teaching artist
JOURNAL

A research initiative of the Office of Academic Research, Columbia College, Chicago

ABSTRACT

A leading writing TA
applies creativity
research in a
community-based
writing program.

Applying Research in Creativity

and Skill Acquisition in a Community-Based Creative Writing Program: Implications for Teachers and Learners

Valerie Harris

Correspondence regarding
this article should go to:

Valerie Harris
P.O. Box 28663
Philadelphia, PA 19151
writersAcademy@aol.com

Since 2004 I have been facilitating a creative writing program for teenagers at the historic Paul Robeson House, centrally located in the urban community of West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Begun as an intensive five-day summer workshop, Teen Writers Academy has expanded to offer ten-session Saturday workshops during the spring, two ten-day summer sessions, and an annual invitational public reading. In September 2007, with support from two local foundations, we published our first anthology, *IDENTITY: poems and writing from Teen Writers Academy* (BPT Media), which features work by thirty of the more than seventy young writers who have participated in the program over the course of three years. My aim in facilitating Teen Writers Academy has been to encourage creativity and improve the writing skills of participating teens by offering a consistent methodology of researched creativity exercises as well as exercises of my own devising, along with selected readings, writing practice, and one-to-one mentoring. Working with small groups of between eight and twelve teens, Teen Writers Academy offers a safe place for young writers, ages thirteen to eighteen, to practice and grow as

writers, to share their work with their peers, and to receive feedback that respects their creativity.

Recently, while completing a graduate program in the Department of Culture and Communications at Drexel University, I had the opportunity to survey a body of research, conducted from a psychological perspective, on how creativity is developed within the individual. My study centered on several interrelated areas, including elements of creativity development, attributes of creative individuals, how one progressively acquires skill in a given creative field, and environmental aspects conducive to encouraging creativity. This article looks at the research in light of my work with Teen Writers Academyand documents how some of the expert findings are applied in my creative writing workshops. Discussion of these issues may be useful to other teaching artists and community arts practitioners, working within and outside the domain of creative writing, in increasing their understanding of the attributes, behaviors, and conditions that enhance creativity and skill acquisition and how these factors may be applied in a learning environment.

Elements of Creativity Development

I begin with a discussion of creativity development because there is a body of research that maintains that creativity is "quintessentially a developmental matter" (Feldman 170). Rather than a static, invariable process, creativity has been described as a multidimensional process capable of being influenced to the extent that there is an increase or decrease in the likelihood that a creative outcome will result. Theorists have proposed a number of models, all of which include the idea that creativity requires a combination of cognitive and interactive factors that are influenced by environmental conditions. Let's look at three of them.

- The *systems model*, espoused by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the most widely referenced creativity experts, maintains that creativity "is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields interact" (314). The *domain*, or area of focus, such as creative writing, represents the cultural aspect of creativity while the *field*, that is, the teachers, critics, editors, and other gatekeepers who control or influence the domain by evaluating, selecting, and giving visibility to what they consider to be novel or creative ideas, represent the social aspect. Both the domain and the field encompass the environment in which the individual operates and influence significantly what is deemed creative. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi argues that "creativity is not the product of single individuals but of social systems making judgments about individuals' products" (314).
- The *componential model*, forwarded by Teresa Amabile, proposes that creativity is rooted in a combination of *domain-relevant skills* (expertise and talent), *creativity-relevant skills* (such as mental flexibility, capacity for idea generation, etc.), and *intrinsic motivation* or commitment to the task, and "suggests that creativity will be highest in that area where the three components . . . overlap" (Collins and Amabile 307). Intrinsic motivation, defined as the motivation to participate in an activity because the individual finds it particularly satisfying, interesting, and challenging, is considered to be particularly conducive to creativity (Collins and Amabile 299).
- The *multivariate model*, developed by Sternberg and Lubart, asserts that creativity calls on intelligence, knowledge, thinking styles, personality, *and* motivation, all interacting

within an environmental context. Those who adhere to the multivariate model place an emphasis on different aspects of intelligence that they believe are essential to creativity. Accordingly, practical or *social intelligence* plays an important role in that it influences one to present a creative solution that will be accepted by one's audience (Lubart and Mouchiroud 128–129).

