



2022 QUICK REPORT: Creativity Gains in Student Writing



Creativity at 826

Writing and creativity are deeply connected. A key tenet of 826’s pedagogy is supporting and growing students’ creativity through the power of writing. Through writing, students practice flexing their creativity muscle: they imagine themselves as superheroes or scientists, create inventive solutions to everyday problems, and engage deeply with new concepts and information. Students are inherently creative with bold imaginations; 826 provides an environment for that creativity to flourish. This starts in our themed storefronts, which were originally a creative solution to a specific problem: the building that housed 826’s first writing center was zoned for retail. When someone remarked that the interior space looked strangely like the hull of a ship, it sparked a solution to the retail-requirement dilemma—establish a Pirate Supply Store as the entryway to the writing lab and tutoring center. Ludicrous and logical, the idea worked, establishing the 826 model of a whimsical

storefront that welcomes students and the community and inspires creativity and imagination.

That spark of creativity is the throughline in all of 826’s work. From the moment students step through 826’s doors, they are immersed in a distinctive world where they are valued as creators and are encouraged to try new ideas and experiment with their writing. They are no longer only students—they are time-traveling adventurers, Bigfoot researchers, and authors working with our imaginary, grumpy editor Captain Blue to share their story with the world.

Benefits of Creativity

Why is it so important for 826 to support student creativity, now more than ever before? Research has shown that creativity is one of the most important skills for success in the twenty-first century, preparing students to live and work in a world that is constantly adapting to new technologies, social movements, and increasing global interconnectedness. It is not just a needed skill, but a beneficial one. A recent Gallup poll found that creativity can benefit students in many ways, including by promoting adaptability and problem-solving, building confidence, and creating lifelong learners.

THE GALLUP POLL
FOUND THAT

87%

of teachers and

77%

of parents agree that teaching approaches that incorporate creativity **have a bigger payoff for students.**

This Report

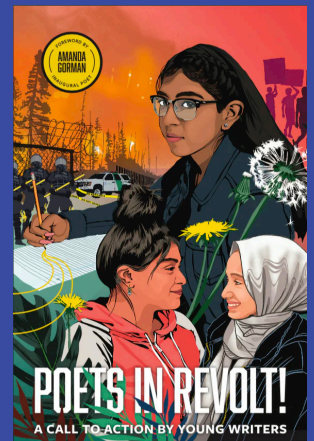
While research on creativity in education has grown in recent years, how to assess it has remained unclear. This report shares our first steps in contributing to this area of research by piloting a creativity assessment using student writing. Our initial results are positive, showing evidence that 826 programs lead to gains in student creativity.

CREATIVITY IN ACTION

Poets in Revolt!

A Call to Action by Young Writers

Poets in Revolt! began as a workshop led by Ola Faleti at 826CHI, challenging students to draw meaningful connections between poetry and social justice. As momentum grew for both the lesson and youth activism across the country, 826 National saw an opportunity to leverage our expertise in publishing and amplifying student voices. Soliciting poetry from its nine chapters and educator partners across the country, 826 National created an anthology that highlighted the incredible youth poetry sparked by the lesson. The revolutionary poets in this anthology use language to address the most pressing contemporary issues behind social, personal, and environmental activism. Drawing on historical precedent and cultural identity, as well as their own experiences and ideas, these poets are writing our world’s way forward by envisioning a more peaceful, sustainable, and loving possibility.



[READ THE BOOK HERE](#)

826 IMPACT

Using a new creativity measure, the results reinforce that 826 programming positively impacts students' ability to write creatively. Over 400 students were given a writing prompt in the fall and then again in the spring of the 2021–22 school year. Their writing was assessed by two independent scorers using a rubric measuring three attributes: originality, elaboration, and task appropriateness. The results show statistically significant gains in student writing across all three attributes of creativity. 826 programming helps students better express creativity in their writing, particularly in the areas of task appropriateness (9% gain) and elaboration (8% gain). 826 chapters create an environment, both in partner schools and their own writing centers, where students are valued as creators and are encouraged to try new ideas and experiment with their work.

This effect is seen by student and teacher alike. In a recent 826 publication, *Faceless: Untold Side Effects of Culture, Race, & COVID-19*, the student authors share what the writing program means to them:

“

This book is more than just a project that was assigned in class, this book is a creative outlet for us to use our voices and express our deepest thoughts while the world is in shambles. We want to share how we have adjusted and overcome every obstacle that the world has thrown at us, and share our thoughts about what society will be like once this pandemic is over.

