2010

Writing as an Altered State of Consciousness: Process, Pedagogy, and Spirituality

Julie Kearney
Penn State Harrisburg

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Disability and Equity in Education Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Instructional Media Design Commons, Liberal Studies Commons, Other Education Commons, Special Education and Teaching Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Writing as an Altered State of Consciousness: Process, Pedagogy, and Spirituality

Cover Page Footnote

Julie Kearney is Assistant Professor of English Composition at Penn State Harrisburg, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, and writing theory. Her research focuses on the physiological and psychological benefits writing can produce, and on the historical implementation of psychological theories to composition pedagogy.

Writing as an Altered State of Consciousness: Process, Pedagogy, and Spirituality

Julie Kearney [*]

"When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, and obey. . . ."
—Rudyard Kipling

"Even if they do not originate in the heavens, [writing processes] certainly go beyond our intentions and our control, acquiring——with respect to the individual – a kind of transcendence."
—Italo Calvino

Writing-to-learn is often touted by composition scholars as one of the underlying goals of a writing class. This goal, however, is increasingly overshadowed by mainstream society's ideas about the main functions of writing: 1) that school-sanctioned writing should serve only the purpose of communication—the production of correct, clear, and well-organized prose for a variety of audiences and purposes; 2) that school-sanctioned writing should serve fundamental needs in our society by producing literate individuals who are able to adhere to correct business formats and conventions; and 3) that writing should serve to test (rather than *discover*) knowledge and can, for this purpose, be neatly packaged as a formula, ready for inspection. The 2008 report commissioned by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, for example, while advocating more innovative course design and more assessment based upon student engagement, is still quick to remind us that, "[a]ccording to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy . . . the percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy has actually declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade" (*A Test* 19). Yet the link between proficient literacy (with its emphasis on correct conventions and effective communication) and writing-to-learn is implied in the same paragraph from the Spellings' report, which reveals: "These shortcomings have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces" (*A Test* 19).

Many of the ideas concerning the function of writing—at least as they are manifested in the pedagogies of our schools and universities—reflect only the utilitarian and product-oriented notions of writing: proficient literacy, correct conventions, and effective communication. While each of these functions do have their own merits, reducing the function of writing to these few serviceable aspects neglects valuable teaching approaches that can promote more proficient critical thinking and problem solving, as well as more proficient writing. These approaches are most often found in the theories of process writing pedagogies, particularly expressivist approaches to teaching writing, which tend to place as much emphasis (if not more) on the process of writing and writing-to-learn

---

[*] *Julie Kearney is Assistant Professor of English Composition at Penn State Harrisburg, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, and writing theory. Her research focuses on the physiological and psychological benefits writing can produce, and on the historical implementation of psychological theories to composition pedagogy.*

as they do on the product. Unfortunately, given the common beliefs concerning the utilitarian goals of writing, expressivist approaches are often rejected as not sufficiently rigorous for respectable composition classrooms. In addition, the experiential research methods associated with expressivist approaches are often regarded with suspicion, as is the empirical data concerning the writing process that often focuses on the enigmatic concept of writing and the unconscious.

So, in an attempt to reinvigorate the investigations into writing-to-learn, this essay reexamines the philosophical theories put forth by expressivist practitioners such as Emig, Mandel, Elbow,[1] and Murray,[2] positioning them in a more scientific framework that can help to explain how the unconscious aspects of the writing process affect the ability to concentrate and to retrieve memory. From this framework—which consists of two psychologically based perspectives: the psychological *systems* approach developed by psychologist Charles Tart and the psychology of flow and creativity proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—parallels can be drawn between what is termed "an altered state of consciousness" (ASC—a state that amplifies focus and aids in the retrieval of memory) and the writing process. These parallels are significant because they demonstrate how student writers who cannot achieve a level of ASC sufficient enough to carry them beyond anxieties concerning correct mechanics and conventions will also suffer in terms of their learning potential. Unlike writers who are able to reach an ASC during the act of writing, writers trapped within their realm of ordinary consciousness will find it more difficult to access the hidden memories, ideas, and feelings necessary for learning or to explore those areas normally inaccessible to them—all of which are important foundations for critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

