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Creativity or Conformity? **Building Cultures of Creativity in Higher Education**

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## **Risk: the ethics of a creative curriculum**

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## **Risk: the ethics of a creative curriculum**

### **Introduction**

It is generally accepted that university education should be challenging – encouraging the development of an enquiring mind that does not accept things at face value and the confidence to argue from an alternative viewpoint. These aspirations are related to notions of autonomy as espoused by J S Mill (1859) and others. Nurturing such attributes means respecting the autonomy of the *student* to make decisions, stand by them and to take responsibility for risk taking and its outcomes. It also means allowing *lecturers* to design courses that permit change, diversity of practice and risk taking. Utilitarian ethics (West 2004) is effective in surfacing such dilemmas. Its use in designing learning and teaching strategies may help students and academics to plot the risks and benefits of innovative practice.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between risk, ethics and the introduction of creativity and innovation into learning and teaching strategies in the curriculum

### **Regulating academic quality**

Current educational policy in England is heavily influenced by a particular approach to quality

assurance. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocates money to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), on the expectation that the quality of provision is measurable and measured. It may be argued that this policy developed out of political scepticism regarding the value of higher education and the 'returns' to the government and general population of the funding provided. Formed in 1977, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has emerged as the largest government sponsored agency regulating quality in higher education (QAA 2006). Much could be said about how we have arrived at our current situation; however the purpose of this paper is not to offer an historical critique, nor to attempt to pinpoint the start of the current trend.

The QAA have incrementally developed a framework for assessing and measuring quality, developing processes that have dominated quality assurance of higher education in England over the past 20 years. Early models - 'Teaching Quality Assessment' and then 'Subject Review' required assessment to be based on the subject areas own self evaluation. This was because, although many professional bodies specify content and standards for particular subjects, there were no general benchmark standards for the delivery of programmes across the sector and thus nothing 'objective' against which to judge the relative quality and standard of education in and between institutions. In parallel the QAA worked steadily through a series of developments to create a framework that could provide some objective, measurable standard for the sector. This now includes subject benchmarks for all undergraduate and some post graduate subject areas in higher education, a code of practice covering 10 areas from assessment to placement learning, and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) which regularises academic levels and credit tariffs (QAA 2006).

A further development related to this movement has been the emergence of a pivotal unit of importance: the learning outcome. In a system where measurement is central then a unit to measure is needed. The Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) in regularising the currency of each educational programme and facilitating the transfer of credit between HEIs has increased the significance of this unit. Each package of learning, described as a number of CATS points at a particular level on the FHEQ, is defined by its learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes work on a number of levels. They are written in a stylised language which signals to enlightened readers the area of learning and the academic level that will be demonstrated; in doing so they facilitate a form of description that can be used to approve award bearing programmes of study. They also act as the starting point from which the learning and teaching strategy for the module, assessment tools and assessment criteria can be determined. This concept, described as 'constructive alignment' (Biggs 2003) now represents the building bricks from which modules, and thus programmes are created.

## **Creativity**

Creativity appears in numerous academic papers and in educational policy. It is celebrated and encouraged by organisations such as the Higher Education Academy in the UK and praised when it is identified in QAA reviews. Creativity is a common word and is much used in academic writing. For example Knight and Yorke (2003:88) suggest that 'flexibility, openness to learning, creativity and drive' may be the attributes that higher education is expected to produce in

graduates. With regard to the organisation itself Heaton (2005:254) believes that creativity is essential to compete for 'funding, people and reputation'. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (2006) defines creativity as an adjective 'involving the use of the imagination or original ideas in order to create something' and for Wikipeddia (2006) creativity is a 'mental process involved in the generation of new ideas' but interestingly they state that there is no single definition of creativity, nor is there a standardised unit of measurement. Thus we may prize creativity as a valuable attribute, but we can neither define nor measure its presence or effect.

It is clear from the literature that it does not represent a single concept with a shared meaning. Craft (2003) suggests that in political, social and economic discourses creativity is currently portrayed as a 'good thing' but that what this may mean to different people is less clear. She describes creativity as playful; as something that can be harnessed in both educational and economic senses as an antidote to inhibition and a means of managing change in order to survive in changing and sometimes hostile environments. Gibson (2005) also notes that there are many discourses around creativity, around teaching creatively, being creative, creativity enriching peoples lives, and 'creative learning culture' leading to profitable business strategies to name but a few. Both authors challenge the unconditional goodness of creativity; Craft (2003) identifying that creativity can have a dark side that may not necessarily always lead to good outcomes and Gibson (2005) that creativity can be misused to support political ends.

