

6 Creativity and curricula in higher education

Academics' perspectives

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Introduction

The concept of creativity is contested and, as yet, imperfectly understood (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999; Osborne, 2003). Much current research is exploratory; little is currently written specifically about creative learning and teaching in the context of UK universities. Much of what does exist proceeds from the assumption that most students are capable of some creative work at some level; that creativity can contribute to the lives of individuals and societies; and that its encouragement among academics and students is a central part of universities' mission. This chapter synthesises discussions involving academics in two universities in order to explore their perspectives on creativity and the curriculum. The relationship between these is critical to understanding what higher education needs to do to create the spaces within its curricula to promote students' creativity. The diversity of views on these topics serves to illustrate the complexity of these concepts in practice. The structure of the study permits a number of comparative questions to be asked. For example, how much convergence or divergence is there in the views of lecturers in two very different institutions – a post-1992 university and a research-intensive Russell Group university; and between the disciplines that were represented?

Methodology

This research was undertaken between 2002–4, when the Imaginative Curriculum project commissioned two studies that examined academic teachers' views on creativity and the curriculum at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) (McGoldrick and Edwards, 2002) and University College London (UCL) (Oliver, 2002). Interviews were used to elicit perspectives and, to give consistency, a common semi-structured approach was adopted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed by constant comparative categorisation. A total of 32 academic staff were interviewed, 14 from LJMU and 18 from UCL. The sample was intended to include a range of disciplines and of staff experience. The subjects represented include Architecture, Dentistry, Dutch, Education, Electrical Engineering, Engineering, English, French, Law, Library and Information Science, Physics, Science and Technology, Studies and Skills

60 Margaret Edwards et al.

Development. Levels of responsibility for curriculum design (or re-design) varied from programme coordinators to junior teaching staff. Staff with a central support role in learning and teaching were also represented.

Findings

A context for conversation about the HE curriculum

Before attempting to explain the link between curricula and creativity, it is useful to provide some context about what academics thought ‘curriculum’ meant. Use varied widely, ranging from ‘syllabus’ and programme plans, to notions of the hidden curriculum, in which the social, cultural and political context (what some participants described as the ‘fuzzier bits’) was counted as part of what was taught. Predominantly, these notions of curriculum described plans of one kind or another; consequently, when talked about in this way, ‘creativity’ had to be interpreted as something that could be planned for, scheduled and anticipated.

However, one conception of the curriculum emerged that offered broader possibilities for understanding creativity. This was the idea of the ‘lived’ curriculum – this included talk about the curriculum as experienced in the classroom. The lived curriculum arose dynamically out of interactions with students:

You’ve got to improvise – it’s like a performance in a way. One in which the audience can heckle and change the ending [...] you just have to prepare as best you can and then cope.

Conceptions of creativity

‘Creativity’ was recognised to be a complex, contested concept that is poorly theorised, as acknowledged in many accounts (e.g. Czikszenmihalyi, 1999: 313). Some participants were aware of this complexity explicitly; for others, it manifested through the confused and sometimes inconsistent ways in which they used the concept. Examples of confusion arose in relation to the overlap between discourses of creativity and those about innovation, novelty, imagination and ‘genius’.

This section attempts to identify common perceptions across disciplines. Some features of ‘new-ness’, for example, were present in all accounts, but it was recognised that the nature of the ‘new’ would be assessed according to criteria applied by academics within the disciplines.

Most participants considered that creativity included most of the following main features:

- *A quality of ‘new-ness’* – ‘Pastiche ... or straightforward copy’, though newly-made, was not felt to be creative work (although it could be a precursor to it). However, what was no longer new in some particular context could be reconstructed imaginatively in others to produce a creative outcome.

Creativity and curricula in higher education 61

- 1 • *Original* – This was, perhaps, the extreme end of the idea that creativity
- 2 expressed ‘new-ness’. It was suggested that creative work involved a
- 3 ‘certain excitement: the Eureka! feature’. It was felt to be ‘different’ and
- 4 interesting for the producer and for those who encounter the work.
- 5 • *Related to traditions of work* – ‘Creativity (is) not an individual – *I stand on*
- 6 *the shoulders of giants* (attributed to Sir Isaac Newton) – or context-less
- 7 achievement’.
- 8 • *A break with tradition* – For some, creativity was contrasted with received
- 9 wisdom. Active language suggested that creativity was about ongoing
- 10 processes rather than discrete decisions. The students were:

11 Not . . . having to produce according to some formula, they’re . . . having

12 to think about things as they go – and I guess that’s what I see as being the

13 key to the creativity thing, not just going with the routine, safe, pedestrian

14 options, but pushing the boundaries, trying things out, and if it seems sensi-

15 ble, really going for it . . . it’s a matter of us . . . teaching in a different way

16 than the one in which we were taught.