I believe Teen Writers Academy engages elements of each of the three models discussed. For instance, in my experience, I've found that a young writer who voluntarily enters an ongoing workshop situation has sufficient intelligence to come up with creative ideas. This is first demonstrated during the preadmittance interview in which applicants to Teen Writers Academy must share samples of past writing. Although I now constitute an element of "the field," in that I have the authority to select who gets into Teen Writers Academy, I require writing samples more as a way of determining that the teen does indeed write. While generally not the case in the average high school composition class, motivation to write and to partici- pate in the program is key to my selection process. (It is surprising the number of parents who set up interviews for their teens who may have written something interesting at one time or another but are clearly not interested in practicing creative writing. This is easily discerned during the interview.) Once in the program, domain-relevant skills, personality, a degree of social intelligence, and motivation come into play. To undertake the task of developing a cre- ative idea to the point that an audience "gets it"—which, in the context of Teen Writers Acad- emy would mean that the writer reads her work to her peers, who have questions that beg clarification, and so the writer may then be asked to do several rewrites—requires that the writer must be willing or sufficiently motivated to do so. Factors influencing motivation would include a commitment to the idea, an understanding of how the idea might be expanded upon and the most suitable literary form in which to express it, and a level of respect for her writing peers, her instructor, and the workshop experience.

In his article "The Development of Creativity," D. H. Feldman defines creative accomplish- ment as "a significant reorganization of knowledge and understanding, which can lead to changes in products, ideas, beliefs, and technologies" (170). I think that the phrase *reorganization of knowledge and understanding* is important, in terms of creativity, tackling creative exercises or problems, and to the creative writing domain. How we approach any prob- lem, whether we are in the math class- room, the corporate boardroom, or our


Writing teens, Paul Robeson house.

Valerie Harris

kitchens at home and faced with deciding what's for dinner, requires that we first recogniz or represent the problem mentally, so that we can gain some understanding of the initial or current state and move toward the desired outcome. Clearly, this demonstrates a reorganiza tion of knowledge (what is accessible) and understanding (what needs to be done). Similarl in creative writing, if we set out to create a poem or short story or stage play, we are likely t engage in the same process. We must have some knowledge of the form and an understandi of the impact we want to make. But also, as we progress toward our goal, we are certain to engage some or all of Feldman's seven dimensions of creative development: (a) our cogniti processes; (b) social/emotional processes; (c) family history and dynamics; (d) education ar preparation; (e) characteristics of the domain (e.g., in writing, we might include form, stor lines, plot, characterization, dialogue, etc.); (f) social/cultural context; and (g) historical forces, events, or trends (171–172).

A cursory study of all of the dimensions of creativity, as Feldman describes them, yields interesting food for thought, not least of all the *family aspects, education, and preparatio* and the prevailing *societal and cultural influences.* In my work with teens, family history an dynamics are, not surprisingly, often explored and shared through creative content, as the young writers struggle to distinguish themselves within and apart from that very personal, influential, and sometimes painful context. In fact, I encourage them to "mine" their personal experience, as well as their imaginations, for something to write about, often reminding them that there is nothing in their lives, in their community, that is not worthy of a poem (or story, dramatic monolog, etc.) if they can see the poetic in it.

As regards *education or preparation,* Feldman writes of the importance of special teachers, mentors, and instructional arrangements for notably creative individuals, parti- cularly at what he calls "transition points, when wise counsel and support can make the dif- ference between a process that continues on course and one that is distorted or aborted altogether" (175). One-to-one mentoring was part of Teen Writers Academy's initial design an continues to be a mainstay of the program. This mentoring is achieved during what we cal "the writing clinic" and takes place in an adjacent room to where we work as a group. Here, w

