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Creativity and Web Design: Designing and Producing a Successful Site on Creativity and Leadership

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Travis N., "Creativity and Web Design: Designing and Producing a Successful Site on Creativity and Leadership" (2014). *Creativity and Change Leadership Graduate Student Master's Projects*. 215. <https://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/creativeprojects/215>

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Creativity and Web Design:
Designing and Producing a Successful Site on Creativity and Leadership
by

Travis N. Turner

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science

August 2014

Buffalo State College
State University of New York
Department of Creative Studies

ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

*Creativity and Web Design: Designing and
Producing a Successful Site on Creativity and Leadership*

This project explores the connection between design, website development and creativity. As the Internet plays an increasing role in every day life, the ability to produce a high-quality website showcasing one's personal and professional writing becomes essential to personal and career success. This project features a literature review as well as an analysis of successful website to determine what makes for a good site. The project then implements these findings with a complete re-design of www.creativeleader.com as well adding and improving the content already on the site.

Keywords: *blogging, website development, design, search engine optimization*

Travis N. Turner

Signature:

August 29, 2014

Date:

Buffalo State College
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August 29, 2014



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Section One: Background of the Project

Rationale for the Project

It all started back in 2008. My interest in creativity began with a product, and now this masters' degree culminates with work on yet another product. I first became interested in creativity as the by-product of a hobby, attempting to design board games. I say "attempted" because while I succeeded in designing some fun-to-play board games prototypes, I have yet to bring one to market. As part of this process, however, I became increasingly interested in creativity itself, both academically and practically, as the process by which ideas and creative products are produced. This interest in creativity led me, in 2010, to attend a creativity conference in upstate New York where I was introduced to Four Sight model as well as past alumni and professors of Buffalo State's International Center for Studies in Creativity. In addition, I learned that my problem solving preference was as an ideator and implementer.

At Buffalo State, I have learned numerous tools for engaging in deliberate ideation, as well as developing tools for convergent thinking. While working on my Master of Science in Creativity degree, I have been working on establishing myself as a blogger/online entrepreneur. In total, I have five sites that I am currently working on:

- Creativeleader.com
- Gainselldiscipline.com
- Gainemotionalstrength.com
- Manner-of-happiness.com
- Ldsstudyjournal.com

As part of this learning-by-doing process, I have been perplexed (and somewhat stymied) by a creative challenge, how to produce a website with engaging content that is also profitable. For years I have focused on producing worthwhile substantive content on creativity and leadership. However, to my chagrin, the content I produced was not getting the results or readership that I hoped.

As I investigated why my results were, quite frankly, so poor when compared to the immense energy and time invested, I came to two main conclusions. One, I write like a lawyer/academic, not a popular blogger. And two, my websites featured terrible design and implementation. Considering that I have nearly eight years legal experience and zero marketing and website development experience, the results are probably not too surprising. Some problems include a lack of professional word press theme, cluttered formatting, unclear content focus, and a lack of clarity regarding my personal style and brand.

Over the past year, however, I have made substantial improvement as online author and with developing sites. This included by studying, among others, online copywriting, photography, search engine optimization, and Word press website development.

While I have made some progress in the last year, I would still like to learn how to produce great websites and book reviews.

Purpose and Description

The purpose of this project is four-fold: (1) to become more familiar with general design principles, especially those relevant online; (2) re-designing my website on creativity and leadership – featuring book reviews of creativity books as well as other

articles; (3) learn how to attract viewers and build repeat traffic by producing good content and through search engine optimization; and (4) increase my earnings through this and other sites.

Section Two: Pertinent Literature

I reviewed a variety of types of literature (books, journal articles, blogs, other online resources etc.) in researching design and website development. For the most part, journal articles were not really useful – there were few relevant articles and they were dated or too abstract.

The most helpful resources turned out to be books on design and web development. Generally speaking, these books were published in the last few years and contained a collection of valuable information and resources. Blogs were helpful in terms of providing anecdotal support or illustration of design principles in action as well as technical know-how regarding website development.

Aesthetics of Website

- Look and feel of a website is very important. People decide first whether they trust the site based on its look and feel, and then they use this information to justify trusting (or not) the content of the site. (Weinschenk, 2011, p. 177).
- Aesthetic-Usability Effect – This principle describes an occurrence in which people “perceive more-aesthetic designs as easier to use than less-aesthetic designs-whether they are or not. ... Aesthetic designs look easier to use and have a higher probability of being used, whether or not they actually are easier to use.” (Lidwell, W., Holden, K., Butler, J. & Elam, K., 2010, chap. 6, sec. 1, para. 1).
- Alignment – “Elements in a design should be aligned with one or more other elements. This creates a sense of unity and cohesion, which contributes to the design’s overall aesthetic and perceived stability.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 8, sec. 1, para. 1).

- Consistency – “According to the principle of consistency, systems are more useable and learnable when similar parts are express in similar ways. Consistency enables people to efficiently transfer knowledge to new contexts, learn new things quickly, and focus attention on relevant aspects of a task.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap 24., sec. 1, para. 1).
- Entry point – Landing pages and main pages of websites are exceptionally important as they form a user’ opinion of the whole site. “This initial impression of a system or environment greatly influences subsequent perceptions and attitudes, which then affects the quality of subsequent interactions.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 36, sec. 1, para. 1). Effective entry points minimize barriers, allow people to become oriented to the whole site with their options, and use “lures” to encourage people to continue through the entry point.
- Horror Vacui. “A latin expression meaning ‘fear of emptiness’ – regarding the desire to fill empty spaces with information or objects.” For website design, this means designers should include sufficient empty space. “Recent research into how *horror vacui* is perceived suggests a general inverse relationship between *horror vacui* and value perception—that is, as *horror vacui* increases, perceived value decreases.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 60, sec. 1., para. 1)

Functionality of Website

- People want more choices than they can process. More choices draw people in and encourage them to look but including too many choices makes it hard for them to decide. Often they end up leaving without choosing anything. The safest

bet is to include three to four choices, as any more can send them into information overload. (Weinschenk, 2011, p. 206).

