

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

Vikki Pollard

vikipollard@nmit.edu.au

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NMIT

Abstract

The development of capacities of creativity has long been important in creative arts education (Morgan, 2012) and is increasingly becoming important to other fields in higher education (McWilliam and Haukka, 2008, Csikszentmihalyi, 2006, Edward, McGoldrick & Oliver, 2006). To develop such capabilities at least two factors need to be addressed: defining 'creativity' and thinking about how to teach it. This paper has two aims; firstly to consider the idea that creativity is a process (Morgan, 2012) of changing habits (Koestler, 1964, McWilliam and Sandra Haukka, 2008) that is inherently traumatic (Peirce, 1940) because it involves taking risks with habits which have previously proven useful and comforting. The centrality of trauma and risk raises concerns if creativity is to become a standard graduate attribute; concerns for students asked to take risk and the concern that the university is traditionally adverse to risk-taking. Secondly, a technique for teaching how to be creative derived from Russian Formalism is considered. *Ostranenie*, or making strange might be deployed with the aim of teaching students a technique for habit breaking.

Introduction

The development of capacities of creativity has long been important in creative arts education (Morgan, 2012) and is increasingly becoming important to other fields in higher education (McWilliam and Haukka, 2008, Csikszentmihalyi, 2006, Edward, McGoldrick & Oliver, 2006). The reasons for this peaking interest in creativity as an attribute of education are varied; an overriding one is that creativity has recently become linked to productivity due to its creativity being seen as necessary to being responsive to rapid technological social change and predictive of future social and environmental requirements demands creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006, McWilliam, Hearn & Haseman, 2008). Another reason for this interest is the relationship between creativity and autonomy (Runco & Albert, 2010). These various reasons for the current interest in creativity are considered early in this paper, as is the question of higher education serving economic ends. As a curriculum developer in TAFE I take a particular stance to this vexing question. The aim of this paper is not to solve this dilemma but to consider what creativity means and how it can be taught. In addressing these two areas I draw from Koestler's (1980) *The act of creation*, in which creativity is defined as the art of

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

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breaking habits in order to develop new connections. This, despite the democratic turn, remains a traumatic event (Peirce, 1940), raising interesting questions when it is considered a standard graduate attribute. While these questions are beyond the scope of this current paper I think it is important to raise them.

Given that creativity is becoming more wide-spread in higher education, McWilliam, Hearn and Haseman (2008) wonder “how universities might make more of the call to creativity than its current status as a rhetorical flourish in policy” (247). In a similar vein Csikszentmihalyi (2006) asks, “How is education preparing young people for this creative task?” (xix). My second aim is to consider teaching practices aimed at teaching how to break habits. The Russian Formalist technique of *ostranenie*, or estrangement (Shklovsky, 1917), might be put to use in teaching for creativity. Whilst, I cannot, as yet, offer examples of how to do so, it is worth considering as we work towards teaching for creativity with an awareness of trauma.

Why creativity now?

Creativity as an attribute of higher education has usually been confined to the creative arts departments (Morgan, 2012). However, the last decade has seen a shift of interest to it becoming a standard graduate attribute of a higher education degree. This is because creativity has become central to the effort to increase economic productivity. “Dispositions to flexibility, adaptability, self-management and the cultivation of an ‘enterprising self’ are key elements of a ‘creative’ disposition to the workplace (McWilliam & Haukka, 2008: 656). This is starkly seen in the 2005 report conducted for the Prime Minister, *Imagine Australia: the role of creativity in the innovation economy* in which creative capacity is named as a key economic driver (McWilliam & Haukka, 2008). The European Council also believes creativity is necessary to “build a dynamic, competitive, knowledge-based economy in the European Union (Smith-Bingham, 2006: 11) and there is interest in China and other parts of Asia on the impact of creativity on the economy (Montgomery, 2010, Wuwei, Keane, Li & Guo, 2011). Higher education is being urged to respond and creativity has become a standard graduate attribute. McWilliam (2008) refers to this as the ‘democratising turn’ (9) which has seen a change in perception away from creativity as the agonising experience of the isolated individual artist to a focus “on the thinking and doing of a much greater proportion of the population” (*opcit*). There is concern however, that higher education ought not to be driven by economic imperatives.

