creativity exploratory
Sparks Your Imagination

College of Arts and Letters students regularly gather in Creativity Exploratory dedicated spaces to brainstorm and plan new projects. Here, (left to right) CAL students Terence Gipson, Kathryn Palczewski, Sophia Rochon and Sarah Matthews meet to schedule their team’s workflow for the Fall 2013 semester.
What do you get when you combine creative experimentation, critical reflection, and innovative production with a space designed to accommodate, facilitate and promote these critical functions? The short answer is the Creativity Exploratory (CE) at the College of Arts & Letters. The long answer is a bit more involved.

The Creativity Exploratory is an innovative, practice-based co-curricular addition to the College of Arts & Letters programming, designed to enhance the College’s majors. The CE offers a unique learning environment that allows students to reach beyond honing the core skills of the majors in the College of Arts & Letters—writing, research, information organization, visual and textual literacy—and utilize those skills working on collaborative creative projects. In hands-on informal learning experiences, students and faculty collaborate on projects that integrate skills from various majors, bringing their various skill sets together in a free-spirited laboratory setting that offers rich cross-fertilization. CAL students are empowered to build on their broad-based skills and surpass conventional disciplinary boundaries to spark creative innovation.

These project-based collaborations bring students in contact with peers from other disciplines within the College to learn from one another. Understanding and learning this creative process represents a valuable résumé- and portfolio-building experience for CAL majors.

**BOTH A SPACE AND A CONCEPT**

“The Creativity Exploratory is both a space and a concept. It is a ‘third place’ (as urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg called it) between home/dorm and the classroom,” says Dean Karin Wurtz. “It facilitates frequent interactions among students from a variety of majors in a playful experimental environment as they work on common creative projects.”

Dean Wurtz notes that, based on the research into creativity, there are a few conditions that can be created to foster creativity and innovation. The focus, at times, on solitary concentrated work that is associated with courses benefits from a more collaborative co-curricular environment where students learn from other smart students in purposeful yet informal and fun interactions.

“As students work on projects,” she says, “whether a publicity campaign, a website, research, or a project for a campus or community group—they learn to brainstorm and to offer critiques of ideas. This leads to more sophisticated outcomes in an iterative process.”

**SO, WHAT IS THE CE?**

Above all else, the Creativity Exploratory is a place where ideas fuel actions. It is a place to bring ideas to life. The CE is an innovation center; a creativity lab; a place to come and make things—artwork, documents, mixed media projects and more. A place to come and learn to shoot digital video; to record and edit audio; to learn how to create web pages. In the CE, students practice presentations; get feedback on their media, research, and other projects; host meetings for their student organizations, and launch new ones.

“In the CE,” says Professor of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures and Creativity Exploratory Convener Danielle Devoss, “students have the opportunity to join a team of people—faculty, staff and other students—working on interesting, engaging artistic and research projects addressing real-world concerns and issues. Excellent educators lead the CE, and understand that our students live in a world of constant change. Thus, they are committed to fostering a mindset that encourages students to create ideas and innovate.”

Dean Wurtz adds that, because the Creativity Exploratory is a co-curricular function, no grades are assigned. “This allows for more risk-taking in figuring out how to dissect difficult problems, how to gather information and clarify ambivalent information, elicit productive feedback, cope with criticism, persist and persevere.”
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WHY THE CE?
Upon graduation, today’s students enter an increasingly competitive job market—a job market that requires creative problem solving and collaborative teamwork.

The fact is, many of the jobs that our current freshmen will apply for upon graduation do not even exist today. And many other graduates will need to essentially create their own positions in organizations.

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“The CE helps prepare them to work in teams—cross-functionally and across disciplines—thereby bringing added value to their jobs and employers in a wide range of industries.”

CE FACILITIES
Located on the third floor of Linton Hall, just down the hallway from Dean Wurst’s office, the Creativity Exploratory space consists of a brainstorming room, a small computer lab, and a combination meeting/project room. Also accessible are a larger conference room/presentation area, and a small fabrication lab for prototyping and project work.

