In the early 1990s, sociologist Roberto Franzosi’s career derailed. Some of his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison cast a dubious eye on his work, and he was denied tenure, leaving him unemployed for two years. “They were saying, What’s Franzosi going to do with these thousands of words in the computer?” he recalls.

But Franzosi, now a professor of sociology and linguistics at Emory, kept the faith. He continued his endeavors to code written texts (such as newspaper reports) and analyze narrative with statistics. Decades and many temporary positions after he conceived the project, From Words to Numbers: Narrative, Data, and Social Science was published by Cambridge University Press in 2004, the four-volume Content Analysis appeared from Sage in 2008, Quantitative Narrative Analysis will appear from Sage in 2009, and “The Trilogy of Rhetoric: Rhetorical Foundations of Social Science Quantitative Work” is forthcoming from Cambridge.
Franzosi’s story and Galenson’s analysis, which he based on a qualitative study of creative productivity, should reassure those who struggle with the prevailing notion that creativity is the province of youth and its brash energies. Certainly, however, the challenges of staying excited about one’s work are different at different stages of a career—especially an academic one.

When people are willing to get “off track,” that is when I see them at their most creative. When they stop worrying about traditional modes of recognition, they tend to be far more spontaneous.

—Laurie Patton, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Religions and Director, Center for Faculty Development and Excellence

**AE:** As a scholar, poet, and program director, what gets you excited?

**LP:** I have always been driven by a sense of possibility that humans can re-imagine themselves entirely—so when I come across an ancient Indian text or a contemporary thinker or poet that suggest compelling ways of reimagining, I want to pay attention. For instance, many scholars of ancient India argue that sound is more important than meaning. And yet I think the picture of ancient India is far more complex, and what we have is rather patterns of thinking in which sound and meaning interact and are constantly finding new forms of balance. Poetry works the same way: I think truly new poems find new ways of balancing sound and meaning. Religious texts are the most intriguing poetically to me for that reason.

The same goes for human organizations—there are usually far subtler and more imaginative possibilities to human relationships than we usually bring to the table. I think there are fascinating ways to re-imagine how we work together in the university—but it takes a lot of commitment to think about one’s own institution in that way. I think such an approach tends to work most effectively on a small scale.

**AE:** What do you see as challenges to your creativity?

**LP:** My challenge is to see creativity in the follow-through and drudgery. For the past fifteen years I’ve trained myself to be draconian about follow-through because of that tendency. Many of my students experience me as hyper-disciplined, but in fact I’m just trying to compensate for the opposite tendency. Many of our most creative tendencies compensate for some actual or perceived lack.
The Center for Faculty Development and Excellence

Mission
The Center for Faculty Development and Excellence will support the work of the office of the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs in encouraging faculty development and excellence, particularly through the sponsoring of faculty programs in teaching, writing, research, and institution building. Each program sponsored will build intellectual community by 1) honoring the work of faculty at all levels and career stages; 2) encouraging and rewarding creativity and innovation; 3) disseminating information across disciplinary, departmental, and school boundaries; and 4) providing opportunities for follow-up and integration of programs within the regular life of the university.

Provenance
Created in January 2009 by Provost Earl Lewis in response to a call from faculty for more support for teaching and professional development. Funded through the consolidation of previous provostial resources, such as University Advisory Council on Teaching, Gustafson Seminar, and so on.

People
Laurie Patton, Director
Donna Troka, Project Coordinator
Jamie Weems, Administrative Assistant

Location
1599 Clifton Rd. Building, 5th floor, rooms 206 & 207

Coming Up
Third Annual Institute for Pedagogy in the Liberal Arts (IPLA) Center for Academic Excellence, Center for Faculty Development and Excellence
May 12–15, Oxford College
RSVP to Jeff Galle at: jgalle@emory.edu

Thirteenth Annual Pedagogy Seminar with Marshall Gregory Center for Faculty Development and Excellence, Center for Teaching and Curriculum
May 18–22 and 26–28; 9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m. each day
RSVP to Donna Troka: dtroka@emory.edu

Topics and Themes in 2009-2010
Professional development courses for assistant and associate professors
Distinguished Teaching Fellows Program
Event series on creativity at various stages in an academic career
Millennial Learner Series focused on teaching with technology
Gustafson Seminar on race and difference
Author Development Programs on digital scholarship
Religion and health seminar

AE: How do you maintain creativity in a period of economic contraction?
LP: I tend to work harder and expect that everyone else will too. Head down, move forward, find another path to maintain what is truly excellent. I think we need to be particularly generous toward ourselves and one another where budget cuts come in. We need to listen better and respond very carefully when others are experiencing or pushing back against a professional loss—say of a program or a graduate line—that might not seem that important to us.

