

## Chapter 3

### Troublesome creativity

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##### Introduction

'There have been many popes but there is only one Michaelangelo'. That risky aside to a powerful benefactor who literally held power of life and death, demonstrates many of the troublesome issues which surround the concept of creativity. This includes the white, western, male concept of the creative genius which still pervades our culture; the individual nature of that power and the potential disruption and challenge to existing ideas, knowledge and power structures. This chapter will explore this strange phenomenon of creativity which our society holds in such high regard, through discussing a short history of creativity, by looking at different types of creativity and considering different explanations of the creative process.

##### A short history of creativity

In western civilisation the idea of creativity starts as a literal 'act of god' and is aligned with the power of bringing the universe into being, the ultimate act of creation - 'let there be light'! The rise of the importance of the 'individual' in society developed during the renaissance alongside a rapid expansion of knowledge and what could be termed creative acts in the arts and sciences. Creativity was explained as god inspired acts of man. Michaelangelo painted the giving of life by God to man in the Sistine Chapel yet his artistic creations led him to be labelled a great artist in his own time, contributing to the cult of the male creative genius. Yet even as art was often made to the glory of god, the relentless visual inquiry into the reality of nature was beginning the work of the enlightenment. As early as 1490, Leonardo Da Vinci's famous drawing of a man in a circle and square illustrating human proportions, placed mankind at the centre of, and fitting those pure geometric and mathematical forms.

As, around the time of the renaissance the sum of all human knowledge became more than one person could know, knowledge began to divide into specialism's with the increasingly determinist science on one side and the arts in gradual opposition. As the ideas of the enlightenment gained a hold, the developing scientific paradigm challenged the position of the established religion. Work by Kepler, Galileo and Newton began to transform the way our world was understood and with this

developed the technology and the philosophies which supported the taming of nature to mankind's ends.

A romantic belief in the 'inspired self' arose as a reaction to the new rationalism and the 'means to an end' rationale of industrial capitalism. At the same time the decline in religious belief was mirrored by the rise in the belief of the spirituality of nature. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the transition of creativity from god to man was complete when Nietzsche (1969ed) wrote in 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' that 'God is Dead' and man/woman is the centre of their own universe and can therefore, by inference, all be creative.

As, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women, through the suffragette and feminist movements have struggled for and claimed equity in society with men, so they challenged the romantic notion of the 'male genius creator'. Definitions of creativity became more inclusive, accepting community as well as individual activity. However, the century has also seen the trivialization of creativity as mere novelty. This and the sublimation of the individual as a consumer in the global economy have arguably led to the devaluation of creativity as a mere tool for economic ends.

### **So, what is creativity?**

The word 'creativity' has become a modern mantra and is seen by many as a panacea for a wide range of problems. Interpretations of what creativity is range from the power of god to create matter and life, through the inspired artist or scientist such as Bach or Einstein to an individual's craft skill or ability to re-organise an office layout. As a concept, 'creativity' may have become so broad as to be completely devalued (Negus and Pickering, 2004). Yet creativity involving the manifestation of new ideas, concepts, processes, artefacts or new understanding is important to individuals, communities and our society as a whole. In many ways it is like the Tao, indefinable yet with describable attributes. But what is it fundamentally and why do we as humans value it so much?

Arnheim argued that from psychologist's point of view one needed to decide if creativity is more of 'an instinct or a reflex'. If instinctive, creativity, is essentially a gift of the gods which causes the creative person to feel '... impelled to search the world for subjects about which to be inventive, formative, scientific or poetical.' If a reflex, creativity is a possible form of reaction for people who are 'born into the world full of invitations to act' where there are 'mysteries and problems, challenges, threats and opportunities'. In such a world, he sees that we are 'driven' by 'our own interest to explore, understand' the potential around us. (Arnheim 1996, 92)

As we are social creatures, some forms of creativity are seen as having more value than others, but these value judgements are dependent on both the context and the dominant values of the society or section of society that is making those judgements.