Research into the unconscious in writing began because certain composition scholars acknowledged that those of us who write on an extended or regular basis recognize certain subconscious aspects of the writing experience that often escape less experienced writers. Loss of a sense of time, for example, or loss of a sense of space are the most basic of these experiences. But, more importantly, many experienced writers also report the ability to access vivid details of emotions and memories that are only accessible during the intense concentration of the writing process; these heightened recollections act as mechanisms for both learning and critical thinking. In more extreme cases (particularly for professionals), writers adept at achieving ASC report the ability to conjure ideas, narrative, characters, and concepts that are not necessarily drawn from their memory—exemplifying the potential of writing as a tool for discovery and invention.

This shared awareness by experienced writers prompted several composition researchers to attempt to explain these enigmas. Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, Janet Emig's and Barrett Mandel's articles address the notion from a philosophical standpoint. Later, in the 1980s, taking a more scientific approach in their attempts to discover what happens inside the minds of writers as they write, composition "cognitivists" Sondra Perl,

---

1. It should be noted that Elbow sees the terms "expressivist" or "expressionist" as problematic and credits them both as terms of "disapproval" coined by Berlin.

2. Donald Murray is an expressivist particularly noted for his views on writing-to-learn. See especially his book *Write to Learn* and a quote from *Expecting the Unexpected* where he states his belief that "writing is not the reporting of what was discovered, but the act of exploration itself" (4).

Nancy Sommers, Linda Flower, and John Hayes used protocol analysis (where writers were asked to verbalize their thoughts during and after writing) as their main research methodology. Ironically, though, the empirical data the investigators gathered was drawn from externally observable, and perhaps most important, *conscious* behaviors (i.e., verbal responses to prompts and interview questions), a factor which later became a focus of criticism.[3] It is perhaps because of those criticisms that more recent composition scholars utilize a less positivist approach and, recognizing that the *un*conscious in the writing process is a function that is, by its very nature, *un*observable, usually restrict their research to qualitative inquiries that only indirectly address the concept of the unconscious and the retrieval of memory.[4] While all of these research approaches tend to leave us with more questions than answers concerning the workings of the unconscious in the writing process, what these scholars have provided is a tantalizing insight into the role the unconscious plays in writing-to-learn—an insight that can be expanded upon using a theoretical framework based on ideas from Tart and Csikszentmihalyi.

In *States of Consciousness,* Tart argues that attempts to study the internal processes of the mind from an external behavioristic approach are ineffective, but his systems approach organizes the various degrees of human consciousness into discrete structures and subsystems more readily adaptable to research. Tart's systems approach is easily applicable to the study of the writing process and, used as a foundation to examine a writer's internal process, can help to demonstrate that the act of writing, in itself, is the *cause* of an altered state of consciousness (ASC) that shares many similarities with the trance-like states induced by hypnosis, meditation, and hallucinogenic drug use. While different from Tart's systems approach, Csikszentmihalyi's model, called "flow," includes various markers indicative of an ASC and emphasizes the enjoyment of concentration and creativity that comes from the ability to control consciousness through certain activities, including writing. The major similarities between the two psychologists' theories lie between the ways in which Csikszentmihalyi defines several requirements for achieving enjoyment and flow, and Tart's description of the four destabilization processes described below.

Tart begins explaining his systems approach by first describing an ordinary state of consciousness as a state of mind characterized by "a high degree of rationality and a relatively low degree of imaging ability" (54). Tart argues that the basic function of this ordinary state of consciousness "is to cope successfully with an (external) environment," a state wherein the mind maintains a constant alertness of the immediate surroundings for any potential threats to survival (63). The negative aspect of this need for alertness is emphasized in Csikszentmihalyi's claim that "the normal state of mind is chaos. Without training, and without an object in the external world that demands attention, people are unable to focus their thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time" (*Flow the Psychology* 119).