”

GAINS IN CREATIVITY IN STUDENT WRITING (n=464)

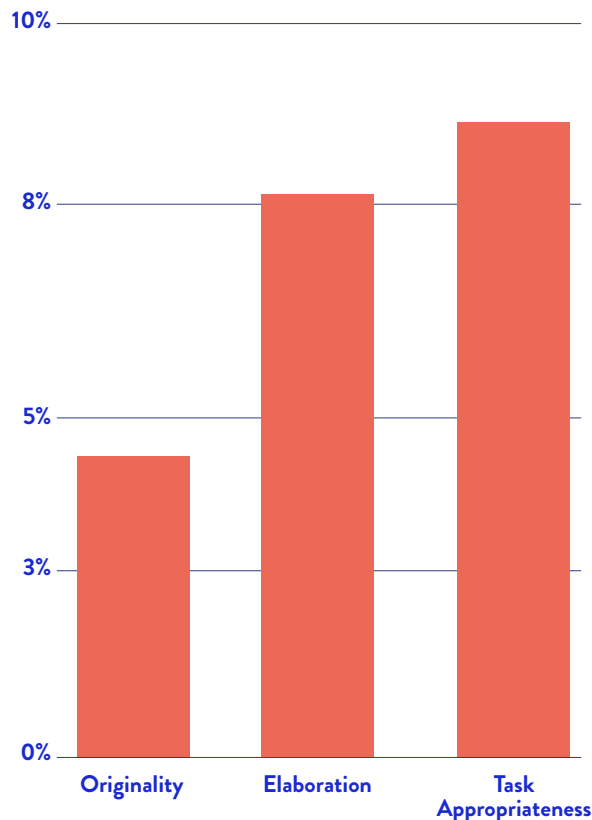


Figure 1. Gains in Creativity in Student Writing. The average percent gained for all attributes was statistically significant from pretest to posttest at $p < .05$.

CREATIVITY RUBRIC



ORIGINALITY:
The ability to come up with ideas that nobody else has thought of.

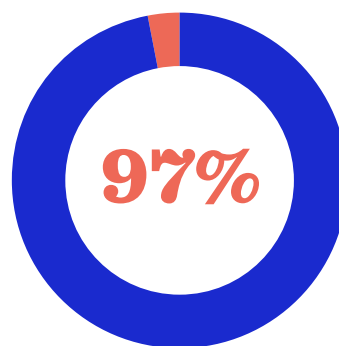


ELABORATION:
The ability to develop an idea by adding details and specifics.

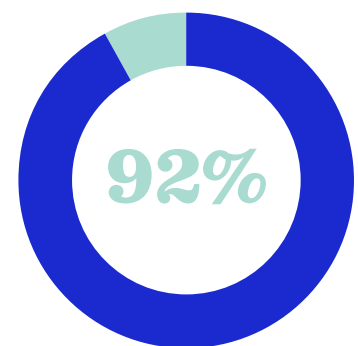


TASK APPROPRIATENESS:
The ability to come up with ideas that best fit the task at hand.

IN A SURVEY OF OVER 2,000 STUDENTS AND 200 TEACHERS



of students felt they could be creative and try new things during 826 programs



of teachers reported that their students improved in creativity after attending 826 programming

HOW 826 MEASURES CREATIVITY

Researchers have been focused on developing tests of creativity for years, yet these measures are rarely used in the classroom setting. In order to understand how our programming affects student creativity, 826 National worked with creativity researcher Professor Steven E. Stemler of the Wesleyan University Psychometric Laboratory to create a rubric for measuring creativity in student writing.

The rubric and the attributes it measures build on years of creativity research, particularly on Professor Stemler's book *Measuring Creativity in the Classroom*. The Creativity Rubric scores student writing on a four-point scale across three attributes key to creativity:



ORIGINALITY

The ability to come up with ideas that nobody else has thought of. This is the first thing that comes to mind when people think about creativity: that thing that nobody else has done before.



ELABORATION

The ability to develop an idea by adding details and specifics. Elaboration is a criterion to differentiate high-quality creative work from lower-quality work. "We can think about artwork in which two people might draw a picture of a mountain, but the level of detail and elaboration of the drawing is often what distinguishes a truly original and creative drawing from one that is a simple sketch. Similarly, written stories that are well-developed and elaborated upon are often perceived as more creative," said Professor Stemler.



