

THE ESSENCE OF CREATIVITY



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The Essence of Creativity



Someone asked me recently when I was at my happiest and I replied that it was when I knew that I was in creative flow, no matter what the project. The flow that I was talking about is intimately connected to dynamic processes rather than any end result and has a thrill that stems from the unknown and the unpredictable. It has an energetic 'quality' to it that invites intense focus and concentration and that seems to go beyond the simple accumulation of information. When I am in flow I lose track of time and can achieve crazy amounts of work with what feels like the minimum effort. It is a state that is common in musicians and artists. Creativity isn't only about being good at the expressive arts though - it is about tapping into who we really are and how we express it.

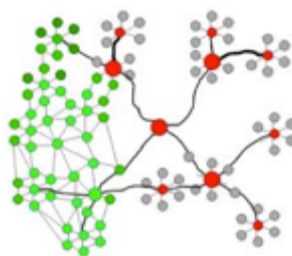
The old versus the new

The traditional approach to learning has relied on the transmission, accumulation and reproduction of information on the assumption that we need to constantly build on what has been acquired before. It is like a long linear staircase that we must climb, building a wall as we go and fearful of any cracks or holes in the structure that might weaken the edifice. The ultimate aim is to achieve externally imposed end results that then reflect our value to the system as a whole. We are extrinsically motivated and seek affirmation of our worth from the outside world. In his recent TED Talk Charles Leadbetter called it a 'Bismarkian' 19th century model' that no longer serves the dynamic needs of the information age.



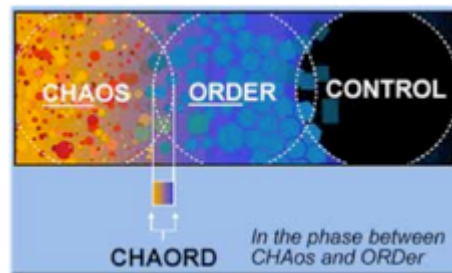
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Many voices are now coming together in the call for a new approach however, and this is one that relies more on the essential nature of personal 'meaning-making'. It is more akin to the language used by scientists when they try to describe the creative nature of the universe. The physicists Bohm and Hiley talked of a 'patterning' of potential' and expressed their concerns about the limitation of language ' words have the effect of fragmenting our understanding' and 'the word can at most be a local expression of context'. Instead of being rigid, order in this model is expressed as a fluid concept that is known by the symmetry of its relationships. It reflects the dynamic processes of nature itself and its structure can be likened more to that of a rhizome where the node itself initiates its own developmental processes and is open to all creative possibilities. Value in this model is intrinsic and all about personal fulfillment.



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Chaos and unpredictability are fundamental qualities of natural, autocatalytic, self-organizing systems and they thrive on the creative edge, with just enough order to give them patterning, but not enough to slow their adaptation and learning. It is this 'chaordic' space between chaos and order that is the essential source of creativity. It is a place of 'deep learning' through which competencies and dispositions can be explored and brought to a place of balance. It is also the kind of free-floating mental space that births new thinking and inspiration.



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The Inner and the Outer

I am beginning to think that there are two forms of creativity and innovation - one that is a deeply personal inner process that stems from the intuitive capacity and then builds on pre-existing personal knowledge, and another that is an outer process that is about actively participating, sharing and collaborating with others. Both rely on open structures that allow possibilities to be birthed and explored free from external expectations. In order for us as individuals to flow we need to be allowed to follow our developmental instincts and find our unique purpose in the world. In order for a group or organisation to flow there needs to be a letting down of boundaries and an honouring of the skills, abilities and vision of the other. Both need structure in order to facilitate the flow, but this structure is both open and organic. In the first we acknowledge our own unique interests and capacities in the service of our own development, in the latter we celebrate the unique interest and capacities of others in the service of the group vision.

The organisational experts Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge are currently exploring the new concept of 'Presencing' which implies the capacity for 'deep sensing' into the field of the emergent future. It is something common to all artists, visionaries and entrepreneurs who 'see' things in their heads as though they already exist. Presencing allows us to drop all previous models of the world and to simply allow the creative process to flow. It is an experiential and highly intuitive state recognized by many eminent thinkers as essential to our wellbeing and fundamentally about our deep relationship with the larger whole. It is also essentially the nature of creative play.