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- 19 • *Different by degree* – Specific acts were judged as being more or less cre-
- 20 ative. At one extreme were works of genius, including anything ‘which has
- 21 far-reaching significance over time’. In contrast, one participant saw ‘cur-
- 22 riculum design at the . . . weakly original end!’
- 23 • *Personally new* – Undergraduate attempts at creative work were, in general,
- 24 considered to be less creatively significant than those produced by experi-
- 25 enced academics, but it was considered important to give credit for trying to
- 26 go beyond the boundaries of what a student had previously achieved.
- 27 • *Expressed through a product* – This could be a design, an essay, a model,
- 28 etc.; Without some production, ‘creativity remains at . . . the imaginative
- 29 idea level’.
- 30 • *Recognised* – There was doubt expressed that ‘creative’ work ‘existed’
- 31 without recognition. It was also felt that expertise in a domain was import-
- 32 ant in recognising creative work. In the context of university work,
- 33 however, it was suggested that disciplinary tradition might also impede
- 34 recognition of creativity. (This concept is clearly related to the idea of cre-
- 35 ativity being related to traditions of work.)
- 36 • *Useful* – ‘It works – at least for the present.’ However, it was recognised
- 37 that there could be a planned and deliberate separation of practical purpose
- 38 from experimental work at the ‘prototype’ stage. This was difficult ground
- 39 and drew on the idea that creativity could be expressed through a product.
- 40 For example, one participant criticised a particular student’s design ‘where
- 41 imagination o’er leaped any technical resources [. . . This] was not judged to
- 42 be creative, but over the top.’
- 43 • *Ethical* – Some participants felt that certain creativity ought to be seen as
- 44 good not just in some general, abstract way, but by being linked to morality.
- 45 For example, ‘so-called creative accounting [could be] innovative . . . excit-
- 46 ing for the practitioners and so on’, but was potentially destructive of

62 *Margaret Edwards et al.*

- companies and livelihoods in the longer term. Consequently, some participants felt that ‘it’s our job to indicate limits’ over acceptability.
- *Trivial* – Some participants felt that almost every act a person takes involves an act of creation; consequently, on this broad and inclusive interpretation, everyone is creative already.
 - *Hard* – In contrast to the above assertion, some participants felt that ‘departing from familiar practice or cherished notions ... it’s hard’. Thus an important part of encouraging student and academic creativity involved the motivation to develop imaginative ideas into creative work.
 - *‘Motherhood and apple pie’* – Very similar to the notion that creativity was trivial, this idea questions whether the concept of creativity had any discriminatory power. For example, one participant asserted: ‘I should think everyone wants their students to be creative, rather than dull automata, so I should say that this ... is taken for granted. It’d be a bit like saying you want your students to be breathing at the end of the course.’

Generally, the renewed official interest in ‘creativity’ in education was given a qualified welcome. It was felt to be ‘unthreatening in the sense that good teachers have always tried to stimulate ... creative work’, although there was a concern that ‘there will be a try to SMART it’. SMART – Specific, Measurable, Assessable, Realisable and Time-related – is an acronym commonly used to judge whether some objective is manageable. It is widely advocated that learning objectives should be SMART, which has drawn criticism that those things that are valuable but hard to measure will be neglected. Clearly, the same concern about capturing the letter of the concept but losing its spirit was present here.

Creativity and the individual

It is not necessarily a *feature of ‘ability’* and may not be measured by university assessment. The relationship between ‘intelligence’ and creativity is debated. High intelligence and creative work are not necessarily associated, for example. Nickerson (1999) explores important dimensions of this debate.

Curriculum designs for creativity

Participants’ comments suggested that creativity is unlikely to be incorporated into curriculum designs unless it is explicitly valued either by potential students or by influential academics in the discipline or department. There is little evidence in participants’ responses of the rational, structured design processes so prevalent in the educational literature; instead course planning appears to involve orientation to norms (academic or cultural) rather than being a formal process of designing from first principles. Typically, meeting needs, rather than analytically moving from course aims towards content and format, was more important. Needs were identified as familiarisation with the basic knowledge of the discipline, generating student interest and consideration of the ‘likely audi-

1 ence'. Other influences included the opinions of external examiners and col-
2 leagues.

