

Students' self-perceptions of creativity: the case of Emirati students in a first-year English program

Students' self-perceptions of creativity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the opinions of first-year Emirati students in a writing-intensive English program regarding the extent to which they found themselves creative and the ways in which they expressed creativity in general. The other aim was to identify the ways in which they tended to make their writing creative. The study also sought to see if there were differences between male and female students' responses.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 54 first-year Emirati students using a survey with closed and open-ended questions.

Findings – Results revealed that only three quarters of the students considered themselves creative. The most common ways in which they perceived themselves creative were through originality, problem-solving and design. With regards to creativity in writing, amongst several factors, they believed that the incorporation of experience, skillful use of lexis and grammar and understanding of their audience in particular make their writing creative. There were no statistically significant differences between male and female students' responses.

Originality/value – People's cultural backgrounds play a significant role in their perception of creativity and beliefs in their own creative writing powers. Creative writing skills are, therefore, often among key learning outcomes, and many universities offer their students writing-focused courses. For these courses to be successful, students' perceptions of creativity skills ought to be taken into consideration. The current study achieved this.

Keywords Academic writing, Creative writing, Creativity, Student perceptions, Creativity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Cultures around the globe differ from each other in a variety of ways including politics, religion and climate. These factors have a direct effect not only on people's decisions about the ways in which they express their desires, feelings and thoughts, but also whether and how they make these explicit. As such, individuals' perceptions of creativity are heavily influenced by their cultural orientations (Chua *et al.*, 2015).



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Given its role in cultivating inventive and adaptable individuals, creativity is often a central theme in university curricula across disciplines. This is because of the belief that the development of creativity in students will contribute to their personal triumphs and the economic and social development of their societies. The latter, in particular, has been shown to resonate with the UAE-based professionals' opinions on creativity with research showing that creativity is key to driving social and economic growth in the UAE (Kazim, 2015).

A recent research report (Batey *et al.*, 2018) identified areas on which the Dubai Government could focus to foster greater levels of creativity and innovation in colleges and offered a list of policy recommendations. One of these concerns

“[...] the production of a supporting ecosystem for creativity and innovation in the government by ensuring that graduates of the Dubai school and university system are equipped with the mindset and skills to be highly creative and innovative should they go on to take on employment in the government [...]. (Batey *et al.*, 2018, p. 34)

Similarly, the Ministry of Education has issued the [United Arab Emirates School Inspection Framework \(2018\)](#) wherein there is frequent reference to creativity, highlighting the importance attached to the development of creativity in the youth.

Similarly, the universities in the UAE are required to act on the ministry's requirement of cultivating creativity in students. Universities take a number of approaches to doing this. Among these are adoption of design thinking methodology, the establishment of innovation centers, implementing project-based learning, etc. Although there is evidence that creativity can be enhanced through instruction (Dihi and Bouamri, 2018), much is dependent on individual characteristics such as self-concept (McVeigh, 2014). Indisputably, students' self-concept impacts on how creative they perceive themselves. Despite the heavy emphasis placed on it in the UAE education context, there is a dearth of research into students' perception of creativity. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the following:

- To what extent do Emirati students perceive themselves to be creative?
- In what ways do they think they are creative in general?
- How do they think they make their academic writing creative?

The study will provide valuable insight into students' perceptions of creativity in general and in their English writing classes in particular as writing supports creativity skills. That is, when students are engaged in writing, they are encouraged to use reflective thinking, which in turn supports the development of their reasoning and curiosity skills, two important ingredients of creativity (Wang, 2012). It may be especially important to study first-year students' perceptions because it is the initial years at university that lay the foundation for a fruitful tertiary education and a rewarding life after university.

