

Towards transformation: conceptions of creativity in higher education

Paul Kleiman ¹

PALATINE, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

[This paper appeared in *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 45: 3, 209-217. This is a 'Special Edition' of the journal, focused on a number of papers presented at the *Creativity or Conformity? Build a Culture of Creativity in Higher Education* conference, Cardiff, 2007]

ABSTRACT

Creativity, which has now entered the discourse in higher education alongside other agenda items such as enterprise, entrepreneurship and innovation, is an elusive and complex notion. It may evade the sort of definition, categorisation and compartmentalisation required to integrate it fully into the curriculum frameworks and assessment regimes that are currently in place in higher education. After a contextualisation of the subject, this paper describes the outcomes of a phenomenographic research project that set out to identify the qualitatively different ways university lecturers, across a range of arts, humanities and science disciplines, conceptualise creativity in relation to their pedagogic practice.

Keywords: creativity; conceptions; phenomenography; pedagogy; practice

¹ Paul Kleiman is Deputy Director of PALATINE, the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music based at Lancaster University. He has a long-standing pedagogic and research interest in creativity and assessing creativity. After a professional career in the performing and visual arts, he was a member of the team that created the innovative curriculum and assessment methodology for the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. He is a regular speaker at conferences and seminars on creativity, curriculum design and assessment, and was recently appointed as a special adviser to the Creativity and Critical Thinking Project in the USA, which focuses on assessing creativity in liberal arts colleges.

E-mail: p.kleiman@lancaster.ac.uk

To cite this Article

Kleiman, Paul (2008) 'Towards transformation: conceptions of creativity in higher education', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 45: 3, 209 — 217

Towards transformation: conceptions of creativity in higher education

Paul Kleiman¹

PALATINE, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Creativity surrounds us on all sides: from composers to chemists, cartoonists to choreographers. But creativity is a puzzle, a paradox, some say a mystery. (Boden, 1994, p. 519)

The defining problem

In the introduction to the book *Beyond Productivity: Information Technology, Innovation and Creativity* (2003), written by members of the American National Academy of Sciences, the section on creativity opens as follows:

Creativity is a bit like pornography; it is hard to define, but we think we know it when we see it. (Mitchell, Inouye, & Blumenthal, 2003, p. 7)

Though there may be no single, 'hold-all' definition of creativity, there seems to be a general coalescing of agreement amongst creativity researchers that creativity involves notions of novelty and originality combined with notions of utility and value. This is certainly reflected in the set of definitions compiled by Mayer (1999, p. 449) from the writings of established creativity researchers. While those researchers tend to belong to the field of psychology, the following definitions are worth noting as they are written from an educational perspective:

Creativity is imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value. (National Advisory Committee on Creative & Cultural Education, 1999, p. 30)

Creativity constructs new tools and new outcomes – new embodiments of knowledge. It constructs new relationships, rules, communities of practice and new connections – new social practices. (Knight, 2002, p. 1)

Those two definitions reveal rather different conceptual approaches to creativity, and this research project set out to explore those conceptual variations. There are a relatively small number of research studies that have focused on the academics' perceptions of creativity (e.g. Fryer, 2006; Gioia, 1995; McGoldrick, 2002; Oliver, 2002). Jackson and Shaw (2005) contend that 'at the highest level of abstraction there is a good degree of consensus as to what being creative means in any context' (p. 2), and in his guide to creativity in the curriculum, Jackson provides the following definition:

Creativity involves first imagining something (to cause to come into existence) and then doing something with this imagination (creating something that is new and useful to you). It's a very personal act and it gives you a sense of satisfaction and achievement when you've done it. (Jackson, 2002, p. 1)

As part of a wide-ranging series of papers produced under the aegis of the Imaginative Curriculum Network, Jackson and Shaw (2005) compiled the results of what they referred to as 'many conversations in workshops, interviews and email surveys', and produced a list of the most common ideas academics associate with creativity. There were: originality; being imaginative; exploring for the purpose of discovery, doing/producing new things (invention); doing/producing things no-one has ever done before (innovation); doing/producing things that have been done before but differently (adaptation, transference); and communication.

Jackson and Shaw (2005) also analysed the studies of McGoldrick (2002) and Oliver (2002) who both asked UK academics the question 'what does being creative mean when you design a course?' They synthesised the responses as follows:

Creativity as personal innovation – something that is new to individuals. This is often about the transfer and adaptation of ideas from one context to another creativity as working at and across the boundaries of acceptability in specific contexts: it involves exploring new territory and taking risks.

Creativity as designs that promote the holistic idea of gradueness – the capacity to connect and do things with what has been learnt and to utilise this knowledge to learn in other situations.