AE: What’s the difference between creativity and generativity?
LP: Once you realize a certain scholarly formula in a field, it is easy to be generative in a mechanical kind of way. I worry that we are asked to be generative but not creative. Then in our academic system we come up with a mechanical formula for what is “creative,” and the category gets worn thin. It’s a risk—so we need to come up with new words for the idea of “creativity” if we’re really going to be attentive to it.

AE: What do you look for as signs of creativity in the work of others?
LP: When people are willing to get “off track,” that is when I see them at their most creative. When they stop worrying about traditional modes of recognition, they tend to be far more spontaneous. That’s almost impossible in any institutional setting that has “benchmarks” and “goals” and “accountability.” I actually think all those modes of institutional life are important, but only if people speak in loyal opposition to them at the same time.

AE: Why has the CFDE taken this topic on?
LP: I think faculty need to talk about these questions. When I sit with faculty, it’s where the conversation almost always ends up—are we staying creative or are we just treading water? The risk is that creativity will become a tired institutional buzzword. But I think the topic is almost infinite, so providing different kinds of opportunities to explore it and listening to people’s stories is really rewarding. We’ll stop when the conversation stops helping others. The most important thing is to let people go off and be creative and not require them to talk about it if it is getting in the way of their work.
Academic Exchange: What can an individual scholar do to keep his or her own creative life vigorous?
Sander Gilman: I have always followed the NASA model. NASA at the very beginning of the race toward the moon decided that it could not focus in on one project at a time. It had to have multiple things that it was doing, so that if one project dead-ended or failed, there were other projects.

Right before I got tenure, I had a major moment of boredom and malaise and an enormous writer’s block. I would go to the office and spend the day sharpening pencils. Every day was worse than the day before. What I realized after months and months of this was that the problem wasn’t me. The problem was that I had only one thing that I had to do. I decided at that point that I needed to have multiple things to do. Many of those never come to fruition. For me, that’s fine. I’m quite happy to work on a project for a number of years and have it simply not realize itself, whether it’s an administrative or a writing task, because I know there are other things that will come to fruition.

It’s the curse of the academy that we train graduate students to become monomaniacal. We train them to focus in on one project, one idea, one strand of their lives. If a student comes to an adviser and says, I want to take a semester off and work for Doctors Without Borders, we say to them, But that will inhibit your progress, rather than saying, Let’s see how we can fold it into your experience. Every academic has interests and strengths—some of them have to do with their research, with their teaching, with their creativity beyond the classroom. I would like to see all of that harnessed for the

I’m quite happy to work on a project for a number of years and have it simply not realize itself . . . because I know there are other things that will come to fruition.

—Sander L. Gilman, Distinguished Professor of the Liberal Arts and Sciences and Director of the Psychoanalytic Studies Program

Having a community of scholars you relate to is important to creativity and important to grooming people to be creative thinkers.

—Barbara Stoll, George W. Brumley, Jr. Professor and Chair of the Department of Pediatrics

Academic Exchange: Your career has not followed a proscribed path. How have you responded creatively to opportunities and challenges?
Barbara Stoll: I’ve had a nontraditional academic career. As I look back, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to work in several different and unusual settings that have enriched my life personally and opened professional doors that at first blush you wouldn’t think they would have. In a nutshell, I went to medical school at Yale and trained in pediatrics at Columbia. I moved to Atlanta to follow my husband, ended up being a fellow in neonatology, which was not on my original career path list. We wanted to work overseas and went to Bangladesh after I completed my training. We went for a year but ended up staying for four. It was an extraordinary experience that opened my eyes to social and political issues of the developing world and introduced me to global health and challenges of international child survival, which have stayed with me throughout my career. During these years we also worked at a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand, where I learned to be a doctor without the comfort of Western tests and technology—and lived the political and human horror of the Pol Pot regime.

