, the opportunity to assist in the steering of a course, and by extension my own education, was foreign but ultimately invigorating. High school reading is so regimented that it can be kind of soul-crushing. Just being told “Sit down, read this, feel this, understand this” made me feel kind of helpless and I often resented what I was reading. The voting process, in my eyes, was a win-win. If what I wanted to study was selected, I obviously got what I wanted. If I was in the minority, then at least the other students got what they wanted and we’d made that decision together. I never ended up doing something I just didn’t want to do.

Moreover, this approach allows students to practice many of Wagner’s survival skills. The students showed great initiative and entrepreneurialism when designing their own genre studies. Many also voted for a genre in which they had no experience, revealing a willingness to test their agility and adaptability skills. One known for being gifted in STEM jumped at the chance to write a Science Fiction story. He initially signed up for the class to fulfill an elective requirement during junior year, but he quickly became a leader. As a senior, he worked with me to study the common tropes in Science Fiction literature and wrote his own novella to satisfy his senior thesis requirement at the magnet school, which is a testament to the preference for risk-taking, rather than risk-aversion, found in the creative writing class.

*Creating Student Ownership.* Throughout the writing process, I continue to democratize the classroom by helping students take ownership of their learning. For example, in the short story unit I ask them to make a list of the greatest short stories they have ever read. We then examine the list, debating how and why these stories made it on the list as well as which authors and stories might be missing. I often advocate for Sherman Alexie, an author students aren’t typically familiar with, while they almost always include (demand) Poe.

Next, students write down a single title for a short story on a piece of paper. These papers are collected into a basket and shuffled. Then, they draw titles at random and are responsible for creating a short story inspired by that title. First, they list as many possibilities for their title as they can within a two-minute time-frame. They must cast the widest net possible with their thinking and “exploit [their] curiosity, imagination, and capacity for skepticism” (Bernays & Painter, 1990, p. xv). As one student noted, through this exercise he “learned that your best idea is not usually your first one.” Figure 1 below illustrates students’ curiosity and imagination:

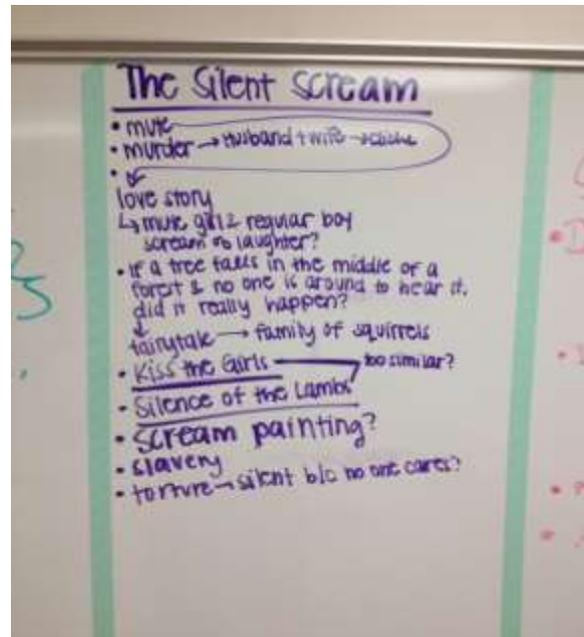
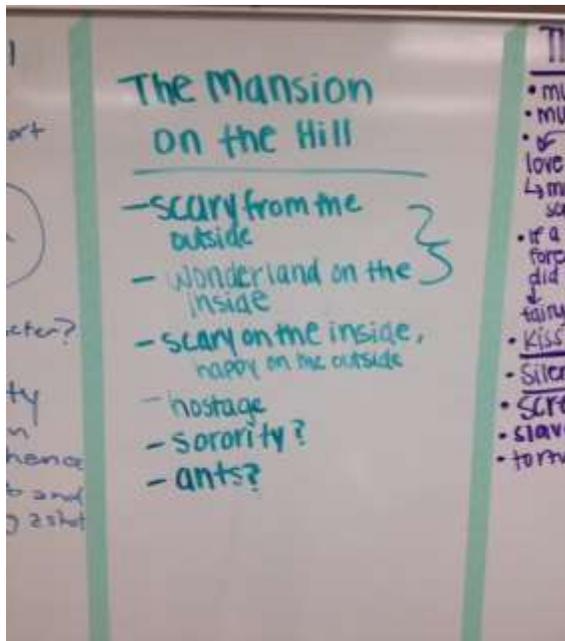


Figure 1. Student Short Story Brainstorms

Students become frustrated with this exercise at first, but many break through after periods of deep critical thinking and problem solving in order to create truly innovative approaches to their title. One student reflected on this exercise and noted that he hated the title he received, thinking “What am I supposed to do with this?” However, after working with the title during several class periods, he “came to view the title as a problem, and [his] own creativity as a solution.”

As they reflect on their brainstorm results and workshop their ideas, they then form short story exemplar groups, which allow them to study the authors and short stories from their initial lists. In the spring of 2017, students created exemplar groups for Edgar Allan Poe, Tim O’Brien, Sherman Alexie, Flannery O’Conner, and Shirley Jackson. While working in these groups, they must flex the survival skills of teamwork and collaboration as well as accessing and analyzing information.