Literature review

Definition of creativity

In defining creativity, Guilford (1967) refers to fluent, flexible and original thoughts. While fluency refers to the quantity of created responses, flexibility is the variety of created responses. Originality, on the other hand, is relative to the uniqueness and cleverness of these created responses. In the same vein, Kaufman (2016) identifies certain key determinants of creativity. First, creativity represents something different, new or innovative. Second, creativity is appropriate to the task at hand. That is, for something to be considered creative it ought to serve a purpose, be useful and relevant. It should not only be

valuable for the individual but also for the society at large. Third, creative act or thought is unplanned, therefore, surprising.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996), however, thinks that approaching creativity as an idea or action that is “new” and “valuable” may be misleading. This, he notes, would lead us to lose sight of:

[...] person's own account as the criterion for its existence. There is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards, and there is no way to tell whether it is valuable until it passes social evaluation. Therefore, creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context. (p. 23)

This indicates that not only is creativity a subjective phenomenon but it may also require some sort of social confirmation for something to be labeled as “creative.” This, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p. 1), points to “the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person.”

In prose, creativity is often thought of in relation to “creative writing.” Macgove (2009, p. 22) points out that “creative writing in prose is usually taken to mean novels and short stories,” but she stresses that other types of writing including autobiography, biography, travel writing, the arts and essay also aim to arouse interest and reflection in the reader. Academic writing, too, requires creativity. The definition of creative writing by Tan *et al.* (2012, p. 276) resonates with the stand taken in this paper: “[a writer's] mold[ing of] language in an individualistic way toward a particular purpose.” The purpose in academic writing, especially research publications, often involves establishing a niche for the paper. Writers tend to do this by showing that the topic of the paper is important, central, interesting, problematic and, therefore, relevant to the readers in one way or another. According to Tan *et al.* (2012, p. 276), the writers' purpose may also be “to convey something that is more than objective information but is somehow related to the author's own subjective experience.” This, too, may be the case in certain genres in academic writing, particularly through reflective journals. This engages writers (i.e. students) in reflection on course content and personal experiences. Inevitably, this requires objective descriptions as well as subjective experience. Similarly, the discussion section of a research paper likely brings in anecdotal evidence and introspection, together with reflection on the significance of the study findings. The latter often requires writers to comment on claims and hypotheses made earlier in the paper. According to Hemlin *et al.* (2004, p. 6) “in many research contexts the truth [...] of a knowledge claim may be seen as an indication of its quality and hence its creativity.” Writers also need to generate creative solutions to problems and challenges identified in their research.

Relationship between creativity and writing

Just as our creativity feeds our writing skills, so does writing feed our creativity. Practicing our creativity allows our writing to generate a variety of ideas and help us acquire richer knowledge (Nashville Community Education, 2016). This often happens “by reflecting, connecting the dots, and cross-pollinating seemingly unrelated ideas” (Jun, 2015, para. 14). Practicing writing allows our creativity to bring intrigue, beauty and thought (Nashville Community Education, 2016). Therefore, our engagement in “writing practices such as thinking, remembering, reasoning, feeling curiosity, and freedom of expression” (Wang, 2012, p. 40) fosters creativity.

As is also discussed above, academic writing requires as much creativity as other creative forms of expression such as storytelling, creative writing and music (Bell, 2018). This is because academic writing requires authors to use original ideas in communicating

their thinking to their audiences. It is true that academic writing tends to be rather formal and structured. However, it still is an expression of creative thinking that is bound to the expectations of a scholarly audience. This resonates with [Sergeant's \(2021\)](#) position that creativity is always a dialogue between writers and their readers. He warns that writers should be well aware of their audiences' expectations and be skilled in the ways they can play with these. Linked to this is the genre approach in writing, according to which writers ought to consider their relationship with their audience in addition to the subject matter ([Badger and White, 2000](#)). The genre approach has been adapted to support university students' literacy skills such as understanding the purpose and register of academic texts, the kind of knowledge they need, and how to compose academic texts ([Ellis, 2005](#)). [Pollack \(2010\)](#) also argues that nonfiction can be creative. This is often influenced by authors' choice of a topic and the questions they answer about that topic. Their choice of structures and forms allows them to present their meditations and discoveries about their question in a clear and organic way. Taken together, these indicate that writers ought to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to be a part of their academic communities. Toward this end, universities offer writing classes where students learn and practice a variety of writing skills. In this current study, I aim to identify Emirati students' perceptions of creativity skills in a writing-intensive first-year English program. Further, I first describe the context in which the study was undertaken, the method of data collection and the results. This is followed by the discussion and the recommendations sections.

