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Conceptualising creativity in the creative arts: Seeking common ground

Abstract:

This paper reports on a research study that investigated how university academics in the creative arts conceptualise creativity, both as a general concept and also as a set of situated disciplinary beliefs and practices. The study, located primarily in the UK and Australia, reveals that the problems of defining and articulating creativity lead to a series of ongoing dilemmas for teaching and assessment in the creative arts. These dilemmas include the ability to explain and foster the creative endeavour with students; to provide transparency to students about expectations and standards; and to make demonstrably fair and reliable judgements about student work in a relatively subjective domain. It argues that if tertiary-level teachers are to devise creative curricula, facilitate creative environments and make judgements about the quality of creative work, they need to both share an understanding about the creative endeavour and the ability to communicate this to students effectively.

Biographical note:

Chris Morgan is an academic developer and curriculum designer at Southern Cross University, Australia, with a long history of working with university teachers in the creative arts fields. He is the author of two internationally published books on student assessment. His PhD explored the issues and dilemmas of student assessment in the creative arts, and posed a model of assessment practice that helps to advance fairness and transparency for students.

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Introduction

Many observers have noted that society has moved into an era driven by the so-called 'creative class', described by Florida (2002) as hybrid professionals whose work generates creative ideas and conceptual innovation in all areas of industry, entertainment and the arts. The creative economy is now accepted as a large and rapidly growing aspect of most advanced economies (Howkins 2005). Many universities throughout the Western world have a declared commitment to developing creativity as a graduate attribute, yet evidence of its attainment is elusive (Jackson 2008). As Jackson notes, we barely acknowledge its existence in many university disciplines and it tends to happen 'more by accident than design' (2008: 4). Creative arts academics are at the forefront in grappling with key questions about how students learn to be creative, how we can teach to foster creativity, what kinds of curricula and learning environments are appropriate for creative endeavours, and how to make fair and reliable judgements about students' creative works. A large part of this problem is the elusive nature of creativity itself. Despite a considerable volume of research, there are no shared definitions or models of creativity and the more it is analysed, the more this seems to slip from one's grasp (Greene 2004, McWilliam 2007, Kaufman & Sternberg 2010).

Historically, conceptions of creativity have been heavily influenced by two distinct philosophies: romanticism and rationalism. Rationalists argued that creativity was the product of conscious, intelligent thought, whereas romantics believed that creativity filtered mysteriously from the subconscious mind, and that rational thought hindered creativity (Sawyer 2006). Systematic research into the nature of creativity has been underway since the 1950s, primarily in the field of psychology. As Richards (1999) reports, research has been directed in a variety of ways including studies of:

- creative persons – the qualities of highly creative people that distinguish them from less creative people. These studies have focussed upon personal abilities, intention, motivation, cognitive style, attitudes and values (see Feist 2010, Simonton 2010, for example);

- creative products – the characteristics of creative works and what distinguishes them from less creative ones. Studies have particularly focussed upon developing generic criteria for recognising and judging creativity, including concepts such as originality and meaningfulness (Cropley & Cropley 2010, for example);

- creative processes – the kinds of cognitive and other processes commonly employed during the development of creative ideas or works. These studies have explored how highly creative people think, feel and act when engaged in creative work (Runco 2010, for example);

- creative environments – the kinds of social, physical and psychological environments that support and foster creative effort (Richards 1999, for example).

Much of this first wave of creativity research (pre-1980) sought to provide a broad empirical explanation for the phenomena of creativity, but it operated on assumptions about creativity that are now widely referred to as myths, such as that creativity involves flashes of inspiration from lone geniuses, or that social expectations and

conventions inhibit creativity. As Sawyer (2006) reports, studies since the 1980s focusing on the lived experience of working creative practitioners have successfully critiqued these ideas. There are few bursts of great insight in the creative process. Rather, it is characterised by diligent, sustained effort in fundamentally social, collaborative and negotiable contexts. Leading researchers (for example, Amabile 1983, 1996, Csikszentmihalyi 1988) provide explanations of creativity in socio-cultural terms as the complex interplay of many factors in situated settings.