This paper starts from a premise, that the lack of clarity around definition and measurement of creativity makes its inclusion in learning outcomes and assessment criteria very problematic. Consequently the focus for discussion will be creativity where it is used in learning and teaching strategies in order to nurture creative abilities in students and attempt to harness and develop creativity within curriculum design. Such creativity it may be argued leads to emancipated learning and develops the student's imaginative and intellectual capabilities.

In order to illustrate the argument two case studies will be used (see boxes one and two). Both in different ways show how creativity can be included in learning and teaching strategy. The first case, is a whole programme approach, taken from a period just before the commencement of the current academic framework and the second is a module within a contemporary social studies programme.

### ***Box One: creativity and mental health nursing:***

*Keen (1999): describes a creative, experimental curriculum which was designed for mental health nurse training in a brief period in the 1980s and 1990s. Before the development of the CATS system and the integration of nursing education into Higher Education, there were a number of radical nursing courses. At the time the criteria for nursing registration involved a 3 year programme culminating in unseen exams. It was permissible for an approved institution to set its own exam but there still existed a national set of papers set by the professional awarding body. Whilst being tightly regulated, the actual syllabus was open to some interpretation, as long as student could pass this examination and meet expectations of their competency in practice. Thus Keen and colleagues developed a three year programme where students had a great deal of freedom to spend the majority of their time in mental health settings of their choice. Supervision*

*and assessment along the way were creative and students centred, aiming for development and maturity. This strategy made no attempt to impose a particular order on things. At the end of the three years the students sat the national exam after a fortnight of crammed examination preparation. In general the Author claims that pass rates and other measurable criteria were comparable with more traditional nursing courses, but that the nature of the experience was more authentic and better equipped students for practice.*

**Box Two:** *Developing citizenship in University and secondary school students:*

Gifford et al (2005) describe an innovative module introduced as an option to third year social science students to develop their understanding of and skills relating to citizenship. In this module groups of students are involved with developing student councils and debating skills in partnership with pupils and teachers from local secondary modern schools. This module builds on learning in the first two years of the degree and challenges students to really get involved with an aspect of citizenship, rather than simply theorise about it. Assessment is based on written accounts rather than the student's actual 'performance'. The module puts the theoretical learning gained within the university, and the lecturer's commitment to making citizenship happen to the test. Notwithstanding the inevitable logistical difficulties, the evaluation is positive and suggests that some powerful learning has been experienced.

Looking at Keen's 1999 mental health curriculum, this period in the history of nurse education was a window of opportunity between the strict regularisation of the earlier post- Nightingale curricula and the imposition of a new set of rules following from the integration of nursing programmes into higher education, which in turn merged with the growing regularisation of Higher Education identified in the introduction to this paper. The nurse lecturers at the time tended to have been exposed to liberal curricula in Higher Education in the 1960s and 70s and were open to experimentation and change. This course was very clearly focused on the student's experience of practice. It had only a loosely predetermined curriculum and assessment evolved out of the progress of each stage and the belief that 'to avoid the emotional turmoil of burn-out, the hard edges of emotional distance, and becoming routinised, unresponsive clinicians, students might need to remain inventive, spontaneous and hopeful' (Keen 1999:238). The professional body requirement was for an unseen examination which the academic team subverted by designing a course that prepared the students for a life in mental health nursing, rather for passing an exam. The exam became the object of a short intensive preparation period which yielded a very good success rate. Whilst this course was unique to a particular geographical location similar stories could be told of professional education across the UK in the same period.

By comparison current higher education is subject to tight regulations in terms of content and delivery and is located within an academic framework in which each module of study is defined, packaged and weighed to exactly match a given structure preordained in the Programme Specification. Professional education frequently has even more restrictions, as professional bodies impose their own set of rules on top of the academic framework. Having created a system where creativity cannot happen spontaneously it would appear that the current aim is to strategically

reinsert creativity into learning and teaching. However it may be argued that the management and responsibility for the risks involved in doing this need to be carefully thought through.