---

3. See North (218-226) for a detailed critique of the empirical research methods used by Perl, Sommers, and Flower & Hayes, as well as a critique of Emig's empirical study.

4. See, for example, the collection of articles in Brand and Graves that employ a qualitative research approach and the anthology edited by Anderson and MacCurdy that emphasizes the psychological benefits of writing.

But moving beyond this chaos and away from an ordinary state of consciousness is not as simple as it might seem because, according to Tart, there are at least four distinct psychological processes in place which constantly stabilize our ordinary state of consciousness: Loading, Negative Feedback, Positive Feedback, and Limiting. In this complex psychological system, all or several of these consciousness stabilizers might be functioning simultaneously to maintain the ordinary state of consciousness necessary to satisfy our primal instinct for survival. But if we want to make a transition from our ordinary state of consciousness, we must actively induce an *altered* state by disrupting "enough stabilization processes to a great enough extent that the baseline pattern of consciousness cannot maintain its integrity" (71).

For example, in Tart's systems approach, "Loading" refers to the constant bombardment of physical sensations and thinking processes continually occurring in an ordinary state of consciousness. Our consciousness is kept so busy with the input of physical sensations (Exteroception) and the constant chatter in our heads (Interoception) that there is little attention left over for any digressions. We can see an example of the destabilizing of this process using the most familiar of altered states, sleep. In order to induce sleep, we must first destabilize the Loading process: a dark, quiet room helps to slow down the bombardment of physical sensations, but an uncomfortable bed or a cold room will only serve to keep our minds busy and prevent sleep.

Writers, too, are aware of the necessity to disrupt Loading stabilization before beginning to write. Many writers need a place away from distractions and often require either complete quiet, or music, or some sort of rhythmic background noise to help them destabilize the Loading function and block out distracting external input. Csikszentmihalyi describes the necessity for blocking out the internal input by observing, "If the musician thinks of his health or tax problems when playing, he is likely to hit a wrong note . . . . Flow is the result of intense concentration on the present" (*Creativity* 112).

Emig suggests a parallel to Loading destabilization when she describes writing habits (a favorite desk, the sharpening of pencils) as ways of "reducing the minutiae, suppressing the irrelevant, [and] subordinating the daily in our writing contexts" (9). While she also provides much anecdotal evidence of professional writers using rituals, even most beginning writers recognize the need to block out distractions as they start their writing process, so they utilize writing habits and rituals to initiate such external blocking. Emig distinguishes between ritual and habit by explaining: "Where habit is suppressive, ritual is evocative; where habit is eliminative, ritual is initiatory" (9). The words "suppressive" and "eliminative" resound as accurate descriptions of Loading destabilization, and "evocative" and "initiatory" are words synonymous with induction into a trance or an ASC.

Loading destabilization (blocking distractions) is enough to begin induction into an ASC, but other processes such as Negative Feedback must also be minimized to sustain a trance-like state. According to Tart, Negative Feedback refers to a correction process that takes place when our consciousness extends beyond its preset limits. One example involves becoming suddenly alerted by a noise in the midst of daydreaming and being reminded of the necessity to stop daydreaming and monitor for threats. Another example involves the negative response of feeling anxious when our thoughts stray into areas our social background or traditions have taught us are taboo. This anxiety, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is because "we are always monitoring how we appear to other people; we

are on the alert to defend ourselves from potential slights and anxious to make a favorable impression" (*Creativity* 112). He adds that when people are in flow, they are too involved in what they are doing to worry about what others might think (112). For writers, however, there is an even stronger reason they are able to avoid this negative response; a writer's Sense of Identity becomes skewed when she assumes the identity of a fictional narrator in a fictional story, and what might have been a taboo subject for the writer herself becomes much less taboo in her new identity role. She might feel, as Csikszentmihalyi puts it, that she "has stepped out of the boundaries of the ego" (*Creativity* 112).