Creative activity in universities is most commonly associated with the creative arts, in disciplines such as music and performance, visual arts and design, and creative writing. Here the term 'creativity' is an explicit part of teaching and learning discourse, and is often stated as a learning goal (Jackson 2008). In these disciplines, *originality* is usually considered to be the core of creativity, unlike a range of other more applied disciplines such as architecture, engineering and design, where both originality and *functionality,* or suitability for purpose, are equally important. Originality may be seen along a spectrum of possibilities from 'interpretation' at one end, to 'innovation' at the other end. Artistic traditions, represented by artistic movements or literary genres, will tend to steer practitioners towards interpretation, whereas highly creative expression will usually be found at the innovation end of the spectrum (Amabile 1996).

Drawing upon foundational creativity research, researchers in arts education have explored various approaches and pedagogies for fostering creativity. Sir Ken Robinson's influential body of work (Robinson 2001, Robinson & Aronica 2009, for example) draws upon interviews with leading creative practitioners to explore the nature of achievement in creative fields. He links high levels of creative achievement to the intersection of personal talent with passion, where artists become fired with a strong sense of self-efficacy, motivation and inspiration. Another influential creative arts researcher, Elliott Eisner (2004) argues that learning in the creative arts develops cognitive thinking in ways that have important application in all areas of human endeavour. He analyses differing approaches to teaching within the creative arts and how they hone particular thinking skills during the act of creation that contribute to society in unique and invaluable ways.

Important contributions to the understanding of creativity have also developed in specific fields of study. In the visual arts, for example, foundational research includes Arnheim's (1954) classic treatise *Art and visual perception* that provided a major linkage between psychological research into creativity and art theory and practice. Drawing from gestalt psychology, his work sought various explanations for how artists perceive, think about and create artistic works. Further foundational research is found in Ehrenzweig's (1967) work in which he explored the role of the unconscious mind in the act of creativity, and the multilayered mental processes employed by artists during the creative process. In the field of music, Leman (1999) characterises creativity as a process of complex problem solving and rapid decision making with unexpected and satisfying results. He outlines a range of research directions in the exploration of musical creativity, including behavioural and brain studies and the development of models that provide conceptual guides for music education. Green's (2002, 2008) influential studies explored the creative processes and informal learning

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practices of popular musicians that are contributing significantly to formal music education. These are but a few examples of significant studies that have sought to bridge creativity research with domains of practice in the creative arts.

In his review of disciplinary research into creativity, Sawyer (2006) identified two significant common themes across a range of fields including music, creative writing and the visual arts. First, creative processes in these disciplines differed enormously from their romanticised mythology. Rarely were there bursts of great insight in the creative process. Rather, it is characterised by diligent, sustained effort peppered by 'mini-insights' that are embedded in the focussed work underway. Second, creative activity was rarely achieved in isolation. Rather, it is forged through relationships such as the interactions between musicians, the collaborations of author and editor, and the social networks and collaboration in studios that have given rise to much art production. Sawyer (2006) argues for a sociocultural rather than psychological approach to the understanding of contemporary creative expression. He argues that creativity research, being focused on individualist 'high art' conceptions of creativity, has no particular explanations for contemporary forms and expressions of creativity, or the processes that enable it to come into being. Indeed, these emergent postmodern forms of creative expression, found in many areas of the creative arts, challenge traditional dichotomies of high versus low art, and creative versus derivative work. Yet Sawyer (2006) acknowledges that our understanding of creativity is at best partial, and McWilliam concludes that:

> Notwithstanding academic longing for a theory or model, creativity continues to be regarded by many both within and outside academic circles as so mysterious and serendipitous that it defies definition and thus also defies any attempt to foster it systematically (2007: 2).

Given the evident complexity and plethora of research directions, questions arise about academic understandings about creativity. Kleiman's (2007) study of academic perceptions of creativity revealed that much creativity research does not readily speak to academics, nor does it form part of their daily discourse. This poses particular concerns in the creative arts because creativity is so central to its core purposes. As Jackson notes: 'The complexity of creativity is a confounding issue for university teachers who are often deeply perplexed by the whole idea … What exactly is it they are trying to develop?' (2008: 8). Yet an understanding about creativity and creative processes are arguably central to one's decisions about developing curricula and particular teaching approaches, facilitating student learning, providing feedback and making judgements about creative works. This study was therefore developed with questions about whether academics in the creative arts share much common ground in their understandings about creativity, and also how the creative endeavour is explored and discussed with students.

