

Ubiquitous Creativity, Imagination in Dialogue, and Innovative Practice-in-Action

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Topics

by [Lori A. Custodero](#) — 2015

Background: *Over the past century, the role of creativity in teaching and learning has been interpreted in many ways, leading to often conflicting discipline-specific definitions, measurements and pedagogical applications.*

Purpose/Objective: *This issue takes on the perspective of creativity as ubiquitous, and follows that line of inquiry in its psycho-social manifestations, its application in innovative educational settings, and the persistence through which ideas and imagery become active forces for transformation and social change.*

Research Design: *As an introduction to the issue, this article summarizes and articulates the relatedness between scholars within a variety of educational fields.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *When viewed as ubiquitous, creativity can be a lens through which to interpret learning as a transformational experience, where the learner resources the social and physical environment to move from not knowing to knowing. Motivating such transformation are (a) the ability to identify what is not known, (b) the juxtaposition of difference to reveal alternate ways of knowing, and (c) the openness to possibility and willingness to explore.*

In 2009, the department of Arts and Humanities at Teachers College set forth on an exploration. Fueled by the first of two Provost's grants, we reviewed literature, collected interview data and began department-wide discussion about the role of creativity in teaching and learning. We expanded those discussions with a "domain dinner"—an invitation to our college colleagues to engage with one another across the table and across disciplines.

We were social scientists, cognitive scientists, musicians, artists, poets, and philosophers; historians, critical theorists, motor learning investigators and technology specialists. We conducted our research in laboratories, classrooms, homes, museums, prisons and MRI chambers.

Conceptions of creativity were, as expected, diverse and even oppositional. A trait reserved for a few elite or the process of human growth? Domain specific or general? Measurable? Observable?

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Creativity

- Technology**
 - Evolution of personal education
 - English: understanding is a way to understand other cultures; distance groups are creative but has other challenges
 - Creation of a new consciousness - new ways of thinking
 - How will people be using technology
 - How will people be using technology
 - Creating new possibilities: learning, entertainment
 - What is the country's role in it?
 - Other: extent of using, past world to the new
 - Country as a decision
 - How technology presents new challenges, encourages creative solutions
 - Country's role in it?
 - What is the country's role in it?
 - Why?
 - How does the personal, pragmatic, and professional?
 - How does the US, which is usually known to other countries?
 - Formulating a perspective from a single angle
 - People moving into a different form of analysis
 - Technology as a catalyst for learning, culture and adaptation to escape being pigeonholed
 - What is the country's role in it?
 - Why?
 - How does the personal, pragmatic, and professional?
 - How does the US, which is usually known to other countries?
 - Formulating a perspective from a single angle
 - People moving into a different form of analysis
 - Character: how is it?
 - Experiencing new technologies
 - Adding, creating (but do not rely) typical about
 - What is study working?
 - English: space's two aspects to technology
 - Local language: thinking
 - Local language: thinking
 - Why is a team important in a school's country?
 - Creating through thought by info: creative ideas
 - Time of the arts for every day: tasks like climbing, creative, creating, creating, creating
 - What is my perspective on the personal?
 - Individual groups
 - How do you think it?
- Interdisciplinary Studies**
 - What is the country's role in it?
 - Why?
 - How does the personal, pragmatic, and professional?
 - How does the US, which is usually known to other countries?
 - Formulating a perspective from a single angle
 - People moving into a different form of analysis
- Global Perspective**
 - How does the US, which is usually known to other countries?
 - Formulating a perspective from a single angle
 - People moving into a different form of analysis
- Sociology**
 - Assumption that working in the arts is extremely hard to creativity and imagination
 - Can exposure to the arts translate to success in other fields?
 - What type of art is perceived to be the best? (creativity?)
- Music**
 - What type of art is perceived to be the best? (creativity?)
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
- History**
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Anthropology**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Social Studies**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Moment/Sensor/Applying Physiology**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Cognitive and learning sciences**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Individual groups**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Arts and the creative**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- TESOL/ Applied Languages**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Technology Education**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?
- Higher Education**
 - Funding resources to understand the past and present clearly in the context of the past
 - What are the elements of the music?
 - What are the elements of the music?

