9   Views from the chalk face

Lecturers' and students' perspectives on the development of creativity in art and design

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Introduction

This chapter describes a study of lecturer and student views on creativity, undertaken in the field of art and design. The study, completed in 2004, involved over 100 students and 20 lecturers from FE and HE art and design courses in two institutions. The results provide useful insights into perceptions of creativity from a single discipline field, one which explicitly focuses on the creative individual and the development of their creative potential.

Methodology

Data was collected from 21 lecturers and 113 students at two art and design institutions. Participants were drawn from a broad range of subjects at FE and HE levels, including fine art, graphic design, ceramics and industrial design. The study group was selected to provide a spread of responses from foundation students through to final-year undergraduates.

All participants completed questionnaires (one for lecturing staff, one for students) which allowed for quantitative (tick box) answers and optional qualitative comments. Both students and lecturers were asked to define creativity in terms of their own practice. Students were asked to choose an art and design project which they had undertaken and to assess their creative development within it. Through the questionnaire responses they then identified which pedagogic and personal factors had assisted that creative development. In addition, they were asked to specify the two most significant factors for their creative success from a list which included physical environment, project organisation and scheduling, teaching styles or approaches, teaching methods, type of project, prior skills and knowledge, and approach to learning.

Lecturers were also asked to rate the significance of these factors for their students' creative success, and to identify the two most salient factors. Their questionnaire responses provided the basis for semi-structured, recorded interviews. Student and staff responses were categorised and compared to identify commonalities and differences of opinion among staff and between staff and students. The quantitative data provided further comparisons. The data were analysed via SPSS using chi-testing to assess significance.

110 *Ruth Dineen*

In addition, each lecturer was requested to identify one or two students whose
project work revealed high levels of creativity, and asked on what basis that
judgement was made. Samples of that work were recorded both to provide evid-
ence of the consistency (or otherwise) of lecturers' evaluation of creativity, and
visual evidence that would support or extend understandings gained through
questionnaire and interview responses.

The data are extensive and analysis is ongoing. However, several themes re-
occur in the responses of both teachers and learners. For this account I am going to
focus on the centrality of creativity, the importance of the teacher–student relation-
ship, and the problematic nature of assessment. An overview of the qualitative
data relating to these themes is presented here.

Perspectives on creativity

By their very nature, art and design deal with speculative and divergent ideas,
the negotiation of uncertainties and ambiguities. The knowledge-base is contin-
gent, moving across boundaries to make new connections. All of the lecturers
interviewed for this study were practising artists/designers. They appeared to use
their personal understandings of creative activity to inform their pedagogic prac-
tice, placing creativity at the centre of the curriculum and its delivery.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the development of learner creativity was
considered by all of the lecturers to be the primary goal of art and design educa-
tion. In the words of one interviewee, 'we must give [the students] the right con-
ditions to find their own self and their most exciting minds'. A humanistic view
of creativity prevailed, reflecting Carl Roger's belief that creativity is libidinous,
made manifest by 'man's tendency to actualise himself, to become his potential-
ities' (Rogers, 1952: 35). Interviewees' definitions of creativity thus tended to
focus on the route to self-actualisation: through 'originality, imagination and
curiosity', 'empathy and understanding mediated through practice', 'taking risks
and jumping into the unknown'. With powerful conviction, one lecturer sug-
gested that:

Creativity is imagination, fired by passion, underpinned by knowledge and
skill. What is imagination? It is questioning, foolhardiness, a belief that you
can actually move yourself to that [new] place; spirit, determination, and
optimism. And passion? It means having an open mind, integrity and a
courageous heart.

Many students defined creativity in similarly active terms, describing it as 'a
form of release', 'spontaneous excitement', 'vast and endless', 'a flamboyant
explosion of imagination and emotion. Something that builds up inside me to
sporadically spill out into a piece of work.' One suggested succinctly that it was
'getting the inside of my head onto a page'; one spoke of 'the ability to express
myself and my individuality through my work'; another defined it as 'freedom to
develop in the way you choose, refining your skills and imagination'. Student
responses were most frequently emotional or personal. They referred to self-

expression and self-development, to expressing emotions or individuality, and to interpreting or communicating their viewpoint through imagination and intuition.