Study methodology

The data for this study was extracted from extended interviews with thirty mid-career and senior academics from creative arts disciplines in universities. The study required an interpretive approach to understanding the phenomena, as it largely entailed the

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construction and interpretation of meanings given to these concepts by the informants for this investigation. The particular approach of *naturalistic enquiry* (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Robertson 2007, Agostinho 2005) was chosen because it is well suited to research issues that are discursive, context-specific and often tacit in nature. It also provides amply for consideration of the trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected. Purposive sampling (Patton 2002) was employed to recruit informants for this study. Participants were selected on the basis of their prior interest and expertise regarding the topic of creativity and assessing creative works. Participants were recruited through advertisements in international web-based special interest groups including the Imaginative Curriculum Network, ArtNet and an online forum for creative writing academics found at creative-writing@jiscmail.ac.uk.

An interview schedule was developed that included 30 participants in three countries (UK=15, Norway=3, Australia=17) and six disciplines, including creative writing (n= 14), visual arts (n=6), design (n=2) music (n=5), filmmaking and multimedia (n=2) and choreography and dance (n=1). Participants were interviewed in their own university offices, amongst the bustle of their daily academic life. In a naturalistic approach, as Patton describes, participants 'are interviewed with open-ended questions in places and under conditions that are comfortable for and familiar to them' (2002: 39). Participants were provided with a series of open-ended questions including:

- What does creativity mean in the context of your discipline?
- How are your students expected to demonstrate their creative abilities?
- Do you talk about creativity much with your students?
- Are there more and less acceptable or valued forms of creative expression in your discipline?

The interview transcripts were analysed with the use of inductive data analysis processes such as coding and categorising (Glaser & Strauss 1967). These processes are described by Patton as building the 'foundation for the interpretative phase when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretation are constructed, conclusions drawn and in some cases, theory is generated' (2002: 465). The following presents findings under four main headings: (1) Conceptions of creativity; (2) Disciplinary expressions of creativity; (3) Tensions in conceptualising creativity; and (4) Boundaries of acceptable creativity. For the purposes of citation, participants are coded by number and discipline as follows: choreography and dance (C), design (D), filmmaking and multimedia (F), music (M), visual arts (V) and creative writing (W).

Findings 1: **Conceptions of creativity**

The thirty participants in this study were initially asked to define or explain creativity as it related to their particular teaching context in higher education. Many struggled with their responses to this question, and spent some time framing, re-framing and qualifying their responses. Many indicated that it was an important, but complex, question, and they found it difficult to articulate their response concisely or satisfactorily.

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There were three distinct categories of response. There was strong consensus among participants that creativity is a *process*. There was moderate consensus among participants that creativity is an end *product* with particular characteristics, and also some consensus that it is also a series of personality *traits or attitudes* of the individual that are either innate or acquired over the course of the university program. Some saw creativity as a mixture of these different elements. These three categories closely align with three out of the four focus areas of creativity research identified earlier (namely: person, process, product and environment). However, some participants openly acknowledged the impossibility of defining creativity and felt that it was beyond definition. This latter category of participants instead explored the difficulties of defining creativity and why they preferred to steer away from using this term with their students. The three major conceptions of creativity are considered below:

(1) Creativity as a process

A significant majority of participants conceptualised creativity as a *process*. There were five key elements to the creative process that were regularly identified by participants as follows:

- *Experimentation and risk taking*

Participants commonly spoke of the primary necessity for students to 'push out of their comfort zones' during the creative process. They aimed to stimulate students to identify their boundaries and to push beyond them by taking risks and engaging in experimentation. They sought to stimulate motivation and an enthusiasm in students to take risks, and to foster a safe environment in the classroom where it is okay or even noble to fail but, critically, to *learn* from failure. One participant, typically, described risk-taking as follows:

> *What we're looking for is that students can draw upon the conventions, identify their own boundaries, recognise if they're stuck in any way, then ask them to move beyond that. It's about an instinctive desire to make your mark on the world, and then stretch beyond with experimenting and risk-taking. That's where the creativity is measured in our courses* (1F).