3 Processes akin to constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999: 44–6) were noted, but
4 in intent rather than in method. There was only one instance of formal design
5 processes being used, and even here it was as a reflective aid when refining an
6 existing course rather than to design a course from first principles: 'I have tried
7 to think more about what I . . . want students to come away with at the end of the
8 course, and try to work back from there'. Instead, participants described the
9 majority of curriculum design as being either a form of bricolage or an iterative
10 process of refinement and readjustment. Curriculum design was thus seen as a
11 creative act in its own right, although not necessarily one that promoted the cre-
12 ativity of students.

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14 I looked at it and delivered it for the first time, and I know what to change
15 in the next year. So it's an incremental thing
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17 In fact, such processes of re-design, rather than design per se, were what domin-
18 ated discussions. Re-design happened informally and on an ongoing basis, in
19 response to academics' experiences or student comments. More systematic
20 changes arose from the five-year curriculum review process, especially when it
21 was felt that the ongoing revisions had been so extensive that the curriculum
22 looked as if it had been 'tweaked too often' and lost its coherence.

23 Institutional arrangements for student feedback were not felt to be particu-
24 larly effective in either university. Students could regard them as 'an annoying
25 routine', and academics rarely found this type of feedback helpful ('because . . .
26 they just tick the numbers, and the numbers are arbitrary anyway – what does
27 plus two mean?'). Student representatives on Boards of Study and informal
28 feedback were found to be much more helpful. Generally, however, students
29 tended to concentrate on details and 'not to be all that insightful about the whole
30 curriculum'. Within this discussion a number of themes emerged:

31 *Core knowledge* – 'core' elements were identified as vital prerequisites for
32 further study: 'to do [this subject], there's a certain core knowledge that you have
33 to give to students . . . the concepts . . . and the maths to be able to apply and
34 solve problems.' However, more generally, the 'core' was not seen as a logical
35 pre-requisite, however, but as the result of social conventions, thus open to con-
36 testation: 'There are continual debates about what belongs in the core course and
37 what doesn't, and it's an evolving organism for that reason.' This idea relates
38 back to the notion that creativity 'has to be grounded', operating within a tradi-
39 tion: 'Accepting any curriculum is politically and value-driven . . . there's usually
40 enough course team consensus [on] the foundations . . . [without which] students
41 are not in a position to be creative in the context of their course'.

42 *A personal act of sense-making* – for some, the first step in designing a cur-
43 riculum involved making sense of the discipline. This was particularly visible
44 when faced with problems, such as designing for novel or controversial topics,
45 or when an academic inherited a module on an unfamiliar topic and had to
46 master new literature:

64 Margaret Edwards et al.

You have to fall back on your own creative processes. [This involves] a lot of brainstorming, actually. . . . You actually start asking quite deep and difficult questions, like what classifies as [this category], how do you know – if nobody else is teaching this, why is nobody else teaching it? Is it something quite specialized that only my students are going to be interested in? Is it something that other people have found too difficult? Does it fall under, into other types of courses as maybe just a sub-category? You know, I mean, you ask, you ask questions – because absence is significant.

Internal orientation – this involved designing the curriculum to fit within a wider context, such as building on prerequisite modules or giving relevance to follow-on modules, taking account of existing offerings and departmental practice, and focusing on the students and their needs. Generally, this was felt to be helpful in providing a grounding for design. Indeed, one participant focused on the difficulties of designing a ‘widening access’ module that was supposed to have no prerequisites. It was not always positive, however; it could constrain creative practice by encouraging status quo.

External orientation – in addition to locating a module within the contexts of a course and department, most participants made comparisons with courses taught elsewhere. This process provided inspiration, developed a sense of the ‘norm’ within the curricular area being established, and located student resources. The location of the course in relation to others in the university, or to courses elsewhere in the world, were some of the more complex external orientations. Taking account of the needs of potential employers was also important.