Negus and Pickering (2004) and Bohm (1998) see originality as being a key element of creativity, something that is still prized in our society. However, not all creative endeavours are successful and it is perhaps a willingness to risk failure that is a key feature of the creative process. As such, this poses a severe problem for its inclusion in our increasingly 'risk averse' society. In HE, the increased responsibility on staff for student's academic success and those student/consumers increased focus on attaining qualifications, can be seen in opposition to any process which adds extra risk into the knowledge transfer and reproduction seen as the safe route to banking qualifications.

Bohm sees the creative process as arising from a creative state of mind which is, "... one whose interest in what is being done is wholehearted and total, like that of a young child. With this spirit it is always open to learning what is new, to perceiving new differences and new similarities, leading to new orders and structures, rather than tending to impose familiar orders and structures in the field of what is seen" (Bohm, 1998, 17). Perception is at the heart of this process but this is not the day-to-day recognition process of the mind judging against its known patterns. It is a form of seeing through what artists would call the 'veils of perception' so one is capable of seeing afresh, which Bohm and Krishnamurti (1992) say requires one to be attentive, alert, sensitive and aware.

To engage in creative inquiry, one must therefore put oneself in a creative state of mind that is open to new possibilities. This can only be achieved if one is aware of the ways in which the mind creates, what many psychologists and philosophers call the 'veils of perception'. These 'spectacles of memory' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) filter new experiences and ideas through our existing knowledge, values, beliefs and one needs to become aware of, and learn to suspend such judgemental thought processes in order to be open to new possibilities. This is similar to the practice of many artists and Briggs and McCluskey observed that artists have "grounded themselves in the ambivalence of meanings and have worked to reveal to us the nuances and uncertainties that infiltrate our apparently absolute perceptions and truths about life" (Briggs and McCluskey in Pylkkanen ed. 1989, 279). As an artist I understand this process as a form of visual inquiry but many other disciplines have their own creative processes.

Above all, the rationale of creativity is to make new meaning manifest either in the form of transforming one's own or others understanding or creating a new object, idea or process. This may require a sort of mental balancing act between the openness to the new and the employment of disciplinary skills with which to capture and develop the new meaning. For example, for an artist who develops her ideas of something seen and felt, there is a dialogue through the medium with the object / image being created. There are skills needed in the use of materials and judgements about line, tone, form, composition etc., and how the emerging work successfully

captures the idea, but these have to be subordinated to serve the process and allow the new to emerge and not stifle it.

## **Types of creativity**

If it is problematic to try and define what creativity is, many thinkers have attempted to define types of creativity from observations of its attributes.

The art educator Eisner (1972) identified four main ways in which creativity can be displayed:

- 'Boundary Pushing', which consists of extending or re-defining the limits of common objectives, such as adding blades to safety razors to make them more efficient.
- 'Inventing', the process of employing the known to create an essentially new object or class of objects.
- 'Boundary Breaking', where there is a rejection or reversal of accepted assumptions and the making of the 'given' problematic.
- 'Aesthetic Organizing', the conferring of order and unity, coherence and harmony which could be evidenced in a work of art or piece of architecture.

However, Banaji et al. (2006) in their report 'Rhetoric's of Creativity', took a mainly sociological perspective seeing creativity as defined by its rhetoric's which are in turn constructed by the various societies and communities within which the phenomena is observed. These include;

- 'Creative genius', as discussed earlier, where creativity is historically cited within the white, western, male, individual.
- 'Democratic and political creativity' which relates to the connection between creativity and different definitions of culture and what those cultures recognise as having value and social acceptance and power.
- 'Ubiquitous creativity', with its democratic vision of creativity as capability within all people.
- 'Creativity as social good' where creativity is seen as a co-operative activity for the potential benefit of all.
- 'Creativity as economic imperative' about advancing the country's economic prospects through creative workforce development.
- 'Play and creativity', which recognises parallels between the processes inherent in both.

- 'Creativity and cognition', researching the links between the two via both qualitative and positivist techniques and traditions to see if creativity is a function of cognition and or intelligence.

