

Example of a Creative Ecology : Dewitt Jones

Norman Jackson

So what can we learn about creative ecologies from creative people? I believe that we can learn a lot about creativity from people who have done something creative and are able to explain what they did and how, why and when they did it.

Mostly we do this from observing people, like colleagues or friends at close quarters, often when we are collaborating with them and they share with us their thinking and decision making processes and subsequent actions. But we can also learn in other ways for example when people write biographies, or researchers, like Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, interview people as in his book on the Psychology of Flow, or when we interview people ourselves if we are involved in research. I conducted many interviews with students while working at the University of Surrey a few years ago and learnt about the ways they used their creativity. There are also many resources on the internet as creative people record their thoughts and experiences in blogs, or in talks and interviews.

One example is a YouTube recording of a talk given by photographer Dewitt Jones, in which he tells the story of an assignment he completed for Dewers Whisky. It describes a scenario in which he had to produce a photograph of salmon fishing in Scotland for the company's advertising campaign. As the story unfolds he finds himself in a set of circumstances that he did not imagine but his actions and thought processes reveal the way in which his technical expertise and imagination intermingle to produce the results he wanted.

Watch him telling his story at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVL2ruZiXso>

Narrative

Jones: This is not assignment for the [national] geographic but a big advertising campaign I did for Dewars Scotch, and they sent me over to Scotland with an obscene budget and a crew of nine, and three clients to watch over me. No pressure.

One of the things they asked me to do was photograph salmon fishing on Scotland's River Tweed. Man again I'd done my homework, I knew what I wanted I came down that windy road to the river tweed. I had images in my head of backlit salmon and silver cataracts and leaping fish and the windy road delivered us and there it was. It looked like the East Sandusky River, the River without Drama. I turned to my art director and say, "What are we going to do?" He said, "I don't know I'm carsick I'm going back to the road."

It was up to me. How many times every week is up to you? I got talking to one of the guides, the gillies. The gentleman there in the foreground. Each beat of the river, each stretch has a different guide, a different gilly and they know every rock, and every shoal and every riffle. He told me that salmon fishing in Scotland is a very formal affair you wear a coat, a tie, and a hat and chest waders. I'm getting intrigued.

He told me when you catch a salmon you bring it up to the fish hut, and in that hut there's a leather book and in that book there's a list of every salmon that has been caught on that beat

in the last 100 years. Now I'm getting intrigued, now I'm seeing these great formal dumps that these guys are doing in this salmon giver on the river.

Then he said, "You know Dewitt there was mist on the water this morning, that's unusual for this time of the year. My intellect climbed all over and said, "I want to be in the place of most potential." I'm out there two hours before dawn, and when the sun starts coming up I got the boat, I got the gillie, I got the fisherman, I got the right lens, I got the right focus, I got my first right answer. I got to roam up there for tight little bottle of scotch I know what I'm doing right.

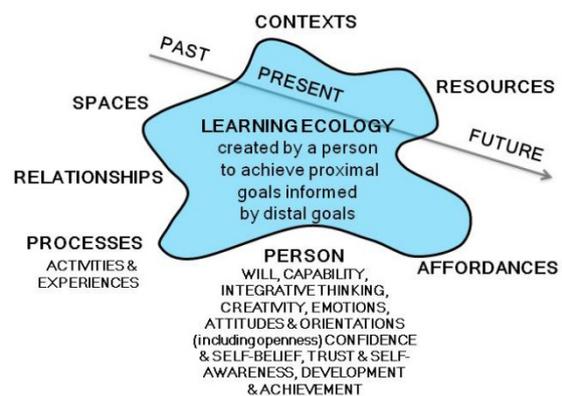
Then my intuition starts screaming at me it says, "Turn around do it, you're shooting the wrong way." Yes sir, I listened to it. I turned around man I was really getting nice. I'm trying to pay attention to realize that this photograph is made by body language not by facial expression. Get that right and the two guys, and at the same time my intellect realizes the suns going to come up behind those trees so I yelled at the guys to get the boat rowed down there because I want to be in the place of most potential.