- Hierarchy of needs. “The hierarchy of needs principles specifies that a design must serve the low-level needs (e.g., it must function), before the higher-level needs, such as creativity, can begin to be addressed.” The five needs are functionality, reliability, usability, proficiency, and creativity. (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 56, sec. 1, para. 2).

Content of Website

- Blog posts – There are at least 12 elements of engaging blog posts, including a compelling headline, hook statement (identify a problem give them a reason to keep reading), an appropriate image, promise a solution, provide a solution, make it easy to read and scan, include quotes, select a keyword to focus on, link your articles, provide an action plan, and solicit feedback or questions. (Scott, 2013, chap. 4, sec. 1, para. 4).
- Stories – Stories persuade more than logic or data because stories trigger emotional reactions and evoke empathy. Emotions trigger the memory centers so stories help improve memory recall as well. The most effective stories are often in video format. (Weinschenk, 2011, p. 168).
- Chunking – “A technique of combining many units of information into a limited number of units of chunks, so that the information is easier to process and remember.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 16, sec. 1, para. 1).

- Headlines – Without a great headline, it is unlikely that content will be read.
“The best headlines can’t help content that’s consistently thin and weak. But it will do a lot to increase audience engagement for quality content, as well as shares and links.” (Simone, Dec. 16, 2013).
- Use subheadings – “...if you’re writing a long post, it often a good idea to subdivide your writing into smaller units, using subheadings inside your post.” (MacDonald, 2012, p. 169).
- Highlighting – “Highlight no more than 10 percent of the visible design ...Bolding is generally preferred over other techniques as it adds minimal noise to the design and clearly highlights target elements. ... Underlining adds considerable noise and compromises legibility, and should be used sparingly if at all.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 59, sec. 1, para. 3)
- Inverted Pyramid – “The inverted pyramid refers to a method of information presentation in which critical information is presented first, and then additional information is presented in descending order of importance.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 58, sec. 1, para. 2)
- Footer – “Over time, web page footers have grown to resemble a mini site map, with links to each of the main pages of the site. These links not only help the user navigate the site but also help search engines like Google index the site properly, improving the search engine ranking – Google places a higher value on words contained within links.” (Miller, 2011, chap. 2, sec. 6, para. 1).

- Persuasion – Preparing evidence is important in persuading people to listen to you. “People need to hear your reasons and evidence to understand your position and be persuaded to arrive at the conclusion you want.” (Puhn, 2005, chap. 18, sec. 1, para. 2).

Process of Website Development and Content Creation

- Design by committee – Design works best when many are involved, unless there are tight time constraints. “Design by committee is preferred when projects are quality-driven, requirements are complex, consequences of error are serious, or stakeholder buy in-is important.” Design by committee help ensure acceptance among a wider audience (Lidwell, 2010, chap. 33, sec. 1, para. 4).
- Desire lines – Use online tools to create “heat maps” of user behavior on a site as a way of harnessing “desire lines.” Desire lines represent “an unbiased indication of how an object or environment is actually used by people, which is valuable information that can be applied to the design ... of an object or environment.” (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 34, sec. 1, para. 2).
- Focus and distraction – The more sites you maintain, the harder it will be to create a top-notch site. Focus your site on a few keywords and a central theme. But make sure to write on topics you are interested, so that you can keep up blogging. (Apokedak, Oct. 11, 2013).
- Iteration – “In design, iteration allows complex structures to be created by progressively exploring, testing, and tuning the design. The emergency of ordered complexity results from an accumulation of knowledge and experience

that is applied to the design.” In other words, plan to take a design through multiple iterations before implementing it. Even after implementation, you may make tweaks but that involves re-work. (Lidwell et al., 2010, chap. 67, sec. 1, para. 2).

- Research – The best copywriters are diligent researchers. Dig deeper, scour websites, articles, out-of-print books. “Don’t just be an expert – be a dork about your topic. The depth and richness you’ll gain will show.” (Simone, Dec. 16, 2013).
- Measuring success – The best way to measure success of a blog posting is by tracking four metrics for each posting: number of comments, social shares, longest average time on page, and unique page views. The author encourages an iterative design and writing process: “once you detect a pattern in reader demand, just write more of the articles that people like and less of what gets a low response.” (Scott, 2013, chap. 5, sec. 5., par. 3).
- Narrative structure – A typical narrative follows a pattern: exposition, rising action, crisis, climax, followed by falling action. “Good exposition provides just enough backstory to explain how the protagonist happens to be in a particular place, at a particular time...” (Hart, 2011, p. 27).
- Finding your voice – “Voice, as conventional wisdom would have it, is your unique style. It’s your personal brand of verbiage. Basically, if someone started reading your words, she would know it’s you without reading your name anywhere. ... Your voice is you. It’s how you sound on paper.” (Hughes, 2014, chap 13., sec. 2, para. 3).

The literature review was a valuable exercise in that it provided a number of principles that I could apply to improve my site. For instance, I could break up the text (chunking, highlighting) to make it more readable. I could add more white space (horror vacui) by choosing a different theme. When the literature review was coupled with the analysis of other successful sites, I had a plethora of actionable ideas that I used to make significant improves in my websites.

Section Three: Process Plan

As a project plan, I used the course framework as a starting point to make sure that I had my project ready ahead of the deadline (see Table1 below). I wanted to make sure that I was focusing my attention on the project itself, rather than the course requirements surrounding the Master's project.

Table 1 Process Plan

	Phase	Description of Phase	Goal Completion Date
I	Literature review	Review academic and popular literature on design, website design, book reviews, and blogging	January 15
II	Analysis of web sites; preliminary write-up	Analyze successful sites and distill essential principles; include analysis of current sites; complete for three sections of write-up	February 5
III	Produce website design documents	Create website design documents Appendix A – Analysis of Current Site Appendix B – Analysis of Successful Sites Appendix C – Design Elements of Ideal Site Appendix D – Blogging Skills Checklist Appendix E – Screen Shots of Old Site Appendix F – Google Analytics Metrics	February 15
IV	Select and write book review; redesign website; Finalize write-up	Read three creativity books and write book reviews; write three posts on non-book review topics; re-write current top eight pages; Finalize write-up	April 1

One challenge I faced with this project is dealing with limited time and energy constraints. Work and my personal life have been busy so I have had limited energy to devote to this project. This became especially true when I was put out of house for an extended period of time and became unexpected ill for a few months. Therefore, one

objective of this project has been to be effective in producing my intended creative outcome.