Other responses, from both staff and students, focused on originality and 'adventure', on the importance of 'seeing things differently', 'pushing boundaries', 'making connections' and working in ways which were 'wild', 'crazy' or 'unorthodox': 'It's about lateral thinking, distance from the origin, pushing all ideas good and bad with a belief in producing something of interest and desire.' The need to allow for the unexpected and to encourage open-minded approaches through experimentation, exploration and play was another common theme.

Similarly, all participants emphasised connections between creative expression and everyday life. Speaking of one, highly creative, student, a lecturer commented: 'She just knew how to interact with life. Everything that she delighted in, and everything that went on for her ended up in her workbook. That's the great thing about art and design, you live life and it comes out in the work.' Another was clear that 'by being a fully alive human being, your whole creativity flowers'. Creativity was held to 'relate to all areas of practice: intellectual, practical, material, social interaction, conversations . . . it's ever-changing and ever-present'. Student definitions were often equally broad-based. One felt that, '[my creative work] expresses ideas, emotion, thoughts, humour, outlook, beliefs, love, hate, music . . . a mixture of life experiences and imagination'; another simply stated, 'it's a way of observing the world'.

Several categories of definition emerged from the analysis of student responses. A small number were based on cognitive or motor skills. A much larger group related to imagination and self-expression, others to originality or to freedom from restraint. Most were inclusive, crossing the superimposed category boundaries. A first-year student, for example, suggested that 'creativity is using all your knowledge and skills, and then doing the impossible'.

All of the students were able to define creativity in relation to their own practice (and, by implication, themselves). Unlike the students in Oliver's study (see Chapter 5), their responses suggest that they view creativity as an innate and unproblematic aspect of their identity as learners, practitioners and individuals. This is perhaps partly to do with the UK art and design admissions procedure. In order to gain a place, students must demonstrate their creative potential through showing and discussing a portfolio of their work. To an extent, therefore, acceptance on to a course means that their creativity had been judged acceptable by the subject 'gatekeepers'. In Holmes' (2002) analysis (discussed more fully in Chapter 5 of this book), this would provide students with an 'agreed identity' in relation to their creativity, claimed by them and affirmed by others.

Students in this study also appear to be generally confident in their ability to realise their creative potential. Participants included the full range of ability levels, yet, when asked how creatively successful they had been in their current or last project, all ticked either 'very successful' or 'successful'. The assumption that this response might reflect not creative confidence but low aspirations on the part of learners or teachers is powerfully countered by interviewee responses and by the diversity and originality of the work itself.

112 *Ruth Dineen*

The view of creativity expressed by participants in this study is extraordinarily all-embracing. It is seen as a defining factor of our humanity, and the wellspring of personal growth. Unless thwarted, it provides the motivation for self-actualisation, for the development of our innate potential. It is not limited by context but can manifest itself in all aspects of our lives. Creative potential is thus seen as a given; the task is 'to set up strategies that allow it to emerge, or to be confirmed'.

Teacher–student relationships

The pedagogic model that emerges from this holistic view of creativity does not appear to be discipline-dependent. Rather, it is based on a commitment to an 'emancipatory and transformative' education (Danvers, 2003: 47). One interviewee affirmed that her job was to 'tap in to the imagination and curiosity of the student, helping them access something that's deep inside themselves'. Lecturers stressed the need to 'make the students feel valued, for themselves and their own views, for everything they do', believing that art and design education 'is not just vocational training, it's the development of the whole person. I reinforce that, reiterate it throughout every single process that I teach'.

The teacher–student relationship was believed to be at the heart of this endeavour: '[it] is really important to show them you are interested in what they are doing, you care about it. It's to do with the relationship between them and us. That's the key.' Lecturers spoke of their role with often passionate conviction: 'to disseminate energy, express love, develop trust, allow them to stumble, to gain independence.'

The non-hierarchical nature of the relationship was frequently reiterated: 'it's about an attitude between staff and students. Both must be willing for things to go wrong . . . for anything to happen'; 'my job is not to impose how I see the world. My job is to facilitate them to have the confidence to say what they as individuals want to say . . . to feel they have something to contribute'. One lecturer stated explicitly that 'I don't teach, what I do is help people see, help them unlock what is already there. I know what helps people gain confidence . . . I find the right buttons to push and then they start to push them for themselves.' Lecturers were also clear that 'it's not about putting your own ego forward. It isn't about "here I am", it's about "here's this idea, this problem, let's solve it"; it's about enthusiasm and delight'.