Just as the symposium experience had a trajectory that was shaped by the push and pull of dialectical tensions and the generative nature of collaboration, this collection is a result of similar processes. It has evolved, or “emerged” (see Keith Sawyer, this volume) to represent the ubiquitous nature of creativity.

Rather than a concretized replay of the symposium, the form of the issue is the consequence of a progressive inquiry, responsive to the coherence of part to whole. We begin with three articles offering a variety of entry points from which to consider our topic and its implications for education.

These are followed by “short essays in which educational researchers examine the concept of innovation in a variety of content areas. The final section features imagined dialogues,” between students and teachers, processes and products, legacy and wonder.

CREATIVITY

In this first section, creativity is examined by three scholars who attended the symposium and participated in a seminar panel which addressed the following questions:

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What is creativity, and why is it important?

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What motivates it?

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How do teaching and learning need to be redesigned to foster it?

The authors consider these questions as well as some of the core dialectical issues raised at the inception of the project as described in the opening paragraph.

Sharon Bailin, Emerita Professor of Philosophy of

Education at Simon Fraser University begins with a critique of existing frames of thought, calling for the use of critical inquiry as a means of generating the creative impulse. She introduces a thread which weaves through each of these papers, that is, the dynamic relationship between the freedom of imagination and the constraints of tradition/convention. Creativity resists the acceptance of knowledge as static and disciplines as fixed; it values adaptation and questions. Bailin reminds us that the questions, however, are most fruitful when emanating from experience within the represented domain(s). Such contextualization is grounding for an informed receptivity to the given, feeding awareness of “what is” in order to best reveal “what could be.”

Addressing the challenges implicit in creative educational practices, Keith Sawyer, Morgan Distinguished Professor in Educational Innovations, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, argues that “learning is always a creative process,” (p. xx). He continues by describing such a process as emergent – explaining how categorically new ideas and products evolve from existing situations, materials, and needs. Collaboration fortifies emergence, because shared experience and conversation illuminate the learning process. He makes his point through a case study of the San Francisco Exploratorium, a hands-on science museum. Such an approach conflicts with traditional “instructionism,” which equates learning with acquisition, and, therefore, views teaching as transmission. Sawyer sees teaching as a paradox, one in which structure and creativity need to co-exist in perfect tension to support student learning. He refers to this pedagogical skill as “disciplined improvisation.”

In the third paper of this section Beth Hennessey, Professor of Psychology at Wellesley College, discusses motivation for creative engagement from a cross-cultural perspective. She calls into question the universality of Western research which supports the motivational power of intrinsic rewards and the often harmful effects of extrinsic systems of gratification. Offering a comparative interpretation of studies she and her colleagues conducted in South Korea, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the U.S., she discusses differences between collective-interdependent and individual-independent societies. The analyses reveal complexity in culture-based responsiveness to the expectation of external rewards and evaluation, and serve as a cautionary reminder to keep assumptions in check. Hennessey acknowledges dispositional differences

as well, and urges educators to attend to and encourage students' domain-specific interests.

Through our attunement to the world, we create ubiquitously and are able to respond to the potential in problems, materials, accidents, and juxtapositions to illuminate our sense of possibility. Action emanating from such attunement turns the theoretical into the tangible. What does creativity look like in specific educational contexts?

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE-IN-ACTION

This second section includes four essays describing educational practices from disparate fields of study.

Each of these settings suggests a sense of possibility as a result of engaging in the sometimes very difficult work of remaining open and withholding judgment. These authors identify challenges in their work, and through critically generated questions, have found pathways to innovative practices.

Creativity seems to thrive when diverse groups come together with the common goal of creating something new; however, when groups become factions, and binaries are explicit, there is often little hope for innovative solutions or products. How can these barriers be negotiated? How can difference become a springboard for discovery? Teachers College Associate Professor Srikala Naraian shows us the possibilities and struggles that occur when academics from two areas of theoretical grounding join together to create a course for students at the University of Reykjavik in Iceland. She interrogates the value of uncertainty and ambiguity through her field, disability studies, where resisting the application of standardized expectations to every person has led to a more nuanced understanding of individual potential.