Phase I – Conducting Research and Drafting a Literature Review

The starting place for my project was conducting a literature review. In particular, I researched general design principles that I later applied in re-designing the website. The best sources were actually a handful of books on design and website design by industry experts. Additionally, there were a large number of online articles that were helpful in improving my content and web design.

While I ordinarily place little value in online articles due to concerns about credibility and the lack of verification of information, in this instance they were helpful. This was because their topics were on online writing and web site development – things that online authors have credibility and experience. As websites are constantly changing and improving, it makes sense to look online for answers to what makes a great website. Finally, as success online is easier to measure than off-line, it didn't matter where ideas came from. If the ideas and suggestions are effective, they will result in measurable improvement in terms of website and page visits, returning traffic, and average time spent on site. By implementing different ideas on different pages on the site, I could get a rough idea of what was working and what was not.

Phase II – Analysis of Successful Web Sites

The next phase of my project was arguably the most important. Once I equipped myself with theories of design and website development, I analyzed a number of sites that I determined were successful. My main criterion for selection was based on their “online” success. In other words, I purposefully excluded persons who largely obtained

their reputation “off-line” through traditional mediums and industries such as Anderson Cooper and Clayton Christiansen. Michael Hyatt was selected though he obtained his success partially online and offline, largely because his message concerned with how to build a personal online platform. I selected the remaining persons exclusively based on their online reputation, including Jeff Bullas (JeffBullas.com), Maria Popova (Brainpicker.org), and Brett and Kate McKay (ArtofManliness.com).

As set forth in more detail in Appendix B, I reviewed each site concerning the following issues:

- About the Author – author’s biography, personality, skills, and uniqueness
- Web design basics – Word press theme, color scheme, formatting and display of writing, artistic choices, etc.
- Writing and editorial – main theme, style, topics, connection between author and content, frequency of new content, use of guest authors
- Revenue model – products, services, speaking engagements, classes, advertising, affiliate links, or donations
- Interactions with audience – moderation of comments, social media, speaking engagements, classes, etc.

At ended this phase by starting the preliminary write-up of my project, especially the first three sections. This was important because the first three sections helped me frame exactly what I am looking to do for the project. In addition, writing helps me clarify my thinking. For me, writing and thinking is an iterative process – where writing helps clarify thinking and vice versa. Later, in the project, I went back and re-wrote much of my earlier work based on new and additional insights.

Phase III – Produce Website Design Documents

The third phase of the project was to produce the design documents, including:

- Appendix A – Analysis of Current Site
- Appendix B – Analysis of Successful Sites
- Appendix C – Design Elements of Ideal Site
- Appendix D – Blogging skills checklist

I drafted these documents to help bring consistency to my website and to put into practice the learning gained from the literature review and analysis of websites.

Phase IV – Redesign Site and Revise and Add Content

The fourth phase was the most important part of my project. In order to achieve the maximum results in terms of blog traffic, I divided my time between four activities:

- Redesigning the site
- Producing new content
- Re-writing content already on the site
- Promoting posts through social media

The following are just some of things that I did as part of this phase of the project:

- Implemented a new word press theme
- Developed congruent sidebar with standard image sizes
- Created a footer
- Improved post formatting
- Generated 6 new posts
- Solicited future guest posts from classmates
- Rewrote substantial number of blog posts
- Removed extraneous hyperlinks

- Added videos from Youtube
- Compress file size of images to improve speed
- Wrapped text around images
- Added highlighting and pull quotes to make text readable
- Promoted site via pinterest, facebook, linkedin, and twitter

Section Four: Outcomes

Site Enhancements

The single most significant enhancement to my site was buying a new Word press theme (the genesis framework with the magazine theme). Up to this point, I had been using free word press themes (see Appendix E for screen shots of old site). Besides the cost, I had been reluctant to purchase a Word press theme because there was no guarantee that the new theme would solve the aesthetic and design problems. In times past, I had installed promising themes, but which ultimately proved to be buggy or otherwise difficult to use, not realizing the hoped for benefits.

I researched which word press theme/framework to buy, and the consensus was that the Genesis framework was the best framework. Eventually, I bought the Magazine Pro theme and Genesis framework for \$99. I had purchased the Thesis framework nine months prior, but at that time, my word press skills were insufficient to properly use it and I ultimately returned it for a refund.

However, this time buying the theme proved to be a smashing success. Immediately my search traffic, earnings, and repeat traffic improved. I could tell it was a good theme because it made formatting my blog easier and consistent with industry standards. For instance, when users placed their mouse over titles, the links appeared in light blue. Additionally, hyperlinks showed up as light blue in the text, eliminating the distracting underlying that had previously been used. Further, the new theme had a wide sidebar where I could place large images and Google ads (with the 336 x 280 pixel option). This theme met nearly all design elements that I was looking for.

Aesthetically, the blog looked much better after my improvements. The sidebar was filled with content of roughly the same width and height, which made it appear more consistent and purposefully designed. I also added a video block in the sidebar showing random videos. This helped improve my time on site, a key performance metric, as well as made the blog more compelling to visitors, encouraging repeat traffic.

The new theme suffered from less “horror vacui” than the prior one. For one thing, the prior theme had a tan background while the new theme was white. As a result, there was far more white space on the screen than before making it easier to read.

However, there were some snags along the way. I attempted to edit the theme I installing on one site, and caused some formatting glitches, necessitating me to complete re-install the site (on a different site). Second, the addition of videos caused my Google cost per click (CPC) to plummet for a while. I believe placing video and ads in close proximity caused Google to think that some clicks were fraudulent, causing my CPC to plummet. However, once I moved the videos away from the Google ads, my revenue eventually rebounded.

Analyzing and Rewriting Content

To determine what pages needed to be revised, I reviewed Google analytics for three factors: time on page, bounce rate, and average pages viewed for each landing page (the page a user enters the site). I started by revising pages where I received the most traffic, and then went on to the posts received less traffic.