TASK APPROPRIATENESS

The ability to come up with ideas that best fit the task at hand. There are many ideas that are totally original but utterly useless or inappropriate for a situation. Effective creativity is a balance between coming up with original ideas and having those ideas be relevant or actionable.

This rubric differs from existing measures of creativity in that most tests ask participants to complete a divergent thinking task, which asks participants to produce multiple ideas in response to specific prompt or activity, while this rubric is designed so that independent judges can come to agreement about the extent to which a particular piece of writing contains key elements of creativity. "Understanding the rubric is important because I often hear people suggest that creativity can't be measured, that it is too esoteric. But that is not actually true," said Professor Stemler. "Independent people tend to exhibit very high levels of agreement about products that are highly creative and products that are less creative. The rubric helps to articulate the dimensions (i.e., originality, elaboration, and task appropriateness) that people are using intuitively."

PROFESSOR STEMLER GIVES AN EXAMPLE OF TASK APPROPRIATENESS



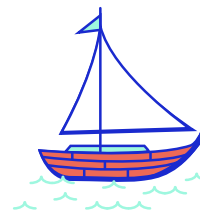
"How many ways could you think of to get from New York to Boston without flying?"

Maybe you said that you could rent a car, take a bus, rent a boat to take up the coast, call a friend for a ride, or that you could break some tigers out of the zoo and go for a joy ride.



The last response is **original**, technically speaking, but it is not very **task appropriate**, in that it doesn't get you closer to your goal and is not realistic. By contrast, most people would likely think about taking a bus, which makes it less original but highly task appropriate.

But fewer people probably would think about renting a boat, making it more original, and it could get the job done, thereby making it task appropriate."



WHAT'S NEXT WITH PROFESSOR STEVEN E. STEMLER

What's next in your research on creativity?

Students in my courses often ask me for examples of successful projects from the past in my classes, so I have sometimes given my classes examples of a few of the most creative projects that I have received from prior years. What inevitably happens when I do that, however, is that students simply model their projects on those examples and don't push themselves to innovate in new ways. In fact, some of my past research suggests that people may actually be better at avoiding negative examples than they are at approaching positive examples.

As a result, I just ran a new study in which we asked students to write a creative story and we varied the instructions. In one condition, we told them to be creative and gave them examples of how to do that (e.g., take the point of view of a minor character). In the other condition, we asked them to write a creative story and told them to not be boring or predictable, don't just go with the first thing that pops into their head, etc. Our hypothesis is that the students who did not receive examples will generate stories that are more creative (i.e., original, elaborate, and appropriate) than those who were given more explicit suggestions on how to be creative.

What advice would you give educators for fostering creativity?

It may feel natural for educators to model a lesson, provide concrete examples, and to define clear expectations for student work. That was my first approach. However, when it comes to creative work, like writing, my advice would be to find the balance between showing examples and mentor texts and providing space and freedom, and try not to be too prescriptive.

WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY

Professor Stemler's research involves the development of innovative ways of measuring broad constructs such as creativity, cultural competence, practical intelligence, and ethical reasoning. He is particularly interested in systematically studying the purposes of school (elementary through postsecondary) and how those purposes get measured via testing.

Professor Stemler has published more than fifty peer-reviewed articles, books, and chapters. In 2005, Professor Stemler joined the faculty at Wesleyan University where he is currently appointed as a Professor of Psychology and Education Studies. He is the co-founder and co-chair of the College of Education Studies at Wesleyan.



Professor Steven E. Stemler
Wesleyan University
Psychometric Laboratory

ABOUT 826

826 is the largest youth writing network in the country. 826 National serves as the hub of the movement to amplify student voices and champions the belief that strong writing skills are essential for academic and lifelong success. The 826 Network now serves close to 470,000 students ages 6 to 18 in under-resourced communities each year online via 826 Digital and through chapters in nine cities: Boston, Chicago, Detroit/Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis/St. Paul. 826 National was established in 2008 to support a growing network of writing centers founded by author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari in San Francisco in 2002. We work toward a country in which the power and the joy of writing is accessible to every student in every classroom. Together, we believe writing is the key to cultivating a new generation of creative and diverse thinkers who will define a better, brighter, and more compassionate future.

To learn more about how you can get involved with 826's movement for writing and creativity, please visit our website at 826national.org. Download this report at 826national.org/research.

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