CYBORG SELFIE:
SHIFTING TO CREATIVE IDENTITY
IN THE LEARNING SETTING

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This writing is about stimulating a creative consciousness among learners by implementing a curriculum where the learner shifts identity. Learners explore notions of self, mediated through text and images across platforms from real objects to social networks. The curriculum covers approaches to constructing virtual identity and how to create narratives from the perspective of the constructed identity (persona).

My experiences as an artist, as an art teacher in American middle and high schools, as a lecturer in European art academies and universities, and as an organizer of alternative art educational programming in a community setting led up to the development of this curriculum. What I want to achieve with Cyborg Selfie is both personal and social.

It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective—or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity. There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.
(Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 155.)

This paper examines an approach to devise sanctioned territories within the institutional educational setting, for learners to shift into a creative state of consciousness by shifting identity. This paper offers an analysis of how the curriculum, rooted in narrative and based on the image, is realized through social media and trans-media platforms. I postulate why shifting identity stimulates creative capabilities and how it can be a coping mechanism for stress caused by advanced capitalism.

Ideas and information in this paper will be of interest to teachers and learners in creative fields. This paper describes an approach that can open a creative floodgate among learners who appear unable or unwilling to open up in the classroom. The description of how the curriculum was developed and implemented can be useful as a how-to guide or as a springboard for new ideas.

In this paper, I refer to the artistic practice and curriculum which I developed and implemented, titled "Cyborg Selfie", and the courses "Creative Writing for Media", "Trans-Media Storytelling" and "Err Book Creating across Social Media for Youth" among teenagers and university students between 2015 to 2016 in Estonia and Finland.

In this paper, the focus is on a creative state of consciousness, which we will call the open creative mode. As we will see, it is integral to the generation of new ideas, and it can be a specifically challenging state of consciousness to maintain in an institutional learning setting.

FRACTURED SELF AND CREATIVITY

We start by talking about a fractured self in connection to creativity. Within the curriculum, learners are asked to look inward as the source of ideas and feelings for constructing a persona. Persona, in this case, is the virtual identity created by the learner through various real and online platforms. By operating under

a constructed name, image, and outward identity, the learner shifts consciousness into the open creative mode. There is safety in creating under an assumed name, not as someone else, but as the fragile parts of themselves, often shielded by silence, toughness and pride. In the approach described in this paper, the classroom remains unchanged, and learners are guided to look inward as a starting point of engaging in an immersive virtual experience.

By facilitating an environment where students could shift identity, taking control over how they see themselves in terms of markers of gender, race, nationality and social status, students are liberated from real or perceived restraints and empowered by their own authority to engage in self-expression.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

I will refer to three occasions when this curriculum was implemented: two university courses and a community-based workshop were varied by the experience of learners, location, meeting times, and contact hours:

1. Creative Writing for Media is a compact course at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School, Tallinn University (BFM). Between September and October, twenty-seven mixed BA and MA students from Filmmaking, Media, Journalism, Crossmedia and Public Relations programs met once a week for three-hour sessions, for five consecutive weeks. BFM offers an international program with many lectures in English. Among around half the group were international students from Brazil, Spain, Turkey and Italy; the levels of the English language varied, it was high among local students, and one international student was unable to understand the activities or main concepts and could not complete the course.

2. Creative Writing for Media was also implemented at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture as an elective course offered in June 2015. Summer School sessions met Monday through Friday for three hours. Creative Writing for Media met during the first week, and Trans Media Storytelling was implemented the following week. There were fourteen students in Creative Writing for Media, and seventeen in Trans Media Storytelling. The majority of students were MFA students from the Film and Visual Culture and Contemporary Art Department, which is an international program of Aalto University, and the main language of teaching in those programs is English. There were also students from Film, Graphic Design, International Relations and Art Education faculties.

3. Err book was coordinated by the education director of Kunstimaja (Art House) in Tartu, Estonia. We met Friday through Sunday for fifteen hours with eleven teenagers and four participants in their twenties. Eight from the total participants were from the local art gymnasium Tartu Kunstikool (Tartu Art School), including the teacher. Students may earn credits at their school for work produced in the workshop. The overall level of the English language was very high, and the learners liked to experiment with slang and wordplay.

This curriculum was first developed when I started teaching at the Baltic Film and Media School (BFM). I was so proud of myself teaching Creative Writing that at my own expense, I printed a poster announcing the next registration period in the spring semester 2010. The poster was so popular that a university authority was alerted to redundancy in course titles as Creative Writing was also offered in the Fine Art Department. My course was renamed Creative Writing for Media in 2011.