Erick Gordon, Senior Research Fellow for Innovation at the Center for the Preparation of English Teachers (CPET), and Ruth Vinz, Morse Professor of Teacher Education, both from Teachers College, found similar benefits from a more improvisatory approach to teaching. They write that when teachers provide spaces that invite creative potential, students can communicate their ideas

about literature, considering the crafts of expression and interpretation. In this essay, they present the story of such a space in which 13 teachers from around the world collaborated with 13 New York City High School students. Together, they stepped inside the world of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through improvisational sound and movement, experimenting with the layering of mode and medium, the interplay between physical and digital space and the remixing of text on text as they sought to explore the questions raised by Shelley's tale.

Sandra Okita, Associate Professor at Teachers College, studies the crossing of boundaries between humans and technology, more specifically, the ways technology may become more useful as it replicates features of human interaction. With the help of peer robots, she is able to look at the ways in which problems are not only solved, but are *found*; she reports on educational practices and the importance of curiosity and feedback. Her innovations in working with children, families, and robots have implications for our understanding of self and other, especially through the reciprocal lenses of teaching and learning.

In examining Human Rights Education, Associate Professor at the University of San Francisco, Monisha Bajaj, explores the transformational nature of social change through the lenses of creativity, imagination, and innovation. Her critical inquiry addresses: How do agency and freedom interact? In what ways does the ability to imagine foster or resist the capability for peaceful co-existence? Does innovation have a role in re-conceptualizing ways in which we educate for a more inclusive, participatory and wide-awake global citizenry?

Innovation demands deep disciplinary knowledge, while welcoming playful interdisciplinary explorations that cause us to see and hear and feel differently. This change is often provoked by our encounters with others, whose expertise and perspectives may incite doubt regarding previously held beliefs and practices, or delight in surprise connections and insights. How do we position ourselves and our students to see the broad landscape of opportunities for change? We can imagine.

In this final section, scholars were invited to interact in conversation with words and images, allowing the content of their thinking *on imagination* to be *imaginatively formed*. The first two articles began with archival data. Olga Hubbard, Associate Professor of Art Education at Teachers College, returns to the transcript of a 2009 interview she gave on creativity in the early stages of the project. She extracts excerpts of her spontaneous responses in the interview, shapes them to reflect her current thinking, and creates an imagined dialogue between her words and the artwork of her students, thus aesthetically playing with the tensions between process and product, of now and then, of belief and evidence. (For color photos of the artwork, see the online version of this article.)

Much theorizing about creativity, including the points of view espoused by authors in the opening articles, involves the tensions between structure and freedom -- between form and content. Musical improvisation serves as an exemplar of this dialectic, perhaps most audible in the blues forms of early jazz: 12 Bar – 32 Bar – take a solo. Kwami Coleman, postdoctoral fellow at New York University, dialogically interprets an interview (2009) with Columbia Professor, George Lewis, whose most recent publication is an exposition of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music. Pushing formal conventions aside, Coleman offers commentary on Lewis' views on creativity, improvisation and jazz, and how the contexts of oppression and opportunity both fueled and extinguished creativity in educational communities. Historical views are juxtaposed with contemporary conditions as a way of looking forward.

Nick Sousanis, Post-doctorate Fellow in Comics Studies at the University of Calgary, and Daiyu Suzuki, an independent writer and current doctoral student at Teachers College, collaborate in an artful ode to the imaginative force of Maxine Greene. Through active reflecting on conversations with this teacher philosopher, joining memories of profound experiences with a present sense of gratitude, responsibility, and awe, these two former students share a denouement of sorts, one which invites openings for further discovery. A view of the tree from her apartment window generates metaphorical thinking, images of the aesthetic experience which dance through the consciousness of the authors. Such dialogue between the actual and the imagined reminds us about the power of place, and the importance of positioning, so that our vision

advantages both perception and possibility.

In this collection of papers, authors indicate in myriad ways that in terms of education, it may be worthwhile to re-conceptualize creativity as ubiquitous – through the act of creating we are making meaning from understanding. In teaching and learning, this often happens in dialogue with people and the environment: Innovation comes from interactions with those whose views call us to re-consider the known and with spaces which demand new ways of situating. Rather than a trait existing in a few, this issue offers perspectives and evidence that creativity might best be interpreted as a process by which certain questions, circumstances, and ideas provoke re-imagining. It is our hope that this volume challenges you to look anew at the trees outside your windows, creatively resourcing current and envisioning future conditions and company in the pursuit of meaningful work.

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