Engagement with the question of higher education serving economic imperative is valid but beyond the scope of this current paper. I would like to say however, that working as a curriculum developer in higher education in TAFE, the dichotomy of industry and higher education is far blurrier than at a university and, I am biased towards educating for a place in the economy. I would also like to raise the

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

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question of coupling economic imperative with social equity agendas (Singh, 2001) and ask can we do both? I think we can if we consider that creativity has long been linked to freedom of thought. It is thus not something that is the sole property of “artists” and those who teach in creative arts, but an element essential to developing thought. This is well described by Boden (2004) who argues that creativity is “an aspect of human intelligence in general” (1). As such, teaching for creativity becomes the business of all within higher education, especially those interested in developing critically aware and thoughtful citizens. If it is pushed on us due to an economic imperative, so be it. We can subvert that to teach towards intellectual freedom. However, any teaching for creativity, whether for the base ends of economic productivity or for intellectual freedom, requires a definition of creativity.

What is creativity?

A great deal of effort has been expended on the attempt to produce a definition of creativity (Morgan, 2012, Runco & Albert, 2010, McWilliam & Haukka, 2008, Boden, 2004, Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, Koestler, 1964/1980). In researching the definition of creativity by interviewing academics in creative arts disciplines, Morgan (2012) found a strong consensus “that creativity is a process” (6) inherent to which experiment and risk. The focus on process conforms to the democratising turn and the focus on collaboration, self-discipline and ways of thinking (McWilliam, 2008). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines creativity as “an idea or action that is new and valuable” (23). He argues this is a social process because “value” is decided in relation to a cultural context; “Therefore, creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural phenomenon” (*opcit*). The move away from isolated geniuses gives reason to think that creativity can be taught.

In developing their idea of small ‘c’ creativity, McWilliam and Dawson (2008) argue that we not leave behind what big ‘C’ theorists have found. They especially ask that we consider Arthur Koestler’s (1964) *The act of creation*. “Koestler’s (1964) long-standing definition of creativity as the ‘defeat of habit by originality’ is still highly relevant” (635). Koestler defines creativity as the art of:

combining previously unrelated domains of knowledge in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you put in [...] each new synthesis leads to the emergence of new patterns of relations – more complex cognitive structures on the higher levels of the mental hierarchy (1980: 344).

He calls the act of bringing two previously unrelated things (ideas, thoughts) together ‘bisociation’ (345) and argues that that this requires “a shift in attention to aspects of reality previously ignored, discovering hidden connections, seeing familiar objects or events in a new light” (*ibid*: 348). The “shift in attention” is linked closely to habits, especially the habits of perception. Koestler writes that “revolutions” in thought and artistic endeavour:

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

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is wrought by jettisoning previously sacrosanct doctrines and seemingly self-evident axioms of thought, cemented into our mental habits. This is what enables us to distinguish between creative originality on the one hand, and diligent routine or virtuosity on the other. [...] Creative originality, on the other hand, always involves un-learning and re-learning (364).

Koestler argues both that both “un-learning” and *bisociation* are necessary for creativity to be achieved and we can read into it the inherency of risk. Koestler’s influence can be seen on contemporary definitions of creativity. Boden (2004) defines creativity as “the ability to come up with ideas and artefacts that are *new, surprising, and valuable* (1, emphasis in original). Drawing from these definitions, and considering that I am writing about teaching for creativity, I define creativity as a process of taking the risk of breaking habits in order to develop new devise new ideas, thoughts, connections and artefacts that have value to society. However, in placing habits and risk as central to the process of creativity we need to be cognisant that taking risk with our habits can be traumatic event. What does it mean then, if we aim to deliberately inflict trauma upon our students? The inherency of risk and trauma to creativity is examined in the nest section.

Trauma and habit

In his essay ‘The principles of phenomenology’ published in 1905, Peirce offers a theory of experience, central to which is risk and trauma. He claims that experience is an *event* that changes the way that we think. More than that, it is a *compulsion* to think otherwise. This theory of experience is underpinned by the idea of risk and, as Peirce argues, not everyone is willing to take risks that might challenge their everyday habits. He argues that the individual exists in two worlds; the world of fancy and the world of fact. In the world of fancy, the individual thinks they have complete control and merely has “to pronounce his fiat, and the thing exists, with no resistance and no effort” (Peirce, 1940: 87). Peirce calls the world of fancy the internal world and the world of facts the external world. In the latter world, there is little the individual can control. In that world, humans are masters of their “own voluntary muscles, and of nothing more” (*ibid*: 88). This world, as we well know, is always changing. Peirce argues that the individual attempt to “defend himself (sic) from the angles of hard fact by clothing himself with a garment of contentment and habituation” (87). Without this garment they would find “every now and then his internal world rudely disturbed and his fiats set at naught by brutal inroads of ideas from without” (*opcit*). He calls “such forcible modification of our ways of thinking the influence of the world of facts or *experience* (88, emphasis in original). According to Peirce humans are sly and carefully “exclude from his internal world every idea” (*opcit*) likely to disturb. And, at other times, we provoke the idea in order to meet it when it can do no harm, thus again protecting our garments of habituation. Nonetheless, ideas do impinge on us and when we take the risk

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

Vikki Pollard

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to ‘confront’ them, we undergo an *experience*. Thus for Peirce, experience “is the compulsion, the absolute constraint upon us to think otherwise than we have been” (89). Now, can we argue that this understanding of experience coheres with the definition I have used above of creativity?