The second case study (Gifford et al 2005) is an example of how this has been achieved in one particular programme. Citizenship is a very relevant topic within social science and for the secondary school sector. By combining the motivation of school's to develop in the area with students willing to engage the module provided a very rich learning opportunity. However the experience needed to be designed and delivered within the tight timescale available within a single module, restricting the amount of development possible.

As in the mental health nursing curriculum this was not without risk: in both cases the students were exposed to experiences for which the outcome could not be fully predicted or controlled.

### **Creativity and risk**

Introducing creativity into an educational experience involves risk on a number of levels. There is risk to the individual students. Groth and Peters (1999) suggest that a major barrier to creativity is fear – of the unknown, of ridicule and of failure so engaging creatively may be a source of anxiety for students. In any circumstance these fears are very real for students who have invested a great deal of time, effort and increasingly money in their studies. Thus including unusual and creative strategies in learning and teaching may feel threatening. Whether or not the student is anxious about failing creative endeavour is unpredictable so if it is combined with assessment tasks and criteria that are incompatible it may actually lead to variable success rates, thus validating their fears. Gifford et al (2005) minimised the anxiety regarding assessment by uncoupling the assessment tasks from the performance within schools. For Keen (1999) this was achieved by focusing on students professional development and making the exam, whilst important, a secondary concern at the end of the course.

For lecturing staff the risks are also two fold. I would argue that introducing creative activities requires more skill and courage than traditional teaching methods. The lack of syllabus in the Keen (1999) example above illustrates this factor: if you are going to allow students to stray from a given content and direction the lecture needs to be knowledgeable enough roll with the punches this entails, confident enough to allow students the freedom to learn in their own way and shrewd enough to offer enough supervision and guidance to enable them to succeed in the assessed components. For Gifford et al (2005) a significant amount of extra time was spent making contact with the school and setting up the student's access. Students worked in teams rather than alone and were given positive support and supervision. Failure to manage these delicate and unpredictable transactions may lead not only to losing the confidence of students and colleagues but to poor quality assurance manifested by variable progression, poor student satisfaction and low achievement. As with the students risk above the teachers 'performance' is judged by quantifiable outputs.

These risks are mirrored at an institutional level. Creativity might be seen as evidence of quality enhancements and therefore welcomed. In addition, in a competitive market where student numbers are volatile and the introduction of fees nurtures a much more consumer oriented ethos creativity may be seen as necessary to maintain the cutting edge. However the penalty for negative publicity if the auditing of academic quality reveals flaws in the systems is high.

Strategically HEIs attempt to balance these risks by combining rhetoric around quality enhancement with confining principles and frameworks that limit the flexibility for truly creative approaches.

These risks create ethical tensions at all levels. As custodians of vast quantities of government allocated and privately contributed funds HEIs have a responsibility for good governance and to offer 'value for money'. They are also responsible for ensuring that their practice does not in any way harm lecturers or students. In ethical terms nonmaleficence, that is to do no evil or harm (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001) may be seen as the most basic of moral principles to maintain. The QAA code of practice and the restrictions laid down by professional and regulatory bodies attempt to uphold this principle but in doing so stifle creativity and innovation. The resultant 'duty of care' can become a straight jacket which challenges any strategy that deviates from a tried and tested methodology. Whilst this paper does not argue that HEIs should throw caution to the wind and put students and staff at risk, some way of mediating the inevitable defensive position of doing nothing needs to be found.

### **Autonomy and risk**

Hill (1991) offers a critique of the various definitions of autonomy that can be summarised as being a *feature* of human beings in that it is an ability to make choices, and a *right* of human beings to make their own life choices free from interference. Mill (1859) writes passionately about liberty and freedom and offers a story about autonomy that illustrates its connection to risk: you observe a man approaching a damaged bridge. You know there is a strong risk of injury or death if the man crosses the bridge so you have a duty to stop him and inform him of the dangers. Beyond this you must allow the man to decide his own fate; if he decides to risk the crossing you are morally obliged to leave him, rather than to intervene further and he is morally responsible for his own actions. This view of the primacy of autonomy remains a strong ethic in western society. The right of the individual to make choices about their own destiny, free from interference, is upheld in ethical and legal practice and underpins many of society's norms.

