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**A LITHUANIAN CASE OF FOSTERING CREATIVITY WITHIN  
ACADEMIA: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS**

Nijolė Burkšaitienė (a)\*

\* Corresponding author

(a) Institute of Humanities, Mykolas Romeris University, Ateities str. 20, Vilnius, Lithuania n.burksaitiene@mruni.eu,  
+37052714617

**Abstract**

Creativity has been increasingly researched in higher education. Until recently, however, empirical studies exploring creativity and creative writing simultaneously conducted from the students' perspective are rare. The present study aims to analyse undergraduate students' perceptions of the course of Modern English and Creative Writing and its impact on their creativity. The data were collected through feedback questionnaires and analysed using both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

The general conclusion of this study is that the course encouraged most students' creativity and fostered their creative writing skills. Prominent among the findings was the perception that creative writing practice was the most valuable component of the course, followed by new knowledge gained during the course and an increased awareness of others and self. It was also established that the course changed some students' general understanding of creativity and raised their awareness of creative writing. On the other hand, the results also imply that to some students the course was a challenge.

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**Keywords:** Creativity; creative writing; students' perceptions; translation studies; higher education.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, creativity has been researched in higher education using different theoretical approaches, models and frameworks. Students' creative thinking, development of creativity abilities, and academic environments have been widely investigated (Davis, Keegan, & Gruber, 2012; Newton, 2013; Yeh, Yeh, & Chen, 2012; Zenasni, & Lubart, 2011; Šliogerienė, 2013; Burkšaitienė, 2014). To illustrate, Davis, Keegan & Gruber (2012) studied creative thinking using the evolving systems approach and created a model to analyse the life and work of a creative person. In their model, creative thinking was



conceived as a developmental process and a product of a creative individual, the latter being viewed as a complex system comprising three interacting dimensions, including affect, purpose and knowledge. In another example, Newton (2013) studied the interaction between creative thinking, moods and emotions and designed a framework to help teachers to foster creative thinking of students at all levels, whereas Yeh, Yeh & Chen (2012) used a blended knowledge-management model in an instruction programme for future teachers which proved to be effective in improving their abilities of creativity.

The most recent research has focused on the impact of academic environments (courses and programmes) on students' creativity and creativity-related cognitive abilities. For example, Zenasni & Lubart (2011) investigated the relationship between undergraduate students' perceived pleasantness of creative story writing tasks and their creative performance. Šliogerienė (2013) studied the impact of students' self-reflection on creativity in a portfolio-based learning environment, Grakauskaitė-Karkockienė (2006) created a programme aimed to develop future teachers' cognitive abilities of fluency, flexibility and originality and investigated its effectiveness, whereas Burkšaitienė (2013) analysed the impact of project-based learning environment on students' creativity, to mention just a few. However, even though different aspects of creativity have been investigated, empirical research exploring students' creativity and creative writing simultaneously conducted from the students' perspective are rare. The present study aims to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the course of Modern English and Creative Writing and its impact on their creativity.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

For the present research the investment theory of creativity and the perception theory are important. The central assumption of the investment theory of creativity is that creativity is neither a mental ability nor a personal feature, thus it can be taught and learnt (Sternberg, 2006; Nettle, 2009). To foster creativity, both the learner's perspective and the resources should be considered, the latter being intellectual abilities, knowledge, styles of thinking, personality, motivation, and environment. From the investment theory perspective, creativity is not a simple sum of a personally acquired level of each of these components but rather their confluence in which knowledge of a field is the component for which a threshold level is required (Sternberg, 2006).

According to the perception theory, perception is a process through which knowledge of the objective world is acquired, therefore it can reveal how this interaction is perceived (Maund, 2003; Freitas, 2014). The acquired knowledge can lead to the identification of areas calling for consideration, which, in turn, can result in necessary action, e.g. making improvements or modifications in the learning environment. It is reported in the literature that in higher education research perception theory was used as a theoretical underpinning to investigate teaching and learning, students' expectations from studies, and creativity development in different fields of study, including teacher training, health education and foreign language studies (Paulos, & Mahony, 2008; Ezer, Gilat, & Sagee, 2010; Zenasni, & Lubart, 2011; Yeh, Yen, & Chen, 2012; Newton, 2013; Burkšaitienė, 2014; Šliogerienė, 2013; Zacher, & Johnson, 2015). For example, Paulos & Mahony (2008) studied students' perceptions of learning and teaching within health courses to investigate the effectiveness of feedback. Their research showed that feedback enhanced learning and facilitated first year students' transition from school to university, and that the impact of feedback was influenced by the students' perceptions of the teacher who provided it. In another example,