discuss problems the writer is encounter- ing in determining what idea to develop further, or in the writ- ing itself. Whether initiated by the young writer or by me, every participant has multiple writing clinic time over the course of the ten-day Academy, which is another reason why enrollment is kept small. One of the tenets I stress is per- severance, that is,
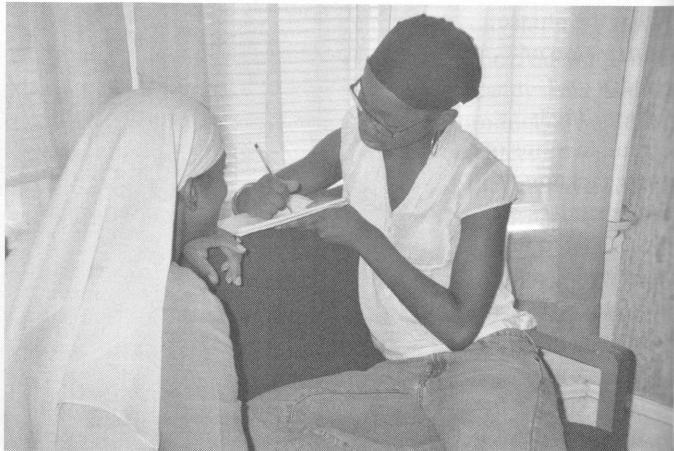
Instant plot outline.

working through challenges and completing what one starts. (For the writer, not finishing is an easy habit to fall into and a desperately hard one to break.)

Feldman describes, in his discussion of the *societal and cultural influences*, his construct of a "cultural organism," or the process of organizing resources for the purposes of developing creativity. A cultural organism exists to set and sustain the conditions that allow for creativity, and includes all those who support enterprises designed to facilitate awareness, access, initial engagement, and development of creative work (179). In facilitating Teen Writers Academy, and in planning events and publications that will bring the writing of talented teenagers to a larger audience, I feel privileged to be an active participant in the local cultural organism that is emerging for young writers in my community, similar to the informal cultural organism that Feldman says has evolved around classical music globally.

In formalizing his dimensions of creative development, Feldman looked to another eminent theorist, Howard Gardner, who did seminal research between 1983 and 1993 into the lives and work of seven creative individuals working in seven different fields, including T. S. Eliot, Pablo Picasso, and dancer/choreographer Martha Graham. Gardner was able to identify in several of the individuals the occurrence of what Feldman calls "a critical moment," wherein the creative individual developed a sudden and strong attachment to the domain, in addition to increased motivation and sense of purpose (172). Gardner also notes that, in terms of *social/emotional processes* all seemed to benefit from an intense, supportive relationship while accomplishing a major breakthrough in their work, after which the relationship grew less close or dissipated altogether (Feldman 174).

Perhaps because of my work with people aged thirteen to eighteen, I find it fascinating to note the similar life experiences found in Gardner's study of biographies of creative individuals, which he summarizes in his portrait of the "ExemplaryCreator" (E.C.) or archetypical creative individual. Typical of the E.C. experience is having moved during or after adolescence to a major cultural center; discovering other young individuals with similar talents and ambition; selection of a domain from a limited range of options; willingness to challenge authority, either directly or through the creation of works that are counter to the current trend; a feeling of isolation; and the importance of psychological and practical support at the time of a creative breakthrough. Several of these E.C. experiences seem almost common to the developmental experiences of adolescents as a whole.

Graduation.

Valerie Harris

Creativity and Skill Acquisition
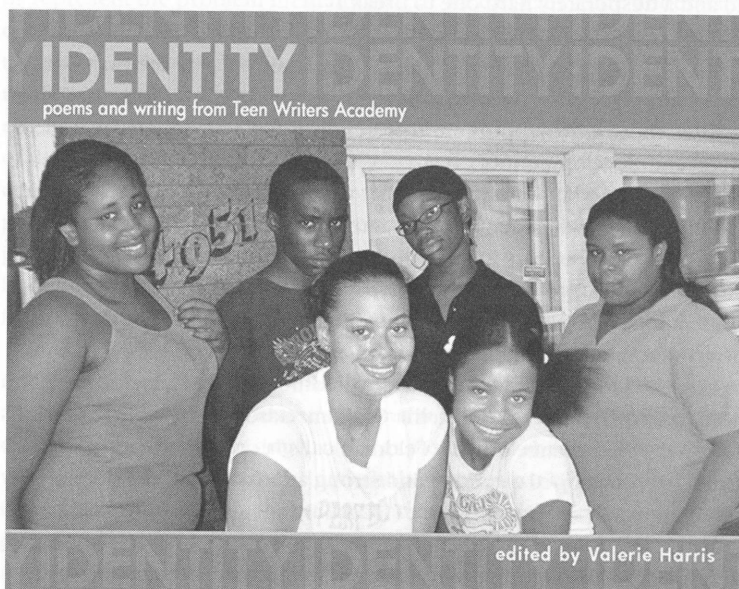
IDENTITY features the writing of 30 teens and is available in local libraries.

