

## Creativity in education: challenging the assumptions

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## EDITORIAL

### Creativity in education: challenging the assumptions

Every day I go to my study and sit at my desk and put the computer on. At that moment, I have to open the door. It's a big, heavy door. You have to go into the Other Room. Metaphorically, of course. And you have to come back to this side of the room. And you have to shut the door. So it's literally physical strength to open and shut the door. So if I lose that strength, I cannot write a novel any more. (Haruki Murakami, interviewed by Brookes 2011)

The creative process is mysterious, intriguing and elusive. The above quote from celebrated Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami evokes an other-worldliness, a dream-like state, an escape from reality that many other creative individuals through the years have described in similar terms. It is perhaps this type of artistic creativity – with its allusion to an enhanced or altered mental state which generates something original and beautiful – that appeals to so many people who have researched creative processes and promoted the benefits of creativity for society.

It is interesting therefore that there has been, over the last decade or two, a growing demand for creativity to be at the heart of education systems, and this special issue is a response to these demands. Schools are encouraged to nurture creativity, and universities are called upon to become centres for creativity and innovation at the heart of the knowledge economy. Universities are increasingly encouraged to produce graduates with creative thinking skills, who are flexible, adaptable, and able to solve problems in order to face the challenges of the twenty-first century. Creativity for innovation is a discourse which is not the sole preserve of programmes in management and business studies, information technologies, or science and engineering; but even within the arts and humanities there has been a privileging of the 'creative industries' which position culture as a consumable good. Yet, despite this increased insistence that creativity is a 'good thing', creative processes are still poorly understood and elusive. For all of the research and policy statements, there remains a considerable challenge as to how to enable our students and ourselves to open the door that Murakami so evocatively describes.

For a number of years we have, in the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at the National University of Ireland, Galway, been researching and discussing creativity with a range of colleagues from different disciplines. One of the editors of this issue (Aurélié) facilitated a creativity discussion group with colleagues from a wide range of disciplines, and these conversations illustrated the challenges of speaking across disciplines to find common understandings of creativity. We continued these discussions in a Symposium on creativity in June 2010, to which a number of authors in this special issue were invited as speakers and workshop facilitators. The range of perspectives on creativity that are evident in this issue are testament to the challenges of promoting creativity in education that we have been exploring.

We are aware that in the midst of an economic crisis (and in Ireland we have experienced a dramatic economic collapse), there is little doubt of the need for new thinking and approaches within education. Yet it is potentially dangerous to treat creativity, as some seem to do, as almost a panacea to the challenges that the twenty-first century poses. As will be clear throughout this special issue, this type of creativity imperative is based on an arguably false assumption that we can somehow train students to be creative or that we can unlock creative processes in classrooms simply because we have been told to do so. There is much more to the creative process that we need to understand (and we need to be clearer as to why there is an imperative for more creativity), and we believe the authors in this issue pose new lines of thinking and tackle some of the challenges that we have identified here.

The seven articles of the special issue therefore reflect different perspectives on the challenges, constraints and possibilities of creativity in terms of practices, managerial strategies or policies evident mainly in the Irish and British education context. There are, however, a number of common themes, one of which is the disjuncture between policies and practices. Iain MacLaren's article in particular highlights the significant gap between the practices that are required to nurture creative endeavors and the direction in which education policies push the system. The institutional structures and the managerial strategies put in place within higher education constrain the emergence of creativity, based as they are on a culture of surveillance, performativity and individualisation. Lesley Saunders also suggests that the creativity agenda oriented towards employability has become a prized commodity of capitalism. However this type of discourse, she argues, contradicts the nature of creativity. She evokes an alternative discourse of creativity, one which is 'stimulated by the encouragement of vivid inner lifeworlds, a sense of imaginative interiority and a sensuously-felt subjectivity'.

Another common thread running through these articles is the transformative power of creativity. Finbarr Bradley argues that universities should be places where transformative learning can take place, via creative experiences that encourage self-discovery and an exploration of 'inner emotional worlds'. Anna Newell and Paul Kleiman also continue the theme of transformation by illustrating how creative learning can be a transformative learning journey for students. Transformative learning is grounded in approaches of risk-taking, exploration of self, collaboration and play. Yet it is rare to find the leeway needed within our educational structures that would facilitate these types of processes.