Creating spaces – several participants noted how ‘crammed’ curricula tended to be, attempting to cover an ambitious range of topics. A recurrent theme in interviews was the need to replace some content with ‘creative space’ – areas of the curriculum where teacher and students felt able to try things out and negotiate what should be done, and how to do it. Such spaces created opportunities for ‘more relaxed pedagogy and . . . discussion, workshop, individual feedback – you need this for deeper understandings’. Important features of such ‘creative space’ were that it should be enjoyable (‘I’d want to make it fun!’), part of the course, but not so tightly assessed that risk-taking and the exploration of ideas were inhibited. Moreover, it was felt that the ‘space’ was not boundless. As a curriculum designer, ‘your creative act is in trying to build in these spaces . . . in a way . . . which will still allow students to feel secure that there is a curriculum and that they aren’t just in a free for all’.

Creative teaching – slightly distinct from the design process were discussions of the techniques that teachers associated with creativity. Several approaches were identified that were felt to support and build students’ creativity:

- *Developing critical thinking* – this could be initiated with fairly simple tasks, then built upon. For example, one participant talked about the need to ‘build in assessments and discussions which . . . from level 1 . . . question . . . official positions, from governments, pressure groups, academic writing’.

Creativity and curricula in higher education 65

- 1 • *Encouraging lateral thinking and problem-working.*
- 2 • *Move between the university and 'outside'* – this could be achieved through
- 3 the use of case studies, study visits, or hearing or working with external
- 4 teachers, such as visiting specialists in the field or employers. The general
- 5 principle was to 'get students outside classrooms . . . with the chance to hear
- 6 new voices . . . and then critically review them . . . [since] the business view
- 7 can be uncritical'.
- 8 • *Give space for group work* – This can be informal working in a practical
- 9 session – get students to report a summary of discussion orally – and at least
- 10 once a year, include . . . some assessed group work'.
- 11 • *Increase student confidence (in staff and student colleagues)* – fieldwork,
- 12 off-site visits and social occasions were considered helpful to 'collegiality'
- 13 and confidence. 'Without confidence in the context, creativity doesn't
- 14 happen . . . students *must* be confident in order to try new things . . . I must
- 15 harness developing confidence and foster enthusiasm – the two together –
- 16 it's more interesting for me, too!'
- 17 • *Have fun!* – 'Most students (as I am) are averse to sitting and
- 18 listening for long periods – 2-hour slots? Break them up with listen – activ-
- 19 ity – discuss – summary'; 'Brighten up dull walls . . . could a small assess-
- 20 ment involve 'doing a wall' with posters created from recent work?'

22 Generally, creativity was felt to be served by being able to draw on a wider
 23 repertoire of teaching approaches, rather than just relying on 'the cliché of
 24 lecture, seminar, lecture, seminar. . .'. Being forced, for example, to consider the
 25 needs of part-time students made one participant think in new ways about how
 26 they could teach their course. Similarly, one participant discussed the need for
 27 creativity when designing curricula that were intended to appeal to able students
 28 who had left university because of financial and other pressures. A number of
 29 these students were first-generation undergraduates with no family financial
 30 resources to draw upon, making part-time employment a necessity. Could the
 31 curriculum be designed in more flexible and creative ways in order assist them?
 32 It was felt that university space and systems could be used more flexibly,
 33 although there were considerable resource implications:

35 What about the undergraduates who cannot come into the university in a
 36 conventional way – perhaps for financial reasons? It should be possible, for
 37 example, to come into laboratories at unconventional times – give them
 38 tutorial support. It is not satisfactory, but life is not satisfactory. However, it
 39 may be the best we can do for some students. . . . Open learning is difficult
 40 for undergraduates – as we have found. . . . We would also need more flexi-
 41 bility of exam opportunities. Further, pay as you go is more affordable for
 42 many students.

44 However, several people noted that students did not always welcome new
 45 approaches to teaching. Students who lacked a grounding in 'core' parts of the
 46 course (particularly within science) often seemed to prefer academics to be

'teaching to what they can comfortably learn'. Further, the optimistic view that student creativity increased as autonomy was developed through the course was questioned. Some staff believed that students become encultured during their time at university, coming to expect the 'lecture/seminar' cliché to less comfortable alternatives. This sense of the conservative student may appear negative and perhaps even dismissive, but this was recognised as a sensible strategy on the part of students. Much effort is invested in learning the 'rules' that govern the programme, the 'hidden' curriculum, and once learnt students are reluctant to have these rules changed mid-study, which might have the effect of wiping out their investment of time in learning how to play the game.