Beyond the cognitive to the practical, a major factor in the differences in individual performance in a given domain is *deliberate practice*, or what K. Anders Ericsson describes as "particular practice activities that lead to gradual improvements in skill and adaptations that increase performance." In his chapter "The Acquisition of Expert Performance as Problem Solving: Construction and Modification of Mediating Mechanisms through Deliberate Practice" (p. 55), Ericsson refers primarily to the development of "world-class" expertise, but I think much of his theory is adaptable and useful for those of us working with people who are perhaps just beginning to seriously develop their creative potential. Key to Ericsson's position is that different levels of mastery present the learner with different kinds of problems that must be solved for the skill to develop further and that each individual's path toward skill acquisition is distinct and depends upon the specific methods or exercises used to help the individuals continue in their development, or move beyond their current state to a desired goal state.

As teachers or facilitators, we can contribute to creative skill development by constructing and modifying "mediating mechanisms," or what Ericsson refers to as the design and adaptation of conditions, activities, and methods or representative tasks that facilitate the learner's acquisition of expertise. Skill acquisition always involves transforming existing behaviors and skills and is thus built upon previously acquired knowledge, skills, and experiences. Once we have developed representative tasks that induce skilled performance under laboratory-like or classroom conditions, we can determine what works and submit those tasks to analysis and modification. This allows us to capture the process by which skill or expertise in a specific domain is acquired.

I feel privileged to be an active participant in the local cultural organism that is emerging for young writers in my community, similar to the informal cultural organism that Feldman says has evolved around classical music globally.

So, how might we usher young writers, painters, musicians, dancers, and other performers to improved skill acquisition and a level of expertise in their chosen domain? Perhaps we would first need to acknowledge that our goal is to develop exceptional levels of performance in a select few rather than to provide a degree of knowledge about a few domains and merely acceptable levels of skill to many, which is mostly the goal of our general education systems. Again, intrinsic motivation is important if we agree with the idea that "the best way to help people to maximize their creative potential is to allow them to do something they love" (Collins and Amabile, 305). In general admittance schools constrained by limited resources and the mandate to serve large numbers, such as many in Philadelphia, students seldom have the freedom to pursue arts training in depth, even when they are motivated to do so.

Again, intrinsic motivation is important if we agree with the idea that "the best way to help people to maximize their creative potential is to allow them to do something they love."

Ericsson's description of how musicians are trained has implications for training within other domains as well. For instance, specialized training takes place over an extended period of time during which the focus is on individualized training and mastery of domain-relevant skills that incorporate specific techniques. Teachers assess the strengths and weaknesses of the student's current performance, and they select and design practice activities that will help the student overcome obstacles to progress. Successful, deliberate practice requires identifying specific goals for how to change the performance. The teacher guides the student by setting knowledge and skill-appropriate and attainable goals to be attempted in individualized or solitary practice and by providing feedback on the student's performance. "The use of techniques designed to overcome weaknesses and increase control exemplifies the essence of *deliberate practice*" (73). Hence, according to Ericsson, enhanced skill acquisition and the development of expert performance include not only transmitting the knowledge that has been accumulated about the domain but also "teaching the problem-solving methods necessary for maintaining high levels of technical proficiency, attaining new levels of mastery, and extending knowledge in the domain to produce . . . creative contributions" (72).

An exercise I frequently use in Teen Writers Academy is the "Instant Plot Summary." Students working in two-person teams are given a one-sentence story idea and asked to create the protagonist, the antagonist, the conflict, perhaps three stages of story line development, the crisis, resolution, and conclusion. The first time they do this, I often get many complaints. It's difficult. It's boring. Only a few think it is fun. The resulting stories are shared and analyzed. Did the team have a clear understanding of who (or what) is the antagonist? Does the story develop in a way that is satisfying or makes sense? Does the conclusion leave the audience with the impression intended by the authors? The next time we use the "Instant Plot Summary" students work alone and generate their own story idea. The resulting stories are generally stronger and the students demonstrate a better understanding of the elements of story development. We continually consider the various story elements and how well they work together in other writing the students produce. My aim is for the students to internalize knowledge of these elements so that the elements are reflexively at the students' disposal as they progress in their writing practice.