This transfer of identity roles caused by the destabilization of Negative Feedback can also be seen in hypnosis where, for example, a participant in a hypnotist's stage show often acts and speaks in ways normally beyond their preset limits of public modesty. Both the writer and the hypnotized can hide behind the masks of their new identities and are thereby able to alleviate much of the responsibility—and therefore anxiety and guilt—associated with transgressing taboos and also with assuming perspectives not normally available to them in an ordinary state of consciousness.

Even if the writer is composing nonfiction, ideas that would be too difficult to explore (either verbally or physically) due to preset social constraints can be explored through writing if the author feels secure that her or his writing will not be read by anyone else. In this case, the expressivist approach of private writing—which does not need to be read or assessed by the teacher or other students, and where socially constructed taboos, ideologies, and identities can be explored while hidden from public ridicule—will act to destabilize Negative Feedback. Elbow warns, "it's not just 'mistakes' or 'bad writing' we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings" (5). It is in this respect, then, that a writing pedagogy that advocates Elbow's theory of a writer's need to ignore her audience as she writes is also one that will help student writers destabilize Negative Feedback and induce an ASC, while at the same time enabling exploration of new perspectives. In advocating the loss of self-consciousness as necessary for flow, Csikszentmihalyi also underscores the benefits of destabilizing Negative Feedback with his conclusion that, "Paradoxically, the self expands through acts of self-forgetfulness" (*Creativity* 113).

The next process in Tart's approach is Positive Feedback that works in response to our need to feel good and be rewarded. Tart uses driving (one of the many automatic activities, such as running and walking, that lends itself easily to induction into an ASC) as an example. When we are not concentrating, we might drive off the shoulder or narrowly avoid causing an accident, at which point we are instantly jarred back to ordinary, wakeful consciousness. Having learned from the incident, the next time the hypnagogic thoughts begin to take over as we are driving, we will immediately feel anxious and activate measures to reinstate ordinary consciousness: long before we reach a potentially dangerous situation, we'll roll down the windows or stop for coffee and be rewarded with the knowledge that we are safe drivers.

Positive Feedback is probably the most difficult of the four stabilization processes to overcome in order to induce an ASC, at least for a writer, because as Tart explains:

> During the formation of our ordinary d-SoC [discreet State of Consciousness] during childhood, we are greatly rewarded by our parents, peers, and teachers for doing various

socially approved things, and because most of our socially approved actions are initiated by socially approved thoughts and feelings, we then internalize this reward system and feel good simply by engaging in the thoughts and actions that were rewarded earlier. (66)

One of the socially approved things that is the most easily recognized, and therefore, most easily rewarded by teachers assessing the compositions of beginning writers, is students' adherence to correct conventions and grammar rules. But if mechanical and grammatical correctness is the main focus of a writing assessment, imagine how difficult it must be for beginning writers to overcome the feelings of anxiety or alarm that surface as they involuntarily misplace punctuation or misspell words. Just as the sleepy driver is brought back to complete wakefulness as soon as the first signs of hypnagogic thoughts begin to surface, so too, the mind of the writer undergoing induction into a trance state will be jarred back to an ordinary state of consciousness by worrying about correctness. It is a worry about failure similar to this example that Csikszentmihalyi addresses as one of the elements that acts to inhibit flow (*Creativity* 112).

One way to destabilize this Positive Feedback process and help induce both an ASC and flow is to encourage writers *not* to worry about mechanics, grammar, and correctness as they write. Freewriting and journal writing—two pedagogical approaches strongly associated with expressivism—are both ways of encouraging fluency in writing by destabilization of Positive Feedback. In fact, any form of informal writing practice that is not assessed by the teacher for mechanical or grammatical correctness will act to destabilize this process, but without this form of destabilization, student writers will constantly be jarred back to ordinary consciousness as they become anxious about spelling or comma placement. Such writers will be unable to reach a level of concentration necessary for intense concentration and learning. As Elbow points out:

> Editing itself is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. No wonder the producer gets nervous, jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent. (5)

Freewriting, private writing, blogging, journal keeping, unstructured writing, and associational writing are all pedagogical strategies that help to discourage correctness anxiety and easily support destabilization of Positive Feedback. And, as Mandel reminds us, these writing techniques are simply terms for "*actual* writing," adding, "What these pedagogical strategies stimulate is natural fluency" (376).