Although teachers, managers or researchers can feel constrained within education institutions, Saunders reminds them they have the power to challenge such limitations. To her, the 'pedagogy of creativity' developed by creative practitioners should provide a model to 'embrace the richer, riskier and more nuanced and subjectively powerful approaches that individual creativity and the work of the imagination truthfully demand'. Anna Craft in her article also advocates for a change in educators' approaches in order to engage with the playful possibilities now opened up for children through their interaction with new technologies.

Yet, such changes do not seem to be able to happen by themselves. Another common theme is the potential for interdisciplinary practices to unlock the creativity of educators and managers, even though it is a challenge to break outside of disciplinary structures. The inspiring story told by Newell and Kleiman, of how they enabled two very different cohorts of students (drama and medical students) to work successfully on a collaborative project, provides a powerful example of how these structures can be overcome. Interdisciplinary practices can generate a space where teachers and students allow themselves to imagine new ways of doing things, take risks, reflect on their own practices and identities, explore new options, and potentially engage in a personal transformative experience.

Camille Kandiko also argues that interdisciplinary approaches in leadership can be sources for creativity. There is a need for creative leadership within the university in order to face the challenges of the knowledge economy. As she explains: 'Developing and sustaining networks across disciplines and with business, industry, the cultural and public sector to support innovation will be the creative leadership challenge of the future'. Bradley also champions interdisciplinary approaches as a survival response to 'the turbulent global economy'. As he states: 'Perhaps the best way to nurture creativity and innovation would be for each Irish higher education institution to pursue a clearly defined interdisciplinary purpose, in effect a roadmap to guide all its research and learning activities'. The roadmap across disciplines that he advocates higher education institutions to pursue is a sense of place: a deep-rooted connection with the local environment. As he provocatively argues, a connection to the local can inspire more, rather than less, creativity in a globalised world.

The final common thread we would like to point to in this special issue is the importance of collaboration. Creativity is increasingly thought of as intrinsically connected to collaborative work between individuals with different identities and backgrounds. However this was not always the case, as early research on creativity originated in the field of psychology in the 1950s. Amabile and Hennessey (2010) explain that the initial analytical approach to creativity was based on the idea of creative individuals. Researchers were exploring the question of what distinguishes highly creative persons from others (Amabile and Hennessey 2010). There was subsequently a rapid shift in the literature and research towards organisational creativity and the emergence of creativity in contexts (Sawyer 2006). Creativity occurs in certain types of social and cultural environments. A better understanding of these contexts is necessary, and an expanding area of research has been the study of group processes within different environments in terms of group interaction, motivation and disposition.

One of the authors in this special issue, Kevin Byron, provides an in-depth exploration into the common practice of brainstorming, which was initially developed by Alex Osborn (1953). He explores the possibilities and limitations of this group technique as regards the emergence (or not) of creativity within such group processes. Although he acknowledges a large part of the literature has dealt with the limitations of the brainstorming approach in relation to the generation of ideas, he also points out potential solutions in order to improve the creative process within this type of group setting. In addition, Newell and Kleiman highlight the power of collaborative work towards the introduction of creative teaching approaches within a specific university setting. The interdisciplinary module which is the subject of their paper not only encouraged and enabled medical students to dance but also was an award-winning teaching innovation. Finally, Craft examines how creativity emerges through the types of collaboration enabled by the new digital age. She encourages us to focus on the 4p's of creativity: 'plurality, playfulness, participation and possibilities'. These 4p's notably place children as co-producers of knowledge. The traditional nature of education is challenged as students are no longer individualized, passive learners. Within this digital environment, they become actors within their own learning as they are empowered to create new knowledge.

In this brief introduction, we have attended to the similarities between the authors in their exploration of possibilities and limitations for creativity within the Irish and UK education systems. Although educational settings are increasingly constraining, there are doors leading to different possibilities if we can find the strength to open them. The door that Murakami opens when he writes (to return to the quote at the beginning) is a door that he enters alone. The question is whether this is a door we want to open for our students and, if so, how. What we hope this special issue will do is convey that we would be wise to

approach that door with caution. As MacLaren's article so powerfully argues, there are still many myths about the processes and possibilities of creativity in circulation.

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