Creativity as making sense out of complexity, i.e. working with multiple, often conflicting factors, pressures, interests and constraints.

Creativity as a process of narrative-making in order to present the 'real curriculum' in ways that conform to the regulatory expectations of how a curriculum should be framed. (Jackson & Shaw, 2005, p. 2)

In this synthesis Jackson and Shaw have begun to outline the forms of variation that might constitute academic conceptions of creativity. What follows provides another perspective on the same phenomenon.

A conceptual map

Phenomenography focuses on the limited but qualitatively different number of ways in which individuals experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, and conceptualise various phenomena 'through their own discourse' (Tan & Prosser, 2004, p. 269). The central part of the research consisted of in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews undertaken with 12 academics from a range of disciplines. The transcriptions of the interviews formed what Marton and Booth define as a 'pool of meaning' that 'contains all that the researcher can hope to find, and the researcher's task is simply to find it' (1997, p. 133).

What initially emerged from that 'pool of meaning' was a list of over 30 possible different variations in conception of the experience of creativity in learning and teaching. There then followed an intensive, iterative process in which those categories were distilled and reduced. Eventually, five main categories of description, describing qualitatively different ways of understanding creativity in the context of learning and teaching, were constituted, and they focused varyingly on the experience of creativity as:

- a constraint-focused experience;
- a process-focused experience;
- a product-focused experience;
- a transformation-focused experience;
- a fulfilment-focused experience.

The five key aspects of variation are depicted in the diagram or 'conceptual map' shown in Figure 1. The map is an attempt to depict not only the variations in the conceptions of creativity constituted by the source material, but also to portray those variations in a way that captures the fluid and complex nature of their relations.

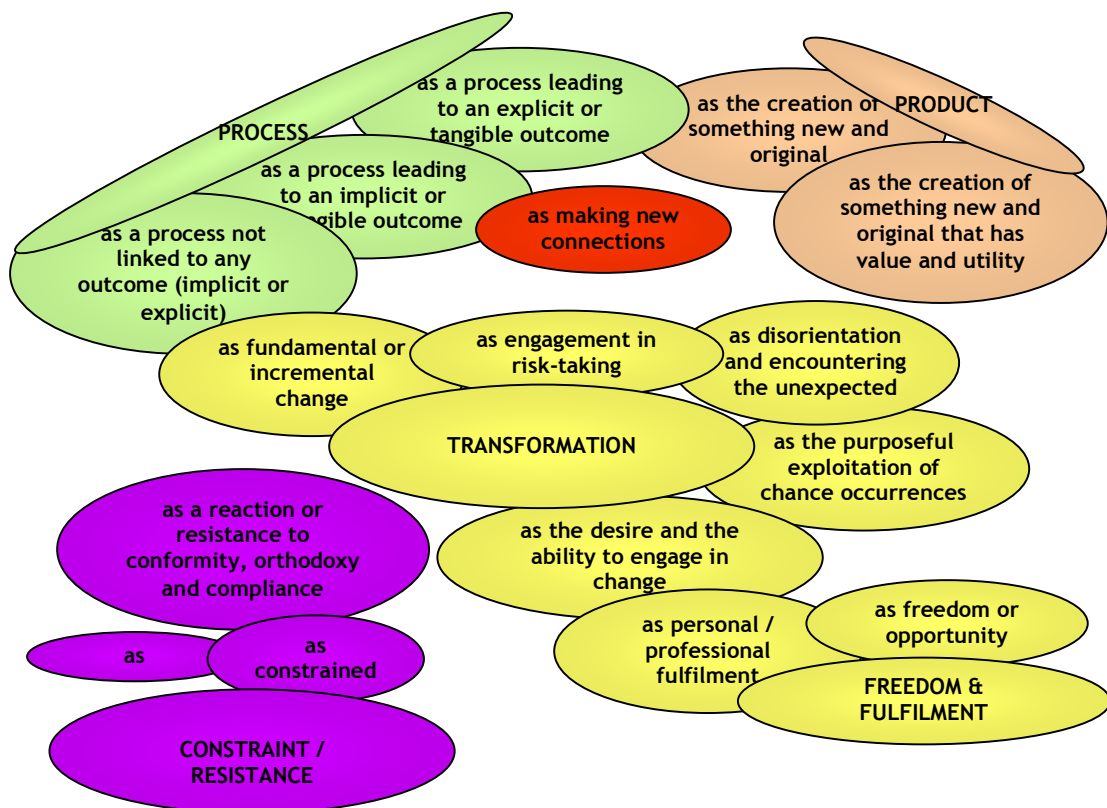


Figure 1: conceptual map of creativity in higher education

It is important to stress that this research is still emergent and requires further analysis and distillation in order to depict both the relational and hierarchical aspects of the variations that have emerged during the course of this research.