- *Drawing upon knowledge of tradition and the profession*

Some participants argued that experimentation should be prefaced by an understanding of disciplinary traditions and professional expectations. It was stressed that creativity rarely occurs in a vacuum; it is grounded in history, traditions, culture, professional standards and expectations. Students need to explore these traditions in tandem with their own creative efforts, drawing from traditions and yet mindful of the necessity to push beyond imitation and to find one's own voice. A representative comment was:

> *The first thing we talk about in performance is that in order to be liberated into the creative zone, you have to have informed and open ears, and you have to recognise your place in a community of musicians and musical practices. We say creativity only*

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emerges from disciplined skills and technique along with an awareness of what's going on around them (2M).

- ### *Developing craft and technique*

Many observed that highly creative output is founded upon the discipline of practice and the development of one's craft – learning how to use the core skills with sophistication. For example, in creative writing, craft was considered to include syntax and grammar, point of view, imagery, plotting, structure, voice and a range of stylistic concerns appropriate to the genre. A few participants observed that if creativity was lacking in a piece, it is probable that there are problems with skill level that are impeding the capacity of the story to flow or to work as a satisfying creative piece. Similarly, in music, it was noted that:

> *there is a lot of craft – my sub-tribe is the brass instrumentation of an orchestra – a lot of the emphasis is on 'getting the business done'. That means the technical performance and the right notes at the right time. Of course I want students to build on that artistically, but that's the basis* (15M).

- ### *Developing intellectual curiosity*

Many participants stressed the importance of intellectual curiosity to the creative process. Intellectual engagement was variously described as '*thinking laterally and imaginatively*' (18W), '*making unexpected connections and imaginative juxta-positions*' (17V), and '*experimentation and problem solving*' (10W). It was also conceptualised as a critical engagement with ideas and the capacity for students to evaluate differing perspectives, ideologies and debates in the field, to formulate their own positions, and to give expression to this in their work. One participant described how she sought to stimulate this with students early in their study:

> *I help them position themselves in their own worlds. What they notice and how they act and interact in their worlds. Getting them to become curious. I want them to ask questions* (28W).

For some participants, the creative process was founded upon developing the habits and discipline of the creative practitioner, described by one participant in design as:

> *a creative way to think and a creative way to work. It applies to the search for ideas, what you do with your ideas, how you develop them and the inspiration you bring to the process – it's like a method* (20D).

- ### *Developing an artistic consciousness*

This final element of the creative process was more global, and encapsulated many of the previous four elements into a single state of consciousness: '*I want them to develop an artistic consciousness and artistic expression founded upon choices*' (15M). Another participant similarly commented that:

> *I want students to integrate knowledge into something personal for them. I'm looking for individuality. I believe they have a holy flame inside and my job is to give oxygen to that – a personal signature. To find their voice* (6W).

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These five key qualities of the creative process were mostly not considered by participants to be preconditions for creativity. Rather, they sought to foster and develop these processes alongside students' creative efforts. They hoped that students' awareness of concepts such as risk taking or intellectual curiosity would become part of a cycle of learning and reflecting and thus be acquired in greater depth with developing maturity and confidence throughout a program of study.

(2) Creativity as found in an end product

Although most participants defined or explained creativity primarily as a process, there was some consensus that it could also be explained by the qualities of an *end product* or creative work. Creativity, in other words, can be defined and evidenced by particular qualities of the creative output. There were two key qualities that were consistently raised in this category:

- *Originality*

A variety of words were employed to capture the idea of newness in the creative work, including 'originality', 'freshness of thought', 'surprise' and 'novelty'.

- *Provoking a special response in the viewer*

Connected with the newness above is the reaction of the viewer who experiences a kind of excitement or even tension: '*it's new, exciting, you want to hold it, use it, lay with it*' (13D), or it '*creates a sense of questioning or wonderment in the viewer*' (19V) or it '*disrupts and disturbs in some way*' (27W).

(3) Creativity as personal traits

As part of their efforts to define or explain creativity, participants mentioned a wide variety of ideal student *traits, dispositions and attitudes*. Four traits were identified as follows:

- *Self-awareness*

Participants sometimes referred to self-awareness as a critical factor in creativity: the ability to understand one's own strengths, weaknesses and boundaries in relation to creativity, and a willingness to confront boundaries:

> *I encourage them to develop self-awareness about their own personal moments of big creativity. A lot of them will operate instinctually, but I would like to help them to understand the mechanics of their own creative process, to push up against their boundaries* (1F).