What I've found is because it's a final year course [...] and because of the department that it's in, the teaching methods in that department are very traditional. It's pretty much chalk and talk. And the students actually seem to prefer that. . . . The students in a sense are quite resistant to something that's quite different to the previous three years of teaching that they've had, and then also if you do something that's different, the students don't like it and they do badly then they get berated [laughs]. So I mean there's a kind of a – a sense of being worn down and saying, ok, I'll just do what everyone else does as well.

Assessment

Assessment appeared central to the whole issue of designing creative curricula. As one participant commented, 'If the assessment process is right, you can cope; creativity is encouraged'. What was 'right' about assessment was not only that it should be appropriate to course level and reliable with equitable standards, but that it should encourage 'student reflection on work, indicate areas for improvement . . . it is important not to destroy confidence – or encourage self-delusion. It's a delicate balancing act – the result may be disappointing, but feedback should point forwards.' Two further points were interesting. First, it was felt that 'divergent thinking [was] not encouraged in criteria-ridden assessment', yet creative work lacked credibility unless it were an explicit element of assessment. Second, assessment should be varied in order to give 'scope for different aptitudes' and encourage thinking in different ways.

A particular problem related to 'institutional practices . . . and a drive towards end-of-term exams', which it was felt 'are really not the best way of testing, especially in the higher levels, the skills we want students to learn and the kind of knowledge . . . that we want them to acquire'. However, proposals for replacing exams with other forms of assessment, or lowering their weighting, could result in 'pretty stiff resistance' at departmental or institutional level. This resulted in an interesting paradox:

So it's really an interesting circular dilemma there. Yes, we privilege students' capacity to be creative, but no we don't let them show it to us in anything that counts.

Creativity and curricula in higher education 67

1 The position did seem to vary by discipline, however, especially in those that,
2 stereotypically, are viewed as 'creative'. In Arts disciplines, exhibitions, port-
3 folios and performances were used for assessment, and would be viewed by
4 internal and external assessors. 'Mini-vivas' would give undergraduates an
5 opportunity to comment upon their work and would be taped in final-year
6 modules for external examiners. Outside Arts disciplines, more than one asses-
7 sor would comment upon assessments that were specifically designed to incor-
8 porate creative work; these included oral presentations, poster demonstrations
9 and role play.

10 Nonetheless, having a variety of assessment types was felt to be an important
11 stimulus to creative work. Assessment was typically entirely summative, con-
12 cerned with 'solo performance' and characterized by exams or academic essays.
13 Changes that participants sought to make included the more formative assess-
14 ment (work in progress that received feedback, and which was 'contributory –
15 otherwise some students wouldn't do it') and having a greater variety of written
16 and practical work (to include, for example, précis, report-writing, critiques of
17 articles, group work and projects on topics negotiated with students).

18 Some respondents tried assessing creative work, but there were issues about
19 defining what 'counts' as creativity in assessable ways.

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21 [Creativity] is not written into the learning objectives, but then again, it
22 wouldn't be, would it? ... But like all these things that are important, you
23 can't pin it down – so we try to encourage it ... but we don't necessarily
24 give marks for it.

25
26 Given the problems of changing forms of assessment, one interim tactic was to
27 subvert the conventional forms. One participant included questions with an
28 element of creativity in summative examinations; another described how
29 'essays' could incorporate group work and discussion, at least at the thinking
30 and planning stages. One participant tried to counter the 'power dynamics' of
31 assessment by engaging in negotiations with final-year students about the
32 assessment tasks and criteria. Some students were wary of this departure from
33 more usual approaches within the discipline, but the end results were felt to
34 include 'greater engagement' by students in 'their' topics, more transparency
35 about assessment criteria and institutional processes and an opportunity for
36 personal development.

37 A final observation in this section is from a participant who had assessed oral
38 problem-working among groups in two universities. The comment illustrates
39 that placing value on creativity can create problems, if this happens on a piece-
40 meal basis. It highlights the importance of holistic courses, which would allow
41 students time and opportunities to develop areas which some can find difficult.

42
43 In the first case, the students were raring to go – ideas were coming thick and
44 fast ... what emerged was an imaginative and well-designed working hypothe-
45 sis. ... Good teamwork was noticeable. In the second example (and I wouldn't
46 say there was an ability difference from in the first case) ... it just didn't work.