Study

Context

This research was conducted at a university in the UAE. A key mission of the university is to build a diverse community of service-oriented, ambitious and talented individuals, through an environment that encourages and nurtures creative inquiry, critical thinking and human values. Toward this end, curricula across the university endorse student engagement in creative inquiry and critical thinking through different types of writing practices. The college, where this study was conducted, aims to support students' sense of academic curiosity since "[c]uriosity is the tool that sparks creativity. Curiosity is the technique that gets to innovation" ([Grazer and Fishman, 2015](#), p. 62). The two core courses (English 111 and English 112) in the Department of English are a part of the college's endeavor to develop students' academic skills with a heavy focus on reading and writing. This is often done by engaging them in learning experiences that enhance their creativity skills. For example, in English 112, which is a project-based course, students are asked to conduct a term-long research project relevant to their studies and lives as first-year students. They identify a central question to which they seek answers by reading the relevant literature and collecting primary data. They then report and discuss their findings. They also offer their recommendations. They are encouraged to think outside the box and practice creating a niche for their projects. This requires them to use creativity skills in writing as well as in other forms (e.g. oral presentations) to engage their audiences.

Participants

Fifty-four Emirati first-year students in an intensive English writing course participated in this study. Thirty-six of the participants were male and 18 were female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 with a mean age of 20. They were engineering students. They had graduated from Arabic-medium high schools, so for them to be eligible for their freshman studies, they were required to complete a year-long intensive English program.

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected using an adapted version of a survey by [Burkšaitienė \(2017\)](#). This survey was deemed suitable for the current study for two main reasons. First, the original survey was developed to collect opinions of university students in a language-focused class similar to the one in the current study. Second, it involved questions related to students' general perceptions of creativity, how creative they perceive themselves to be as well as different ways in which they are creative in language-specific areas. It was also important that the survey included both closed and open-ended questions, allowing for quantitative as well as qualitative data.

The survey was administered to the students during class time. A total of 30 min of class time was dedicated for this. For anonymity purposes, the students were explicitly told to avoid indicating their names. They were assured that their grades were not to be affected by their responses in any way. The students were first asked if they thought they were creative. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they found themselves creative (from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very great extent). This was followed by a section where the students were required to explain in what ways they found themselves creative in general, if at all. The final section was about writing and how they used their creativity to make their academic texts creative.

Qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed by two faculty separately: the researcher and a colleague. An overall interrater reliability of 90% was achieved. The divergences were discussed and agreements were reached. When student responses to open-ended questions were analyzed, attention was paid to the themes that emerged. Frequencies of each theme were recorded.

Results

The first research question sought to examine whether the students thought they were creative and to what extent. Almost three quarters of the students (74%) responded that they were creative. A further 59% of the students indicated that they were creative *to a moderate extent*. The number of those who believed that they were creative *to a great extent* was comparatively lower (13%). In fact, only one student stated that he was creative *to a very great extent*. On the other hand, 19% of the students remarked that they were creative *to a small extent*, and 7% stated they were *not creative at all*. On the whole, the average rating for the whole population was $M=2.83$ indicating an overall moderate level of creativity.

The second research question was related to the ways in which the students thought they were creative. The students' responses revealed four main themes. The most recurrent theme (49%) was originality. The students often pointed out their desire to be unique in the way they do things. They wanted to be different from others. Examples of ways in which they tried to do this included how they wrote. Some also indicated that they liked to include a personal touch to their work. Corollary to this was the theme of problem-solving which was detected 11 times (27%) in the data set. Among answers relative to this theme were their approaches to tasks assigned by instructors, their desire to solve their own problems in innovative ways and to help others tackle problems with their original ideas. Third most common theme was designing, mentioned by seven students (17%), one of whom indicated her strength in interior decoration. Other students said they liked to design new machines and carve wood. Another theme was interest in learning (7%). These students pointed to their desire to learn things that would contribute to their creative thinking. Reading, for instance, was mentioned as a way to add to their body of knowledge, which they then use for

innovation to the best of their abilities. A student also mentioned that asking “good” questions helps him achieve more knowledge, which he can use for creativity purposes. A summary of their responses is given in Table 1.