After Bangladesh, we moved to Sweden for almost a year, where the focus of my work changed completely and I worked in a basic science infectious diseases laboratory. When we returned to the US, I continued to work in the laboratory for three years but soon realized that the life of a relatively isolated laboratory-based scientist was not
different people in different ways—somewhere between forty and sixty. I think that one of the things one has to look at as an individual are not only those things which cause or are caused by depression and malaise: I have written my big book, what now? I’m no longer interested in this disciplinary strand; what now? I hate students—what now? But also, what excites us and interests us?

AE: How do we stay creative in this time of economic contraction?

S6: The general response to radical shifts in the economy is one of anxiety and fear. But these times can be times of unbelievable creative productivity. The question always is how do you look at it? It's the half-full versus the half-empty glass problem. Creativity either can be hampered by the notion that in times of economic downturn, as academic institutions fall back on strict disciplinary definitions, departments become very jealous about sharing students and faculty time. Or you could think about it in terms of the unbelievable outburst of creativity during the Great Depression, which included people at universities who suddenly felt themselves liberated to cross boundaries. That has to do I think very much with institutional leadership.

AE: What are some challenges to creativity over the life cycle?

S6: There are plateaus in life. And those plateaus may have external structures which create them. I always think about the period after getting tenure in my own case. Suddenly I was faced with, What am I supposed to do having accomplished the most important thing in my life? I was twenty-four years old, and I thought to myself, Oh my god, I’ve got fifty years to live, and it’s all downhill from now. There is the mid-life crisis, which articulates itself among

a great fit for me. We decided to return to Atlanta. When I joined the Emory faculty I had this odd background of several years of infectious disease work both in a basic science lab and in a global health setting, but I was trained as a neonatologist. I ended up going back to neonatology partly because I had the training and credentials, but given my research credentials, I could have chosen to become a professor of pediatric infectious diseases. For a number of years I had a more traditional career of an academic clinician scientist—taking care of sick newborns; teaching medical students, residents, and fellows; writing grants and papers; and finding a research niche and an area of expertise. About twelve years ago my husband and I spent a year on sabbatical at the World Health Organization in Geneva, once again working on issues of global health, child survival, and neonatal mortality in developing countries. When I returned to Emory, I broadened my academic pursuits and continued to do projects in global health.

An outsider could look on paper at my career and say, This is totally disjointed, or one could say, What wonderful opportunities to enrich your own life, to have an exciting and challenging career, and to learn about the world and develop a broad perspective. I think all of these things prepared me to be the chair of a large department, to have a bigger view of things.

AE: What is that bigger view?

BS: I think it’s flexibility, openness, and somehow a life view that doesn’t get scared away by ambiguity. The career I know the best is academic medicine, and I think one of the things that attracts young faculty to academic medicine is that we are able to do different things. We’re not only clinicians; we’re not only teachers; we’re not only investigators. We get a taste of everything. The challenge is to do these different things but also to find an area that excites you and where you can be creative and engaged.

AE: What do you see as some of the challenges to creativity? And what kinds of things foster it?

BS: One issue is time. Time is a major challenge to creativity. Also important is having a cadre of like-minded people to work with, people who spark your enthusiasm. So having a community of scholars you relate to is important to creativity and important to grooming people to be creative thinkers. I personally think having interests outside of your own narrow focus, whether it’s medieval studies or medicine, that having a broader interest in literature, art, music, or something that gives you a broader life perspective, makes you more creative in how you approach problems.
NASA-inspired approach of pursuing multiple projects at once (Gilman, who earned tenure at age twenty-four and is a self-described “tinkerer,” would qualify as one of Galenson’s “Young Geniuses”). Following these interviews, in “Show Up and Get to Work,” visual artist Katherine Mitchell writes of not waiting for inspiration but of making room for it. Neuroscience and behavioral biology faculty member Lori Marino, in “On Becoming a Scientist-Advocate,” relates her mid-career decision to take an unconventional and controversial stance as a scientist–advocate and the creative possibilities that decision has opened up. Finally, AE associate editor Steve Frandzel examines the work of two Goizueta Business School faculty, Russell Coff and Jill Perry-Smith, on how creative ideas are generated and selected in business—and, by extension, in academe. Voluminously on topics such as The Academic Exchange