Students used similar words to describe the teaching approaches they encountered. A first-year BA student 'found the tutors welcoming, helpful and enthusiastic', commenting that 'they actually talk to you, rather than at you'. Another felt that 'the tutor's enthusiasm inspired me to think harder and become more creative'; a third commented that 'the tutor's attitude spurred me on to open all the doors of my creativity; it really inspired me to push myself and not hold back'. In the study, 97 per cent of the students considered that their creative success had been significantly and positively affected by the teaching styles they encountered. According to one interviewee, these were 'not to do with "success" or "non-success" [but about] getting them [the students] to enjoy themselves.

We are here to have fun, feeling enthusiastic, excited about the subject matter. That enthusiasm has to be there from the start; it comes from the teacher.'

Many students at foundation level commented on the differences between school and FE teaching approaches. They clearly relished being in an environment where 'creativity is considered important and is encouragingly taught by people who are passionate about it', and enjoyed the freedom of 'being given support without being spoon fed . . . like having an idea planted, then you grow on your own'.

Their lecturers emphasised the need to build confidence and trust, to 'nurture what they [the students] have and then give them a little bit more' and to 'be approachable'. They appeared to negotiate the subtleties of the staff–student relationship with considerable sensitivity: 'I feel I'd failed if students put up barriers, psychological walls. That can be tricky. It can be to do with something that's happened at home, or a previous bad experience. Sometimes you have to back off, give them a bit of leeway, a bit of space, and they might come back.' Empathy was felt to be key to success in this enterprise:

> I empathise with the difficulty of assimilating new information. I think they feel safe with someone who knows what it feels like. I emphasise that and my concern for them and their feelings. Then they are willing to look at additional options, to push themselves beyond a locked-in, mechanical attitude. And humour is used to break the ice, the tension, help them relax. It prevents the paralysis that can occur when they think 'I have to do this task'. The relationship dissipates that paralysis.

Comments by staff frequently echoed understandings of the relationship between teaching for creativity and creative teaching found elsewhere in this book. Stressing the importance of 'the right attitude and motivation on the teacher's part', one lecturer affirmed 'you have to be fully involved otherwise you fail [to reach] them'. Another provided an inspirational picture of art and design education:

> It was all to do with the staff-student relationship. It increased student motivation *and* staff motivation. The task could be dispiriting – almost mechanical. There's much more to us than that. The fact that we did it together made the students more responsive, and having an 'outside' client increased group cohesion – a common enemy! We were in this together and together we could do it. Staff involvement goes through the roof – I'm flying! Motivation [can] soar in the face of challenge.

Responses also affirm the collaborative nature of post-compulsory art and design education. Collaboration is encouraged not only within the teacher–student relationship but within and across the student cohort: 'We can teach them about 65 per cent if we're lucky – the rest comes from each other: testing things out on each other is absolutely fundamental. It's about collective energy'; 'It is nerve racking when you're reaching out for something that is quite unknown to you. I

beings. We need a pat, somebody to say to us 'well ok, you got a double E – but actually I feel you did your best and this element is particularly good'. For people to grow there needs to be personal interactive warmth . . . that's what makes all of us prosper. That can't always be put on a piece of paper, especially not the subtlety.

Clear distinctions were drawn between informal or course-based diagnostic evaluations and institutional requirements for formal, summative assessment. The latter were generally viewed as demotivating, antipathetic to creative development. Conversely, all staff affirmed the value of diagnostic assessment:

Assessment (i.e. everything the student received during the [module], everything said by tutors, themselves and peers) is one of the greatest learning elements within the whole experience. It's not whether they got an A, B or C, it's about how did they respond to something, are they further down the road of understanding, how well did they contextualise things, how has that moved them forward?

This view of assessment parallels Cowan's proposal in Chapter 12 of this book that an assessment strategy should 'enable students to explore, experience and develop their own understanding of creativity and construct new meanings'. To this end, lecturers sought ways to subvert the imposed systems, to turn assessment into a collaborative and creative learning experience.

Primarily, lecturers encouraged students to redefine their notions of success and failure; '[we get them] to take risks with the way they are thinking, what they are making. I say to them "if it doesn't work then you learn as much from that as if it does". That idea of failing . . . I hate that idea, it's a learning process – no right or wrong.' From the start students were expected to engage in this debate, to make their own judgements; 'the student evaluation doesn't have to justify their process or outcome – it could have been wrong, but the experience of doing it would enable them to get it right next time. Mistakes are always positive.'