The entire process, from the selection of the genre, the story authors and examples, and the exemplar groups, are all student-centered and student-driven. When students become “architects of their own learning” (Wagner, 2012, p. 176), they stay in a constant state of critical thinking and problem solving. In the creative writing classroom, much

like the STEM classroom, we encourage students to step into a zone where a singular right answer no longer exists; we challenge them to drive their own learning and dream up what does not exist, which presses them to reflect and ask *what if?*

*Embracing a Culture of Slowness.* We also spend four to five weeks on each unit, reading exemplar texts while crafting our own entries into the genre. Unlike many core academic courses, we take our time with each project. Honore (2004) details humans' long struggles with speed and efficiency and our need to escape from the "tyranny of the timetable" (p. 262). The culture of speed lives prominently in K-12 schools. The common bell schedule of fifty-minute classes often stifles deep thinking and creativity. However, innovators need time to make mistakes, diversions, and revisions. The excerpt below reveals a student response to the pacing of the class:

The pace of my creative writing class freed me to truly work through the creative process. In other classes, it felt as though I could not actually explore the material and had to fake a greater depth of understanding when I was given time for only a surface level analysis. Creative writing cannot be manufactured and the time we were allowed to explore different aspects of the subject matter not only increased my understanding, but also lowered my anxiety. Creative writing was a deep breath in a marathon of a school day. I was still learning, but there was no pressure to sprint to the finish.

Indeed, students are often pressed to digest information and then complete a set amount of work for each class period each day, forcing many to feign understanding and meaning. Likewise, Pink's (2009) research explores the stresses of the "billable hour" used among lawyers and notes that "these sort of high-stakes, measurable goals can drain intrinsic motivation, sap individual initiative, and even encourage unethical behavior" (p. 97). The creative writing classroom, on the other hand, has the luxury of slowness, which cultivates Wagner's survival skill of curiosity and imagination.

*Balancing Assessment and Innovation.* My creative writing class has always operated in a nearly gradeless ecosystem, which spawns dichotomous results. Wagner (2012) argues that the absence of grades is not an absence of structure but “rather a different structure for learning” (p. 148). Robinson (2015) celebrates this approach as well: During an interview with a teacher, he details how this teacher has abandoned traditional grading practices because it diminishes tensions and invites his students to “focus on the content of their assignments and their classwork rather than on the rubric to score them” (p. 172).

Thus, on one hand, my students are allowed the free reign to explore, innovate, and create without the threat of grades and the pressure to tailor creative assignments to please either me or a rubric. Wilson (2006) also warns about the suppressive nature of rubrics, noting that something as organic as writing cannot be effectively assessed with a rubric or check boxes. Instead, Wilson (2006) advocates for an environment where students are invited to fall, learn, and pick themselves up and try again. In a ranking environment, students cannot take risks and discover their own writing talents (p. 87). Table 2 below illustrates reflections from my students on the open grading practices in our creative writing class.

Table 2. *Student Perspectives on Grading in the Creative Writing Classroom*

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“The grading aspect of my creative writing class perhaps had the greatest impact on me as a student. I no longer was afraid of misstepping when it came to exploring the various genres. As a high achieving anxious student, I was used to having to find the ‘right’ answer. But in creative writing I slowly learned to accept that there is no one answer, and that our individuality is what makes our writing stronger. Writing is such a vulnerable art form and, by taking away the fear of punishment, I felt as though I could be vulnerable.”

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“While some may think that loose grading is a cop-out for teachers and students to not try as hard, I think it had the opposite effect. Because I knew my work would not be graded harshly, it encouraged me to stretch my creative boundaries and to step outside the norm, which I would not have done in any other class. I saw the loose grading as mutual trust that students would put in their best work and freshest ideas if they did not think they would be criticized for it”

“I loved that our class wasn’t focused on grading, but being ourselves and being creative. I didn’t feel confined to a rubric or any policies. I was able to write how I wanted to without fear of any penalty. The loose grading policy created a low-stress zone, which I think is essential for students to thrive in and succeed.”

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On the other hand, the open grading practices have drawbacks. Many of my students soar with the non-traditional assessment structure of the class while others choose to abuse such freedoms. Therefore, as Spandel (2006) notes, there are times for rubrics, but they must be “thoughtfully crafted and used with discretion and understanding” (p. 19). In our class, we build the rubrics together based on deep discussions about what we value in writing. Figure 2 below represents the four-point teacher/student-created rubric.

<b>Category</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Characters</b>				
<b>Relationships</b>				
<b>Conflict</b>				

<b>Choices/Decisions</b>				
<b>Outcomes/Consequences</b>				

Figure 2. Teacher-Student Created Rubric

This rubric was created in the fall of 2016 when students discussed how we should grade our work during the semester. During this process, they practiced critical thinking and problem solving as well as collaboration and leadership to establish what we valued in writing as a class.

The looseness of grades and the use of formal rubrics in my creative writing class have been a constant experiment. However, one assessment has remained the same: the final exam. At the end of the semester, students must select a piece to revise and submit to our Creative Writing Anthology, a bound collection of the work each student deems worthy for publication. Once again, they are forced practice their survival skills by evaluating their own creations, revisiting those creations, and searching for a signature work that showcases their unique curiosity and imagination.

### Conclusion

The pressing need to equip students with the seven survival skills cannot be ignored. At the same time, Wagner (2012) argues that our “education system does not encourage risk-taking and penalizes failure” (p. 113). According to Robinson (2012), “Human achievement in every field is driven by the desire to explore, to test and prod, to see what happens, to question how things work, and to wonder why and ask, what if?” (p. 135). The creative writing classroom innately operates around this same *what if?* mindset. King (2000) says in his memoir *On Writing* that we must have a door we are willing to shut in order to create, a door to block the distractions and excuses (p. 155). We must now consider closing the door on practices that stifle innovation and instead embrace the 21<sup>st</sup>-century qualities of the creative writing classroom.

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