BFM is traditionally a film, television and radio training program. The institutional curriculum for Creative Writing was focused on writing narratives. In preparation for diverse careers in media fields, the curriculum I developed addressed script writing, press release, synopsis, biography, titles, emails, subject headings of emails, file labels, as well as writing for social media covering blog, video blog (vlog), status updates, comments and Tweets.

Overall, the students at BFM were so polite that they sat quietly during lectures and rarely questioned the purpose of the assignments given to them. Their stories were too often derivative of American television and cinema, and their characters were based on representations of racial stereotypes.

I knew that the students at BFM are creative people, but I felt alarmed that most of them were solving problems in the same way instead of finding fresh solutions. How could I help learners open a floodgate of creativity? I started to sort out what I was doing to put myself in a creative frame of mind in my artistic practice.

MODES OF CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

While the term "consciousness" is often used referring to a heightened state of spiritual awareness, the phrase "a shift in consciousness" came into my vocabulary through my acquaintance with Al Paldrok from the Estonian artist collective Non Grata, who would say things like "The performance was great, we changed their consciousness". This was perhaps his poetic way to indicate that a shift occurred in thinking or, more notably, a change in how one sees and experiences the world. Throughout this paper, I will refer to this "shift in consciousness" as transitions in ways of thinking.

It has only been through implementing and reflecting on the curricula that I have understood how to differentiate between the variances of states of creative consciousness among a group of learners. It took

a while to get it sorted out that I was working with basically three or four states of consciousness in the creative process: 1. The open creative mode, open, joyful, synergistic; 2. The zone, full immersion in a single line of inquiry; 3. The closed mode, rational, pragmatic and cognitive; and 4. The social mode, outgoing, conversant, empathetic.

ZONE

The zone is a term used in athletics, business and artistic jargon. In an art context, the zone is often associated with the personal mythology of Jackson Pollock. Based on films, photographs, texts and observations by Hans Namuth, we have understood that Pollock painted in a trance-like state performing a shamanistic dance across the canvas. In this paper, the zone refers to a state of consciousness where we experience total absorption as we become immersed in a single line of inquiry.

The zone is a lovely and meditative state to be in. There can be visceral signs of the zone, a posture of focused concentration, the jaw relaxed with evidence of the tongue peeking from between the lips, a lack of reaction to other sounds and movements in the room, a look of peace. When learners are in the zone, lengthy class time passes comfortably. As if opiated, the learners will automatically engage in forming clay, drawing, painting or other tasks. But, we should note, the proportion of how good it feels to create while in the zone may not be balanced with the value of the work.

CLOSED MODE

While attending to banal and pragmatic details, visiting suppliers, ordering materials, operating machinery and cutting, checking measurements and efficacy of each process, and managing deliveries of materials of the finished work to the exhibition space, I am largely in the closed mode. The closed mode is a vital creative operation.

SOCIAL MODE

Describing the modes of consciousness aims to bring the variety of experience into the discourse. If we think in terms of modes, then we have to understand that modes can mix, blend, blur and overlap. If we can deduct my tasks as an artist to artwork, network and paperwork, we will add a fourth category of the social mode. To be delightful at private views, to charm curators and critics, to cheerfully explain oneself, to read nonverbal cues, to listen, to feel and express empathy, to connect with others and develop networks among artists and organizers are performed best in the social mode of consciousness.

OPEN CREATIVE MODE

Generating new and exciting ideas is a symptom of the open creative mode. Learners are in a frame of mind where they can accommodate, assimilate, converge, remix, synergize, improvise and synthesize many ideas in order to imagine new possibilities in the form and content of their work. The open mode is characterized by playfulness, a childlike approach to materials, exploring possibilities, pushing limits and testing boundaries.

While learners are in the open creative mode, there is an easygoing or joyful attitude. They may engage in active conversation blurting out ideas, or display behaviors which include demonstrative gestures and unexpected actions. As educators invested with control in the learning setting, we need to let up on the reins for learners to operate freely in the open creative mode.

I wish to emphasize that this paper focuses on this open creative mode as it relates to a shift in identity. The shift is realized through social media but the process begins when the learner is asked to look inward.

Storytelling, the main strategy is focused on the idea of a "fractured self" (Haraway, 1983). At the beginning of the curriculum, learners are asked to look inward, for parts of their self that may be hidden in their day-to-day lives. They are asked, "If I am not my image, my name, my history, my status… what am I?"

In each implementation of the curriculum, between five to ten percent of the learners struggled relating to the concept and seeing themselves as unified. The remainder of the group will say that they understand the concept, and five to ten percent of that group will enthusiastically relate to the concept and seem relieved to find camaraderie within the perception of a fractured self.

When introducing the curriculum, I explain that by looking inward, complexity reveals itself and we avoid creating tropes or stereotypes. With these brief prompts, learners comprehend the learning activities and are able to demonstrate through their persona the notion of looking inward.