68 *Margaret Edwards et al.*

Students were not used to brainstorming, to trying ideas for size... It was stilted and the students failed – dramatically – to communicate. A very plausible explanation for the difference seemed to lie in curricular content and assessment. Once you looked at the curriculum, you realized that group two... had sparse practice and no guidance in this sort of problem-working until final year – where was the preparation? You cannot expect students to draw things out of a hat... it's unfair.

Designing first-year courses

Experiences of design for first-year courses were similar at both institutions, but were felt more acutely at LJMU. There, most introductory courses had undergone significant redesign, largely in response to a perception that there was a growing mismatch between school/Further Education and university-level study, even when admission grades appeared to be constant. The criticism was not of the students per se but of their previous educational experience, which was felt to be unduly 'convergent', with one participant explaining that the 'crowded, heavily normative curriculum in schools [encouraged] superficial learning and regurgitation'. Independent study skills and basic numeracy and literacy were also felt to be a problem in some contexts.

'Collective brainstorming and a lot of heart-searching' had produced some proposals to change the situation; this was also felt to have a creative aspect. 'We tried to articulate fundamental values about society and... what is a university for?'

Some course teams had experimented with literacy and numeracy sessions for weaker students, but they were generally not well-attended, since students who were expected to attend felt stigmatised. Consequently, numeracy enhancement was built into the curriculum for all students and it was found that even better-prepared students benefited ('we just take them faster, further'). Problem-working was felt to increase understanding and motivation. As discussed earlier, designing to address particular problems resulted in participants feeling more creative about their approach to teaching overall.

Designing final-year courses

The final-year curriculum typically combined some core study (often advanced applications of concepts and techniques) with student choice of modules and more independent study time. Academics often felt that they often had greater freedom to draw upon their own research interests at this level.

The idea of creative space, discussed earlier, was felt to be particularly important here. Opportunities for discussion between staff and students were encouraged as 'students [are] more likely to have a better grasp of the discipline and insights from elsewhere... and more confidence to challenge you in informed ways'.

One lecturer spoke optimistically about students becoming more creative as they developed their autonomy throughout a course – but went on to reveal that

Creativity and curricula in higher education 69

1 her experience contradicted this, and that what seemed to happen was that stu-
2 dents developed set expectations about what ought to happen which then limited
3 what could be achieved:
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5 I would assume that I had greater creativity with the later years, because
6 they've had some exposure to the university system and hopefully they've
7 learnt how it works and that they're supposed to think for themselves.
8 [Later that same interview] That's what I expected when I started out. And
9 ... there are some who really are just really interested, want to think about
10 things on different levels. But then there's a large majority who are just
11 there to pass the exam. And they are the majority, as far as I can tell, and
12 they really do prefer just for you to transfer information to them, then they
13 go away, they do the past papers, and then they regurgitate it. So it ought –
14 three years of university ought to mean they were mature enough and put in
15 of their own effort outside lecture courses and practicals and what have you,
16 that you could do something different, but in reality, I've not yet found that
17 that's generally the case.
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19 This sense of the conservative student may appear negative and perhaps even
20 dismissive, but as the interview progressed it became clear that this was a sensi-
21 ble strategy on the part of students. As noted above, after learning how to study
22 in a particular way, students are reluctant to have their successful study habits
23 overturned by unfamiliar approaches to teaching. This was particularly acute in
24 relation to assessment:
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26 How to assess is an obvious case. I think first year courses are quite
27 amenable to different modes of assessment, in a way because students
28 haven't yet learned how to do the standard things.
29

30 New assessment formats in the final year produced great anxiety – particularly
31 when they are first introduced. Such changes render worthless many of the
32 points of reference that enable students to judge their progress and prepare for
33 forthcoming exams.
34

35 If you change a course that exists, and the exam questions then become dif-
36 ferent, and students rely very heavily on past papers.
37

38 Thus designing final-year modules had to take account of 'a widening gap ...
39 between students who are beginning to fly' in creative ways and those who
40 could not cope with too much autonomy. It was generally felt that the final year
41 should be a development of the previous years, rather than a quite different cur-
42 riculum – for example, to achieve this, two course teams had introduced more
43 'mini-dissertation work at level 2' as a preparation for final-year study. Sim-
44 ilarly, on a course where 'mini vivas' were expected, 'the preparation has come
45 through levels 1 and 2'.
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70 Margaret Edwards et al.