"The converging evidence authenticates what outdoor researchers like myself sense in natural areas. A fundamental, binding, energy underlies every aspect of the world we know. Be it a form of Love or the Unified Field sought in physics, sub-atomic, human, and global relationships, form, hold together, and "communicate" via a cohesive natural attraction energy. Natural attraction connects everything into a system. It makes things supportively belong rather than be isolated."

Michael J Cohen

We've come to believe that the core capacity needed for accessing the field of the future is presence. We first thought of presence as being fully conscious and aware in the present moment. Then we began to appreciate presence as deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical ways of making sense. We came to see the importance of letting go of old identities and the need to control and, as Salk said, making choices to serve the evolution of life. Ultimately, we came to see all these aspects of presence as leading to a state of "letting come," of consciously participating in a larger field for change. When this happens, the field shifts, and the forces shaping a situation can shift from re-creating the past to manifesting or realizing an emerging future.

Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers

Natural attraction

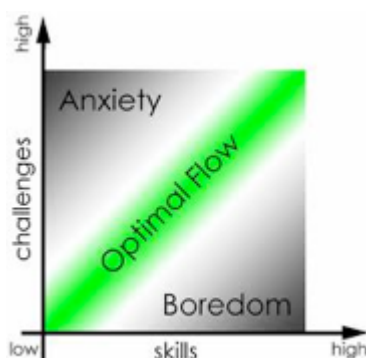
We know that children have an innate motivation – a ‘natural attraction’ to explore those aspects of the environment that best serve them at any moment of time, and that the culture in which they must develop has a great influence on them. A child’s sense of self worth comes not only from within, but is fundamentally affected by the expectations of others. As children internalise, they personalise or adapt cultural information. A culture that is predominantly externally motivated creates a particular social pattern that the young child must adapt to if he is to be accepted. Very early on in such cultures children learn to make a clear distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’, and have no illusions what it is that reaps acceptable rewards. The moment that an early years teacher is given a ‘target’ or ‘outcome’ to achieve the dynamic between teacher and child is subtly changed and an adult agenda starts to shape the environment.

These adopted value systems become part of the child’s personality even though they may go against his own feelings and experiences. Once the source of evaluation lies outside of the self the individual must seek the approval of others in order to feel self-regard. The natural and highly intuitive capacity for seeking out levels of unique personal challenge and fulfillment diminishes and we are disconnected from the extraordinary and joyful learner that lies inside.

Flow

When a child carries out an activity purely for the fulfillment that he experiences in the learning process itself he increases his contentment, self-confidence and general sense of being in harmony with the world. Children seek out meaningful work, demand responsibility and are capable of extraordinary creativity if left to their own devices in a supportive environment. What matters is not such much what they are doing, but how they perceive and interpret the activity. Researchers into creativity and intrinsic motivation have discovered an underlying similarity that is common to all intrinsically rewarding activities: they all give the participants a sense of discovery, exploration and problem solution. They also appear to need no goals or rewards external to the activity itself. In Chicago Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent many years studying states of optimal experience in adults- those times when they report feelings of intense concentration and deep enjoyment - and has showed that what makes experience genuinely satisfying is the state of highly creative consciousness which he also calls ‘flow’.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



According to him the state of Flow occurs when the experience of learning becomes its own reward and he terms this an ‘autotelic’ or self-rewarding experience. In the flow state action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the personality. In the Flow state the achievement of goals is no longer a priority. Rather, the freedom from having to focus on any specific end result allows the individual to escape the confines of boredom or anxiety and to fully enjoy the experience for itself. The experience itself becomes immensely fulfilling, but this does not necessarily equate with simple pleasure, for many flow activities are, to all intensive purposes, immensely complex, time-consuming and even frustrating. It is this deep and focused concentration that both Montessori and Steiner saw in children that were allowed to work at their own time and pace, free from the pressure of adult expectations. In order to achieve this level of concentration the activities needed to have personal meaning and relevance to the learner.