The third research question aimed to identify the ways in which the students made their academic writing creative. Table 2 summarizes their responses.

Table 2 shows that the most frequently mentioned way in which the students made their academic writing creative was the use of examples from experience, which emerged 40 times (22%) in student responses. These examples mostly included students’ own experiences. They noted that experience would be evidence for ideas they put forward. Some also noted that example experiences should be interesting.

Table 1.
In what ways do you think you are creative in general?

Themes	#	Total	(%)*
Originality	20		49
Problem-solving	11		27
Designing	7		17
Interest in learning	3		7
<i>Total</i>	<i>41</i>		<i>100</i>

Notes: *Percentages were calculated from the total number of responses as some students did not answer this question. Some students indicated more than one theme

Table 2.
How do you use make your academic writing creative?

Strategies	#	(%)*	Descriptions (Key words)
Experience	40	22	Personal, facts, historical information, real, interesting, evidence, everyday life
Lexis	36	20	Synonyms, simple words, attractive words, interesting words, variety, formal, moderate, clear, the right word, high level but not too specific, familiar to readers
Language use	34	19	Good/perfect grammar, correct punctuation, no spelling mistakes, proofread, figurative, rhetorical questions, easy to understand Those everyone would understand, not too simple, not too repetitive, not too long and complex, mixture of simple and complex sentences, avoid long boring sentences, simple, avoid repetitive sentences
Familiarity with readers	24	13	Knowing audience, reader interest areas, reader concerns, readers’ behavior, sweet-spots of readers’ likings, relevance to readers
Originality	21	12	Something new, out of ordinary, original ideas
Organization	9	5	Organized, linking ideas together, linking words, avoid repetition of ideas/information
Length	7	4	Not too long, not too detailed, enough information, focus on relevant ideas
Voice	5	3	The active voice, directed to reader, self
Detail	3	2	Specific
<i>Total</i>	<i>179</i>	<i>100</i>	

Notes: *Percentages were calculated from the total number of responses as some students did not answer this question. Some students indicated more than one theme

The second most frequently mentioned strategy was related to lexis, which accounted for 20% of the students' responses. The students often pointed out the importance of using a variety of words to avoid repetition.

The third most frequently mentioned strategy was related to language use (19%). Student responses related to this strategy included a wide range of topics such as varied grammatical structures used appropriately. Some students mentioned the importance of figurative language to write creatively.

The fourth most commonly mentioned strategy was familiarity with the reader (13%). The students often noted that readers' areas of interest, concerns and behaviors should be considered in deciding the content to cover. One student emphasized the importance of "touching sweet-spots of readers' likings."

Originality was the fifth most frequently mentioned strategy, appearing in 12% of the student responses. The students underlined the importance of novelty in writing. This, they noted, could be achieved through incorporating original ideas.

One of the other strategies mentioned by considerably fewer students was organization, which was detected nine times (5%) in student responses. They referred to the role of linking words in organizing their ideas. They also noted that they should repeat important information but refrain from unnecessary repetition.

Among other strategies mentioned were length (4%) and voice (3%). The former was related to the total number of words. The students also stated that certain sections such as the introduction and conclusion should not be shorter than the body-paragraphs and discussion section of a report. There were also some references to sentence length, with a particular focus on not using short sentences frequently. Inclusion of relevant ideas was also noted to help with length. The latter, on the other hand, was mentioned in reference to use of active voice and direct address to the reader.