The diagram in Figure 1 is an emerging 'outcome space' in which the constituent parts are present but not yet fully formed or composed in relation to each other.

Nevertheless some patterns and relationships have emerged. In particular, there are the five key aspects of variation that, if placed on a continuum of inclusivity, would almost certainly situate creativity as a *constraint-focused* experience at the 'lower' end, and creativity as a *fulfilment-focused* experience at the 'higher' end. It would also appear logical that creativity as a *process-focused* experience ought to precede creativity as a *product-focused* experience. However, that is problematic as it is clear from the research data that there is a conception of creativity-as-process that is not linked to product.

Creativity as a constraint-focused experience

A number of the participants provided what may be termed a 'reverse view' of their experience of creativity in learning and teaching, describing it in terms of constraint or as a form of resistance to compliance and orthodoxy. Where creativity is perceived through the lens of constraint, it appears in several forms, e.g. constrained in order to enable student creativity; constrained by the institutional environment; and constrained in order to meet the expectations of the students.

An example of creativity constrained to enable student creativity was the principal lecturer who gained their creative fulfilment through engagement in their own creative process (in this case professional work in the performing arts). Teaching, for this lecturer, was perceived as 'not particularly creative'. However, there was a passionate concern with the students' learning, and enabling their creativity.

A young, relatively inexperienced lecturer perceived their creativity as constrained by the system in which they operate, and in which their lack of experience and the need to maintain their position rendered them relatively powerless to engage creatively as a teacher. However, the perception of the 'system' as constraining creativity is not restricted to the young and relatively inexperienced. It is also a view expressed by this highly experienced, eminent, close-to-retirement, professor and pro-vice chancellor:

I think that in terms of pedagogy and teaching and learning, particularly in departments that recruit large number of students, I sense a considerable amount of frustration that it is not possible to carry through the number of ideas people have ... I think that the culture is inimical to the working out of a lot of bright ideas. My general conclusion would be that I am surprised that there is as much of it about as there is because I think that the climate is pretty hostile. (Academic, interviewed by author [AIA], 2006)

The third variation within this category is one in which creativity is constrained in the endeavour to meet the students' expectations. The lecturer is caught between a keenly felt obligation to fulfil those expectations – thus constraining their own creativity – and the desire to be more creative but concerned about and constrained by its possible consequence.

As well as the constraint or even suspension of creativity, creativity as a reaction to that constraint also emerged as a strong theme.

You don't want to do it the way everybody else has done it. You've got to do something alternative to that, you've got to be creative. (AIA, 2006)

So I've always ... I don't like to be pigeonholed ... I don't enjoy doing something if it is so constrained. I want to try and break the boundaries a bit. I'm just like that I suppose. (AIA, 2006)

The initial response to this 'constraint' category was to exclude it as an outcome, but further thinking about this led to its inclusion on the basis that perhaps there is a binary aspect to the phenomenon of creativity, i.e. its existence relies, to a lesser or greater extent, rather like matter and anti-matter, on the presence of its opposite.

Creativity as process-focused experience

In this category, creativity is conceived as a process-focused experience, in which there are clear conceptual variants, i.e. those processes that lead to explicit outcomes or products; those that lead to implicit outcomes; and those that are not necessarily linked to any outcome. The 'making of new connections' has also been placed within this process category, although it stood isolated in what appeared, for a long period during the analysis, in a category of its own, and could justifiably be placed also within the product category. It contains, as this excerpt illustrates, elements of both process and product, and demonstrates how creativity can slide between 'looking' (process) and 'finding' or 'creating' (product):

I am always looking for different ways to make connections between things. And I think if you're looking for ways to make connections between things, if you find new connections, then, in a sense, you know, the creativity is manifesting itself in something. So I don't know whether the creativity is in the looking, or the creativity is in the finding. (AIA, 2006)

The notion of engaging in a process with the intention of producing a tangible outcome lies at the heart of the current education system. However, as Saunders et al. (2004) point out, it is extremely difficult – due to the number of variables – to draw a clear, definitive 'line of determination' between an engagement in a particular activity and a particular outcome.