It is all about finding the balance between environmental challenge and personal capacities and each individual responds to this in his or her unique way. In the words of Fritjof Capra, the theoretical physicist, *'A living organism is a self-organising system, which means that its order in structure and function is not imposed by the environment, but is established by the system itself.'*

Perhaps the state that we most associate with childhood 'flow' is that of play, but from a psychological point of view work and play are not opposites and what matters is the intense involvement of the participant. There is a powerful force at work that seems to be inviting children to interact in unique ways with the environment. The most effective activities seem to need to be originated by the individual and to be open-ended, with the outcome determined by the participants. There is also frequently a feeling of togetherness and friendship with a consequent loss of self-centredness. Such social traits were observed in the 60s by the psychologists Carl Rogers and Maslow and were the characteristics that most astonished and inspired Maria Montessori. They can now be seen in the extraordinarily creative learning environments emerging throughout the world where the child is an equal collaborator in the learning process.

The Child as a Natural Learner

Children, therefore, are active learners in their own right. They do not simply passively absorb the strategies of the adults around them, but rather they strive to be the causal agents in their own environments. Not only that, but we now know from the paradigm-shifting work of Howard Gardner that traditional education systems have been looking at intelligence in incredibly limited ways. His eight identifiable intelligences now include :

1) *Linguistic intelligence* 2) *Logical-mathematical intelligence* 3) *Musical intelligence* 4) *Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence*
5) *Spatial intelligence* 6) *Interpersonal intelligence* 7) *Intrapersonal intelligence* and 8) *Naturalist intelligence*

"People have a unique blend of intelligences. The big challenge facing the deployment of human resources 'is how to best take advantage of the uniqueness conferred on us as a species exhibiting several intelligences'.

Howard Gardner

There must, therefore, be a very fine balance achieved between the advantages of instruction and the very real dangers of outside assistance undermining the child's independent intuitive thinking. Under instruction children may well learn the expected knowledge and demonstrate the skills, but they may also do so, as Professor Lilian Katz says *'at the expense of the disposition to use them.'*

In this respect is also interesting to examine the research that has been carried out on external rewards. If learning is to be about the excitement of discovering something new, rather than a function of memory children will tend to be rewarded by the joy of the discovery itself. External reward systems can even distort the developmental process itself. A number of studies have now shown that giving children external rewards for their work could actually decrease rather than increase the subsequent desire to repeat the activities. Classroom reward structures tend to implicate the children's self worth in their achievements, a problem that has been recognised by many researchers in the field. Providing the correct degree of structure, however, seems essential for the child to make sense of the environment and to provide choices that lie within the ability of the chooser. Too many choices or too few can depress motivation and subsequent achievement.

Creativity is therefore about allowing children to create their own questions and to find their own answers, to enjoy problem-solving for its own sake. There needs to be a 'reaching from within'. The danger is that instead of us freeing children to become truly independent, creative learners, we must, by nature of our own conditioning, bind them to primarily fit the demands of the culture.

The demands of culture

Classrooms, by their very nature, express the values, preoccupations and fears found in the culture as a whole and both parents and teachers convey the value systems that they have created and measured themselves by. Different cultures place vastly different values on particular abilities, and it is the value systems of cultures that influence the ways in which a young child formulates its goals in its attempts to develop a sense of self worth.

Our culture has championed the accumulation of information together with the power of the analytical mind. The focus is on the parts rather than the whole and we have become very good at dissecting bodies of knowledge in order to better understand them. The problem is that our focus on content rather than context may have profoundly eroded the essentially joyful nature of human learning and development. We have invested enormous sums of money in educational systems that perpetuate the old extrinsic model without standing back and asking the simple question 'Are we nurturing the development of happier and more creatively fulfilled human beings?'

The National Advisory Committee's report 'All our futures: Creativity, culture and education', (DfEE, 1999) states that:

"We are all, or can be, creative to a lesser or greater degree if we are given the opportunity. The definition of creativity in the report (page 29) is broken down into four characteristics: First, they [the characteristics of creativity] always involve thinking or behaving imaginatively. Second, overall this imaginative activity is purposeful: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective. Third, these processes must generate something original. Fourth, the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective".

And a recent report undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media and the Institute of Education, University of London says:

"The project will provide a detailed analysis of how educational stakeholders understand and conceive creative learning and innovative teaching, and to present examples of good practice within the wider context of educational policy and institutional innovation. Building on an understanding that creativity and innovation must go far beyond the arts in education, considerations of creativity and innovation must encompass, discourses around social critique, justice, citizenship, technology and economic regeneration as well as play and everyday cultural practices".