Zacher & Johnson (2015) analysed leadership and creativity in doctoral studies. They explored the relationships between PhD students' perceptions of their advising professors' behaviours and the professors' ratings of their students' work-related creativity. It was established that, on the one hand, the students' perceptions of the professors' transformational leadership positively predicted the ratings of the students' creativity. On the other hand, the results also showed that the students' perceptions of the professors' passive-avoidant and transactional leadership did not significantly predict their ratings of students' creativity.

The literature reveals that students' perceptions of their creativity have been widely analysed, however, research exploring creativity and creative writing simultaneously conducted from the students' perspective are rare. To illustrate, Mansoor (2010) analysed teaching creative writing to undergraduate second language learners. The researcher investigated students' approaches towards creative writing, identified the major difficulties that they faced during the process of learning and established writing activities which best supported students' creative writing skills. In another example, Burkšaitienė (2014) investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of their own creativity in order to establish how creative they considered themselves to be as well as to identify their expectations from a creative writing course in the university studies of English. The findings showed that half of the students considered themselves to be creative, however, only a few of them practiced creative writing and were aware of the nature of creativity or the process of creative writing. Zenasni & Lubart (2011), on the other hand, investigated the relationship between undergraduate students' perceived pleasantness of creative story writing tasks and their creative performance. The findings indicated that the perceived pleasantness of the tasks increased during task completion whereas the perceived pleasantness of divergent thinking tasks remained stable during task performance.

In the present study, perception theory contributes alongside as a theoretical underpinning used to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the course of Modern English and Creative Writing and its impact on their creativity. To this end, students' feedback responses were studied.

### **3. Method**

The present study is part of a larger mixed-method investigation employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, aimed at learning about the students' perceptions of the course and its impact on their creativity as well as on their proficiency in English. The present paper reports only on the findings from the analysis of the data on the students' perceptions regarding the course and its impact on their creativity.

#### **3.1. Participants and Procedure**

The study was conducted with the participation of 32 undergraduate students (29 females (91 %) and 3 males (9%)) of translation and editing at a University in Lithuania. The students' average age was 21 and none of them had taken a course combining Modern English and creative writing before.

The setting for the study was a mandatory 6-credit course of Modern English and Creative Writing which lasted for 16 weeks; every week students had a lecture (2 h), a seminar (2 h) and two practical classes (4 h), as well as a tutorial (2 h) for individual consultations. The course was designed so as to

combine both theory (lectures) and practice (seminars and practical classes). The lectures focused on the theories of creativity and creative writing; the practice-related part of the course included four major elements: (1) creative writing tasks (e.g. creative writing games such as writing descriptions of events, people, moods, places, phenomena, writing essays and creating poetry), (2) analyses of literary works of fiction written by famous British and Canadian writers representing different centuries, genres and styles, (3) project work, and (4) students' learning portfolios of Modern English. After the course, the students were asked to fill in feedback questionnaires on studying Modern English and creative writing. All answers were held anonymous and presented on a voluntary basis.

### **3.2. The Instrument**

The research data for the present study were collected through feedback questionnaires which included both a structured part (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.77$ ) and an open-ended part. This study reports on the results of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the students' responses regarding their perceptions of the course and its impact on their creativity. The research method of content analysis was used to establish the perceptions of the course value and the students' understanding of what it means 'being creative'. Descriptive frequencies analysis was used to establish their perceptions of the course impact on their creativity and their understanding of creative writing as well as on their creative writing skills.

## **4. Results**

To gain insights into the students' perceptions of the course value, content analysis of their responses to the open-ended question 'What was the most valuable in the course of Modern English and Creative Writing?' was carried out. The emerging themes were analysed and categorised. As the result, three categories of value were identified, including practising creative writing, knowledge gained during the course, and increased awareness of others and self. The categories were further analysed and sub-categories identified; the categories and sub-categories were supplemented with samples of evidence. The answers to this question were provided by all the students.