Social media channels like Gmail Hangouts, Word-Press and Twitter offer opportunities for the user to create a profile including name, age, gender, country of origin, marital status and a brief biography. The users can expand their profile to include prior experiences, personal interests, and preferences in food, music and movies, which are provocative questions to consider when developing an identity.

Tastes, temperament, attitude, approach to problem solving and voice are integral to the development of both the persona and character. In Creative Writing for Media, learners are guided to base the main character on their own persona, and the secondary character is based on the persona of a cohort. In this case, we have a consensual sharing of intellectual property and a social approach to writing and collective authorship.

In the curriculum, social media is a place to share ideas and information, course information is shared on a group WordPress blog and Twitter feed, and I contact students using their newly created Gmail accounts. Social media is also the location for creating and publishing content.

Once learners have initially created user profiles for their persona in social media, awareness among learners is developed about the self, identity, persona, personal mythology and artist names in an art historical context. Historical documents from Dada to the present create awareness among learners of artworks and the personal mythologies of artists who work with themes of identity using their own bodies, for example, Claude Calhoun, Marcel Duchamp, Baroness Elsa, Frida Kahlo, Jackson Pollock, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman. With each implementation of the curriculum we investigate different contemporary practitioners which have included Guerilla Girls, Yes Men, Kalup Linzy, Pussy Riot, Ryan Trecartin, Hennesy Youngman and Amalia Ulman. Learners are invited to share their favorite examples of personas and trans-media storytelling.

Learners are asked to do all of their writing from the perspective of the persona. In Creative Writing for Media, learners are asked to publish postings on the Twitter account of their persona. On the social media channel Twitter, a Tweet is a kind of extemporaneous writing expressing an observation, an opinion or any text fitting into the one hundred and forty character limit which can also include an image or link. Tweets represent the perspective of your persona, a unique voice with a catch phrase or a specialized hashtag. In this exercise, constraints are applied to the content but not to the subject of the writing, for instance, post five tweets about a social issue, five tweets about a political issue, five tweets about a personal issue, and five tweets about cultural engagement. Writing exercises in social media help learners consider a point of view, find a voice and establish complexity between the intentions, words and actions of the persona.

When all of us use the same channel like Twitter, we create a peer-learning environment where learners teach each other about the approaches to social media publication. As each learner is guided to publish different kinds of content on Twitter than WordPress, a cross channel narrative emerges. In Creative Writing for Media, each learner is asked to select an additional online channel. To name a few, a persona have posted things for sale on Ebay, joined chat rooms and forums, made play lists on file sharing sites like SoundCloud and Spotify, and published videos on YouTube.

Working with partners or in small groups, learners engage in an online chat in Google Hangouts where a narrative and storyline emerge through role-play. In Creative Writing for Media, the chats are cut and pasted into the first draft of their short stories and serve as a rough draft for a dialogue. Through group role-play, the learner can develop a dialogue in which each speaker expresses a distinct tone and voice. Whether the learners sit side by side or are in remote locations, the learner engages in an immersive experience mediated through the technology, and within this environment a shift into the open creative mode occurs.

CREATIVE CONSTRAINTS

In this curriculum, constraints are applied to the form and structure of the work but the subject and content is at the discretion of the learner. A clear explanation of the social and metacognitive value of the curriculum emerges through discussions and lectures. Assignments are open and leave space for broad interpretations by the learner. Examples and references are shown after learners have had a chance to generate their own ideas. Each implementation of the curriculum is a delicate balance between applying constraints to the form and structure of the work and engaging the learner with the authority to create any content and subject they can imagine.

While implementing the curriculum, personas have been represented by aliens, vampires, politicians, prisoners, heroes, criminals, everyday people, a cheesy squirrel, a disgruntled unicorn and a travel blogging rat. Stories have been written as drama, tragedy, comedy, parody and farce with subjects of existential despair, internal conflict, coming of age, gender fluidity, love and loss, each following the same narrative structure prescribed in the curriculum.

In 2013, in Creative Writing for Media, a student from Estonia who is a native Russian language speaker created a persona, an imprisoned Norwegian who is a white supremacist; writing from the first person perspective, she was, arguably, publishing a hate speech. This is an extreme example of what can happen when learners are given free choice about the content of their work. While white supremacy would not have been a topic I would have introduced to the curriculum, it brought to the surface a concern among learners over recent events with neo Nazis in Estonia and was an opportunity to examine personal and national identity.

As structures are applied to the work in the form of constraints, the learner can relax into creation of content. The constraints generally form a quantitative grading rubric which is given to learners early in the curriculum. For assessments, the rubrics are instructor, peer and self-reviewed, which creates opportunities to discuss the learners' understanding of the curriculum.