Man now it's really getting nice. Talk about having my technique down, I've got a walkie-talkie in that boat yes. I'm not worried about making mistakes I'm just looking for the next right answer and they just kept coming. This was the final ad, "Why would a man rise before dawn to fish for salmon on Scotland's river tweed? Why indeed. The good thing in life stays that way."

Ecological perspective

Dewitt's story illustrates how our creativity emerges through an ecology for learning and achieving that involves ourselves in a relationship and interacting with our environment and the problems, challenges and opportunities we are working with in a continuously unfolding present (Jackson 2016 and Figure 1). A relationship that is consistent with the concept of creativity proposed by Carl Rogers 'the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other' (Rogers 1961:350).

Figure 1 Model of a Learning Ecology (Jackson 2016)



Exploring Learning Ecologies <https://www.lulu.com/>

DJ describes his processes and the activities he undertook. What he did, how, when and why he did it, in order to achieve the goal of his professional assignment (producing an advert for Dewers Scotch. This proximal or immediate goal is set within his long term ambition (implicit distal goal) of sustaining and developing himself as a world class professional photographer.

In his narrative DJ shows us that when we encounter a new and unknown context and situation we draw on past experiences and imagine the immediate future as a way of preparing for it but we are surprised when the reality of the situation does not match our

expectations. We have to understand the new situation and DJ shows us that we need to engage with our problem/challenge and the context (environment) in a purposeful but playful, open, exploratory, intelligent and emotional way.

Initially, his ecology is geared to developing knowledge that is relevant to the specific context and situation and the actions he might take to achieve his goal. He has created the space to inquire and explore in order to seek and sense the possibilities and opportunities for action (affordances) 'I want to be in the place of most potential'. In seeking this knowledge he formed a relationship with the people who knew the environment and the context better than anyone else - the gillies. We can see through his story telling that he has a vivid imagination and he shares with us the way his excitement as he began to recognise the possibilities for action. He demonstrates well how he uses his imagination and it's easy to imagine him imagining possible situations for taking photographs in these sites with 'most potential' and then 'working out' how he would act in order to get the photographs he needed.

Figure 2 Summary of Dewitt Jones' ecology for learning, achieving and creating.



Taking the photographs was not a random act, it was carefully thought through in advance and required considerable planning and the involvement and active participation of the gillies with whom he had formed a working relationship. It also required him to utilise the resources and technologies that were available to him. It also involved performing in the moment, the unfolding present of sunrise. In these moments he brought to bear his technical knowledge and skill and drew on his vision of what he was trying to achieve to act in ways that gave him the shots he was searching for but not knowing how the evolving natural conditions would enable him to produce these shots in advance. He improvised with the skill and knowledge of an expert in order to obtain the results that had highest potential for achieving his goal. He

reveals that the results he was seeking were driven by a desire to produce an image of great beauty with aesthetic and emotional appeal as well as satisfying the technical brief he had been given.

The ecological perspective suggests that creativity emerges over time from our interactions with all of these things and it's not easy to identify creativity in one particular thing, its integrated into our ways of thinking, behaving and being when we are in situations that require or encourage us to be creative. The wisdom in DJ's story of personal creativity is in the way he reveals that not only do we need technical knowledge and abilities to fulfil a goal, we need to learn about the environment we are inhabiting and working, and sense through our deep involvement where, how and when we might discover and create possible solutions (possible right answers) to our problem. In his case much of his learning came from the conversations he had with the people who had local knowledge. Furthermore, he shows us that we should not be satisfied with one possible right answer that is good enough but we should carry on searching for more possibilities. Perhaps we only recognise what is our best possible answer after the event when we have time to reflect and think about what we have achieved.

Perhaps also the best possible answer (the product used in the advert) has to be negotiated with others - presumably his clients had some say in the matter.

'the emergence in action of a novel relational product , growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other' (Rogers 1961:350).

References

Jackson, N J (2016) Exploring Learning Ecologies Lulu

<https://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?keyWords=exploring+learning+ecologies&type=>

Jones, D. (2013) Dewitt Jones on Creativity

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVL2ruZiXso>

Rogers, C.R., (1961) On becoming a person. Boston: Houghton Mifflin