I re-wrote the content in two main ways. Some posts were only tangentially related to creativity. When I rewrote them, I reduced the non-relevant content and made the points illustrating creativity much more directly. Other posts were way too abstract

and academic. I shortened these posts by cutting out long passages, and used highlighting, chunking, quotes, images, and videos to make them more interesting.

For example, two postings were not sufficiently connected to creativity (Review of the Creativity Cruise and Using Clever References at Milburn Orchards). I reduced the amount of extraneous personal information not related to the creativity point in the Milburn Orchards post, and made my point on using references more explicitly. I also added new content related to creativity summarizing speakers on the creativity cruise and substantially reduced the amount of unrelated content and pictures. Another post ([Creative leadership development](#)) was long and rambling. I shortened this, made it more focused on my key points, and added highlighting, pull quotes, images, and videos to make it more interesting. Other improved posts included [Qualities of Visionary Leaders](#) and [Best Creativity Conferences](#).

Reformatting Posts

Based on my literature review and analysis of websites, I learned a number of ways that my content needed to be reformatted to improve readability. The first problem to be solved was improve the placement of the hyperlinks. Many of my links were placed in a cluttered and distracted manner (“[Read [Quotes on Creativity](#)]”) and embedded them carefully and subtly in the text (“[Creativity is important skill](#)”). This alone made the text less cluttered and more readable. In addition, the new theme made the text more readable by showing hyperlinks in blue (rather than underlined).

The next technique I applied was highlighting. Consistent with the research, I highlighted using bold – removing underlining, quotation marks, and italics wherever possible. I also added a plugin that allowed me to do pull quotes – large font quotations separated from the text.

To a lesser extent than highlighting, I applied the technique of chunking. Mainly, I accomplished this by breaking larger paragraphs up into two and sometimes three smaller paragraphs, sometimes of only a sentence or two. The shorter paragraphs made the text much easier to read. I also broke long sentences into shorter ones. Occasionally, I chunked the text by adding bullet points, but I found that with the short paragraphs there wasn't too much need for bullets for further chunking.

Content Addition

In addition to revising the formatting and content of many posts, I also added substantial new content to the site in the form of three books reviews:

- [Cracking Creativity by Michael Michalko](#)
- [Creative Confidence by Tom and David Kelley](#)
- [The Creative Habit by Twilya Tharp](#)

Besides book reviews, I added some content that was a little “lighter” than full the book reviews.

- [Seven Deadly Sins of Delegation](#)
- [Inspiring Quotes about Visionary Leaders](#)

I selected the topics because they represented keywords that I wrote on frequently. By adding content with the same key words already on the blog, I strengthened the rankings

of both the old and new content. When I first started blogging, I would constantly right on new keywords (e.g., I had no focus), but this resulted in very poor results. By narrowing my keywords (e.g, creativity, leadership, visionary, strategic, book review, quotes, etc.), the traffic to my blog has increased quite a bit.

Process

I employed an iterative process throughout the project. After my proposal was accepted, I immediately researched and purchased a theme for my site. I constantly bounced back and forth between working on the big write-up of the project, updating the blog, and producing future content for the blog. The upside of doing this was that I learned new things I went, using google analytics and revenue earned as metrics for when I was doing things right.

For instance, by installing some the new theme and re-formatting the top ten landing pages, I was able to double the time on site (amount of time an average viewer spends on the site), which resulted in a substantial increase in traffic, especially in the month of January.

However, I did have some problems along the way. Google did not like it when I placed videos near the Google AdSense ads; my earnings per click decreased substantially. So I changed course, and placed my Amazon affiliates near the videos.

An aspect of process that was new was that I wrote several of the book reviews nearly at the same time. I took a trip out-of-town and locked myself in a hotel, and cranked out three book reviews over the course of a few days. Writing multiple posts nearly at the same time helped improve both the quality of the posts and made it more time efficient.

Different Sources of Feedback

In order to assess the success of my efforts to improve my site, I looked to three main sources of feedback. First, I obtained qualitative feedback from three different friends/classmates (see Table 2 below). I had attempted to get more feedback, but not everyone responded and some feedback wasn't really that helpful or useable. Second, I obtained valuable statistics from Google Analytics (see Table 3 below). Third and finally, I viewed my earnings via Google AdSense as a generic proxy regarding the success of my sites (see Table 5 below). If my sites started making more money, it meant that people generally liked them better and found them useful and informative, and as a result, were visiting them more often and clicking on my advertisements.

Table 2 Feedback about Website

Positive Feedback	Suggested Improvements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like how it already has a bunch of content, instead (like mine) a sparse beginnings...makes it seem 'meaty' already when I go to it. Great stuff. • Site looks really good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to make social links consistent – on way page you show 2 twitter accounts and another place you show 4 accounts. • You should include a picture on your about page, as well as possible the main page. • You need an introductory page or post tying the blog together, defining creative leadership, etc. • Your belief sections covers a topic (religious) that is not relevant to the blog. You should tie it to the blog or remove altogether.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'd say that I like the clean, uncluttered layout. • The symmetry or consistency of the layout is very good (pictures of all the same size down the left margin, etc.). • The content has a wide variety, even your self-authored content covers a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add a search box. It would help anyone who is looking for something specific, such as an old posting or article that they remember and liked. • Add a sign up for updated notices option - a box where a visitor can enter their emails so that they can

<p>broad range of creativity subjects. It's a really good resource, and it has something for everyone on it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like your 'my beliefs' link. 	<p>be automatically notified by email when a new posting is made to the website.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add a way to contact you (web form, not email address or you'll get spammed a lot) - there may be some folks who would like to have you speak to them at events, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Your content speaks for itself. Good collection of interesting articles." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I would ultimately transition from a Word Press theme to something more professional, or at least unique. Nothing says I'm an amateur blogger like Word Press precisely because it is easy to use and very common."