The fourth stabilization process described by Tart is Limiting, and it involves the various subsystems of consciousness that he defines as Memory, Sense of Identity, Space/Time Sense, Motor Output, and Emotions. Each of these subsystems is capable of destabilizing ordinary consciousness. For example, tranquilizers act to blunt strong emotional responses thereby interfering with emotion's ability to destabilize ordinary consciousness. Tranquilizers are, therefore, a Limiting stabilizer.

Of the several subsystems involved in this process, one, Sense of Identity, has already been mentioned, but others such as Emotions and Space/Time Sense are also de-Limited through the act of writing. For example, rather than *sup*press (Limit) emotions as certain

tranquilizing drugs might do, writing enables the writer to *ex*press (literally "squeeze out") emotions, again destabilizing the Limiting system of ordinary consciousness. But this can only be accomplished by allowing student writers to express their emotions, concerns, or feelings in writing, either privately or publicly, by encouraging narrative explorations of past events, feelings, relationships, etc. Such strategies clearly de-Limit emotions and memory. Csikszentmihalyi encourages such an approach by explaining, "Writing becomes a therapy for shaping some order among the confusion of feelings. It is possible that the only way writers can experience flow is by creating worlds of words in which they can act with abandon, erasing from the mind the existence of troubling reality" (*Flow the Psychology* 132).

But even though part of a pedagogical approach to encourage induction into ASCs and promote fluency should include allowing students to choose topics they feel passionately about, those topics do not necessarily need to consist of traumatic events; emotions and passions can stem from a variety of subjects and perspectives. Because only the student writer herself, however, can determine what these topics are, the invention stage of writing becomes a crucial step in de-Limiting. Once students have chosen their own topic—one they have a unique interest and passion for—the intense focus that results from writing about the topic can draw the writer's attention away from her habitual measurements of time (checking a watch, feeling hungry, noticing the sunset) and her awareness of position in space (in the room, on the chair), thereby further destabilizing the Limiting of Space/ Time sense. This aspect of Tart's systems approach can also be compared to one of the main elements of Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow, where he explains, "[I]n flow we forget time, and hours may pass by in what seems like a few minutes" (*Creativity* 113).

Many of the pedagogical strategies associated with writing-to-learn *are* introduced to student writers, but, unfortunately, in an educational climate saturated with rewards related to assessment and accountability, the *product* of writing has continued to be privileged over any kind of process. In many cases, the term "process-writing" has come to mean a rigid three-step system of prewriting, writing, and revision, with the product as the only part that merits reward. In the worst cases, even the three steps have been completely eliminated, and the students' only reward is a numerical score assessed via a timed writing sample during high-stakes testing. Csikszentmihalyi warns against such extrinsic rewards and explicitly cites the educational benefits of process over product:

> Another thing that would help [learning] is focusing on the process rather than results. One of the obstacles is when a child gets the message that the only reason to play music, to learn music is so that they can end up in Carnegie Hall 20 years later or something, or that the only reason to learn to read and write is so they can get a job. ("Flow and Education" 26)

It's clear that the products of some of the expressivist strategies such as journal writing and freewriting cannot be easily assessed by administrators seeking accountability, but these expressive "products" are also often discounted as fun, non-rigorous, non-academic writing relegated to the stage of invention or saved for times in the semester when the "real" work has been completed. What we fail to realize, though, when we treat these strategies as a less-than-crucial part of writing, is that student writers who are unable

to practice such strategies—and practice them often—and who are, therefore, unable to reach an ASC or a flow state, are also students writers who will never lose themselves in the act of writing to the extent that they will enjoy writing enough to eventually care about the technicalities of the craft. As Mandel points out, "Just as sitting and breathing are simple—when they are not conscious—so writing simplifies as the writer disappears into the act itself" (373).

