



SUBJECT PERSPECTIVES ON CREATIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION WORKING PAPER APRIL 2005

CREATIVITY IN HISTORY TEACHING AND LEARNING Norman Jackson

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Readers are invited to endorse, challenge, change or add to the statements so that they embody more fully and accurately the meanings of creativity as it is understood within the discipline. *Please send further contributions to the author Norman.Jackson@heacademy.ac.uk.*

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy is trying to encourage higher education teachers and subject communities to consider the role of creativity in students' learning and their experiences of learning¹. Underlying this attempt to engage higher education are the assumptions that:

- Ø Being creative is present in all disciplinary learning contexts, although we rarely use words like creativity to describe such things.
- Ø We all need to be creative (inventive/adaptive) in a world that is constantly changing: a world that also requires us to change/adapt.
- Ø Apart from those disciplines that explicitly recognise creativity as a central feature of their identity (like the performing arts and design), creativity is largely implicit in discussions about teaching and learning. However, teachers do value creativity, originality, flair and imagination in their students' learning. Indeed, creativity as one of the hallmarks of excellence in higher education learning and performance.

Underlying our project is the desire to show that **creativity is an important part of being a historian**. This proposition is being evaluated through discussions with higher education history teachers aimed at gaining insights into how they understand creativity in the context of their professional practice (both disciplinary practice and practice as teachers). This Working Paper synthesises the results of an initial survey conducted by the Higher Education Academy's History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre. Nineteen higher education teachers and two departments responded to the invitation to participate in the survey.

Questions used to prompt discussion.

- How would you describe creativity in History?
- What conditions (forms of teaching, assessment tasks etc.) encourage/enable History students to be creative?
- What are the main constraints/deterrents to developing students' creativity in History?
- Do you reward students for being creative? If so, how do you measure their creativity?
- How important a place do you feel creativity currently occupies in the History curriculum at undergraduate level? Do you feel it is adequately valued?

¹ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/creativity.htm>

'Creativity cannot be understood by looking only at the people who appear to make it happen... creative ideas vanish unless there is a receptive audience to (appreciate), record and implement them. And without the assessment of outsiders, there is no reliable way to decide whether the claims of a self-styled creative person are valid. According to this view, creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a *culture* that contains symbolic rules, a *person* who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a *field of experts* who recognize and validate the innovation. All three are necessary for a creative idea, product or discovery to take place.' (Csikszentmihayli 1996 p6).

History perspectives on creativity

The central concern of the discipline of history is to understand how people existed, acted and thought in the past and the societies and cultures they inhabited. The objective of the intellectual and emotional enterprise is to create imaginary worlds that never actually existed based on interpretations of factual evidence and intuition. Because the past has no objective material reality, any interaction with it can only be a creative and imaginative one.

In encountering the past the creativity of the historian is directed to understanding unfamiliar structures, contexts, cultures and belief systems. **Imagining** what the past was like – how, why and when people did certain things, is central to being a historian. **Historical imagination**, is essential to grasping the 'other' times and places under exploration and to conveying both that difference and a personal understanding of it. 'The ability to see a situation from a perspective that is not present-minded' is perhaps an essential ingredient of the historian's creativity and imagination.

Imagination may be directed to: the approaches used to engage with historical problems or the use of sources and techniques to produce new interpretations, or significantly qualify existing interpretations. Imagination is essential to grasp the 'other' times and places under exploration, to convey both that difference and a personal understanding of it, and to devising ways of communicating findings effectively to diverse audiences. It is also necessary to teach history in an engaging way. In history, creativity might be conceived 'as imaginative flare in historical interpretation.'

'Fostering imagination and empathy is, in itself, a creative process, while the outcomes of that process contribute to creativity..... There is no better incentive to being creative than following Maitland's advice and forcing oneself 'inside societies'.

Novelty – *creating something new and useful to the discipline* – is seen in terms of the *invention* of: new approaches to historical problems, new techniques to gather and analyse data, new approaches to validate existing accounts and evidence of the past, new /alternative interpretations explanations and insights, new forms of communication, re-interpretations of the evidence and new forms of history. New forms of historical understanding provide insights into how the past has shaped the present.