Analysis of Statistics

My project was definitely a success. There was a number of key metrics that I used, both for the site as a whole and on individual landing pages. Note that my metrics got worse from Q2 to Q3 (see Table 3 below). This is natural as traffic increases; it is harder to increase usage as the site grows from a niche site to a general interest site. However, notice that my traffic and usage improved during the course of the Master's project. This is a direct indication that, on whole, people liked the changes to the site. Not only did the site get more visitors, they stayed longer on the site and viewed more pages. For instance, the total time on site increased by 5.1% from Q3 to Q4 2013, but then 67.5% from Q4 to Q1 2014. Some of this time is attributable to my own views of the site (when editing, etc.), but most of it indicates the real growth of the site.

Table 3 Quarterly Site Statistics

	Total Visits	Total Time on Site (mins)	Average Time on Site (mins)	Average Pages / Visit	Bounce Rate

Q3 2013	2469	6172.5	2:30	1.82	76.59%
Q4 2013	4231	6487.5 (+5.1%)	1:43	1.49	81.59%
Q1 2014	6330	10866.5 (+67.5%)	1:43	1.45	78.23%

The Table 4 below shows that my effort to revise the content already on the site was fruitful. By in large, the vast majority of the pages that I worked on showed improvement. The only pages that didn't do as well tended to be the result of me focusing on different keywords. This chart is a summary – the full chart is shown in Appendix F.

Table 4 Post Revision Summary Statistics

	New Visits	Average Time	Pages Viewed	Bounce Rate
Pages showing improvement	6 / 8	7 / 8	6 / 8	6 / 8

The Table 5 below shows the earnings attributable to Google AdSense earnings from my various sites. Though this project was focused on my creativity site, I spent a fair amount of time during this period working on my other sites as well. Earnings fluctuate widely and depend on the amount of traffic during a given time period as well as the CPC (cost per click) paid by the advertisers on my site (all arranged through Google AdSense). As demonstrated by Table 5, my earnings nearly doubled during the course of the master's project. However, when you take in account the hundreds of hours I put in, I would make more in retail than via blogging. Blogging is truly a labor of love.

Table 5 Summary of Adsense Earnings

	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Total
Creativeleader.com	\$6.03	\$2.15	\$10.05	\$5.34	\$23.57
Manner-of-happiness	\$4.46	\$4.43	\$5.41	\$4.47	\$18.77
Gainselfdiscipline	\$1.03	\$0.20	\$1.12	\$0.92	\$3.27
LDS Study Journal	\$1.90	\$9.31	\$4.63	\$10.61	\$26.45
Total	\$13.42	\$16.09	\$21.21	\$21.34	\$72.06

Section Five: Key Learning

Domain Name

Picking a good domain name is an absolute essential aspect of online success, as once it does, it essentially impossible to un-do. While you can move your site to a new domain, ever time I have done that I have lost nearly all my traffic.

Of the sites I analyzed, the publishers either chose their full name for their site (Michael Hyatt or Jeff Bullas), or a branded site name (Art of Manliness or Brain Pickings). Using your own name comes across as a little vain if you're not well known. Using a branded site is effective in communicating the theme of your site to visitors but it can also be limiting if you want to expand the topics on your blog over time.

A third option is choose a domain named largely for search engine optimization purposes such as copyblogger or problogger, where search keywords are paired with other branding words.

My domain named creativeleader.com is a branded site name. It is the only premium domain name that I have purchased. The upside of my site is that it has a catchy branded name. The downside of the site is that it really two topics – creativity and leadership. While the academic community has developed the unitary ideas of the creative leader and creative leadership, those concepts are still relatively separate in the minds of most readers. In contrast, my site gainselfdiscipline.com is getting higher page views and time on site (because it focused on only one topic) even though it is less developed and has less content.

Topic Selection and Blogging Theme

The sites I analyzed all had a clear central theme and focus with a limited number of topics. For instance, the Art of Manliness was clearly about “being a manly man”, written from a 1950s-themed perspective and covered a variety of men’s issues. Michael Hyatt was about online publishing, and limited topics to leadership, productivity, platform, publishing, and resources. Maria Popova of Brainpickings.org has the most diverse topics – spanning love, art, life, creativity, writing, and more. However, all her postings are done with her signature curatorial and artistic style.

My blog features creativity and leadership and covers events, book reviews, theories, people, and more. While my blog ostensibly is tied together via creative leadership, it features a variety of topics – creativity, leadership, vision, and strategy. However, even with the new design of the blog, the unifying theme isn’t readily apparent (though it is better than it was). For a complete analysis of my current website (before I made changes), see Appendix A.

Website Design

There were common elements between the best blogs that I reviewed. First, a theme with lots of white space with a traditional right-hand sidebar with two-levels of navigation, pages and categories, was common. Second, a strong design is one that reflects the central theme of the site. For instance, the Art of Manliness clearly showcased the theme of old-fashion manhood by its heavy use of black-and-photos as well as a variety of iconic images and diagrams showcasing manliness. In contrast, Maria Popova’s site portrays a post-modern art feel with her incredible use of fonts, images, all set in her simple but elegant yellow and black theme. See Appendix C for a complete listing of the elements that I identified would represent an “ideal” website.

My theme has a simple magazine feel. It does not really reflect creativity (yet). However, it is more like a simple magazine on creativity and leadership. I can improve this by finding better images and using a more interesting front page layout than the one I currently have (see Figure 1 below). However, my current theme nonetheless represents a huge improvements over prior themes.

Figure 1 Preview of New Site

ABOUT ARTICLES PERSONAL BELIEFS READING LIST SOCIAL MARCH 17, 2014

f g+ in p t

Creative Leader

CREATIVITY LEADERSHIP BOOK REVIEW EVENT QUOTE

Creative Confidence by Tom and David Kelley
 In the book *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us* All within us all, Tom Kelley and David Kelley share with their readers the valuable insights gained at IDEO, the award-winning design firm. Blending insights from a thriving design practice and the Stanford School of Design, the Kelleys help readers to embrace their creative potential [...]

SAVE 30% ON NEW HEATING & AIR CONDITIONING DELUXE SYSTEM PACKAGES FROM LENNOX
 SAVE 30% ON NEW HEATING & AIR CONDITIONING DELUXE SYSTEM PACKAGES FROM LENNOX. *SAVE 30% ON NEW HEATING & AIR CONDITIONING DELUXE SYSTEM PACKAGES FROM LENNOX.*

Inspiring quotes about visionary leaders
 Being a visionary is not easy. It takes work to stay motivated, keep your passion, while overcoming obstacles. The inspiring quotes about visionary leaders will help you become one yourself. If I have seen farther than others, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants ~ Isaac Newton The only way to [...]