“What frightens me a little bit right now,” adds Gilman, “is that many individuals and institutions are trying to sit in their neutral corner, thinking it’s a safe space. But if you sit there long enough, you get tired and fat. The creative juices flow only when one is engaged with one’s profession, one’s institution, the world beyond the institution.”

Perhaps few understand the relationship between creativity and hardship better than Roberto Franzosi, but it is not hardship alone that motivates him. “My driving force over the last few years has been the idea of creating something unique and beautiful,” he says. “The way I think of creativity is that it’s not one big, incredible idea, but one thousand little ideas. It is like specks of light that make up a kaleidoscope or fireworks. Each individual speck of light is inconsequential and not very exciting, but it’s the way all these little specks of light are put together.”

The study of creativity over the lifespan, by psychologists in particular, has been around for nearly a century, and until lately the news for folks over age forty was grim. In the 1920s, Stanford University researcher Louis Terman began conducting longitudinal studies of gifted children, noting that not all of them ended up with creative abilities. In his eccentric 1953 classic, Age and Achievement (Princeton UP), Harvey Lehman identified correlations between age and outstanding performance in fields ranging from lyric poetry (twenty-six to thirty-one) and chemistry (before thirty) to amateur bowling (before thirty-four).

In more recent years, Dean Keith Simonton of the University of California, Davis, has written voluminously on topics such as Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity (Oxford UP 1999), in which he notes a difference between the kind of creativity behind the masterworks of a visual artist or an author and the kind that leads to radical discoveries in science, for example. Both kinds, he suggests, require a mastery of skills, but scientists tend to appreciate less structured environments.

There is more to the creative environment than structure or lack thereof, however. Psychologist Jing Zhou of Rice University identifies two critical factors for environments that encourage creative work: supportive management and creative colleagues. The work of Harvard psychologist Teresa Amabile suggests that while freedom, support, and positive challenges encourage creativity, fragmented work schedules, time pressure, isolation, and insufficient resources can kill it.

While freedom, support, and positive challenges encourage creativity, fragmented work schedules, time pressure, isolation, and insufficient resources can kill it.
WHEN CONSIDERING creativity, people often think in terms of inspiration. But Chuck Close, an exceptional painter, has said, “Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us show up and get to work.” He added that if you wait for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike, then you’re not going to get a lot of work done. Inspiration, and the creativity to which it leads, comes with constant working, questioning, and effort.

Looking back, it is hard to know when one has been most or least creative. Certainly 2004, the year I received the Winship Award for Senior Lecturers, was a very high point. One of the great things about the Winship Award is the semester’s leave it provides. It is important for anyone working creatively to have time to think, to enter deeply the world of her own thoughts, and to have the freedom to fail and try again. Jeanette Winterson, author of a wonderful little book titled Art Objects, wrote, “The condition of the artist is a condition of Remove. Work is rooted in silence.”

The Winship was to enable me to prepare for a solo exhibition at the Factory (contemporary wing) of the Kunsthalle in Krems, Austria. Much of the time of the award semester, however, I spent preparing for another solo exhibition, a ten-year survey of my work at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. These exhibitions were followed by a thirty-two-year retrospective as Atlanta City Gallery’s “Master Series” artist of 2007. This was quite a roll of major exhibitions and related projects (including creation of an artist book and publication of a catalogue for the retrospective).

But exhibitions are not necessarily measures of creativity. What interests artists most is the actual creative act and the thought process that surrounds it. Another writer who has been very important to me for many years is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote, “The necessary thing is after all but this: solitude, great inner solitude. . . . What goes on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love.”

These ideas may seem old-fashioned, romantic, and reclusive. So be it. This solitude, however, produces the source of all communication, even in collaborative works or in teaching, and is in many ways an act of love. Artists from Ravi Shankar to Mozart have spoken of the importance of love—their love of art, of their work.