'Creativity arises when one identifies an aspect of history or a subject previously uncovered, and sets out to portray it in one form or another. It also comes about during the portrayal process, as one considers the best mode of representation.'

Connectivity and synthesis – Another manifestation of creativity in the practice of the historian is the ability to connect, differentiate, and draw parallels across historical topics that are interesting and useful so that the detail is located within a bigger picture.

Transferability – Creativity in the discipline is seen as utilising insights/concepts/theories/methodologies from another context or discipline in order to approach and analyse a particular issue from a new perspective. Other 'disciplines' might include philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, literature and art.

Challenging the status quo – 'Creativity can, of course, have negative connotations, in terms of departing from the objective or the given past. However, counterfactual history is also a positive type of creativity, as long as its intention is to spur thinking in others.'

Historians grapple with complex social systems of the past which have to be viewed holistically in order to be understood; but interpretations have to be developed on the basis of incomplete evidence. Creativity is involved in making sense of disparate and fragmentary evidence. Creativity is manifested in: thinking 'outside the box', thinking laterally and speculatively as a way of moving beyond the more obvious, questioning conventions and orthodoxy, defining new explanations which could plausibly 'fill the gaps' in existing understanding, fluency of language and creativity of expression to convey historical arguments and evidence effectively to others and excite considered debate.

Creativity exists in all aspects of disciplinary study. It is necessary in:

- the processes of knowledge-gathering since the sources are numerous and generally disparate;
- the analysis of the information from the past, including critical evaluation of sources in a comparative context;
- the historian's awareness of the approaches offered by other human science disciplines and their applicability to the study of the past;
- his empathy and imaginative representation of the past, which is an essential component of the historical process;
- the process of writing and presentation of output, a vital part of the discipline
- the releasing of the imaginative truth, enabling students to apply their own life-experience to the understanding of the past.

'Creativity can take place at both the research stage and the writing stage. Historians need to be theoretically, methodologically and historiographically reflexive throughout both of these phases of their research and history-writing. This might be, for example, through the creative selection and combination of the types of sources in use, or through an explicit awareness of the limits and possibilities of historical discourse and therefore the ways in which it can be, and has been, subverted, re-imagined, stretched to its limits etc.'

The outcomes of historical study are not limited by the existence of materially correct or provable answers to questions. They are partly dependent upon freedom in the crafting of questions; explorations are as valid as answers and historical selectivity is not a precise science. The creative historian is able to apply concepts and ideas to an historical source, event or process to produce insightful and alternative observations and interpretations and to compare, connect, differentiate, and draw parallels across historical topics that are interesting and useful – in extending understanding. 'Authority' depends not upon the discovery of 'facts' but upon the construction of convincing and persuasive argument; and all argument is creative. The process of creating stories to explain the past is one of generating possible interpretations and testing these through the evidential record. This combines divergent and convergent ways of thinking.

'Most of us like to feel that we can get pretty close to what happened and 'creativity' reminds us just how much we fill in the gaps in the evidence base for ourselves. We might do this based on contextual knowledge, comparable case studies, the use of interdisciplinary tools or whatever, but at the end of the day we have 'created' elements of 'the past'. It's important to recognise this creativity because it forces us to consider that the picture of the past we put together, whilst based on evidence and contextual 'established' knowledge, is nonetheless rooted in interpretation. So we don't so much recreate History but create it a new, and this is a difference between the 'Past' and 'History'. The Past happened, but history is what we create from what we know of the past.'

The complexity of past worlds that historians' study means that they are open to interpretation. The **intellectual curiosity** that drives historians to think and search for understanding is stimulated by the rich possibility space afforded by different interpretations of the past. All this begs the question, is creativity essential to the development of historical understanding?

Is creativity essential to a historian's understanding of history?

An interview-based study of Australian higher education history teachers (Newton et al 1998 p48-50) described understanding for history teachers in terms of the reconstruction of events.

'Understanding is a mental reconstruction of events which includes, for instance, origins, developments and plausible reasons for their occurrence significant consequences, the ethos and values prevailing at the time.'

'One is trying to stimulate the imagination because it's an imaginative thing to understand the past.'

Broader understandings in history came from the synthesis of accounts of specific events into a larger picture.