Between the creative activities, writing, social engagement and the presentations, there are diverse opportunities for learners to demonstrate their skills, abilities and learning. Part of the curriculum invites individuals or small groups to introduce their personas and engage us in their narrative through real world presentations. Learners are prompted to prepare what they will say, show and do, and are encouraged to create participatory experiences. Learners can use a projector, white board, printed or hand drawn material, performance, games, or any means at their disposal to

engage our cohort in their story and drive us to their blog, Twitter feed and other content.

For some people, presentations are an opportunity to share their abilities in performance and storytelling and to captivate an audience with their presence. For others, it is a way to face their fears by sharing their inner thoughts in a public space. In this curriculum, learners have reported that it was less stressful to speak in front of the group by shifting into the perspective of their persona.

In Creative Writing for Media, students are prompted to give feedback about each other's final presentations through the Twitter account of their persona which could be published and read in real time. While the same group of outgoing participants tended to dominate the discussions using social media, every participant was accountable to offer feedback and ask questions.

SHIFTING IDENTITY AS A STRATEGY
AND A COPING MECHANISM

If we look at aspects of consciousness as sharing similarities with identity, such as the ways of approaching challenges, the ways of solving problems, personal outlook and attitude, then we can say that as we shift modes of consciousness, our identity or at least some aspects of our identity also shift. The question which has arisen during this investigation is what happens when we voluntarily shift identity? Can we likewise stimulate, in our self, a shift in consciousness?

In our daily lives, we may feel pressure to perform according to what we perceive as expected of us and inhibited from performing the parts of our self we fear may feel threatening or confusing to others. There is a contention between who I am and who I am expected to be by my family, friends and colleagues at art and educational institutions which I address within art production. The construction of multiple identities or personas allows me to express the wholeness of self through a variety of voices. When we operate under identities of our own construction, there is a possibility to feel a liberation from the expectations internally or externally placed on ourselves, based on our markers of identity and past experiences. We can consider the fractured self as a coping mechanism for the trauma caused by performing our assigned roles of name, age, gender, social class, ethnicity and nationality.

In art I find a sanctioned territory to give life to the fractured portions of self which are underrepresented in my daily life. Working from the perspective of a constructed persona is a strategy for a conflict in my art practice and my social roles, nurturing through art, virtual bodies being distinct from the one you meet face to face. In those moments of performance, as I nurtured the repressed, fractured parts of myself, I have discovered different ways of experiencing and processing ideas and information, understanding spatial relationships and mediating social relations than in my modus operandi. When creativity is based on the ability to approach a problem from multiple vantage points, shifting our perspective can be impelled by an inhabiting persona.

The curriculum described within this article will be implemented as part of a juried program of ANTI-Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland, July through September 2017. With support from PROMEQ, New Start Finland, and in cooperation with the University of Eastern Finland, we aim for thirty participants and are targeting men aged between 18 and 29 who are new immigrants, having arrived in Finland as refugees.

As with each implementation of this curriculum, based on the experiences and learning needs of the participants, there will be adjustments in the schedule, the content presented and the creative constraints. I wish to pay attention to how the shift in identity described in this article may contribute to relieving stress and coping with trauma among learners who have experienced life as refugees and recent immigrants.

„KIBORGO ASMENUKĖ": PERSIKŪNIJIMAS Į KŪRYBINĘ TAPATYBĘ MOKYMOSI APLINKOJE

Ernest Truely

SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: vidinis „aš", tapatybė, persona, naratyvas, socialinės medijos, kūrybinis rašymas, pedagogika, menas, kūrybiškumas.

Straipsnyje kalbama apie besimokančiųjų kūrybinės sąmonės skatinimą, įgyvendinant mokymo programą, kurios metu besimokantysis persikūnija į kitą tapatybę. Studentai tyrinėja vidinio „aš" sampratas, perteikiamas per tekstą ir vaizdus įvairiose platformose: nuo realių objektų iki socialinių tinklų. Mokymo programa apima skirtingus požiūrius į virtualios tapatybės konstravimą ir analizuoja, kaip sukurti naratyvus žvelgiant iš sukonstruotos tapatybės (personos) perspektyvos.

Mano, kaip menininko, meno disciplinų dėstytojo Amerikos pagrindinėse ir vidurinėse mokyklose, Europos meno akademijų ir universitetų dėstytojo bei alternatyvių meno edukacijos programų bendruomenės aplinkoje rengėjo, patirtis paskatino mane išvystyti šią mokymo programą. Tikslai, kurių noriu pasiekti su „Kiborgo asmenuke", yra ir asmeniniai, ir socialiniai.