Work in the CE is based on an eight-stage continuous-loop process:
- **Communicate**: Discuss the project/problem.
- **Collaborate**: Create a team to work on it.
- **Investigate**: Learn all we can about it.
- **Ideate**: Explore possible solutions.
- **Simulate**: Test alternatives/develop metrics.
- **Create**: Make the chosen solution.
- **Activate**: Implement the solution.
- **Evaluate**: See what works and what doesn’t.

By adhering to this eight-stage process, projects are moved along in an orderly manner, covering all of the basics and better ensuring success.
The Creativity Exploratory hosts the CAL Documentary Film Lab that contains eight high-end, dual-boot Macintosh editing stations. Students working in the Doc Lab can access video equipment ranging from cameras and tripods to microphones, lighting kits and other tools to work on documentary projects.

FACULTY AND STAFF OVERSIGHT
Created in 2008 by Dean Karin Wurst, the Creativity Exploratory evolved from the idea stage into a full-fledged entity over the ensuing three years, with involved faculty and students taking on a few projects each year and proving the concept. Dedicated space in Linton Hall for the CE was committed in 2011, and the Creativity Exploratory was officially launched at the beginning of fall term.

Professor Devoss accepted the position of CE convener, and began building a team to administrate the Creativity Exploratory. The team includes a five-person steering committee, and a larger advisory board comprising primarily faculty and both an undergraduate and a graduate student representative to provide input and recommendations to the steering committee.

CE FELLOWS POSITIONS
Each year, College of Arts & Letters students apply for five paid CE Fellows positions. Faculty and staff interview each applicant, review their qualifications, and choose five new student CE Fellows. Committee members look for well-rounded students with diverse interests, and at least novice skills or experience in areas such as communication, writing, video, digital media, research, computer coding, and/or new technology.

Throughout the school year, Fellows perform research for the CE; host special events such as student open houses and community forums; hold brainstorming sessions for a variety of projects; help design, create and implement student workshops; ideate and conduct research projects that interest them; and complete myriad other creative tasks.

EXAMPLE CE PROJECTS
The Creativity Exploratory takes on a variety of multimedia projects ranging from print publications, websites, videos and short films, to events organization and social media campaigns. CE collaborators have completed digital projects such as the Master of Arts in Foreign Language Teaching website, an iOS-based application called Tour Guide, the Center for Language Teaching Advancement (CeLTA) website, as well as:

• The 517*theory Graffiti Project – CAL students and faculty analyze Lansing-area graffiti projects and study how graffiti impacts and develops communities.

• The CATA Documentary Project, which highlighted the importance of the CATA bus line to Lansing and East Lansing-area citizens, and how it impacts the development of community in the greater Lansing area.

• Help-Portrait – CE students recruited local photographers to use their photography skills to give back to the community. People who could not afford professional family portraits had portraits taken free of charge, including prints.

NURTURING ENVIRONMENT
Students and faculty alike thrive in the Creativity Exploratory’s creative, collaborative, and nurturing environment. Students feel free—and have the resources—to explore issues and problems beyond their coursework. Faculty, whether working side-by-side with students or serving as mentors, enjoy the one-on-one interactions and the less restrictive confines of the CE compared to typical classroom coursework.

“At the Creativity Exploratory…they want to see how big you can dream…,” says Creativity Exploratory Fellow Katie Pastor.

Professor Devoss agrees, and adds, “We want all College of Arts and Letters students—and broadly all university students—to come here to make, to explore, to do, to think, to research, to experiment—to have an experience that’s going to complement their major.”

Come find us at: http://ce.cal.msu.edu

Above right photo: CAL graphic design intern Lance Hammer (center) meets with Sophia Rochon, Terence Gipson, Sarah Matthews and Kat Palczewski to work on initial designs for a CE project.