Attributes of a Program That Encourages Creativity

The research on how creativity is encouraged and nurtured points to many interacting factors that are believed to play some role in determining creative potential. I have chosen to briefly identify a number of extrinsic variables discussed by Raymond Nickerson in his article "Enhancing Creativity" within the context of how they might comprise a foundational basis for a program that facilitates creative development and to attempt to show how some of these variables are demonstrated in Teen Writers Academy.

1. *Establishes purpose and intention—participants demonstrate a long-term interest in some form of creative expression and recognize the program as an environment in which to develop their creative potential.* On the first day of Teen Writers Academy, participants are told that their participation will culminate in an oral presentation of a piece of writing that they have worked on while in the program. Each session begins with first pages, a free-writing exercise that participants initiate as soon as they enter the writing space. Students have commented that although they do not look forward to the free-writing exercise, it does put them "in the mood to write." Thus, purpose and intention are immediately established and regularly reinforced.

2. *Builds basic skills—the program includes activities that build on basic skills and skill levels.* Each day, Teen Writers Academy participants work on an aspect of the writing process, that is, finding a topic, first drafts, revision, editing and proofing, or presentation (with feedback) in preparation for the final presentation. These activities build basic, domain-specific skills.

3. *Encourages acquisition of domain-specific knowledge—the program provides opportunities for mastery of techniques through which the art form is expressed and the study of what has been produced historically, by peers and by more advanced practitioners.* Daily reading of published work by other relatively young writers is another aspect of the Teen Writers Academy program. In fact, a major development of our program publication of the anthology, *IDENTITY: poems and writing from Teen Writers Academy* came as a result of our reading excerpts from volumes supposedly comprising "The Best Young Writers . . ." and "The Best Teen Writing . . . ." My young writers wanted to know who said these chosen published writers were "the best." After a discussion of the subjectivity inherent to who gets published and who doesn't, I decided to enter the field and to take some of my young writers with me.

4. *Stimulates and rewards curiosity and exploration—the program encourages observance and articulation of details, a willingness to see things from various perspectives, and the flexibility to change and explore unique approaches.* In each Teen Writers Academy session, students work on writing exercises, individually and in groups, designed to spark their creative imaginations and to prompt them to write creatively with little deliberation. One individualized writing exercise generally assigned early on is "the color poem." Participants are instructed to select a color that they like and that reflects their personality. They are then instructed to compile a list of words and phrases that describe that color for them. Finally, they are instructed to turn those words and phases into a poem, using the phrase "I am . . .", thereby transferring the attributes they have assigned to their selected colors to qualities they perceive in themselves and arranging them into a poetic self-portrait. The poem is read out loud, and feedback from the group

is given. Those students who want to revise their work are asked to do so outside of the Academy. The revised poems are again read out loud the next day. This exercise provides me, the facilitator, with a quick assessment of each student's imaginative range (flexibility) and facility with language (as well as a peek into their personalities). For the students, the exercise requires problem solving (i.e., rearranging knowledge, actively seeking and constructing new ideas, etc.).

5. *Builds motivation—the program emphasizes the expression of natural and inherent talents and abilities while providing opportunities for recognition of achievement.* As mentioned previously, enrollment in Teen Writers Academy is selective; applicants are interviewed and submit a writing sample, which helps me to determine their level of willingness to write. The annual Teen Writers Academy Invitational Reading, a public event held each September, as well as the possibility of being published, provide opportunities for recognition.

6. *Encourages confidence in taking risks—the program is an environment where genuine effort is supportive and where failures resulting from genuine effort are treated as opportunities to learn rather than occasions for embarrassment.* Upon admittance to Teen Writers Academy, participants (and their parents) sign a Code of Conduct in which they pledge to respect themselves and each others as writers. Breaking the code is grounds for dismissal.

7. *Provides opportunities for choice and discovery—the program allows participants experience in problem selection and problem solving through development of creative work that they choose for themselves.* Teen Writers Academy participants are told that their final project can be about whatever they choose, in whatever genre they choose. Often they choose something other than what they usually write. A poet is likely to try her hand at dramatic monologue, while an essayist might go for a short story.