Review of the Creativity Cruise
 A few years back, I had the good fortune of being part of the inaugural "creativity cruise." Early in February, we set sail from Miami, Florida towards the Bahamas on a Carnival cruise ship (this was before their string of incidents). The creativity cruise featured a number of speakers, including Frank Prince, Amy Basic, Win [...]

Book Review: Cracking Creativity by Michael Michalko
 In the book *Cracking Creativity: The Secrets of Creative Genius*, Michael Michalko reveals the results of his research of over 100 creativity geniuses. Michalko researched visionary geniuses including Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Edison, Wolfgang Mozart, Michelangelo, Nikola Tesla, and Walt Disney. Michalko generalizes that ordinary people solve problems by reproducing what worked in the [...]

Self-discipline will improve your life
 Gainselfdiscipline.com

Creative Leadership Development
 Creative leadership is the combination of creativity (the ability to generate ideas) with leadership (the ability to execute them through the actions of others). According to the IBM 2010 study, creativity was the most important skill needed for dealing with complex and turbulent times. Depicted is the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), which provides excellent [...]

2007 Volkswagen Eos 3.2L
 Silver Gray Convertible 2 door, 8-sp...
 \$16,495 View

2008 Volkswagen Eos Turbo
 Blue Convertible 2 door, 8-Speed DL...
 \$11,000 View

8 Best Creativity Conferences
 Creativity conferences are a great way to learn about creativity, make new friends and connections, and increase your personal vision. I have recommended eight

AWESOME POSTS

Creative Leadership Development
 Qualities of Visionary Leaders
 Types of Creativity and the Movie Admission
 Creative Discipline: An Oxymoron

Writing Frequency and Topic Selection

The best bloggers wrote (1) frequently and (2) stayed focused on a few specific areas or a general theme. For instance, the average posting frequency (per week) was:

- Michael Hyatt: 10 to 12 posts per month
- Jeff Bullas: 5 posts per month
- Maria Popova: 30+ posts per month
- Art of Manliness: 25+ posts per month

In contrast, I am lucky to post once in a month or even two months. This is because I have too many blogs. One way I might solve this is by only posting regularly on two sites (Creative leader & LDS Study Journal). In addition, I will constantly be on the lookout for guest authors. In addition, I might write for a few minutes in the morning on a regular basis before going to work. Another strategy might be develop “short post” formats like the ones used by Michael Hyatt – with a quote and engaging picture, a podcast, etc.

The best way to deal with this is by posting new posts to Twitter and Facebook “New Post – 6 Ways to be a Creative Leader”. Using this method will help people find my new content without repeatedly visiting my site (and find nothing new). This way I can post whenever I want, rather than feel pressured to keep a schedule that is too time-consuming for me. Perhaps I won’t make it as a big-time blogger, but maybe that is fine.

The best sites had a clear topical or thematic focus and stuck to it very carefully. For instance, Michael Hyatt’s topics were leadership, productivity, and creating an online platform. Jeff Bullas was even more focused, covering just social media and blogging. Art of Manliness covered a wide variety of topics, but the thematic focus was extremely clear – an old-fashioned but stylized take on the topics related to what constitutes

manhood. Maria Popova's site contains her curation of "interestingness", covering a variety of topics with consistency and her artistic and curational skill.

My site covers both creativity and leadership. One thing I have learned is that it is easier to rank higher in search engine on a single topic site. However, the downside is that if you are interested in writing on a variety of topics, it gets really hard because you either have to create new sites or forego writing on them altogether.

While my blog has topical focus (creativity and leadership), it still lacks a thematic focus, both in terms of content and in terms of website design. Every post would help readers become better creative leaders. In addition, the web design and layout would support the thematic focus of developing your capacity for creative leadership. A final thing that will be helpful is to have a "start here" page or post, explaining creative leadership and then laying out a path to obtain it.

Revenue Model

While there was some variety in revenue models of successful sites, they almost always had their own products and services to sell. For instance, Michael Hyatt had his book, speaking engagements, as well as other online classes. Art of Manliness had several e-books as well as branded merchandise. One exception to the rule is Maria Popova, who makes money via donations to the site coupled with affiliates links to some well-executed book reviews.

Selling their own products and services helped them in four ways. First, their products help lend credibility to their claims of expertise. Second, their products and services allowed their audience to engage with the publisher to a greater degree (reading a book, an online course, attending a conference). Third, advertising their own products

and services is perceived as being less “pesky” than general banner ads. Fourth and finally, their own products allow them to obtain a much higher amount of revenue per click. In other words, selling their own products allowed them to make higher revenue given a certain amount of traffic.

If they did employ advertising (such as the Art of Manliness), it was generally highly targeted in terms of relevance. I think my next steps will be to explore direct placement advertisements with specific advertisements as well as developing my own products.

Interactions with Audience

The best sites were HIGHLY interactive with their audience. For instance, Michael Hyatt responds individually to comments on his blog (not all of them, but many). He constantly responds to emails and tweets. Brett McKay responds to some tweets, but he has a special community section on his blog. Additionally, he has frequent guest posts.

I have been working on being more interactive on my tweeter accounts by responding to most tweets. In addition, I am actively soliciting guest posts on creativeleader.com.

Process

Prior to this master’s project, I didn’t really have a set process for developing this or other sites. I just got an idea, implemented it, until I got bored or found a better idea, and then repeated the process. The result was a blog covering a wide variety of topics, and web site design that made my site look, in part, like an online bazaar. In addition, I used to work almost exclusively alone. I couldn’t really bring in others into my creative

projects because I didn't know how to delegate. However, that changed when I studied delegation and wrote a series of posts on the subject (Delegation, Effective Delegation for Leaders, and Delegation Strategies for Leaders).