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to arrange for this kind of solitude and freedom from the day-to-day cares of the world is to participate in a residency program. We are fortunate to have The Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences in the North Georgia mountains. The time it provides for true concentration, away from any other cares, is invaluable.

Our highs and lows of creative output are also linked to our emotional states in complex ways. Following my brother’s death in 1996, I experienced a surge of desire just to work. It was a time when everything that wasn’t life and death seemed to fade away. I produced some of my best paintings, paintings that were dedicated to him, in the few years following his death, but I don’t recommend killing off your loved ones to achieve this result. I think the big changes in my work visually were already underway; they would have happened anyway, or at least something similar. There were other very creative periods that were exceptionally happy. How these good and bad times affect my creativity seems to vary. Perhaps the most difficult times for creativity are the relatively flat times—times when too much of the minutiae of life get in the way.

Different artists approach their work in different ways, but often for me—particularly in times of transition—it feels like banging my head against the wall. While I have particular concerns in my work, and they tend to emerge in long series of related works, it is also characterized by what the art historian John Howett described as “ruptures”—times of major change in approach, media, and imagery. During spring break

Continued on page 11
For the past fifteen years I have enjoyed success at Emory as a faculty member, including the past twelve years in the Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology Program. I study the evolution of intelligence and self-awareness in other animals, such as dolphins and primates, and I teach a variety of popular undergraduate courses, including brain imaging and animal intelligence.

In my twenties, thirties, and very early forties, everything took a back seat to my objective of building a reputation as a prolific scientist, and I fell right in line with the typical goals of publishing and, likewise, avoiding perishing. It was all about—well—me. (Academic scientists who claim it is not mostly about them are kidding themselves.) And so it was in 2001, when I published a paper that was to bring me all the professional attention one could ever hope for and, at the same time, challenge me to think at a deeper level than ever before about the implications of my work.

In that year my colleague Diana Reiss and I published a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in which we reported the first definitive evidence for mirror self-recognition in a non-primate species—in this case, bottlenose dolphins who resided at the New York Aquarium in Brooklyn (my own hometown). Our work created quite a buzz, because the findings called into question the primate-centered theories about self-recognition (and self-awareness) that dominated the previous thirty years. With that paper came many experiences: praise from colleagues, scientific controversy, a spoof on Saturday Night Live, and “hate mail” from animal advocates. The statements of the advocates ranged from naïve to provocative. They clearly did not have a sophisticated understanding of how research is done and the need for experimental control. But they challenged me in another dimension by posing questions about whether it is ethical to keep a highly intelligent, self-aware, social individual “in a concrete box.”

One overly dramatic but strangely prescient writer exclaimed,

The bottom line is that your choices are to align yourself with the past: when it was considered acceptable to abuse nature, that animals were solely for man to use, abuse, and ultimately discard however it pleased him. Or you can look ahead to a new century and a new millennium where man finally learns to respect nature and the fellow beings with whom he shares this planet, instead of exploiting them.

At the time I dismissed these letters because I was not ready to listen to them. I knew that any advocacy for dolphins on my part would have a negative effect on how many of my colleagues viewed the paper, and I staunchly refused numerous requests to discuss the implications of our findings for dolphin welfare in captivity. I toed the party line: it was not the accepted role of a scientist to get involved in such matters.

And then one day, unexpectedly, I saw a video that changed the direction of my work forever. It was a video of the annual dolphin drive hunts that take place in Taiji, Japan. In these hunts, over several months, thousands of bottlenose dolphins and other small cetaceans are driven into a cove and hacked to death, their meat sold as a delicacy throughout Asia. The water runs red with their blood amidst the screams of juvenile dolphins who watch their mothers being brutally slaughtered. The “fortunate” ones are taken...
into captivity to work in the entertainment and “dolphin therapy” industries. Only one in six animals survives his or her incarceration past a few days, and those who become long-term residents can look forward to lives of singing for their supper for half the length of their natural lifespan.