- *Vision*

Vision was occasionally described as a special quality that was a catalyst for inventiveness. One participant described it, in the context of creative writing, as '*the seeing and then re-seeing through drafting, reflecting and re-drafting*' (10W).

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- *Enthusiasm and curiosity*

Enthusiasm, drive, passion and commitment were typically depicted as important traits of the creative person, particularly the ability to sustain it over a program of study: '*All students can produce flashes of creativity but my challenge is to help them sustain that across a program and a range of products*' (3C). Similarly, curiosity and excitement are commonly cited personal qualities: '*I nurture an ability in students to get excited and pursue that excitement to its end. It's an investigation that comes from a curiosity*' (3C).

- *Self-directedness*

The ability and disposition of students to direct their own learning was seen as a key quality and a critical outcome for students in the creative arts. As one participant put it: '*It's about making them their own teachers, to take control of their learning and develop their own musical personalities*' (24M).

Participants did not see these as necessarily innate qualities, without which the student would be destined to fail. Rather, they described these qualities as present by degrees in most students, and it was the teacher's job to foster and nurture these qualities in students over the course of a university program.

Findings 2: Disciplinary expressions of creativity

In addition to the three elements of creativity discussed above (person, product, process) which were largely generic to all creative arts disciplines, participants also provided some rich descriptions of what creativity meant to them in a specific domain of practice, such as a particular instrument in an orchestra, or particular art practice such as ceramics. Notably, at this level of specificity, participants rarely faltered or stumbled and often became very engaged and passionate about creative practice. For example, in visual arts:

> *Creativity comes into play when they're looking at the status quo in terms of visual culture. They question how it comes into being and reflect on why things are so, rather than just accept them the way they are. Even with the craft of making something, there's intellectual engagement with that too* (22V).

In creative writing:

> *Creativity is about wordliness – to use and manipulate and exploit the ambiguity of language and words. It's also about story. All stories are mediated. That's the other creative element in writing. How you tell a story* (10W).

In music:

> *The focus of creativity with brass instruments is storytelling. The story is given by the composer. I ask students to focus on the story and encourage them to see that there are choices – emotional content – and you need to be very accurate about emotions and so there are many choices and variations* (15M).

In choreography and dance:

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> *There are particular areas of creativity in the composition and crafting of choreography. It's the most contentious area and more so than most other areas of dance. By this I mean the compositional building blocks and the way students use the stage space and time* (3C).

Findings 3: Tensions in conceptualising creativity

During discussions about the nature of creativity, participants touched upon a range of issues where there were significantly divergent views and perspectives. These divergent views and tensions are discussed below:

Embracing or avoiding creativity as a concept

As mentioned earlier, most participants struggled with defining or explaining creativity. Some participants were reluctant to define or explain creativity because of its elusive nature, and were very hesitant about even employing the term in their teaching because of its inherently subjective nature. For example, one participant commented that '*it's a difficult word to define and as soon as you start it slips away from you. In a way it's beyond definition because it's too subjective and personal*' (6W). This comment was mirrored by another who spoke about the creative process as being '*very intangible. There's no formula. It can only happen through encouragement of students … for people to see they're capable of it*' (13D).

Other participants, however, were keen to embrace the concept and to explore it directly with students. Thus there was a division amongst participants into two camps: those who embraced and discussed the term 'creativity' with all its associated ambiguities, and those who were more inclined to steer away from it, fearing that it may confuse students or, worse, inhibit their creativity.

Tension between creativity and craft

A second area of divergence amongst participants was the degree to which creative expression is preceded by the acquisition of a particular level of craft or skill. For example, can it be expected that a ceramics student is able to express creativity in work before the component skills and craft are mastered to a competent level? Many participants expected creativity to be present from very early stages in a student's career and that craft and creative development occur in tandem over a degree program. As one argued:

> *I was forced in at the deep end as a student and discovered that you can be creative without huge background knowledge. But a deep knowledge of, and sensitivity to, materials is vital to being very creative – it's a balance* (13D).