Empirical evidence for the benefits of informal writing and efficacy of the "expressive" strategies of writing pedagogy are found in the studies done by James Britton and his colleagues in the 1970s and, more recently, in research conducted by educational psychologist Deborah McCutchen. While induction to an ASC was certainly not promoted by either of these scholars, both understand the fundamental need for any writer to practice writing that is enjoyable and would induce an ASC (as described here), in order for that writer's skills to develop enough to produce effective written products. McCutchen specifically cites writing fluency as the necessary precursor for writers to move beyond limitations caused by short-term memory constraints and reach a level of skill that will enable them to tap into their long-term memory (16). In order to reach that stage, however, and eventually achieve a strong level of fluency and, hopefully, enjoyment in their writing, student writers require significant and repeated practice in expressive writing strategies capable of destabilizing ordinary consciousness.

Depending on the quantity of processes destabilized and the extent to which each is destabilized, writers with different writing abilities in different writing situations will be able to reach varying degrees of ASC. Most experienced writers are able to induce a state that temporarily limits their ability to measure time and space, and most also find themselves able to induce a state strong enough to recall vivid images and details of memories thought to be long forgotten. Writing, therefore, seems to qualify as an example of an ASC in which memory retrieval is enhanced, provided, of course, that writers are first able to achieve fluency because "[o]nly with fluent encoding processes can writers begin to build retrieval structures to information stored in LTM [Long Term Memory] and, when such LTM knowledge is itself sufficiently rich, capitalize on the resources of LT-WM [Long Term-Working Memory]" (McCutchen 16). It is this ability to retrieve long-term memory, along with the ability to fully concentrate, that reflect the underlying writing-to-learn goal of a writing classroom, and student writers able to experience this level of ASC have obviously moved beyond mechanical concerns, substituting self-consciousness with self-discovery.

Writing fluency, writing-to-learn, self-discovery, and memory retrieval are the major benefits of inducing an ASC through writing discussed so far. But writers who are able to reach the full potential of an ASC also report the ability to tap into an unidentifiable source—a source that many claim gives them the sense of almost conjuring ideas, narratives, or characters not necessarily drawn from their previous experiences. Writing scholar R.D. Walshe declares that during writing, "[w]hat come out are only partly ideas from the conscious mind . . . but it includes the opening up of a creative source that lies behind the everyday mind" (21).

While many unskilled writers find this a puzzling notion, most skilled writers, particularly those with experiences in creative writing and poetry, cite a familiarity with this "creative source that lies behind the everyday mind" and agree that such a phenomenon

does exist. This belief is also supported by many well-known, published authors, including Kipling and Calvino, who—while they might not describe their experiences in terms of an ASC—do acknowledge encounters with a source of creativity beyond their ordinary consciousness.

Csikszentmihalyi identifies this phenomenon as symptomatic of the creative process and refers to it as an aspect of flow characterized by the merging of action and awareness. Writer Freeman Dyson describes this experience of flow: "I always find when I am writing, it is really the fingers that are doing it and not the brain. Somehow the writing takes charge" (qtd. in Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity* 118). These experienced and obviously fluent writers are able to destabilize the systems of ordinary consciousness during writing and induce an ASC deep enough to enable them to tap into a frequency beyond logic or reason and explore concepts unfamiliar to them in their normal conscious state. The value of this ability lies not within the confines of creative *writing*, per se, but in the concept of creativity in general – a concept defined by psychologists as "the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate" (Sternberg and Lubert qtd. in Dietrich, 1011). Creative explorations, therefore, are enhanced by the writing process, which not only enables the writer to capture and record these new ideas, but also serves as a catalyst to create and even conjure them. These creative endeavors cannot be efficiently assessed or graded by tools like high-stakes testing, yet they figure as some of the most important cognitive aspects of an effective business, political, scientific, artistic, and humanitarian workforce.