In the three minutes that I watched this video, my perspective shifted. I came to realize that it was downright shameful to prioritize my own career objectives over the horrific plight of the very animals I built that career on. This change also came at a time—in my early- to mid-forties—when, as many of us do, I came to a keener sense of my limited time in this world and what impact I wished to have on it. Many of us move from being inwardly focused to outwardly focused on something greater than ourselves. I shifted the path of my career towards science and animal advocacy and have never looked back.

I’ve come to understand that despite the raw theatrics of the advocate letter writers, they had an important point to make. In some ways they were more sophisticated than I at the time because they understood the implications of my work beyond the theoretical debates about the science. They grasped the meaning my findings had for the lives of these animals and the inherent responsibility I had for them because of my position.

Now, five years later, I work to encourage other academics and students also to consider paths as scientist-advocates. I still do basic research and publish. But I have added to the mix the use of my training, skills, expertise and, yes, authority, to promote change in the way we perceive and treat other animals. You won’t find me standing on street corners with signs. Nor will I condone violence and threats on behalf of animals. But now I feel, for the first time, that I am applying my own experiences and education in a truly meaningful and authentic way.

The academic/scholarly community, particularly in the natural sciences, discourages students and young scholars from not only taking animal advocacy positions but using their training in its service. Students and scientists who do are often ridiculed and ostracized. I argue that those of us who study animal behavior and cognition in particular bear the lion’s share of responsibility for animal advocacy because, as such, we know the most about the subjects of our study. We should provide the data-driven guidance that is the sine qua non of science. We are, more than any other constituency and whether we like it or not, “on the hook.”

Precedents exist in other domains: environmental scientists advocating for ecosystem preservation, child psychologists advocating for children’s rights, and scholars of ethnic and gender issues for their respective constituents. I am fully aware that the difference is that scientists who study animals often have a conflict of interest with animal protection aims. I am also fully aware that by becoming an animal advocate I might be viewed differently—that is, negatively—by some of my colleagues. That is fine. I cannot pretend that animal advocacy is an easy row to hoe at a research university.

I am fully aware that by becoming an animal advocate I might be viewed differently—that is, negatively—by some of my colleagues. That is fine. I cannot pretend that animal advocacy is an easy row to hoe at a research university.

And the very act of helping to forge a new “cultural space” in academia for the scientist-advocate produces a host of exciting creative challenges. I have been pleasantly surprised to realize that many of my faculty colleagues share these same concerns for animals. Some have had the mettle to actively engage in these issues. Paul Lennard, the director of the Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology Program, continues to support my role as a scientist-advocate, and, most recently, the Emory Center for Ethics, has offered me a faculty appointment.

I hope my colleagues who are still reluctant to take an animal advocacy role will be encouraged by the fact that there is strong support for this issue “right at home” in academia and will, therefore, get involved. After all, if not us, who?
S everal years ago, Russell Coff, associate professor of organization and management, began conducting a class exercise designed to illustrate the relationship between creativity and competitive advantage. He broke students into small groups and set a cup of red Georgia clay before each. Their task was to brainstorm as many ideas as they could for commercial uses of the common material then select the most promising proposal. The common wisdom about brainstorming holds that the more numerous unique ideas a group produces, the greater the likelihood that the chosen solution will also be the most creative one. But that’s not what happened at all.

The ideas have ranged from the mundane—pottery, cosmetics, and building materials (uninspired but viable)—to the wacky—clay spray for personal defense or filler to elevate New Orleans (certainly novel but not viable). Among the few that have qualified as both novel and viable—thus meeting the definition of creativity in this context—were clay pizza ovens. The concept behind the exercise is that the most frequently conceived product ideas are the least original and therefore would face greater competition, while innovative ones would stand apart. “You can see how you might relate creativity to the ability to be successful in the marketplace,” says Coff.

Over time, though, Coff noticed that the groups generating the greatest number of innovative ideas often selected unoriginal alternatives, such as pottery and cosmetics. “I was perplexed,” he says. “The groups that selected the more creative possibilities at the end were those that had a small to medium number of ideas.” It suggested that there was something different, even contradictory, between the goings-on during the idea generation phase and the idea selection phase of the process. And though there’s plenty of literature on brainstorming and plenty on idea selection, scant research considers the interplay of the two.