Yet in some fields, particularly musical instrumentation and vocal performance, it was considered essential that a certain level of competence be achieved before any creativity can come into play. There is a dance between the development of craft and creativity that was never far from participants' thinking and expectations of students.

Tension between talent and effort

Talent was an issue that arose regularly in participants' talk about creativity. Participants commonly described talent as a series of personality traits or abilities in individuals that predispose them towards success, such as a particularly good ear for music, a natural singing voice, an evolved artistic aesthetic, an ear for dialogue, a personality for risk-taking, and so forth. When a series of these qualities come together serendipitously in a student, participants recognised this and felt a responsibility to nurture them to the best of their abilities. Yet, it was argued by some participants that there is no necessary connection between students who possess natural talents and sustained creative output. As one commented:

> *There's this assumption that if someone is said to be talented, they can do no wrong and I feel that's just not appropriate – it's got to be more than that. There's got to be a rigorous engagement – intellectually and in terms of artmaking* (22V).

Another similarly commented: '*Talent is simply not an issue. It's much more about the commitment to the process and the craft*' (21W).

It seems that for a number of participants there was an unresolved tension around the issue of talent; on the one hand, an excitement at the possibilities offered by highly talented students, and yet, concern that talent is used as a substitute for hard work, or that talented students may be privileged in some ways. A few participants argued that talent was not particularly relevant to creative output at all:

> *Creative writing is a great leveller – everyone has good ideas and people bring different skills and experiences to the course, but they're all coming in at the same level* (28W).

Others recognised differing levels of talent, but stressed that the creative arts offers a personal journey with a unique trajectory for each individual.

Tensions of technologies and culture

An interesting dilemma about conceptualising creativity related to the ambiguities of contemporary culture. Some participants noted that the concept of creativity required constant challenging in the context of postmodern and technological cultures that are dynamic and rapidly evolving. Participants reported that particular challenges arose when students are exploring on the edges of contemporary culture beyond the knowledge or appreciation of teaching staff. Questions also arose for a few participants about the nature of originality in postmodern creative environments where pastiche, referencing other work, and sampling are the norm:

> *I am very interested in the idea of one's own voice and what is the nature of that – and how we relate to that when we live in a creative culture that is all about reappropriating materials. Working with music sampling – how can you say whether it is creative or derivative? And is being derivative not creative?* (2M)

In a similar vein, new technologies posed questions for some participants about authorship and originality:

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> *It is very easy to lay down a very sophisticated sounding dance track but there's almost no creativity in it because it's all pre-packaged in the technology. Same with composing. We have to wean students off technology and then wean them back on again as far more critical users* (29M).

One participant argued that these ambiguities should be embraced, rather than shied away from, and should be discussed with students in the context of contemporary cultural theory:

> *Creativity these days is often about eclecticism. We embrace the idea of inclusivity of all sorts of different kinds of music, styles of musicians and also the multiplicity of ways in which people use music as consumers in their lives* (16M).

Tensions between traditionalism and innovation

At the other end of the spectrum, there were concerns and debates about traditionalism and its place within creativity and innovation. This tension was illustrated by the comments of the following participant:

> *In artistic creativity there's a premium on being different. But we have folk and traditional music here, and shouldn't we reward people for performing in a traditional manner too? And then, who should get the most credit? So we've had to make decisions about that – a beautiful performance in a traditional style is worth as much as a very innovative performance. Innovation is something we have to think very carefully about* (2M).

These tensions reflect both the complexity of creativity as an applied construct in the creative arts, and the diversity of understandings and conceptions of creativity among disciplines, and within disciplines. While some of the tensions discussed above were more pronounced in some disciplines, they were evident to some degree in each of the disciplines considered.

Findings 4: The boundaries of 'acceptable' creativity

Participants were asked whether there are more or less 'acceptable' forms of creativity in their discipline, or within the culture of their own faculty, that might not be readily apparent to students. This question sought to explore the borders or boundaries of creativity as an applied practice in a disciplinary setting. The question also sought to explore the possibility that, tacitly, certain forms of creativity or creative products might be more highly rewarded or filtered out through assessment.