The report raises some interesting questions, particularly for those in education. To what extent is creativity an internal cognitive function or a social and cultural phenomenon? As the creative person acts within a social group she or he, however creative, is not acting in a cultural vacuum and however good their internal creative attributes may be, they are fed by and are expressed through that cultural language. Is creativity ubiquitous or the preserve of a special few? If one ignores the mystery of genius, then however predisposed to creative process people may or may not be, there are many techniques and practices which can help them develop creative approaches to work and life. Is creativity an inevitable social good? Knowledge of nuclear power is in one sense neutral but the use to which it is put can either fuel society or destroy all life on the planet. In that sense creativity has a definite moral and ethical dimension. There has been much creativity in developing ways of killing from the duelling sword to the smart bomb, therefore although it is often hailed by society and governments as an unqualified force for good it is effectively a power for good or evil dependent on our moral judgement for its usage.

The physicist David F. Peat (2000) also recognises the moral dimension of creativity but adds spiritual and humane dimensions. He sees types of creativity as defined by their intentions or outcomes, identifying three main groupings as; making something new, original or unexpected; renewing and sustaining what already exists; and finally healing and making things whole. The first two reflect Eisner's more practical categories, whereas the third implies both an ability and moral duty to use the creative forces for the good of the world as a whole to heal and make things whole where our human interventions are often divisive and destructive to other cultures and species.

### **The creative process**

There have been many attempts at mapping the creative process. Edwards (1988) charts development in models of creativity from Helmholtz in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through Poincaré to the psychologist Getzel in the 1960's. Getzel's five stage model, upon which the InQbate CETL based its early development work included:-

- First insight – the initial awareness of an idea / issue / problem etc.
- Saturation – immersion in the field to find out more
- Incubation – thinking or working through ideas often unconsciously

- Ah ha! - the eureka moment of understanding
- Verification – checking the validity of the new

Whilst this model is helpful in defining the stages of creativity, it is rather linear in concept and pre-supposes an 'Ah ha' moment in the inspirational mode in which all suddenly become clear or is known. Whilst that can be so, as an artist, and like many colleagues in other disciplines, I often experience the development of a work or idea slowly over many months with a myriad of tiny 'Ah-ha' moments and setbacks until the new form, be it a painting, an idea, a design or process reaches a stable state. In effect Saturation, Incubation, 'Ah ha' and verification would be almost a constant cyclical or spiral process often missing out stages.

In many ways it is the psychoanalyst Ehrenzweig (1984ed) who in the 1950's came closest in his analysis to describing my own creative experience as an artist. He saw the process as comprising three states; 'Initial state' of fragmentation; 'Second state' of initiating unconscious scanning and the 'Third state' of re-introjection.

In Ehrenzweig's first state of 'fragmentation' the person must put themselves in a state of 'de-differentiation' by overriding their existing models of understanding and tolerating opposing possibilities and potentials and the anxieties this may cause. In the second state, the person must initiate unconscious scanning allowing new possibilities to emerge and gradually integrating new structures through countless cross ties and connections. Finally in the third state of, 're-introjection', integration or re-differentiation takes place in which conscious awareness of the new whole emerges as a new form or entity. This describes a psychological shift in which the person has to let go or put to one side their existing knowledge, thought processes, values etc, in order to be open to new possibilities; to allow the creation of new possibilities and forms which can be judged when they have coalesced.

### **Creativity as meaning making**

The models of creativity expressed above are similar to the observations of the physicist David Bohm (1998) who sees creativity as dependant on perception and being able to recognise something new, which requires a state of mind which is 'attentive, alert, aware and sensitive' and which does not impose existing preconceptions. This is also very similar to the state which the educationalist Mezirow (1991) says is necessary for transformational learning to take place in which a person may have to abandon or modify their values and beliefs in order to accommodate their new experience and to create a new meaning.

Bohm sees creativity as potentially opening the way to transform the individual, saying that, '...the being of ourselves is meaning; the being of society is meaning... [therefore] a change of meaning is a change of being' (Bohm in Pylkkanen,23,1989).

Both Bohm and Mezirow speak of the transformational process of making new meaning, the core human activity of change and development, which is ultimately what the creative process facilitates in the creation of new forms, knowledge, understanding and processes.

The process of change, creation and re-creation is the natural order of the universe. If, as educators, we do not help people engage with and contribute to personal and social creation and development, what is the point?

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