### **4.1. Students' perceptions of the Course Value**

*Category 1.* The students perceived that the biggest value of the course was practising creative writing (reported by 17 students). Deeper analysis disclosed four sub-categories. The first sub-category included different writing techniques and creative writing games practised during the course (reported by 12 students), which can be best supported by the following extracts from their responses: 'The most valuable in the course was trying various writing techniques' and 'In the course of creative writing, the most valuable part was writing (playing some writing games) in order to improve our writing skills as well as encourage imagination and creativity'. An interesting finding in this sub-category was reported by a student who said that s/he did not feel any pressure to be the best, which s/he appreciated: 'Creative writing games were mostly fun and enjoyable, I didn't feel any pressure to be the best, being creative was enough. I'm really glad about that'.

The second sub-category regarding the course value was the course-provided possibility to write / create one's own works (reported by two students): 'The best thing was the opportunity to create my own literary works ...' and 'Trying to create something by myself was the biggest value'.

The third sub-category was the course usefulness and the interest it raised, which was also reported by two students: 'I loved creative writing seminars; it was really interesting for me' and 'Interesting topics, and presentations were useful'.

Finally, one student considered that the improvement of his/her creative writing skills was the most valuable result of the course: '<Due to the course> my creative writing skills greatly improved'.

These findings suggest that to foster students' creativity, university courses should include both theory and practice-related components with a particular focus being on the latter component as it is highly valued by students.

*Category 2.* The second major category of the student-perceived value of the course was new knowledge which they gained (reported by 13 students). Deeper analysis resulted in the identification of three sub-categories of valuable knowledge. The first sub-category was knowledge of the theories of creativity and creative writing (reported by six students), which can be best illustrated by the following responses: 'The most valuable in the course was the theories of creativity' and '... All the theory which will help me in the future' or 'I've learnt a lot about the theory of creative writing. This was the part of the course that I was scared about, but now I've changed my mind' or 'I learnt more about what creative writing is, as well as more about creativity in general'.

The second sub-category was knowledge of the process of creative writing (reported by six students). Interestingly, four of these students stressed the value of new knowledge of the process of creative writing: 'Now I know more about the process of creative writing ...' and '<I> learnt how to write essays, more details of the principles of writing' or '<I learnt> how to present ideas and thoughts and how to start writing, what the stages of writing are' and '<I learnt> various forms of writing, how to start writing'. On the other hand, two other students emphasised the value of knowledge of the challenges which the process of creative writing poses to writers: 'The most valuable was realizing what challenges a writer faces while writing ...' and 'Knowledge of the challenges of <creative> writing and developing creativity was the part <of the course> which was the most valuable'.

Finally, it was established that one student considered that the biggest value of the course was '<...> Access to theoretical materials on creativity and creative writing'.

These findings are in accord with the investment theory of creativity which stresses that creativity requires a confluence of resources among which knowledge of the field plays a particular role as it is the resource for which there exists a threshold level that students should acquire below which creativity is not possible (Sternberg, 2006).

*Category 3.* The third category of the course value was based on the findings that the course raised the students' awareness of others and self (reported by two students). To illustrate, one of them said that during creative writing seminars '<...> we could hear what our groupmates wrote about the same aspect or theme. We found out how differently everyone sees the same situation and also tried different styles ourselves', whereas the other commented: '<...> I believe that those writing games made some of us step out of our comfort zones'. These results illustrate that the course resulted in mini discoveries leading to the students' personal growth.

#### **4.2. Students' perceptions of the Course Impact on their Understanding of what it Means 'being Creative'**

The results of contents analysis of 13 students' responses to the open-ended question 'How has the course changed your understanding of what it means 'being creative'? revealed two categories of change. Twelve students reported that their understanding did not change, 5 students stated that they did not know the answer to this question, and 2 students did not answer this question.

*Category 1.* The first category of change in the students' understanding of what 'being creative' means resulted from raising their awareness of the phenomenon and the nature of creativity (reported by six students). This can be best illustrated by these extracts from their responses: 'At the beginning of this course I had very little understanding of what it means to be creative. Now I feel that being creative is much more than one could possibly imagine' and 'I didn't know that creativity can be developed' or 'I now know that creativity is not an inborn feature' or 'Creativity is not inborn, it is taught'.

*Category 2.* It was also established that seven students changed their understanding of what it means being creative through becoming aware of the ways of how a person can become creative, which can be supported by the following feedback responses: 'The course changed my understanding of creativity in that you can learn it and provoke it in yourself and that everyone can be creative if one puts efforts to it' and 'I think that it is possible to become creative if one wishes to be creative' and 'We had an opportunity to be creative in different ways ... we wrote in different styles. I didn't know that there are so many ways of being creative. I really enjoyed it' or 'I learnt that creativity can be developed... Previously I thought that it's an inherited ability'.