For all of these useful outcomes—effective writing, learning, artistry, problem-solving skills, and creative capacity—recognizing writing as an ASC and promoting a writing pedagogy conducive to inducing ASCs in writers is worthy of more consideration in our research and our writing classrooms. It is even more important when we consider that the generation we teach is bombarded (as we all are) with input via television, movies, the Internet, video games, iPods, cell phones, etc., and therefore starved of the time for quiet contemplation during a walk or a drive—both activities associated with brief induction into an altered state of consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that "one obvious way to enhance creativity is to bring as much as possible of the flow experience into the various domains" (*Creativity* 342). He argues: "It is exhilarating to build culture—to be an artist, a scientist, a thinker, or a doer. All too often, however, the joy of discovery fails to be communicated to young people, who turn instead to passive entertainment" (342). Maintaining pedagogical strategies that enhance the potential of writing as an ASC and encourage it as an avenue to creativity is one way to bring the flow experience to our young students, particularly when writing might just be one of their few opportunities for induction into an ASC (apart from drugs—many of which are addictive and harmful).

The connection between ASCs and creativity is also documented by psychologist Arne Dietrich who says, "[T]he fact that throughout human history humans have always looked at ways to alter consciousness is a powerful indicator that there are some beneficial effects" (qtd. in Eason). And while Dietrich also argues that "little is known about the brain mechanisms that underlie creative thinking," he is quick to stipulate that scientific studies into creativity "have replaced the view that the creative act is a mysterious or even mystical event" (1011). Yet writers tend to disagree, often labeling

the parallels between writing and ASCs as not simply creative acts, but also as spiritual experiences. For example, bell hooks remarks:

> Not much is written about the connection between writing and spirituality. Even though new age writing describes circumstances where writers receive ideas mysteriously, rarely does anyone talk about the sustained link between spiritual practice and writing. Writers are reluctant to speak about this subject because literary elitism engenders a fear that if we describe "unseen forces" shaping our vision and the structure of our writing we will not be taken seriously. (1)

Writers' reluctance to speak about this seemingly spiritual source of creativity perhaps also comes from the associations it has with the notion of hallucinating—the end result of many ASCs (including those with negative connotations) explained by Tart. In discussing an ordinary state of consciousness, Tart describes it as a state of mind characterized by "a high degree of rationality and a relatively low degree of imaging ability" (54). But the high level of ASC attained by some writers is completely opposite, characterized by a low degree of rationality and a high degree of imaging ability.

Psychologist John Bradshaw also attests to both the ASC and the spiritual aspects of writing. In an interview with Regina Paxton Foehr, he claims, "When you're writing, you go into an altered state. . . . That narrowing of your ordinary consciousness then opens you up to . . . what all spiritual traditions and many psychologists believe, that we have a higher self, that is, a self that is not limited by space and time" (qtd. in Foehr 62). Another professional interviewed along with Bradshaw is Larry Dossey, a medical doctor involved in research into the healing power of writing, who alludes as well to writing as an ASC, maintaining: "[Writing is] simply learning to function as a conduit for ideas that are already out there. I think that the job of the writer is to tap into this source. . . . I think there's a tremendous amount of empirical evidence that the mind is indeed nonlocal" (qtd. in Foehr 53).

Each of these experts is obviously considering the ASC aspect of writing as more than simply a way for writers to easily access memories, ideas, and feelings. They also seem to agree that writers achieving an ASC are able to reach, perhaps, the source identified by C. G. Jung as the Collective Unconscious and, as such, a source that might immediately raise suspicion, perhaps even ridicule, from a scientific standpoint. Yet this source—and ASCs capable of tapping into this source (whether induced via religious ceremony, fasting, hypnosis, mediation, sensory deprivation, dance, dreams, drugs, or writing)—have led to some of the greatest benefits for humankind, from biblical prophecies to scientific discoveries.

On a more personal spiritual level, James Moffett provides a profound practical reason to consider promoting an ASC as part of our writing pedagogy:

> Suppose we don't learn merely to get by, get along, get around, or get ahead. These are all essential, but they fare better when education aims beyond them on the assumption that they are the means and education the end. Suppose we don't so much learn to live as live to learn. Once understood in this way, knowing becomes a different matter—and a much more important one. Making a living and making a life become part of making sense of life, so that everything in it has meaning. (5)

Moffett continues by explaining that "'educate' means to 'lead out'" adding, "What is there to draw out and develop— 'unfold'—besides the garbage of conditioning and the private wealth of narcissism?" (7). His final conclusion: the Soul. It's heady stuff to practice in educational institutions—particularly when we consider that many other wonderful activities which help to induce ASCs—dance, music, painting (all of which can be religious practices, by the way) are gradually being cut from educational programming all over the Western world. I dare say that if writing did not have its utilitarian function, it too might be considered in the cutbacks.