The organisational environment

Apparent throughout these interviews was the way that the wider context (academic, political and social) influenced the ways in which creativity was or was not taken up. Sometimes, these influences were quite general; some participants, for example, believed they were ‘increasingly working in a culture which perhaps doesn’t like failure’, and since creativity may well involve risk-taking ‘no-one wants to be seen to be a lecturer who’s not able to . . . be successful’. Other participants pointed to quite specific exercises of power and authority:

There’s someone I know who can’t do what she wants with her course because other people keep interfering. There’s real issues of power and control there, which I guess also relate to security. It’s hard when you’re a junior member of staff on a part-time contract; how do you turn round to a professor, and say, ‘hang on, that’s stupid, and this is my course so I’m not doing that?’

Issues of personal contracts and security were touched upon by several participants. There were real implications for creative teaching arising from the perceived need for self-preservation: ‘the less security you have, the less willing you are to take risks’. Moreover, junior lecturers in particular experienced problems with inheriting courses designed by other people. Freedom to vary an inherited course could differ by the discipline, academics’ knowledge of the curriculum area, confidence, inter-personal politics, and expectations of students and colleagues.

A more pressing problem for established staff was the perceived lack of resources – particularly time. One course leader, for example, felt caught between the desire not to over-commit colleagues to new course activities and his own time pressures, which meant that he could not ‘carry it all single-handed’. Even if it were possible to bring in more teaching staff, this would lead to a fragmented structure where it would be ‘hard to build in those creative spaces’. Material constraints, such as shortages of suitable accommodation or resources such as books and primary materials, were also felt to place limits on innovative work.

A very considerable discouragement to creative curricular design and student learning was felt to be the university’s ‘insistence on [semester-long] modules. . . there is no space, there is assessment crowding in and reduced opportunity for formative assessment – and – pat! that’s finished. Students don’t easily see linkages.’ Similarly, pressures of accountability (both internal and through external audit) and the perception of managerialism restricting academic practice, not to mention the perceived resistance from some colleagues to ‘debate and change’ in general, were felt to be further discouragements to creativity.

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Creativity and employability

Courses in both universities were also shaped by consideration of employment opportunities. However, the extent to which employers looked for employees whose creativity has been encouraged is open to question. Thrift (2000: 676), for example, argues that ‘something new is happening to Western capitalism – not as new as some of its more evangelical proponents would argue, no doubt – but not just business as usual’. Moreover, the employability literature reports recruiters’ aspirations for graduates who innovate and can be ‘transformative’ (Harvey, 1997). Whether the current emphasis on ‘creative’ recruits is style, an attribute which is only valued in fast-track recruitment or in the ‘creative’ industries, or an awakening to the realisation that in a fast-changing world, routine-dependency may not be enough, it seems that students will be emerging into a world in which their claims to creative work are becoming increasingly important.

Conclusions

These interviews illustrated the complexity of creativity, both generally and within the curriculum. In both universities, the risk of regarding ‘creativity’ complacently and un-analytically was identified. ‘Of course . . . creativity is A Good Thing, . . . a universal aim.’ The problem with this is that the concept is rendered benign but bland. However, participants in each university described absences and difficulties of creativity, as well as instances of creative curricular design and pedagogy. Encouraging creativity was felt to be a worthwhile goal. However, like many complex, qualitative achievements, it required conversation and reflection by academics and students upon the ‘complex and contested’ as part of curricular design, pedagogy and assessment.

There were many commonalities in conceptions of creativity, creative teaching and supporting creativity in learning, across both sites. However, the issue of meanings emerges once more. Did academics in mathematics departments ‘mean’ quite the same thing as those in arts departments when speaking about ‘creativity’ and ‘the new’, for example? An initial reaction might be negative, but the work of the mathematician Poincaré (1970: 80) seems remarkably familiar: creative work produces some ‘new combinations’, but ‘new’ on its own was not the sole criterion of creativity; it also requires ‘discernment’, ‘choice’, ‘not useless’, ‘beauty’, ‘harmony’, ‘elegance’ and an ‘aesthetic feeling . . . [that] surely belongs to emotional sensibility’. Perhaps the common ground between arts’ and sciences’ conceptions of ‘creative’ is more important than the distinctions.