After completing this project, I still don't think that I will employ a static or fixed process as my mind doesn't usually work that way. However, I will modify my process in at least a few respects. First, I will work from a list of proposed posting topics and titles to help me stay on topic. Second, I will use my Blogging Skills Checklist (Appendix D) to help me generate new content. Third, I will involve others more in my blog by soliciting guest posts, hiring (eventually) a good web designer, and by soliciting continuous feedback from others about my blog. Fourth, I will continue to strive for interactivity in all my online activities. And fifth, I will continue to use iteration as part of my process – posting something and then constantly improving it over time.

Section Six: Conclusion

In recapping this project, I thought it would be appropriate to revisit my four objectives for this project and see how this project fared:

- Learn design principles, especially as applied to website design
- Redesign the site www.creativeleader.com
- Produce great content – book reviews and other types of posts; and
- Improve site traffic and earnings.

The first objective was largely accomplished by the literature review and analysis of successful sites. I obtained a plethora of actionable insight, much of which I implemented into the site. While more study on the subject is needed, this project helped open my eyes to many of the issues that were holding back my site and potential online.

The second objective was largely accomplished by implementing a new word press theme as well as revising old posts. This part of the project was very time consuming but had very positive results as demonstrated by Table 3 and Table 4.

The third objective was at least partially accomplished by adding several new posts – three books and three posts on other topics. Unfortunately, due to some external time constraints imposed by challenging circumstance in my non-academic life, I wasn't able to spend as much time crafting these posts as I would have liked. However, I did obtain develop an effective blue print for future posts and online efforts (Appendix D).

Notwithstanding the time constraint challenges that I faced, I did manage to substantially increase my traffic, not only for this site (the focus on my project), but also my other sites during this same period. As a result, my overall online earnings nearly doubled during the masters' project across all my sites as indicated by Table 5.

However, given the large time commitment I have invested into blogging, I will need to continue to make the assessment as to what level of time and effort I want to give to blogging in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Analysis of Current Site

Aesthetics – While my current Word press theme (Bold of Elegant Themes) represents a big improvement from past ones, it still does not have a professional look. Most professional sites feature a white background rather than a colored (tan) background.

My current site has a problem with the header image. I am having a hard time getting it to align with the text in the header.

Other problems include my sidebar, which is not wide enough. Because it is narrow, the text ends up wrapping around which looks really bad.

While some of my images are good, many images are rather bland. I haven't paid for any images so far, relying on free images or pictures that I have taken. However, to get to the next level, I should be some stock photos to make the blog images more compelling.

Formatting – My current theme makes hyperlinks as underlines. Unfortunately, this makes the page very cluttered and unreadable. I would prefer that my next theme show hyperlinks as blue, which is common standard online on Yahoo and other reputation news outlets.

Another formatting problem I have been having with images in postings. I haven't figured out how to make images wrap elegantly around text. Often, there are orphan lines or where the text to the right does not go the full length of the photo.

Functionality – My current site does not feature an effective two-tiered menu structure. The best sites I found had a navigation menu covering the various categories on the blog. Additionally, there is usually a separate menu for pages on the site. Additionally, I need to re-do my current category and tag structure. Ideally, there will be four to six types or “categories” of posts. For tags, I should do topics that are either popular or that will catch people's attention.

Content – My content has been nearly exclusively written, much of with a heavy, academic or legalistic style. Additionally, I have usually written from an impersonal or hidden voice. This is because when I first started writing, I wanted the focus to be on content rather than on me personally. However, to improve my writing, I need to find a way to include my unique voice or perspective in my writing.

Additionally, I need to make my content easier to read. I can do this several ways, including shorter sentence length, shorter paragraphs, using bold highlights and where appropriate. Additionally, I need intersperse the pages with images and videos, which help “pull” readers down the page.

Process – My current process for writing is to wait for something to spark my interest. If something does, I will usually fire off a post, writing furiously until I complete it or quickly lose interest and leave it to be completed late. Unfortunately, a problem with this is that I often have a hard time getting appropriate images, which are probably more important than the writing itself. Additionally, I have not included any third-parties in the process.

Another problem is that I haven't kept a central thematic focus of my work. As a result, the topics I write on tend to shift over time and my blog has an unfocused, wandering feel. Finally, each post tends to be formatted and written differently, as I don't have uniform style sheets for how to write and format posts. I need to develop some conventions that I will strive to follow.

Appendix B – Analysis of Successful Sites

MichealHyatt.com

- **Author** – Michael Hyatt first found success offline as a publisher, but he was quick to make the transition to online publishing. His biggest success is book “Platform”, a book about building an online place where consumer can find and follow you.
- **Web design basic** – Hyatt uses his custom developed “Get Noticed Theme.” This theme features large images, a variety of simple post types (podcasts, quotes, image posts, etc). His sidebar is striking because it features empty space with images all of the same size.
- **Writing and editorial** – Hyatt features a lot of light content – quotes, big images, podcasts. He write simply and punchy. He has also has a slew of people moderating the comments on his blog.
- **Revenue model** – Hyatt gets revenue in a variety of ways, namely his book Platform, speaking engagements, his custom developed word press Get Noticed Theme, and affiliate links.
- **Interactions with audience** – Hyatt interacts with his audience in a variety of ways. Some of his channels are one-way (the book, podcast). Others are conversational such as speaking engagements, moderated comments, and social media.

Jeff Bullas.com

- **Author** – Jeff Bullas is an author, blogger, social media strategist. He has an e-book titled, Blogging: The Smart Way.
- **Web design basic** – Bullas uses the simple Frugal theme, featuring loads of white space, a long scrolling home page, and a simple side bar with a few products and blog posting links.
- **Writing and editorial** – Bullas starts every post with a large compelling image, followed by a detailed by readable posts.
- **Revenue model** – Bullas sells his e-book as well as some online courses.
- **Interactions with audience** – Jeff is on Twitter, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn (but not Pinterest). Jeff is not as interactive as Hyatt though his topic is similar. Jeff is more content-focused than some.