A small number of participants argued that there were no boundaries on student creativity within their programs and they would view any creative work on its own terms '*whether it be a rap poem or a Shakespearean-style sonnet*' (18W). The goal, it was argued, is to create '*conditions for independent, mature practice, not disciples of a particular house style or pet theories of the lecturer*' (1F). Many participants from the visual arts did acknowledge that, historically, art schools had tacit house styles to which students needed to conform for success. However, it was argued, most contemporary art schools eschewed that culture, embracing a diversity of practices

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that reflect a postmodernist respect for the subjective, and a rejection of notions of high versus low art. Participants from creative writing were most likely to reject the idea that there were more or less acceptable forms of creativity. They consistently argued that they embraced all genres of writing, from experimental fiction to popular romance, and their role was to support all student work to be the very best it could be, on its own terms.

More commonly, however, participants acknowledged that there were more and less acceptable forms of creativity, and that creativity is bounded in important ways, but that these issues do not form part of a 'hidden curriculum' (Sambell & McDowell 1998). Rather, these respondents argued that the boundaries were explicit, discussed and negotiated with students from early stages in their program. In design, for example, students are working to a brief: *'There are constraints. There's no point producing something that's wildly creative but doesn't serve its purpose'* (13D). Similarly, '*students have to have one eye on the commercial context and another on creativity and experimentation and marry the two'* (14D). In visual arts, one participant commented:

> *Yes, art schools do tend to privilege certain kinds of creative work, but it must also be negotiated with students in relation to their own goals. We would generally try to give students their own agency. There's no dominant aesthetic* (17V).

A final category includes responses where participants were notably less confident about the explicitness of boundaries, or whether particular aesthetics dominate, and the consequent dangers of a hidden curriculum. In the context of dance choreography, one participant commented: *'I would like to say that there are no biases, but I think there are. It's about high art versus low art'* (3C). This dichotomy reflected the unresolved tensions among teaching staff in this program between traditional, modern and popular culture in dance, along with the historical traditions of dance training in conservatories coming into conflict with a more pluralistic university culture. Other participants in this category reflected upon problems where there are very influential teachers with very strong views and the potential for students to become disciples rather than independent practitioners. A few others also reflected upon the inevitability that their conceptions of creativity are affected by their own experiences, cultural assumptions and personal aesthetics. One participant noted that these assumptions are destined to remain tacit, unless they are openly discussed and debated among teaching staff with a view to finding some consistent common ground.

Discussion

In this study, participants' conceptions of creativity were influenced by a complex range of individual factors relative to their own education and values formed throughout their professional lives as creative artists and teachers. Notably, their conceptions of creativity were rarely grounded in the literature or theory of creativity research. Very few participants mentioned a particular theory or theoretician that was influential to their thinking about creativity, or how their understanding had been shaped by research. This atheoretical approach tends to reinforce Kleiman's (2007) observations that creativity as a concept is not a regular part of academic discourse

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and the research literature on creativity does not communicate well to teachers in the creative arts.

Rather, participants in this study conceptualised creativity as a social and cultural activity that has most meaning for them in their own situated, disciplinary contexts. This situated perspective emphasises the practical, applied, social and values-based practices of the discipline (Sawyer 2006), and that understandings of creativity are a part of this acquired, tacit disciplinary knowledge (Craft 2000, Entwistle 2005, Whitelock & Miell 2007). According to this view, learning about creativity takes the form of an apprenticeship in which forms of discourse and values and standards underpinning them, are acquired over time within the disciplinary setting. Participants' conceptions of creativity can be described as personal practical theories, as distinct from formal knowledge, that are, according to Clark: 'eclectic aggregations of cause-effect propositions, from many sources, rules of thumb, generalisations drawn from personal experience, beliefs, values, biases and prejudices' (1988: 6).

There was a strong consensus among participants that creativity was most tangible or most readily defined when looking at the *creative process.* This focus suggests that, as teachers, this is an issue of primary concern for them, as they are charged with the responsibility of facilitating creativity in the classroom and instilling in students robust and productive creative processes to equip them to enter professional life. Participants' secondary focus on *creative products* reflects a twofold concern: a responsibility to give feedback and make judgements about students' creative products; and the desire to instil in students the ability to evaluate their own output and be able to talk fluently about the work of others. The third focus on creativity as a series of *personal traits* reflects participants' efforts to inspire, provoke, mentor and generally foster excitement and an atmosphere of creativity in the classroom or studio, and to ensure that whatever traits and talents students bring to the program are appropriately nurtured.