The idea of a student 'actually learning something', i.e. achieving a learning outcome, is a familiar trope in higher education, and in terms of conceptualising creativity fits easily into the outcome-focused environment that is now ubiquitous in higher education. But that is only one of three variations in the way creativity-as-process is conceptualised. It is also conceived as leading to implicit or intangible outcomes and, thirdly, as not linked to any outcome. While the latter may appear illogical, in that all processes must lead to some form of outcome, and seems perhaps counter-intuitive, it recognises that creativity sometimes requires an acceptance of a lack of structure and direction, e.g. 'playing for the sake of playing'.

Creativity as a product-focused experience

Some thing that's new. Whether it's a new thing, artefact, or approach to something ... I see that as creative. (AIA, 2006)

In this category the primary focus is on the production of either something that is simply new and original, or the production of something in which notions of novelty and originality combine with notions of utility and value. The creation of something new or original ranges from something relatively modest to something that is truly groundbreaking or paradigm shifting. It also ranges from a 'democratic' notion that 'we are all creative' to the notion of creativity as the province of the great individual or individual genius.

At the modest end of the creative continuum, there is a certain hesitancy about describing the experience.

Because although it wasn't anything earth shattering, it was something that I thought up myself. I think my definition of creativity regarding me is hard to separate from originality. And whilst I know theoretically that they are not the same thing, because I don't think I am particularly creative, or particularly original ... I tend to conflate the two. (AIA, 2006)

At the other end of the continuum, the view emerged that creativity in learning and teaching needs to involve or consist of something significantly new or original:

I see creativity as the ability or tendency of an individual or group, either intentionally or unintentionally, to utilise what they have or know to produce something new and original, ultimately to sit outside the norm ... This sounds like a Kuhnian shift. (AIA, 2006)

Also in this product-focused category, creativity consists of a combination of novelty and originality with value and utility. It is not sufficient for a creative action or outcome simply to be new and/or original: there has to be a sense or recognition that the action or outcome has some utility and value.

In the same way that it appears logical to link creativity-as-process with an outcome, it appears logical that creativity-as-product ought to be linked to utility and value. However, whilst there is an explicit and, to some degree, implicit recognition that value and utility have a role to play, there is still a strong attachment to the notion that creativity is primarily about using the imagination to create something new and the original. An analysis of an online questionnaire that asked academics for the words and phrases that they associated with creativity (Kleiman, 2006) found that of the approximately 1100 words and phrases used by the 82 respondents less than 10 included words explicitly associated with utility or value. One might conclude that, certainly as an initial response, people do not instinctively associate creativity with utility and value.

Creativity as a transformation-focused experience

While a concern with process and product might be expected in any exploration and discussion of creativity, some of the most interesting material to emerge from the interviews involved what I have termed the 'transformation' category, which is encapsulated in this excerpt:

I think there is either an act, or an activity, or a thing itself which is changed in some way ... in some sense. Because if it wasn't, if it was the same as it was before, I don't know what it was meant to be creative. Creativity suggests to me change ... It's my instinctive response. (AIA, 2006)

In this category creativity in learning and teaching is experienced as an engagement in a process that is transformative either in itself, or is undertaken with the intention (implicit or explicit) of being transformative. Engagement in such a process may derive from the desire to change (intrinsic motivation) or as a response to a change event (extrinsic motivation) – whether intended or unintended. It is in this category that encountering and exploiting chance and risk-taking appear as important factors.

A number of the interviewees identified the role serendipity and opportunity played in their creativity in learning and teaching, and it was striking how frequently the unprompted phrase 'I stumbled across something', or words to that effect, appeared. While the role of chance, in the guise of 'stumbling' upon something is important, it needs to combine with the ability to exploit constructively the opportunity that has arisen:

So the creative part, I guess, is stumbling upon it and realising that it might have value. I've stumbled across lots of things, but you don't act upon them. But a combination of stumbling upon it, and then thinking this has a particular use, and then pursuing that little bit. So it's not just stumbling upon it, it's finding that the thing has a use. (AIA, 2006)

The frequency and consistency with which the opportunity to exploit the consequences of 'stumbling upon something' played a critical part in the various self-narratives of creativity in learning and teaching has clear significance for those interested and engaged in learning and teaching. Firstly, it is important to realise that there are several distinct but linked elements in this. One is the 'stumbling', and another is the ability or opportunity to exploit it. As the interviewee (above) states, people stumble across things all the time but rarely act: 'So it's not just stumbling upon it, it's finding that the thing has a use'. Then beyond finding the thing has use, one needs to be able to engage in an action that exploits – in the best sense of the word – that situation.

This leads to two other important factors that appear in these narratives of creativity: risk-taking and confidence. While risk-taking is recognised as an essential element in any creative enterprise, the narratives also reveal a strong focus on the importance of confidence.