Autonomous behaviour in students is a feature of 'graduateness'. The ability to research a subject and defend a particular position on the basis of a coherent argument is the hallmark of an honours level dissertation. The 'deep' learning espoused by Biggs (2003) and others does not come from students learning by rote in large lecture theatres and so a creative approach to learning may be used to develop this attribute in students. For example challenging a student to find out things independently and present a unique or controversial view is enabled through creative learning and teaching activities and is more likely to yield a higher grade. However, this may also present students with a risk. The less able student who interprets creativity as presenting their own ideas without following academic conventions, or who does not have the literary eloquence to present complex arguments in an accessible form may fair worse in assessment than if they had maintained a more pedestrian and predictable method.

Application of the principle of autonomy would suggest that students should be informed of the expectations and methods used in a particular learning situation so they can make an informed decision to participate. However this may not be quite as simple as it seems. In the case study from Keen (1999) students may have made an autonomous choice to join an experimental course but

cannot have really known how it would feel once they were immersed in it. The unique nature of the curriculum delivery would have meant that transfer to another course was difficult, so once started they would have little choice but to continue if they wanted to complete the course. They also took a risk that students would be able to cram for and pass the national exams. Had they failed it would have been too late for that cohort, and the ones following to easily change direction, and hardly fair to just say the students had made a free choice to join this particular course. For Gifford et al (2005) students clearly opted in as this module was optional and was supported by modules in previous years, so it is reasonable to assume that students had a good idea of the theoretical concepts they were engaging in. However, once engaged in the module it may have been difficult to withdraw; the semesterised system means that missed modules leave students with greater workloads in later months and little slack in the system to make good lost time. In addition the reality for these students exposed to pupils in secondary schools who were pretty challenging to experienced secondary school teachers, let alone young inexperienced students, mostly from a different socio-economic background, was potentially a real risk to their physical safety an emotional wellbeing

Thus engaging in a creative experience may lead to unpredictable outcomes but it is reasonable to assume that even the most adventurous student who is game to engage in a creative experience will also want some reward in terms of successful achievement. Creativity needs to be risk assessed and managed sufficiently to facilitate student success and safety.

### **Risk management and utilitarian principles**

In order to risk assess a framework for analysis and decision making is needed. The principles of utilitarian ethics are a possible candidate for this role. There are a great deal of interpretations of utilitarian ethics but for the purposes of this paper it is taken from Mill to be the principal that the 'utility' of actions should be chosen to maximise happiness and minimise pain ( West 2004). Analysis using a utilitarian framework involves identifying all of the known and predictable consequences of a set of actions and calculating the likelihood that they will, on balance, produce an acceptable, positive outcome. The use of 'happiness' and 'pain' needs to be placed within the context that the words are used by Mill and others, in that it suggests a collective happiness and pain rather than a selfish or individual perspective. Thus a hedonistic desire by a lecturer to create an educational experience for their own pleasure or prestige is not acceptable, nor is a strategy where a positive experience for students is achieved at the expense of other factors.

So; designing effective and morally good educational experience involves weighing up the consequences for students, staff and the institution of the learning and teaching strategy and identifying actions that offer the best outcome.

Analysing Keen's (1999) experimental programme it is possible to see how utilitarian ethics could be used in retrospect to defend their actions. The intended consequence was to produce mental health nurses who were appropriately skilled to do a difficult and stressful job with compassion and intelligence. They postulated that a curriculum based on the current syllabus and culminating in unseen nationally set exams was not a suitable vehicle for this. Students were given a huge amount of autonomy to direct their own pace of learning, and set their own assessment tasks. In general it was assumed that:



‘there was no need for a syllabus, because if in three years intensive clinical experience students did not come across a particular problem, treatment or issue, then it was probably not something they were going to need to learn’ (Keen 1999:238)

However this seemingly open ended and risky educational experience is not as anarchic and dangerous as it may sound. Such intense exposure to practice, including as it did rigorous supervision, ensured patient safety and that the students really did have the skills and aptitude for the profession. Risks to the reputation of the training establishment and the student’s probability of failing to qualify were minimised by targeted tutorials if gaps in knowledge were found and by providing an intensive fortnight to cram for the national exam. Overall the teaching team took a risk: it could not be known until after the event that the two week cramming would be a successful strategy for getting the students through the exam, nor was there an evidence base to defend the curriculum design. However they used their knowledge and understanding of and passion about mental health nursing to create a curriculum that maximised the potential good to students patients and themselves, and minimised the harm.