In the same study history students described the evidence for their understanding in terms of 'awareness of a coherent, plausible mental structure representing an event or situation (e.g. relationships within the new knowledge, an empathy with the people in the situation) and of the consequent feelings (e.g. conviction, pleasure).

'Its when I can summon up an image or an atmosphere of the time in my mind, rather than, quite often I've forgotten lots of dates and lots of names..'

The responses of history teachers in this survey highlights the importance to the historian of an imagination that is able to assimilate and synthesise complex but often fragmentary historically relevant knowledge from different sources and combine this with intuitive and empathetic ways of thinking that are in tune with the historical situation and moment to grow new understandings. To do this the historian must inhabit the mental and emotional world that he has constructed. The act of inhabiting and gaining insights from such mental worlds is inherently creative.

Conditions that encourage/enable history students to be creative

Teachers' conceptions of teaching are critical to any consideration of the promotion of students' creativity. Negative views of the idea that creativity can be taught are based on transmission models of teaching where teachers' attempt to transfer their own knowledge and sense making to students through lecture dominated teaching, where students' engagements in learning are predominantly based on information transfer, and are heavily prescribed and controlled by the teacher. Such conditions are less likely to foster students' creativity than models of the teacher as a stimulator, facilitator, resource provider, guide or coach, where students are given the space and freedom to make decisions about their own learning process and outcomes, and where their reasoned arguments and solutions are valued. The responses of history teachers recognise these conditions. Some of characteristics of teaching that historians believe are more likely to promote students' creativity involve teaching that:

- Does not purport to supply students with 'correct' information about the past events, contexts and situations but which emphasises the arts of interpretation, scepticism, selectivity and argument.
- Allows students the room to find new (for them perhaps) ways of approaching history.
- Allows students to define a topic or a question for themselves for their Long Essays, Dissertations and Student led Assessed Seminars.
- Allows students to get things wrong so that they can learn from the experience through formative feedback.
- Guides students' learning through seminars, group-work, tutorials and independent study.
- Less overtly 'controls'
- Develops students' confidence that what they do is worthwhile, valid and will get them marks.
- Involves discussion about the relationship between History and memory.
- Breaks down time periods and disciplines
- Involves approaches that encourage critical reflection, reward risk-taking and reasoned experimentation.
- Creates safe contexts so that students gain confidence in their own critical capacities and judgements rather than deferring to a perceived authority.
- Emphasises document work (in its widest sense) and the proposition that documentary 'evidence' is meaningless until it is interpreted and pressed into the service of argument.

- Space to read and think! That is, without constant assessment pressure.
- A tutor willing (and informed enough) to offer off-the-wall suggestions and ideas.

'The following things help students be creative: an atmosphere of trust, encounters with provocative views, experience of the creativity of others (in reading, oral exchanges etc), confidence building and encouragement of creativity by the tutor. Trust can be won through good interpersonal skills, group tasks which involve and reaffirm at a variety of levels. Encounters with provocative views come through reading primary and secondary evidence, through seminars and tutorials, through pictorial and audio-visual materials.'

Methods of learning that history teachers believe are more likely to engage students and promote their creativity:

- Task based and problem based learning.
- Research projects, dissertations : dissertations or topics decided in negotiation with tutors.
- Project work in both written and non-written forms (presentations/posters) and both individual and group project work
- Role-play in seminars, followed by discussion about the interplay between imagination, empathy, narrative, drama – and History
- Interpreting paintings (as primary texts) to encourage creatively reconstructed narrative and intention.
- Reviewing books, oral presentations, group work, debates and (sometimes)1:1 tutorials.
- Experiential learning that enables students to undertake research activity using primary evidence in relation to their particular interests.
- Experiential learning that enable students to apply their research findings in varied contexts, especially those relating to their future careers.
- Experimental approaches to writing history.
- Open-ended tasks e.g. Investigative work (identifying sources – secondary and primary),
- Analytical exercises; those which encourage direct engagement with the past.
- Independent learning/thinking/doing, but within a firm structure.
- Use of imagery to stimulate imagination.

Illustrations of practice

'Show them pictures – always a more direct route to the past. But the sort of guesses students make when they first see a picture will be more creative, but less historically appropriate, than those they make after they've done some further work on it.'