Both look at the issue in terms of structure but totally fail to emphasize the essential nature and importance of deeper 'meaning-making'. They are indicative of the way that our culture approaches things and we need to ensure that we, instead, open our minds to the wider context. It is too simple to say that we will now foster and encourage right-directed thinking (representing creativity and emotion) over left-directed thinking (representing logical, analytical thought). What is really needed is a profound revision of the way that we understand the learner and an appreciation that we all need a sense of purpose and contribution to something larger than ourselves.

Futurelab recently produced the preliminary results of an online survey of around 10,000 teachers, from the 27 Member States of the European Union, about their opinions concerning creativity in schools, as a contribution to the 2009 European Year of Creativity and Innovation. I quote *"Teachers in Europe believe that creativity is a fundamental competence to be developed at school and that Information and Communication Technologies can enhance creativity. An overwhelming majority of teachers also believe that creativity can be applied to every domain of knowledge and to every school subject. However, even when a big majority of teachers believe everyone can be creative, and that creativity is not solely a characteristic of eminent people, the conditions for favouring creativity are not always available in schools in Europe."*

Is creativity a competence? Or is it instead what we essentially are and need to express? In Reggio Emilia they talk of the 'Hundred Languages of Children' *"all those ways of communicating through which human thinking is brought to reflect, dig deeply, ask questions and make interpretations such as science, music, architecture, painting, cinema, mathematics etc"* – Veà Vicchi.

Reflection is an essential quality of creativity. As Guy Claxton says *“Reverie is crucial to the creative mind. And although this predominantly comes down to nurture over nature, creativity is lost without an instinctive ability to access free-floating mental states.”*. Truly creative often people balance periods of intense activity with those of quiet reflection. They crave the fulfillment of their work and often turn away from external rewards in order to maintain the creative process:

“Perhaps the most difficult thing for creative individuals to bear is the sense of loss and emptiness they experience when, for some reason, they cannot work. This is especially painful when a person feels his or her creativity drying out...”

Yet when a person is working in the area of his or her expertise, worries and cares fall away, replaced by a sense of bliss. Perhaps the most important quality, the one that is most consistently present in all creative individuals, is the ability to enjoy the process of creation for its own sake. Without this trait, poets would give up striving for perfection and would write commercial jingles, economists would work for banks where they would earn at least twice as much as they do at universities, and physicists would stop doing basic research and join industrial laboratories where the conditions are better and the expectations more predictable.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly

Educational Policy-making

What does this mean for educational policy-making? It means that we must look outside of our own predictable models to what is actually going on in the world. The learning environment is transforming at a speed that none of us could have predicted and children now have access to unimaginable levels of information. Across the world they are demonstrating their extraordinary capacities in ways that confound adult expectations. Given access to information even the poorest children are now teaching themselves, as demonstrated by Sugata Mitra’s ‘Hole in the Wall’ experiment which revealed that, in the absence of supervision or formal teaching and with the appropriate desire and curiosity, children can very effectively teach themselves and each other. We have probably never lived through such a creative and innovating period of human development and we urgently need to re-evaluate current education models in light of the world that we are moving into. We need to re-visit all the existing models that are out there, especially those that champion the importance of intrinsic motivation, but more importantly we now need to seek new models that unite the best of the past with the needs of the future.

Business leaders are united in the fact that we now need to cultivate students who are flexible, imaginative and innovative thinkers and risk-takers. According to a major new IBM survey of more than 1,500 Chief Executive Officers from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, creativity is *‘the number one leadership competency of the future’*. The President of Pixar - Ed Catmull talks of long-term success *“not coming from playing it safe, but from adapting to the instability of existing in the middle, in the space where ideas are formed, between the divergent pull of art, commercialism, technology and time. The creative leader’s role is not to control, but to create the right environment, to mix things up, to change the dynamics, to protect the vision, to challenge people to keep learning.”* and Hagel, Seely Brown and Davison’s book *‘The Power of Pull’* talks of *“moving from an old organisational order that stocked resources and information, desired control and precision, and pushed messages from the centre to the edge, to a new world where innovation happens at the edges and resources are pulled as needed”*.

Learning is no longer confined to the classroom, innovation is happening everywhere and educational policies need to adapt to a vastly different world. There is a tremendous opportunity to be grasped and out-of-the-box creative thinking is at the very core of it.

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