Discussion

The first aim of the current study was to identify how creative the students considered themselves. To this end, they were first asked to indicate if they considered themselves creative. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they believed they were creative. While the majority of the students responded positively, which is encouraging, a significant number of them (26%) gave a negative response. Similarly, students' responses to the second question revealed that they considered themselves only moderately creative. This negative self-perception is a cause for concern. It may have been caused by their previous educational experiences. Critical thinking is an important determinant of creative disposition and, therefore, needs to be endorsed at all levels of education. However, earlier research in the region found that public schools with a deductive teaching orientation fail to equip students with critical thinking skills (Sperrazza and Raddawi, 2016; Thabet, 2008). The UAE Government recognizes that this prevents university students from taking full advantage of their university education (Evans, 2014). This may be a particular problem for freshman students who are yet to develop the required university skills. Previous research also showed that freshman students' critical thinking scores were below average, which naturally limits their aptitude for creativity (Deveci and Ayish, 2017). Students' self-perception as moderately creative may have also been caused by the students' preconceived belief that "that [they] don't know how to be creative or simply weren't born that way" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 6). Such feelings can easily result in their failure to notice a special moment when creativity may occur.

The second research question aimed to identify the students' opinions on the ways in which they were creative. The most common responses included originality and skillfulness in solving problems. The former centered around the idea of "being different from others," while the latter was often referred to in relation to one's ability to come up with inventive solutions to problems. The students' perception of originality resonates with [Guilford's \(1967\)](#) definition of creativity emphasizing original thought and cleverness. Similarly, their approach to problem-solving resonates with [Kaufman's \(2016\)](#) note that appropriateness to the task at hand is an essential element of creativity. The students' attempt to tackle issues in creative ways would require flexibility ([Guilford, 1967](#)), which was mentioned by some students as well. A creative approach to problem-solving is particularly important, as it encourages individuals to refrain from haphazard attempts to solve problems, eliminating surprises and disappointment with the solution ([Draze, 1986](#)).

Another important theme was designing. Given the fact that creativity and "design thinking" are often used in relation to each other, this theme is particularly important to note. Concurrent with problem solving, design thinking involves the use of "a creative mind toward designing solutions and discovering new opportunities" ([Adikari et al., 2013](#), p. 5). Therefore, it is important to note at least some of the participants' accentuated awareness of the link between creativity and design.

The final research question asked how the students used their creativity to make their writing interesting. Among the most significant findings was the incorporation of experience in writing. This included elements such as facts and historical information. For academic writing, facts and historical information are particularly important, as they can be a source of creative nonfiction. [Dupuis \(2018\)](#) observes that creative nonfiction is often about real people, actual events and actual places. The students also referred to use of personal experiences. According to [Randolph \(2012\)](#), using examples from their own personal lives helps non-native writers express their ideas and feelings. Randolph observes that non-native writers of English are often reasonably skilled in writing topic sentences and providing a transition between sentences and ideas. However, they are not always good at providing support for the main idea. They also likely struggle to provide examples showing the reader that they have a sense of ownership of the topic. Randolph believes students tend to be more comfortable and intimate when asked to write about their own experiences. Note that the participants of the current study enrolled in English 112 were often required to comment on their personal experiences in written assignments they were asked to produce. This reflects at least some principles of creative academic writing.

Students also mentioned use of lexis and grammar in making their writing creative. For them to engage in the content without losing interest, writers need to use lexis and grammar in creative ways. [Pollack \(2010\)](#) underscores writers' choice of structures and form in achieving this. In the same vein, [Sword \(2012\)](#) posits that "stylish" academic writers manipulate language by varying their vocabulary, mixing up their syntax and using both short and long sentences. In doing so, they refrain from using a set of formulae or a rulebook. More importantly, "they always make [the reader] feel that every word counts" ([Sword, 2012](#), p. 60). Collectively, these help engage the audience. The students' attention to language use in the current study is, therefore, noteworthy. However, considering the language-oriented nature of the course in which the study was conducted, the students likely geared their responses toward the teacher's expectations.

