**Towards a (useful?) definition of creativity drawn from creativity research … a confession and some questions.**

*Abstract*

*Various attempts to define creativity are discussed and it is concluded that creativity is a continuum but must be studied in its socio-cultural setting, and concludes with some necessary questions for us as educators.*

Despite its high place in capitalist and educational discourses, creativity is a somewhat ill-defined word – or rather there is an imprecision deriving from a plethora of different definitions. It is a social construct, akin to purity, and is obviously useful grammatically. But I worry about a tendency to reify the concept, to hurry off on a quest for those who possess this magical property.

However, the concept is now firmly entrenched in our discourses – and even in our thinking – certainly in the performing arts. Yet here, even in an educational setting, there is a tendency to accept the concept without delving into it too deeply. It is interesting that a major piece of research (Hughes & Wilson 2004), while alluding constantly to “the creative process”, just assumes its presence and makes no attempt to define it. In my own field, scenography, it is seldom discussed or acknowledged, yet most scenographers, if pushed, will acknowledge its existence as an all-pervading, driving concept – that is what we, as designers, do! So I think we need a useable, useful definition … which we can discuss with our students. I began to examine the literature, particularly from the field of creativity research.

All agree that it will involve the development of something original, some innovation. Yet most would argue that the concept of creativity demands something more. The 1999 National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education Report, chaired by Ken Robinson, provides a definition which allows for a wide inclusion: creativity is an “imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value” (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999), something akin to Cropley when he says that it is something which has novelty and effectiveness (though he does, add ethicality) (Cropley 2001, p.4); whereas Richards, the prime advocate of ‘everyday’ creativity, uses the yet more inclusive word ‘meaningful’ (Richards 2007).

So, even here one begins to see a range of definitions. At one extreme there is the ‘genius’ definition – creativity has to be world changing, or at least change a particular part of the world - known in the field as ‘Big-C’ creativity. Its best-known advocates are Csikszentmihalyi and Gardner. Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi 1997) says “creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation. AII three are necessary for a creative idea, product, or discovery to take place.” From this he points out that to make a creative impact in an area of the culture he calls ‘the domain’, one has not only to be the sort of person to have creative ideas but first have to mastered the domain, have become an expert, which will involve long and hard work – and Gardner espouses a ‘ten-year rule’ of experience before you can be creative (Gardner 1994).

Yet this entails the exclusion of what the general public recognise as ‘everyday’ creativity (the new soup recipes and our offsprings’ charming drawings stuck to the fridge). This ‘everyday creativity’ is generally known as ‘little-c creativity’. Richards is not only sure of its existence but evangelical in listing its benefits for individuals, allowing them to progress towards Maslow’s self-actualisation. She castigates the impact the exclusive acceptance of Big-C creativity can have on individuals and maintains “[e]veryday creativity … is for all of us. It is not only universal, but necessary to our very survival as individuals and as a species” and proposes a construct that focuses on the process of creativity and its effect on the individual and allows for its existence even when it is not necessarily ‘meeting a need’. The examples see cites from her own field of mental health, particularly the use of the arts – for instance creative writing – I find convincing (Richards 2010, pp.194–200).

But these two approaches occupy extremes. Kaufman and Beghetto propose two more categories: a mini-c creativity, which is “[t]he everyday creativity experienced by students as they learn a new concept or make a new metaphor … the personal creative processes involved in students’ development of new understanding and personal knowledge construction.” (Beghetto & Kaufman 2007, pp.75–76) and, perhaps particularly relevant to us, a Pro-c creativity, which covers professionals whose work would certainly be considered creative by any generally accepted criteria but who are not (yet) working at a level to effect wide-ranging domain change.

However, even this can seem rather rigid and deny what many of us regard as a broad spectrum of creativity, a continuum. NACCCE more inclusively provides a measured series of definitions, acknowledging different levels of innovation. It makes a useful differentiation between individual creativity, where the work is original just for the individual, a relative creativity, where it might be original for say a person's age or group, and a “historic” creativity, where everyone would acknowledge its originality in terms of anyone's previous output in a particular field (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999). Plucker et al propose a truly all-embracing definition: “Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context” (Plucker et al. 2004).

That latter concept – the ‘social context’ – is useful, in that it can obviously vary, but it does need some discussion. What, in performing arts, is our social context? We could look at the whole of the history of performing arts, and choose moments of decisive (albeit sometimes incremental) change – Southern’s *Seven Ages of Theatre* provides examples (Southern 1964). But I prefer a smaller concept, and one which I find chimes with my experience – the theatre company … or even the production within that company. And, certainly in HE, I think this is what we do – we assess according to a student’s progress along the continuum - ‘good for year 2’ and so on - and take into account the production context in which they are working.

But having had a good Catholic upbringing I’ll end this with a confession: do we discuss this concept – or any concept – of creativity with our students? *Mea culpa...!*

So, my questions for you all are:

* What will be our definition and how do we refine it to fit our practice(s)?
* How do we communicate this to our students?

Which demands a further step:

* How do we encourage creativity, yet keep our students in touch with the realities of our professional environment(s)?

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