The incongruity led him to turn the class exercise into formal research involving 187 students in 38 groups over two years. Coff teamed with Emory colleague Jill Perry-Smith, assistant professor of organization and management, whose major research interests include creativity. Their findings confirmed the idea that “generation and selection require distinct processes such that success at one might not indicate success at the other,” and that “many groups may leave their most creative ideas on the table.”

Further, a crucial factor in determining a group’s success in each phase was its collective mood, which they measured by averaging the self-described moods of individual participants. Groups whose mood gauged as cheerful enthusiasm, a so-called “activated-pleasant” state, excelled at generating novel ideas. But an “unactivated-pleasant” mood state, characterized as calm, relaxed, and positive, though not drowsy or bored, was most conducive for selecting the most novel solutions from among the options. Further, the viability of the selected idea was greater in groups maintaining both pleasant and unpleasant moods simultaneously—a combination of cheerful enthusiasm and mild irritability. “Negative mood states signal all is not well, causing individuals to critically evaluate problems, not settle for the first available or conventional alternative,” the investigators wrote. Viability requires a critical element, a negative energy, that novelty doesn’t.

Examining idea selection is more than just an appealing thought experiment. In the business world, some well-known cautionary tales illustrate the consequences of setting good ideas adrift. One of the most legendary occurred in the early 1980s, when Xerox’s Palo Alto research center developed, and then largely abandoned, products such as the computer mouse, the graphical user interface, and “almost everything tied to modern personal computers,” says Coff. “They had that capability before anyone.” Then one day a young entrepreneur named Steve Jobs, along with engineers from his fledgling company, Apple, visited the center (which Xerox agreed to in exchange for Apple stock) and very much liked what they saw. There’s no telling how many other such failures have occurred.

A W E B  O F  I D E A S

Another salient variable in creative problem solving turns out to be the structure of social networks. Groups with closer relationships among its members facilitate convergent ways of thinking, says Coff. That’s not desirable in the idea generation phase, where imaginations are encouraged to run free. But the more weak ties there are in a group, the greater the chances of getting a broader set of solutions.

In her own research, Perry-Smith has found generally that individuals who tend to maintain numerous but weaker relationships are more creative than those who cultivate few but closer relationships. “Stronger relationships can be constraining in some cases, whereas weaker relationships, in which individuals don’t know each other as well or whose bonds aren’t as strong,” spark creativity, Perry-Smith says. Several possibilities may explain why. In
interacting with many individuals, a person encounters divergent worldviews and notions about problem solving. They’re also less likely to reflectively reach conclusions consistent with one or two contacts who carry disproportionate influence.

“If your network is represented by different social circles and ways of thinking, you have to think autonomously, and in doing that you may have to reconcile a variety of different perspectives,” says Perry-Smith.

In contrast, unwavering interaction with a tight-knit cluster reinforces deep-rooted habits in a reassuring echo chamber, confirms intellectual prejudices, and insulates clashing beliefs. It’s comfortable but not particularly helpful for solving problems. “Our friends tend to know our friends, so we have much tighter, cohesive subgroups that end up limiting the extent that we think beyond our typical ways of thinking,” she adds.

The pattern, says Perry-Smith, pertains to creative pursuits in many contexts, not just the task at hand. “It’s much more about affecting cognitively the way people approach problems, so that the approach is something they are more likely to apply across other situations.”

CREATIVITY IN ACADME

Ultimately the goal of academics is to say something that hasn’t been said before or to show that something that was said is wrong, Coff says. “That’s the essence of what we do, and it means that being successful means being able to see the world differently.” So applying the social perspective of creativity to a place like Emory seems a natural extension.

Perry-Smith says that an academic researcher who interacts chiefly with colleagues in his or her own department, versus someone who has built a lot of relationships in other departments across the university, is in a parallel situation with someone in the business world who functions within a restricted social-professional network.

At a university, perhaps more than in any other institution, opportunities abound to simultaneously hear new ideas and establish the kinds of peripheral relationships that Perry-Smith believes can kindle creative fires. Attending talks around campus in various departments is an obvious way to do both, but there are reasons it doesn’t happen often enough. Just as in so many professions, college faculty are wrapped up with the immediate demands of their own work—teaching, research, grant proposals, committees, you name it—leaving little time or inclination for marginal pursuits. And how should, for example, a faculty member in the business school evaluate the benefit of attending a lecture in the medical school? The risk is that the benefit is nil, but the potential from improbable intersections can also stimulate exceptional creativity.