Such freedom simply does not exist within current higher education frameworks, but Gifford et al (2005) show that it is possible to be creative. There were a number of predictable risks in their module, which could not be entirely managed. Students were going into what was a potentially hostile environment; with known behaviour control problems with pupils, and scepticism from teaching staff. There was no guarantee that students’ exposure to citizenship would be a positive one and some possibility that the (university) students would have a destabilising effect on (school) pupils, raising their expectations and disrupting the status quo within the school. Indeed, the paper identifies that some of these things did happen. Students needed quite sophisticated skills to control rowdy classrooms, and through trying to give the pupils a voice encouraged them to raise issues that the school would have preferred to steer them away from:. For example:

‘No well, the thing was we decided not to listen to her [the teacher] because she wanted us to do the road safety thing and they [the pupils] were not interested in doing it’ (Gifford et al 2005: 185)

These risks were managed and minimised by a number of techniques employed by the module team. Time was spent preparing the group both with the students and the schools involved, and offering continued support throughout the experience. Students opted to go on the module and thus were motivated to do well. The actual experience was limited to three weeks within the module. Students identify that this really limited what they could achieve, but it also set parameters around the experience, helping the module team to maintain some control. And finally the assessment tasks, an essay about citizenship and a diary of their experience, were designed such that regardless of the success of their ‘performance’ or their level of enjoyment the assessment would be achievable. This ensured alignment (Biggs 2003) without compromising the experiential elements of the learning strategy.

In both cases what is clear is that the lecturers and by proxy one assumes the students believed that this learning strategy would allow students to exploit a learning opportunity which had the potential to yield greater learning and skill development than a conventional classroom based experience.

By applying some of the utilitarian principles embedded in decision trees lecturers can weigh up the risks of creative strategies, minimise potential negative consequences and make sound ethical choices. There are many examples of decision trees development[1] , but the basic principles are the same:

1. In order to make decisions based on utility it is necessary to think through the possible consequences of actions, so identification of all the consequences of a given action is a good starting point.

- What are the likely outcomes of a given learning and teaching strategy?
- Will it work for all students? staff? the institution?
- What is the intention for a given plan?
- What is the worst possible outcome of this strategy? What is the best?
- On balance, how great is the risk that the positive consequences of this strategy will outweigh the negative ones?

2. Having identified all of the possible variables it is now possible to evaluate the outcomes and identify if there are ways of shifting the balance of probability favourably in the direction of success.

- Would greater support make a difference?
- Would a different assessment task ensure students could complete the module without being compromised by uncertain outcomes?

If a subject group can clearly and confidently identify strategies for creatively engaging students, and balance this against the criterion that must be demonstrated in terms of subject benchmarks and student achievement, then it is possible to remain ethical whilst retaining a degree of experimentation. The point at which the students, staff or the institution are disadvantaged by the strategy the ethical balance is lost.

## **Conclusion**

At the start of this paper it was suggested that there were continuing and increasing restrictions on flexibility within higher education, and demand from fee paying students for a predictable quality controlled 'product'. Thus the artificial contrivance of inserting creativity back into learning and teaching may be desirable but is also risky. The lack of clarity of definition and measurement for creativity means that it is avoided in subject benchmarks, learning outcomes and assessment criteria and thus it is not clear where it can be built into a framework that is carefully planned, controlled and measured. However to be acceptable in the current model of educational delivery it must find an acceptable place within this framework. Despite the espoused value of autonomy simply offering students the opportunity to engage and making them responsible for the outcome is not acceptable. The notion from utilitarian ethics of balancing the consequences of an action to maximise the goodness of the outcome is a useful and practical mechanism for judging the moral acceptability of innovative strategies.

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[1] See <http://www.mindtools.com/dectree.html> this site is looking at financial planning, [http://www.health.vic.gov.au/biotechnology/downloads/decision\\_tree.pdf](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/biotechnology/downloads/decision_tree.pdf) is looking at biotechnology. A simple search through Google yields many such sites.