Participants questioned three stereotypes. First, that ‘creativity’ was the prerogative of arts courses. Disciplines in both arts and sciences could go through creative bursts, perhaps in the early stages of their development, then become ‘quite formulaic’, or later become re-invigorated ‘with the emergence of new paradigms’. Second, creativity was not necessarily associated with ‘genius’. Craft (2001) explores the idea of ‘small “c” creativity’, which can enhance

72 Margaret Edwards et al.

individual potential outside the genius range. Finally, neat distinctions in creative processes between arts and sciences were also questioned (see Yeomans, 1996; Fein, 1999: 283).

The strong prominence of assessment in this picture was no surprise. As Yorke (2002: 156) has observed, 'Assessment is ... a problematic issue for higher education [especially in the] extent to which intended learning outcomes can accommodate creative ... work by the student'. Participants identified several dilemmas in the assessment of creativity, and other complex student achievements:

- Students' creative work may be underestimated or dismissed within a domain because of lecturers' unrealistic expectations of developing creativity. Typically, undergraduate creative expression is different from that exhibited by experienced practitioners, and neither group is likely to include a Mozart. Moreover, an undergraduate whom we remember as pushing against conceptual boundaries some years ago may not be such a radical if we apply virtual fast forward and position her or him within the paradigms of the present.
- Creative work can challenge fixed conceptions of the discipline that may derive in part from academics having invested intellectual capital within it and an unwillingness to cede capital gain. Departure from 'imitation' of established ideas may be tolerated or even encouraged within the disciplinary culture of a department; or it may be blocked by gatekeepers who have 'cognitive dominance' in the socio-cultural context in which assessment takes place.
- Summative assessment by examination was felt to be a blunt instrument in the assessment of higher-level understandings and other student achievements, including creative work. Yet participants were, to an extent, 'bound into the belief by some professional bodies, employers... [and even] by conservative thinking internally that this is *the* credible form of assessment'. The way forward was felt to include a range of assessment forms, some of which would encourage divergence.
- The problems of under-assessment of creative work vied with concerns about SMART performance criteria and what has been described as 'an overenthusiastic search for fine-grained benchmarks' (Knight and Yorke, 2003) that might destroy the very creative qualities that academics wish to encourage.

Another recurrent complexity was the relationship between teachers and students. Whilst students were an obvious inspiration for many acts of particularly creative curriculum design, when often-neglected groups were considered within the process of learning and teaching, they were as often an impediment as a spur to reform.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refer to the issue of cultural capital, which consists of a familiarity with the dominant culture in society, especially the ability to understand the use of educated language. In each institutional study,

Creativity and curricula in higher education 73

1 there were references to either explicit or 'hidden' curriculum adjustments to try
2 to take account of some students' more difficult transitions to university. Cre-
3 ative undergraduate work can develop only where there is confidence in discipli-
4 nary knowledge, in the context in which they are working, and when they are
5 interested and challenged. Some participants reported having made adjustments
6 to the curriculum in response to this. Traditional 'teaching' has not been aban-
7 doned in favour of facilitation, since students were found less able to cope with
8 the greater autonomy of facilitatory pedagogy, at least at first (see Northedge,
9 2003).

10 To summarise, a stressed academic, like a stressed student, is not creative.
11 Slightly adjusting Thrift (2000: 688), it may help to consider: 'Is it possible for
12 [a teacher] to achieve 'balance', to 'live lightly' – and be a change agent?' It was
13 clear from this study that real, additional resources (rather than prescriptions
14 from national and institutional centres) are needed to foster creativity and cope
15 with more diverse student bodies. Lighter-touch accountabilities and sensitivity
16 by evaluators to academics' expertise, especially in furthering complex learning
17 such as creativity, might free spaces for collegiality and good learning. Lying
18 behind all of this is the elusive idea of 'culture change', which might remove
19 many of the normative barriers to the introduction of creativity. However,
20 changing cultures is notoriously hard and time-consuming; perhaps, for the
21 moment, it might be sufficient for course teams to create a context in which
22 they, collectively, place value on creativity. Given the central role of creativity,
23 one starting point might be to consider whether there is an over-teaching of
24 content coupled with too little 'high gain [student] and low pain [academic]
25 assessment' (Knight and Yorke, 2003). If systematic changes could begin to be
26 made within complete programmes, rather than in a piecemeal manner, then it
27 may be possible to begin opening up the creative spaces within the curriculum
28 that so many of the participants in these studies seemed to be seeking.
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