8. *Promotes supportable beliefs about creativity—program participants are encouraged to believe that they can reach their full potential, and with continued effort, they will.* I believe this is inherent to the way Teen Writers Academy is implemented. It's my intention to encourage the participants to look creatively at the world around them (or those worlds within their imagination); to give them the skills to express themselves through writing; to share techniques with them that will allow to more readily access those skills so that writing comes more easily to them; and to allow them to express themselves with individuality, so that the writing that results is satisfying—to them, to their peers, and to me. Further, I hope to show them that they can achieve this, and better, again and again, because they have taken writing as their domain. They own it. They are writers! Very often they show marked progress from where they were when they entered the program, in terms of self-expression, construction, exploring new genres, and novel interpretations.

Conclusion

It has been said that "after most of the formal training for work in a field is done, it is common to find that the unique form of a creator's work is forged within a small group of peers" (Feldman 176). This illustrates, in part, the impetus for my developing Teen Writers Academy.

Having reviewed the research into creativity and skill acquisition, and considered it in light of our program, it is apparent that we have some elements in place that should prove creatively productive for learners. In considering the implications for improving the program in order to increase the potential for optimum creative results what immediately comes to my mind is possibly extending the length of time of the training. We started with a five-day, three hours a day summer workshop in 2004. This seemed time enough to transmit knowledge to the participants but was perhaps not enough time for them to understand their own distinct writing process or to absorb creative problem-solving skills that would allow them to over-come obstacles and "blocks" on their own. During summer 2005, we expanded Teen Writers Academy to two ten-day sessions, each with eight to twelve participants. Still, some of the participants felt the need for more (we generally have repeat participants, some for as many as three consecutive sessions). By 2006, we had further expanded Teen Writers Academy to include a series of ten Saturday workshops from April to June, in addition to two summer sessions. That expansion continues to be in effect.

Prior to the Saturday sessions, we'd incorporated in September 2005 more salient extrinsic motivation, namely, the opportunity for selected students to read publicly at the first annual Teen Writers Academy Invitational Reading, presented at Paul Robeson House to a standing-room-only audience of family and community residents. By September 2007, we were cele-brating our accomplishments with a book party for *IDENTITY: poems and writing from Teen Writers Academy.* The professionally produced volume is being marketed to schools and libraries around the country. I believe that having publishing and other opportunities to aspire to will be beneficial for the young writers in both cognitive and practical ways.

Continuous study of Teen Writers Academy in light of ongoing research may well result in further modifications to the program. I think it's important that facilitators in any creative domain continue to research and develop practice activities, making sure that we have a clear understanding of what each activity is designed to achieve. It would seem nearly impossible to consider the body of research into creativity, problem solving, and skills acquisitions, along with the attributes, behaviors, and conditions that contribute to one's creativity, without applying some of the information to ourselves. In the end, we learn by doing, and we must continue to learn as we teach.

Works Cited

[1]Collins, Mary Ann, and Teresa, Amabile. "Motivation and Creativity." *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 297–312.

[2]Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. "Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity." *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 313–336.

[3]Ericsson, K. Anders. "The Acquisition of Expert Performance as Problem Solving: Construction and Modification of Mediating Mechanisms through Deliberate Practice." *The Psychology of Problem Solving*. Eds. Janet E. Davidson and Robert J. Sternberg. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003. 31–84.

[4]Feldman, David Henry. "The Development of Creativity." *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 169–186.

[5]Gardner, Howard. *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

[6]Lubart, Todd I., and Mouchiroud, Christophe. "Creativity: A Source of Difficulty in Problem Solving." *The Psychology of Problem Solving*. Eds. Janet E. Davidson and Robert J. Sternberg. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003. 127–148.

[7]Nickerson, Raymond S. "Enhancing Creativity." *Handbook of Creativity*. Ed. Robert Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 392–430.

Valerie Harris is a writer/publisher and founder of Teen Writers Academy in Philadelphia. A council member of the Transformative Language Arts (TLA) Network, which convenes the annual "Power of Words" conference, she leads memoir and creative writing workshops for teens, adults, and seniors nationally. She has a MS in publishing from Drexel University.