Yet it is clear that there are also many problematic tensions in conceptualising creativity. It is unclear whether, for instance, teachers should actively embrace or avoid the term 'creativity' with all its associated ambiguities. If so, how can staff do this in a manner that does not overwhelm or inhibit students? What balances can be struck regarding expectations about creativity and the skill base of students? How should conceptions of creativity interact with varying forms of contemporary culture and technology, and how is creativity bounded in disciplinary domains? From a student learning perspective, a number of questions also arise from this data. How do students navigate these different conceptions and potentially coded messages around creativity? Should students not expect a more coherent and consistent message about creativity and its attendant processes from their teachers? How do these differing conceptions and practices translate into classroom culture and, inevitably, how are they to be supported and judged in terms of their creative work?

As teachers, it might be reasonable to argue that these differing conceptions of creativity are helpful to students. We might assume that students' conceptions of, and approaches to, creativity will be just as personal and individual as those of their teachers. In this sense it may be constructive for students to be exposed to a variety of

views and approaches. Some may resonate whereas others may not. Yet the critical issue here is one of transparency for students. Participants' stories in this project reveal that there are differing conceptions of 'appropriate' creativity located in underlying issues of ideology, culture and personal taste. Cues to students about what is valued and why may be highly variable and inconsistent, and may impact on the students' creative impulses and efforts in ways that are not intended or expected. Because of the inherent 'fuzziness' of creativity, there is a distinct danger that students will fail to pick up on cues essential to their success. These vital cues include what is expected of them, what are considered appropriately creative outputs, and how they are to be judged on their work.

Teachers in the creative arts, like all other disciplines in higher education, need to induct students into the tacit knowledge of the field, to unpack the ways of thinking and working in the discipline, and to develop a deep understanding of expectations and standards of the field. Some participants in this study found this to be problematic and stated that the concept of creativity can be a 'burden for students' [7W]. In contrast, participants who sought to immerse students in the debates and perspectives about creativity and creative processes were achieving two important outcomes. First, students were being actively inducted as fledgling professionals into the ways of thinking and working in the field (Entwistle 2005). Second, they are equipping students to more confidently choose and reflect upon their creative directions, and to help them make realistic, grounded judgements about the quality of their own creative output (Jackson 2008).

Conclusion

In this study, a rich variety of conceptions of creativity have been revealed, along with the ways in which participants' disciplines and personal philosophies have shaped their expressions of creativity. Given the evident complexity of creativity – both as a concept and a key outcome in the creative arts – it is not surprising that this study exposed differing conceptions, divergent views, and at times, some controversy. While participants were not always articulate about creativity as a concept in broad or theoretical terms, they were clearly deeply engaged with it when viewed as a more concrete manifestation in their own disciplinary context. However, participants' conceptions of creativity tended towards the atheoretical, individualistic and, at times, idiosyncratic. There was little evidence of common, shared understanding of creativity across the creative arts, within disciplines or even in individual teaching programs. Differences clearly flourished in terms of how creativity was articulated and what was valued and rewarded. In this sense there may be some similarities to other disciplines in higher education, where debates about core theoretical constructs are commonplace. However, in the creative arts, the issue of creativity is at the very *heart* of the endeavour. Without this theoretical common ground, it is difficult for academics in the creative arts to engage in nuanced debate. It is also difficult for students to understand what is expected of them in terms of appropriate and valued creative expression.

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I believe that, if creative pedagogy is to develop and thrive and to embrace the challenges of the creative economy, teachers need to move beyond the individualised understandings of creativity revealed in this study. This is not an argument for a single or standardised explanation of creativity, but rather the development of some broadly shared theoretical common ground about the nature and characteristics of creativity in disciplinary settings, which can provide a platform for debate, research and the further development of pedagogy. As one participant in this study argued:

> *We need to hold a public position about creativity. Part of the joy of exploring creativity is bumping up against other people's views and expressions of that. It's our duty as artists to come and make judgements. We have to make judgements about students' creative work, so we have to navigate through these debates and find some common ground* (1F).

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