'modules that encourage students to engage with a diverse range of new, experimental and creative approaches to writing history. This would include not just the most obvious references to impact of 'the linguistic turn', but a wider appreciation of the most innovative and challenging forms of philosophical and cultural histories such as gender history, oral history, landscape history, studies in heritage and material culture, history and film, postcolonial history, war and memory, history and the media and so on. ...Film reviews, oral presentations, working on historic buildings as sources etc. can encourage students to appreciate that history may be primarily a written discourse, but it is not exclusively so.'

'One of the most important factors in developing skills associated with creativity is the learning environment.I have been impressed with the methods of developing creative thinking in students I have heard about in the past (for example, students involved in interpreting the past for local communities; the creation of exhibitions; mind-maps; artworks; role-playing).'

'Setting students an independent dissertation, or other piece of work, and giving them a choice of topic. Some will come up with something quite unexpected, and will show resourcefulness in tracking down local materials or little-known sources.'

'I set up a debate on "Should James Duke of York be excluded from the succession to the throne of England", Whigs against Tories c.1680. But the instructions require them to express support for the existing order in church and state, and prohibit them from criticising either James or the King.'

Factors that inhibit students' and teachers' creativity

Cultural factors

- The main constraint is that we are trying to introduce students to thinking historically. It is often said that history is not about producing the right answer, and this is true if by it we mean the right interpretation, evidence or facts. But we do expect students to write 'historical' essays, which exemplify mainstream historical methodology, based upon the assessment of (primarily) documentary evidence. By rewarding essays which present an argument, avoid description, show awareness of the limitations of source, discuss change, show awareness of historical debate, and engage with larger historical themes, we are expecting students to learn a certain 'professional' form of discourse, which we as practitioners control, and students do not.
- A culture within parts of the History profession which is introspective, unimaginative and narrow in focus.'
- Difficulties of defining exactly what it is historians are looking for their students to achieve. What is creativity in history? How would one construct meaningful assessment criteria on this basis?

Teacher related factors

- Dull teaching and the tyranny of lecturer opinion.
- Reluctance to abandon standard formats of presentation/communication either through the increasingly functionalist approach of most students or lack of confidence.
- Teaching techniques which distance the tutor from the individual, and which prevent the individual confiding and exploring.
- Staff conservatism and suspicion
- Assessment-driven curriculum.
- Assessment regimes that rely too heavily upon the traditional essay, based on the formulaic assimilation of secondary material.
- Exams.
- Modular format with closed-book examinations which encourages students to see learning as a means to assessment success rather than as a process of discovery and excitement
- Lack of flexibility and fluidity of existing assessment formats, teaching formats
- Foolishly devised teaching and learning outcomes.
- Over-emphasis on court-house objectivity and the search for 'Truth'.
- Any exposure to Arthur Marwick
- Undue reverence for 'content'.
- Conservative curricula
- Risk aversion.
- Lingering modernist certainties
- Relativism or lack of a teacher's ability to help students see what is useful creativity
- Insufficient opportunity being given to students to become involved in the types of experiential learning that are likely to encourage creativity.
- The disproportionate amount of work that staff perceive to be involved.
- Emphasis on reporting the views of historians.

Student related factors

- Students reluctance to put themselves into their work
- Risk of failure
- Student responses to an assessment driven curriculum
- Student inability in some cases to take charge of their own learning – a 'spoon-fed' attitude
- Strategic thinking and instrumental behaviour.
- Student conservatism and strategic thinking – the emphasis upon vocationalism and attainment at all costs for students repeatedly assessed since starting school encourages risk aversion.
- Lingering modernist certainties
- Students' baggage re styles of learning/engagement
- The disproportionate amount of work that students and staff perceive to be involved?
- Lack of subject knowledge by students. Creativity in history has to be based upon a sound enough grasp of the period to be creative in historically plausible ways.
- Narrowness of historical knowledge-base on entry which may reflect back to GCSE/A/AS Level curricula or be a reflection of the impact of 'widening participation'.