From this point, it is interesting to return to Tart and his introduction to the processes of stabilizing ordinary consciousness. He states that the four processes (Loading, Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback, and Limiting) are "analogous to the ways people control one another":

> If you want someone to be a good citizen (1) you keep him busy with the activities that constitute being a good citizen, so he has no time or energy for anything else; (2) you reward him for carrying out these activities; (3) you punish him if he engages in undesirable activities; and (4) you try to limit his opportunities for engaging in undesirable activities. (63)

Destabilizing these systems and inducing ASCs just might cause a dangerous lack of control or, even more shocking perhaps, help produce creative, happy, problem-solving, fluent writers who become spiritually conscious.

✦

Works Cited

A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future in U.S. Higher Education. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. U.S. Department of Education. 2006. Web. 2 Oct. 2008. <http://www.ed.gov/ about/ bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html>.

Anderson, Charles M., and Marian M. MacCurdy, Eds. *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.

Britton, James, et al. *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18).* London: McMillan Education, 1975.

Brand, Alice G., and Richard L. Graves, Eds. *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive.* Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Boynton/Cook, 1994.

Csikszentmihayli, Mihayli. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention.* New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.

_____. "Flow and Education." *The NAMTA Journal* 22.2 (1997): 2-35.

_____. *Flow the Psychology of Optimal Experience: Steps Toward Enhancing the Quality of Life.* New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Dietrich, Arne. "The Cognitive Neuroscience of Creativity." *Psychomic Bulletin & Review* 11.6 (2004). 1011-1026.

Eason, Allen. "Interview with Arne Dietrich: Altered States of Consciousness, Creativity,

and the Brain." In *Interviews with Leaders in the Field* 27 (2005): n. pag. Web. 20 Dec. 2008. <http://www.psychsymposium.com>.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. London: Oxford UP, 1973.

Emig, Janet. "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing." *College Composition and Communication* 15 (1964): 6-11.

Flower, Linda, and John Hayes. "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 44.8 (1982): 265-77.

hooks, bell. "Voices and Visions." *Shambala Sun* May 1998. Web. Nov. 2007. <http://www.shambalasun.com>.

Jung, Carl Gustav. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol.9 Part 1, 2nd Ed.). Trans. Gerard Adler and R.F.C. Hull. Princeton, NJ: Bollingen, 1981.

Mandel, Barrett J. "The Writer Writing is Not at Home." *College Composition and Communication* 31 (1980): 370-377.

McCutchen, Deborah. "Knowledge, Processing, and Working Memory: Implications for a Theory of Writing." *Educational Psychologist* 35:1 (2000): 13-23.

Moffett, James. "Soul School." Foehr and Schiller 5-14.

Murray, Donald M. *Expecting the Unexpected: Teaching Myself—and Others—to Read and Write*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1989.

_____. *Write to Learn*. 5th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College, 1996.

North, Stephen M. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field.* Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Boynton/Cook, 1987.

Foehr, Regina Paxton. "Writing the Spirit." Ed. Regina Paxton Foehr and Susan A. Schiller. *The Spriritual Side of Writing: Releasing the Learner's Whole Potential.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton Cook, 1997. 44-68.

Perl, Sondra. "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers." *Research in the Teaching of English* 13.4 (1979): 317-36.

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication* 31.4 (1980): 378-88.

Tart, Charles T. *States of Consciousness*. Authors Guild Backprint.com ed. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com. 1983.

Walshe, R. D. "The Learning Power of Writing." *Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers,* 3rd ed. Ed. Richard Graves. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990. 16-25.