“Let’s say I attend a talk at the medical school,” says Perry-Smith. “The downside is that it takes more effort to make sense and process something when it’s so far removed. At the same time it could open up really interesting possibilities” that could carry over to one’s own work. The interconnectedness that might exist between fields that are unrelated at least outwardly don’t need to be clearly evident for finding useful connections and practical applications. (At a recent Emory conference, “Addiction, the Brain, and Society,” the speakers included physicians, medical researchers, and social scientists, as well as historians and philosophers.) “I think the crazy ideas are the ones that have the possibility to be interesting,” says Coff. “The question is, in the academic world, under what circumstances would it not be so crazy? Ultimately if you’re able to take assumptions or beliefs about the world that others take for granted and identify contexts where they are incorrect, that’s the essence of what’s interesting in general, and certainly in science.”—S.f.

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this year, I felt I had a significant breakthrough. I had been working all winter in several areas I was unable to resolve. I couldn’t quite seem to bring anything to successful completion, nor quite get started with the new elements I wanted to use. Finally, it seemed, I found the one tiny puzzle piece that had been missing, and then everything fell into place. At last, I had the means to start in earnest on the new canvases panels I had ordered months earlier. The issue had to do with transitioning the imagery and materials from a drawing format—small and intimate—to the larger works of paint on canvas.

This breakthrough came not just from having a week cleared of other responsibilities. Rather, it resulted from the process of months of struggling to resolve the imagery and holding these elements in a sort of gestation, not quite able to produce a successful result. The break without the months of struggle would have meant nothing. It was the combination of a long, painful gestation and the moment of freedom to be able to resolve the issues. I return to the idea of Chuck Close—that it’s not about inspiration; it’s about showing up for work every day—being willing to undertake the hard labor and then to know the profound joy and to delight in the play.

Now, days later, I realize that the little painting that seemed to open up the process for me may not make the grade for exhibition. It will, however, remain important to me as part of the process. Henry Moore, the revered British sculptor, said, “The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do.”

Podcasts on Faculty Creativity: http://itunes.emory.edu/
Railroading the nation
Tom Scott [president of the Texas Pacific Railroad in the late nineteenth century], along with the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific, invented the modern corporate lobby. . . . Both the Southern Pacific and the Texas Pacific railroads were so dependent on credit that they were like two large and angry men fighting while on life support. Both carried immense debt, and both depended on steady infusions of existing subsidies and credit. Each attacked the other, trying to maintain his own lifeline while trying to cut off that of his opponent. . . . But in all their forms, [Scott's] bills remained, as an anti-monopoly congressman said, “substantially a proposition to build this road on government credit without making them the property of the government. If there be a profit, the corporations may take it. If there be a loss, the government must bear it.” It is a quote that could have been taken from yesterday’s papers if we had congressmen capable of being so pithy and so succinct.


Breaking the patriarchal code
Violence against women is not a cultural thing, it’s not an African thing, it’s not an Asian thing, it’s not a Georgian thing. It’s actually a human thing. It has to do with patriarchy and patriarchal structure, which depends on violence in order to sustain itself. . . . Right here in Atlanta the rate of violence is out of control. What’s happening in the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] is not cultural; it’s escalated because of war. Most of the rapes and tortures going on in the DRC are actually from other countries who are plundering the wealth of the Congo, and also the percentage of people who are raping is very small. Around the world, most men are not rapists; most men are actually very decent and good. A very small percentage of men are doing the violence. The problem is the men who are good aren’t standing up to make this a central issue, to stop the men who are doing the bad things. When men get brave enough to break out of the male identity patriarchal code and start speaking truth to men and supporting men to change that dynamic, we will end violence against women.

—Eve Ensler, playwright and performer, author of the play The Vagina Monologues, from her conversation with Denis Mukwege of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, February 23, 2009, sponsored by the Emory Center for Ethics