Brainpickings.com

- **Author** – Maria Popova has taken the art of curation and content production to new heights with her site.
- **Web design basic** – Has simple custom developed site with left hand sidebar, and stylish posts. Her use of images and font sizes is spectacular. Her blog has an artistic, post-modern feel.
- **Writing and editorial** – Popova produces new content several times a week. To my knowledge, she does not use guest posts.
- **Revenue model** – Popova relies on Amazon affiliate links and donations via paypal.

- **Interactions with audience**

ArtofManliness.com

- **Authors** – Husband and wife Brett and Julie McKay started the site when he was in law school. It ended up taking off, and they do it full-time. They are exclusively an online publisher.
- **Web design basic** – Blog has a simple, old-time styled header image that sets the theme of the blog. They use thesis framework, and have custom developed the site so that everything has an old-time feel.
- **Writing and editorial** – Blog features frequent posts on men's issues, including occasional guest post. Every post features old-fashioned looking images and fits within their carefully executed style conventions.
- **Revenue model** – They sell direct placed ads on their site, as well as their own e-books, and branded men's goods.
- **Interactions with audience** – Blog has massive email subscribers, Facebook, google plus, and twitter followings. Site features its own social network and tons of comments.

Appendix C – Design Elements of Ideal Site

- Premium Word press theme – features, wide sidebar, magazine layout, good control of images convenient placement of ads, readable text, uncluttered text formats
- Right hand side bar for 336 X 280 sized ads; make all elements 336 pixels wide (280 tall, or 200 tall)
- Attractive color scheme (white, blue, black, purple)
- Lots of white space, including white background
- Two navigation bars, one for categories, one for pages
- Social media buttons integrated into the theme

Appendix D – Blogging Skills Checklist

Drafting

- Identify problem
- Catch reader's interest
- Make text easy to read with short words and sentences
- Draft catchy title for posting
- Know what key words you are targeting
- Find engaging images to write around

Formatting

- Use bold 5-10% for highlighting
- Chunk text into short paragraphs, sentences, and bullet lists

Search Engine Optimization

- One or two images – use keywords for alt name and file name
- Outbound links to high authority sites
- Make hyperlinks a variety of relevant key words
- Put links in footer
- Engaging meta description
- Sprinkle keywords throughout, but especially first and last paragraph, and h2 titles

Appendix E – Screenshots from Old Site

THIS IS BOLD creative leadership

about articles personal beliefs reading list social

Dec 20, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

The Best Creativity Conferences

Creativity conferences are a great way to learn about creativity, make new friends and connections, and increase your personal vision. I have recommended eight creativity conferences based on my...

[read more](#)

Nov 15, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

8 Reasons to Attend a Creativity Conference

Why attend a creativity conference? Have you ever heard the saying, "birds of a feather flock together?" Well, it is true. If you want to develop leadership, you should have met with other leaders. It...

[read more](#)

Nov 6, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

Convergent thinking and Creativity

Convergent thinking is an oft overlooked aspect of creativity. Most people are familiar with divergent thinking - the production of many ideas. The logic is that if you produce many ideas, at...

[read more](#)

Oct 20, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

Pumpkins, Donuts, Cider and Creativity

What do pumpkins, donuts, and cider have to do with creativity? Not much - usually. However, I recently had a chance to get some cider donuts and apple cider at Milliken Orchard, in Elton...

[read more](#)

Oct 3, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

Strategist Tim Ferriss and the Four-Hour Workweek

Recently, I have been reading the Four...

[read more](#)

Sept 12, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

The Blue Man Group and Creativity

The Blue Man Group is quite possibly the most creative live entertainment event that I have ever attended. I recently saw the Blue Man Group at their Arner Place home in New York City. I had wanted to...

[read more](#)

Aug 28, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

Quotes about Leaders

A collection of quotes specifically about leaders, rather than leadership. A Great Leader Inspires People "A leader is a dealer in hope." Napoleon Bonaparte "Our chief want is someone who will inspire..."

[read more](#)

Aug 8, 2013

Posted by Travis N. Turner **Travis N. Turner**

Best of the Second TedX Wilmington

The second TedX Wilmington conference did not disappoint. 24 great speakers presented to a packed audience in the World Cab Line in Wilmington, NC.

[read more](#)

Top Posts

- Qualities of Visionary Leaders
- Types of Creativity and the Movie Adaption
- Creative Discipline: An Overview
- Creative Leadership Quotes
- Creative Leadership Development
- Effective Delegation Skills
- Lateral Thinking by De Bono

Creativity Articles

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- Master's Degree in Creativity
- Designing Creative Space
- 3 Way to Generate Ideas
- Become More Creative
- Develop Creative Discipline
- Formal Education and

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- Vision

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Leading Leaders: How to Manage Smart, Talented, Risk, and Powerful People by Jonwald Salacuse

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You by John Maxwell

Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All by Tom and David Kelley

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- Vision

Key Largo, FL Hotel Deals

Just found 81 KAYAK.com Key Largo, FL Hotel Deals

- 8177* Holiday...
- 8177* Courty...
- 8177* Ocean P...
- 8177* Marlin...
- 8177* Hill...
- 8187* Hampton...

Appendix F – Google analytics metrics

	New Visits	Average Time	Pages Viewed	Bounce Rate
Types of Strategies	751 / 473	0:45 / 1:06	1.15 / 1.21	88.83% / 87.53%
Qualities of Visionary Leaders	603 / 1375	1:55 / 1:30	1.16 / 1.30	82.88% / 82.62%
Lateral Thinking	153 / 291	1:56 / 1:58	1.18 / 1.30	83.64% / 81.44%
Creative Thinking Skills in Executive Education	122 / 56	0:24 / 0:29	1.17 / 1.20	89.93% / 87.50%
The Path of Least Resistance	83 / 112	0:51 / 1:05	1.28 / 1.12	79.31% / 87.50%
Creative Leadership Quotes	77 / 104	1:45 / 3:15	1.18 / 1.30	85.71% / 85.58%
The Creative Habit	55 / 92	0:36 / 1:09	1.19 / 1.15	82.09% / 83.70%
Creative Leadership Development	49 / 84	1:46 / 1:50	1.15 / 1.36	81.48% / 78.08%
Pages showing improvement	6 / 8	7 / 8	6 / 8	6 / 8

Comparison of top posts between (November/December 2013 and January/February 2014)