Institutional or systemic factors

- A modular system that encourages high staff/student ratios that mitigate against seminars, tutorials and forms of group work.
- The overspill of pedagogic terminology into the learning materials ('learning outcomes' in module guides breeds a mechanical, Dickensian mode of learning).
- Inflexible models of modular/course teaching and examining
- Greater contact hours with more students have reduced the individual attention UG students typically receive
- Limited resources in terms of IT, OHPs, Powerpoint, book purchasing, comfortable facilities.
- Inadequate library resources
- Quality assurance can be restrictive in terms of assessing skills which deviate from the 'norm', and often departments and faculties require a complex set of procedures and criteria before you embark upon assessing a new skill.
- External and/or institutional constraints upon unorthodox forms of assessment (and teaching methods)
- Validation of degrees which favour conservatism
- Time constraints (institutional, financial etc) undermining efforts to bring students into contact with a wide range of views, styles and techniques.

School factors

- The existing school curriculum seems to enhance students' perception of history studies as a series of assessment hurdles to be overcome.
- Narrowness of historical knowledge-base on entry which may reflect back to GCSE/A/AS Level curricula or be a reflection of the impact of 'widening participation'.

Evaluation of students' creativity

The views of history teachers fall into two camps. Some teachers believe that students' creativity is evaluated through their assessment criteria. Others believe that insufficient attention is given to recognising students' creativity. The view was expressed that creativity is necessary for good work and an essential component of excellent (1st class) work 'sometimes a good student will get it just right'; 'a student cannot be successful without being creative', 'creativity, characterised by flair and imagination, is the mark of first class work'. This suggests that historians associate creativity with the highest levels of achievement.

Example responses to questions on how is creativity assessed / rewarded?

Generally affirmative views

- In the general senses defined above, our standard assessment criteria factor in writing style and the construction of original arguments explicitly.
- The creative urge as expressed through language, source-analysis and presentational skills are integral to our assessment of student performance.
- I make a conscious effort to reward originality of argument even if it's off the mark.
- Yes, I do reward it, but am not sure my criteria would stand up to scrutiny!
- Most obviously in relation to specified levels of attainment within the assessment criterion we use that deals with originality.
- Taking the definition of "originality", in our criteria for grades this is only mentioned as a quality of first class work, on the (reasonable) assumption that students need to get on top of the subject (2.1) before they can add their own flair.
- Creativity, characterised by flair and imagination, is the mark of first class work. This is hard to measure, but occurs when a student pursues systematically a novel approach, and (more or less) pulls it off. Creativity and originality are thus closely related. But I'm not sure how many students understand that they are meant to be creative.
- Yes, students are rewarded (with high grades, etc.) if they can achieve visible, signalled, well activated/lucidly expressed (in various modes and media) work of a creative kind. This is clearly flagged in our assessment criteria.
- Yes, to the extent that they are rewarded for sharp and individual analysis, and flair in style and presentation. These are written into the marking criteria in course guides, but the more

effective way of encouraging students to aspire in this realm is through feedback on assessment and directly from the tutor.

'At most levels creativity is rewarded particularly clearly in the context of research presentations (especially group research and dissertation work). Creativity is also apparent in the initiative that students show in their reading and analysis of debates reflected in essay and seminar work; initiative is rewarded where its products are used reflectively. Expressive creativity would be most apparent in the fluency and effectiveness of written expression – this is one of the assessment criteria for UG written work. The assessment criteria for degree classification reflect some facets of creativity and would appear to reward its expression, but it is not obvious that the assessment tasks always provide adequate scope for students to display their creativity, with the result that marks are often bunched around the Iiii/Ili borderline'.

'Most evidently in encouraging role play, particularly at Level One (e.g., decision-making simulation exercise), and in the Level Two double with Group Project. The latter includes assessment (with students given detailed criteria for marking so they know what is expected of them in terms of creativity) of individual and collective presentations, public outcomes (the nature of which normally chosen by each group), and joint, as well as individual, reports on reflective essays.'

Neutral or negative views

- There are no 'set criteria' for judging creativity – it is primarily left to professional judgement.
- Insufficiently – we try to reward it through assessment of presentations but this doesn't really work.
- Creativity does not appear within our marking criteria. Independent thinking is and it is made clear that it is rewarded.
- It would be fair to say that there is little explicit encouragement for intellectual risk-taking.
- It is certainly difficult to measure creativity.
- Surely creativity needs to be assessed or judged rather than merely measured? That involves explicit criteria, and pretty soon you've spoiled the joke by explaining it.