These results corroborate Sternberg's (2006) assumption that to foster creativity, one should decide to do so, which requires to be fully aware of the phenomenon of creativity and the ways of fostering it.

#### **4.3. Students' perceptions of the Course Impact on their Creativity**

To establish the students' perceptions of the impact which the course had on their creativity, distribution frequencies analysis of their feedback responses was used. The results showed that 20 students (63%) perceived that the course supported their creativity. Five students (16%) reported that the course did not have such an impact, and seven students (22%) did not know if the course had such an impact.

An important finding of the present study was that 19 students (59%) perceived that creative writing tasks practised throughout the semester enabled them to feel more creative. Five students (16%) stated that the tasks did not have such an impact, seven students (22%) did not know the answer, and 1 student (3%) did not answer this question.

These findings demonstrate that most students considered that the course had a positive impact on their creativity. On the other hand, the results allow to assume that to some students the course was a challenge, which may be due to two reasons. Firstly, before the course, most students had had some experience of essay writing, but none of them had practised any other creative writing tasks in English. Secondly, the course lasted for one semester, which may mean that for some students the course was too short for fostering one's creativity.

#### **4.4. Students' perceptions of the Course Impact on their Understanding of Creative Writing and on their Creative Writing Skills**

The results of descriptive frequencies analysis revealed that 18 students (56%) considered that analysing literary works written by famous British and Canadian writers deepened their understanding of creative writing in general. Five students (16%) reported that it did not have such an impact and nine students (28%) did not know the answer to this question. It was also established that the majority of students (n=28 or 88%) perceived that presenting analyses of literary works to their peers as well as writing such analyses as home assignments deepened their understanding of different genres and styles of creative writing. Four students (13%) did not know if such an impact was made.

Finally, the findings also showed that most study participants (n=23 or 72%) considered that creative writing tasks developed their creative writing skills. Four students (13%) stated that the tasks did not have such an impact, and five students (16%) did not know the answer.

These findings demonstrate that written analyses of literary works and various creative writing tasks as used in the present study had a positive impact both on the students' understanding of creative writing and on their own creative writing skills. Therefore, the format of the course as used in the present study can be used by university teachers for the development of their students' creative writing ability.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

To foster students' creativity, the course of Modern English and Creative Writing was designed so as to combine both theory and practice. The present study aimed to investigate 32 undergraduate students' perceptions of the course and its impact on their creativity.

The general conclusion of this study is that the course format as used in this study was a creativity-favourable environment as most students perceived that it encouraged their creativity and fostered their creative writing skills. On the other hand, the findings also imply that to some students the course was a challenge, which may be due to lack of their previous creative writing practice in English and inadequate length of the course. The results also show that new knowledge which the students gained during the course was perceived as the second most valuable component of the course. These findings reinforce Hausman and Anderson's (2012) view that by answering the question 'How?' it can be established what kind of environment supports or hinders creativity. These results are also in line with Sternberg's (2006) argument that to become creative, a person is required to gain a threshold level of knowledge of the field and that learning environment plays a relevant role in the process of creativity development.

An important finding of the present study is the perception of almost half of the students that the course changed their understanding of what it means 'being creative', i.e. the students realized that creativity is not an inborn personal feature. This is in accord with Sternberg's (2006) assumption that to become creative, one first has to understand the nature of the phenomenon of creativity. The students also acknowledged that this change resulted from becoming aware of the ways of how a person can become creative, which corroborates the statements of many researchers who claim that creativity can be learnt and fostered (Amabile, 1996; Richards, 2007; Sternberg, 2006; Nettle, 2009).

The results of this study demonstrate that the course deepened most of its participants' understanding of creative writing in general and of different genres and styles of creative writing in

particular. This expands the findings of Burkšaitienė (2014) who analysed students' expectations from the course of creative writing and established that they had a need to better understand the nature of creativity, gain specific knowledge about creative writing, and practice creative writing.

The present study contributes to the research conducted in the field of creativity and creative writing in higher education in that it increases our understanding of university students' perceptions of the course developed to foster their creativity and of its impact on their understanding of creativity in general as well as on their personal creativity. Although the present study was conducted on a small-scale sample, its findings may be of interest to researchers and practitioners interested in the topic of creativity and creative writing in higher education.

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