But with no confidence to stand on your own you can't be creative. Because you ... you just can't. I think there has to be some confidence there. (AIA, 2006)

Also in this transformation category is the concept of risk and risk-taking. A strong sense of 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' emerges from the interviews, as well as a keen awareness of the dangers and frustrations of working in risk-averse environments.

I think it's the thing that really creative people live all the time with, because I think they take risks. I think you don't get creativity without taking risks. The risks are only intellectual or whatever ... it's still the freedom to do it. The people who can't be creative are the people who can't dare step outside of the safe zone. (AIA, 2006)

There is a cliché in the literature on organisational change that change is necessarily unsettling. The same is also true of creativity as a transformative process. It is perhaps this particular aspect of creativity – as a positive yet disruptive, disorienting force – that has the potential to disturb and even threaten educational and pedagogic structures, systems and processes.

Creativity as a fulfilment-focused experience

In this category, the experience of creativity is linked strongly to notions of personal and professional fulfilment. In his definition of creativity following his own, many conversations about creativity in education, Jackson (2002, p. 1) wrote that 'It's a very personal act and it gives you a sense of satisfaction and achievement when you've done it', and it is clear, from the interviews undertaken, that the themes of fulfilment and freedom run strongly through the way academics conceptualise creativity. This view is epitomised in the following excerpt:

You could tell the course was buzzing. In fact ... actually ... it was the first time in my life I had to tell the class not to work so hard. I've never had it before or since. But that year it just ... everything caught alight. It was fabulous. (AIA, 2006)

That the excerpt above was provided by a senior lecturer in accountancy – a subject not normally associated, except ironically, with creativity – is a clear testament to the ability of a creative engagement to provide a powerful sense of satisfaction and achievement. What also emerged from the interviews was an acknowledgement that creativity involves a personal commitment or investment:

I think being creative is putting something of myself into what I'm doing ... So it's a personal investment. (AIA, 2006)

The experience of creativity as a fulfilment-focused experience emerged initially as what seemed to be a relatively minor category of variation. But through the repeated re-visiting of the interview data, it became clear that it was a powerful and important element in the way academics experience creativity. There are echoes here of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in which self-actualisation or fulfilment is at the highest level of the hierarchy.

Towards some conclusions

Notwithstanding the emergent nature of this research, several conclusions can be drawn from the existing outcomes. Significant among these is the complexity and richness in the way academics perceive their experience of creativity in learning and teaching. The centrality of creativity-as-transformation, and the importance of creativity in relation to personal and/or professional fulfilment, poses a series of challenges to the current focus on creativity in higher education. The outcomes suggest that there is much more to the experience of creativity in learning and teaching than simply 'being creative'. Furthermore, the results indicate that a focus on academics' experience of creativity separated from their larger experience of being a teacher may encourage over-simplification of the phenomenon of creativity, particularly in relation to their underlying intentions when engaged in creative activity.

What emerges from this research is that issues of definition that so concern creativity researchers are of little concern to those who are engaged with and interested in creativity in learning and teaching. There is an obvious fascination with creativity, but it is also apparent that creativity is not part of the daily academic educational discourse, and that the evident interest in participating in this research stemmed partly from the fact that it provided a rare opportunity to talk about creativity in relation to learning and teaching. As one of the participants said: 'It's been very interesting to talk in this way. I've never really thought about it in these terms'.

The potential significance of these research outcomes is that academics need to be perceived and involved as agents in their own and their students' creativity rather than as objects of, or more pertinently, deliverers of a particular 'creativity agenda'. The transformational power of creativity poses a clear challenge to organisational systems and institutional frameworks that rely, often necessarily, on compliance and constraint, and it also poses a challenge to approaches to learning, teaching and assessment that promote or pander to strategic or surface approaches to learning.

Another potentially significant outcome of this research is that while for the institution (and even the government) creativity is the means to an essentially productive (and profitable) end, for those engaged at the whiteboard, engaging in creative processes and producing creative outcomes is very much about personal transformation and professional fulfilment, and escaping from, or at least resisting, the constraints and frustrations of daily academic life.

¹ Notes on author

Paul Kleiman is Deputy Director of PALATINE, the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music based at Lancaster University. He has a long-standing pedagogic and research interest in creativity and assessing creativity. After a professional career in the performing and visual arts, he was a member of the team that created the innovative curriculum and assessment methodology for the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. He is a regular speaker at conferences and seminars on creativity, curriculum design and assessment, and was recently appointed as a special adviser to the Creativity and Critical Thinking Project in the USA, which focuses on assessing creativity in liberal arts colleges.

E-mail: p.kleiman@lancaster.ac.uk

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