Staff acknowledged the anxiety that this paradigm shift can cause. 'A lot of students are very scared when they start . . . we take time out, take the pressure off . . . [get them to] rely on intuition and trust.' They attempted to minimise fear through support and encouragement: 'I need to be there acting as the bridge between what they know and the unknown, the unfamiliar.' As one BA course director explained:

We attempt to make them aspire very high very early. It's dangerous. As long as you keep telling them that it's deep water and reassuring them that it'll get shallower then it's ok. If you keep aspirations high, nurture things, keep a close eye, it's amazing what people can achieve.

Student responses suggest that these strategies were working. One spoke of the necessity of 'being experimental and not being afraid to try new things. If you

116 *Ruth Dineen*

let go and don't hold back, I believe you're at your most exciting and creative.' Another considered that 'to be creative it helps to be around other creative people, to take account of their ideas, experiments and mistakes, to learn from these and from your own mistakes'. Several mentioned 'risk-taking' and the need for courage. Asked how she could have been more creatively successful, one first-year BA student replied, 'I should have been braver.'

Elsewhere in this book, Cowan and Balchin propose collaborative and con-sensual approaches to assessment. Interviewees in this study similarly stress the importance of having an evaluative dialogue with students; 'even if only to affirm that what they've done is a journey of experience, enriching their under-standing. That feedback is crucial; they cannot make any decisions [or] build on what they have learned if they don't have the opportunity to verbalise it.' At foundation level, students were required to reflect on their learning formally: 'they have to write down their thoughts about their own work – self-assessment, evaluation and reflection. They document what is going on in their everyday life – not just the art and design experience.' The system was less explicit on under-graduate courses, although all students were expected to keep workbooks or visual journals. These were used 'to provide evidence to see how they've developed and pushed the boundaries of what they've selected to do'.

Emphasising the non-hierarchical nature of this debate, one lecturer com-mented:

I'm very honest at assessment. Then I ask them 'am I right or am I wrong? Forget the fact that I'm your tutor. What do you think?' I want them to eval-uate it. It doesn't really matter what I think. It's their understanding. At the end [of the course] they have to walk out and stand on their own two feet as independent thinkers.

Another explained: 'I'm more interested in them going on their journey rather than the grade. It's an ongoing discussion, we talk to students all the time . . . an informal assessment process.' Suggesting that 'assessment is one of the greatest learning elements within the whole experience', one lecturer outlined a discur-sive system where 'assessment is run with the students through critiques and dis-cussion groups; the students make a verbal presentation and the work is displayed'.

Several interviewees raised concerns that formal assessment tended, for prac-tical reasons, to focus on final outcomes rather than the journey taken by the student to reach their goal. This in turn was held to undermine deep learning, lessening student's engagement with 'what's underneath the iceberg [outcome], the two-thirds that supports it . . . you won't be doing the students any good if you just teach them how to make fascinating objects if they haven't got the mechanisms of creativity that took them there'. One foundation lecturer felt that outcomes were 'almost incidental' during the early stages of the course; another's comment suggested that the outcome and process were philosophically indivisible; 'within the project outcome they can see the process of thinking, of making, the places where they went wrong, the new things they've discovered;

how [the object] informs space, how space informs the object; having a project outcome substantiates the experience.'

To emphasise this interconnectivity, lecturers turned the entire creative process into an assessable outcome, using criteria such as 'breadth of experimentation', 'creativity and originality' and 'innovative use of media' to assess work-in-progress. An industrial design lecturer explained: 'we assess the brief, the specification, the range of ideas, the analysis, the solution and the evaluation of the solution. The marking scheme forces them [the students] to go through the whole process.' A similar breadth of approach was affirmed by other interviewees: 'we look at the research, creative development, time management and technical competence as well as their ability to discuss and evaluate and synthesise.'

Brief conclusions

A belief in the innate creative potential of the individual appears to be at the heart of the creative education studied here. This humanist approach has, it seems, given coherence to the pedagogic model used in post-compulsory UK art and design education. It can be seen to have influenced educational aims and aspirations, teacher motivation and engagement, attitudes to assessment and, significantly, to have shaped the relationship between teacher and learner.

The study was small-scale, and interpretation of the qualitative data unavoidably subjective. Nonetheless, participant responses suggest that lecturers and students in post-compulsory UK art and design education are not just 'talking the talk' but 'walking the walk', engaged in an energising and transformative experience of creative learning. Perhaps there are lessons here for the development of pedagogies to promote and facilitate students' creative potential in other disciplines.