How important is creativity in undergraduate history education: is it valued?

The general diagnosis is that creativity is undervalued, that while there is evidence that it exists much more could and should be done to encourage it but there is some anxiety that it is poorly understood within the discipline. This quote embodies these anxieties very well.

'There is a strong case for saying that first we need a rigorous definition of what, within the discipline, actually constitutes 'creativity'. I suspect that this is a vague and blustery way of saying 'I really don't know!'

'Perhaps a clearer outline/identification of what is meant by creativity within history would advance our ability to really encourage this skill in students. With the proposed revision of the history benchmark statement coming up this year, perhaps this would be a good opportunity to develop these ideas?'

Example responses

- Creativity is a hidden variable in the curriculum. If there were a choice between encouraging more creativity and more conformity, I should certainly favour the former, but I suspect I may be in a minority of the whole profession, although not necessarily of the younger generation.
- Not very important and it would be good to encourage/value it more.
- I think it is valued at undergraduate level. If one is thinking in the widest possible terms, then it is not adequately valued nor does it occupy a prominent place in many curricula.
- Higher than it was, but still low.
- There is room for further development.
- No it isn't largely because the curriculum seems to have become assessment driven rather than learning driven.
- I don't believe it is very highly valued, and worse yet, few students appear to be conscious that creativity is an important part of the Historian's craft. We do too little to encourage them to think in this way.

- If the end product is a good piece of historical writing/research fine, but if creativity leads nowhere (and can lead nowhere) should it be valued as a skill in its own right.

'We perhaps tend to rely too much on creativity and intelligence being expressed analytically and reactively for much of the UG programme, and regard success reflecting creativity as a natural ability rather than one we can impart or encourage our students to develop effectively. We may think that students should develop creativity and critical thinking skills as they progress through their studies, and expect them to be able to express this at level 3 in individual dissertation work, but if we don't value creativity early on in the curriculum and encourage its development more directly, it is hard for the average student to develop this approach alone with confidence. With limited opportunities for direct tuition and individual feedback, students are more likely to develop learning styles which are rooted in 'risk averse' strategies to secure a desired outcome and perhaps more likely to miss out on confidence enhancing interactions that can reinforce their own intellectual and creative development. A climate of challenge, critical review and informed debate is easier to cultivate in small groups than large and we perhaps need to see this as a vital part of a successful first year teaching on which subsequent studies can build.'

'Not a very high place at all currently, mainly because it is not valued by what is generally a pretty conservative discipline, although with important radical fringes. Often creativity is seen as new areas of study or new theses, but creativity re history *per se* we think refers primarily to the *forms* of historical thinking: the idea that turning the past into history is in itself a fundamentally creative act. Perhaps a clearer outline/identification of what is meant by creativity within history would advance our ability to really encourage this skill in students. With the proposed revision of the history benchmark statement coming up this year (think that this is the case anyway!), perhaps this would be a good opportunity to develop these ideas?

'It occupies an important position – but could be given more prominence. There is a creeping mediocrity in history in higher education, possibly as the national curriculum approach seeps in (required outcomes, skills provision etc as an attitude towards learning and teaching). Students need to be pushed towards higher attainment, but the emphasis is currently on 'measuring' them according to benchmarks and frameworks.'

'Creativity is a feel-good word that we all tend to feel is a good thing. But in understanding the past, as in many other areas where we take this connection for granted (e.g. comedy), it needs to be based on an adequate grasp of period and context. To be creative in a subject means first to be well-informed about it in order to give one the basis upon which to be creative, otherwise there is a risk that the student will be creative with clichés.'

'I value it! My experience as an external examiner (and of external examiners) suggests that this is not always the case. It depends on whether one regards students as people with potential and lots of ability or merely drones to be dragged into the 'right way' of thinking.'

'Defined as originality, it is highly valued by examiners, perhaps less so by students. I'm not sure how much scope there is for extending the potential for creativity in HE. Yesterday I attended a seminar which discussed a variety of theoretical approaches to addressing student alienation. While these identified the problems of the power relationship in HE, I was left feeling that this power relationship provides a necessary framework for teaching and learning, rather than an unfortunate obstacle to (creative) learning.'

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