If we understand creativity as the breaking and changing of habits then we need to consider whether or not this might be traumatic. It certainly fits with the idea of the tortured creative genius of previous accounts of creativity; an image small ‘c’ theorists are attempting to leave behind. Are they being too rash to exclude trauma from their new definitions? I would argue they are and that what I have suggested here opens the conversation towards, not mitigating risk, but being aware that we may meet with resistance from students outside of the creative arts who are being expected to be ‘creative’. We may also find that universities as risk-averse institutions are settling for a lesser version of creativity; one with less risk for all. While I don’t expect to solve these issues, I do think they are worth raising as they can inform how we teach for creativity. Such teaching needs techniques and in the next section I introduce the technique of *ostranenie*, a literary technique used to prolong perception in order to change it. This is not at all dissimilar to the aims of changing habits of thought and, as such, this technique might prove useful for teaching for creativity.

Ostranenie

As we work towards teaching for creativity, we need to consider techniques that can support our task. As I have argued, these techniques must acknowledge that creativity requires risk and that with risk comes trauma. We need techniques which induce experiences: As opposed to techniques which describe creativity as something that may come in the future. We need creative techniques so we need to look beyond education. The technique of *ostranenie* may answer to this need.

Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984) has been credited with developing the idea of *ostranenie* in his essay “Art as device” (1917). For Formalists, much like for Peirce, literature was an *event*. The aim of Formalism was to discern how the literary text brought on the event. This means that considerations of the biography or the psychology of the author, or pronouncements about the real world from which elements of the work are drawn, do not count in interpretations of the text. What matters is the formal structure of the text; the way in which elements within the text compared and contrasted to each other. The Formalists referred to different elements of the texts as devices or techniques. Literary texts used a range of devices to achieve effects.

Shklovsky made up the term *ostranenie* in order to describe one effect of literature; the slowing of

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

Vikki Pollard

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perception through estrangement from habitual ways of thinking. Achieving this effect, this *event*, might take several devices. The term was made up in order to make ‘making strange’ sound strange. In other words, when Russians say the word *ostranenie*, it is an unfamiliar experience because the word has been concocted (Sher, 1990). It actually performs the technique it describes which is why I chose to use the word itself unlike others who have chosen to anglicise the word and use “defamiliarisation” (Lemon & Reis, 1965) or “enstrangement” (Boym, 2005).

Shklovsky was interested in how art estranges people from relying upon habits because to be habitually means that life becomes automatic.

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously – automatically (Shklovsky, 1990: 5).

If we understand things habitually, then they become unnoticed and change becomes difficult. They “fade away” as Shklovsky says. In this manner, we find it difficult to be accountable. *Ostranenie* aims to make us aware and thus accountable for our habits and to change them.

Ostranenie does a very particular thing; it makes us less familiar with what it is we think we know. It has been described as the “process or act that endows an object or image with “strangeness” by “removing” it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions (based on perceptions)” (Sher, 1990: *xix*). *Ostranenie* does not belong only to “artistic” things. Indeed, Shklovsky might be criticised for removing art from the equation. “*The artifact itself is quite unimportant*” (Shklovsky, 1990: 6, emphasis in original). Anything can cause the event of *ostranenie*. Some scholars have taken the position that *ostranenie* is an ethical act. Boym (1996, 2005) argues that *ostranenie* is integral to the aesthetic development of the self. It is “tactic of dissent, a form of alternative self-fashioning” (2005: 606). This is exciting for those wishing to introduce it to foster creativity. It is as much about teaching an approach to perception as it is about performing it in the classroom. We need to teach students how to slow their perception. Or perhaps they need to teach us...

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued the development of capacities of creativity is increasingly becoming important in higher education. There is a need to consider the problem of creativity and its teaching outside of the domains of the creative disciplines. I have argued that creativity is the process of changing habits and that inherent to such a process is trauma. I have drawn from the work of a Russian Formalists to argue that creativity is the process of changing habits by slowing perception and that certain techniques can be useful to this end. The problem remains for us to consider how to implement these and other techniques in our quest to teach for creativity.

Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

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Creativity and education: Teaching the unfamiliar

Vikki Pollard

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