Familiarity with readers was another factor the students considered in making their writing creative. Authors who know their audience can make a better decision about the content of their papers and the most relevant way to present it. Student responses provide a clear indication that at least some of the students were informed about the importance of

writing for an audience. The references to readers' concerns, interest areas and "sweet-spots" provide evidence for this. This is particularly important when we consider the theory of audience (Ede, 1984 cited in Brooke and Hendricks, 1989) according to which "effective writing always involves a complex interplay between meeting the demands of readers and creating within the text a workable stance for readers to take" (p. xv). In the case of the report writing performed by the students in English 112, the immediate audience is the course instructor. However, the student papers are made available to other stakeholders such as the course coordinator, other instructors in the department and even the university administration when necessary. The students also present their papers orally to their peers who likely share common interests, aspirations as well as challenges. Therefore, the students' reference to considering their audience when writing is important to note.

Although length is related to the number of words in different sections and that of the whole text, sentence length also helps writers establish a position (Deveci, 2019; Dean 2000). Sentence length can be varied through a mixture of sentence types (i.e. simple, compound and complex). This helps writers create a rhythm that feels natural for themselves, resulting in a unique style (Sword, 2012). Therefore, at least some of the students' attention to sentence length for creativity purposes in this study is noteworthy.

Albeit with comparatively much smaller frequency, voice was noted to be a factor contributing to creativity in writing. Those who mentioned this pointed to the use of active voice and personal pronouns. Indeed our recent research into transparency, subjectivity and objectivity in academic journal writing revealed that proficient writers in academia tend to use first-person and active voice to express self-transparency (Nunn *et al.*, 2018). In that paper, we argue that writers make use of a varied range of linguistic devices without excluding any *per se*. This is in contrast to some university professors' advice to students to refrain from "personal language" for the sake of "remaining neutral." Such advice may not be totally grounded although some professors may be insistent on it at the expense of students' creativity skills. In support of this, Whitaker (2009) suggests that students experiment with language until they find what works best for themselves. One strategy she suggests is to decide whether passive verbs can be replaced with active ones. This helps avoid wordiness, a strategy which undoubtedly would contribute to student creativity in writing.

Limitations and recommendations

One of the limitations of the current study stems from its relatively small sample size. It included only 54 students, the majority of whom were male. Limited as it is, this population does serve to illustrate in its given context a snapshot of student self-perception of creativity. Yet it would still be beneficial to increase population size with a larger number of female students. This would allow for a study comparing male and female students' creativity skills in writing. This study was also conducted in a gender-segregated university context, which likely had an effect on students' perception of what creativity means in their immediate environment. Future studies may consider investigating perceptions of creativity in co-educational settings.

While the current study was primarily descriptive based on self-report, future studies could adopt a mixed-method approach to identify how student perceptions are manifested in their written texts. To this end, their written assignments can be analyzed to detect any elements of creative act. Also, this study focused on student perception of creativity in a specific course context heavily based on writing. Considering the possibility that one's approach to creativity in a particular context influences their orientations in other contexts as well, research can be conducted to identify the manifestations of student creativity across

courses or even disciplines. Longitudinal studies could also be undertaken to track possible changes to students' self-perceptions of creativity as they progress into their college studies on to graduation.

Conclusion

This study showed that the participating Emirati students had a moderate level of confidence in their creative abilities. Results also revealed four main areas in which the students found themselves creative in general terms: originality, problem-solving, designing and interest in learning. Furthermore, the inclusion of personal experiences, effective use of lexis and language structures were among the key features of students' creative academic writing. As well, they said familiarity with the target audience and originality contribute to their efforts of producing creative academic texts.

Collectively, these findings indicate that the students have an adequate threshold for engagement in creative acts in academic writing. Although this is a promising result, it is important that their perceptions of creative abilities be enhanced. To this end, it is essential that learners' characteristics be taken into consideration. The results of this study revealed that the students had varying beliefs and attitudes about their creativity abilities. It may be the case that some individuals refrain from engaging in creative acts owing to limited self-confidence or preconceived cultural orientations. Others, on the other hand, may be awaiting opportunities for enhancing their existing skills. Both can be helped through effectively planned educational support.

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