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The Rhetorics of Creativity

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This article introduces understandings of creativity in relation to social relations, play and pedagogy in policy and practice: where these understandings come from in terms of their theoretical heritage, what functions they serve, how they are used, and in whose interest. The focus is on discourses about creativity circulating in the public domain. The aim here is not to investigate creativity itself, but rather what is written and said about it. Creativity is thus presented as something *constructed through discourse* and how we might choose to locate ourselves in relation to claims being made about it. In the critical review of literature from which this article originates (Banaji & Burn, 2006), the rhetorics of creativity are given names which broadly correspond to the main theoretical underpinnings or the ideological beliefs of those who deploy them. Thus, the rhetorics referred to in this article are as follows:

- Creative Genius
- Democratic Creativity and Cultural Re/Production
- Ubiquitous Creativity
- Creativity for Social Good
- Creativity as Economic Imperative
- Play and Creativity
- Creativity and Cognition
- The Creative Affordances of Technology
- The Creative Classroom and Creative Arts and Political Challenge

The rhetorics have complex histories; in the following sections, brief indications of these histories are sketched. Following these historical descriptions, the rhetorics are traced through in academic and policy discourses.

The discussion of individual rhetorics raises a series of questions that cut across and connect several rhetorics to each other. For instance, two questions running through the rhetorics of Genius, Democratic and Ubiquitous creativity are: Does creativity reside in everyday aspects of human life or is it something special? And what are the differences between 'cultural learning' and 'creative learning'? Similarly, the issue of whether there is, in fact, any difference between 'good' and 'creative' pedagogy is the focus of attention in a number of the rhetorics. Writing on creativity in education distinguishes between creative teaching and creative learning, but often fails to establish precisely how such processes and the practices they entail differ from 'good' or 'effective' teaching and 'engaged' or 'enthusiastic' learning. So, is there good teaching that is not creative? Meanwhile, the questions of how significant play and individual socialization are remain central to several rhetorics.

Creativity: Unique or democratic?

The rhetoric which could be said to have the oldest provenance and to have remained resilient, albeit in more subtle guises, within educational pedagogies in the 20th and 21st centuries is that of *Creative Genius*. This romantic and post-romantic rhetoric (Simonton, 1999; Scruton 2000) dismisses modernity and popular culture as vulgar, and argues for creativity as a special quality of a few highly educated and disciplined individuals (who possess genius) and of a few cultural products. In this rhetoric, culture is defined by a particular discourse about aesthetic judgment and value, manners, civilization and the attempt to establish literary, artistic and musical canons. It can be traced back through certain phases of the Romantic period to aspects of European Enlightenment thought. Perhaps the most influential Enlightenment definition of genius is in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which presents it as the 'mental aptitude' necessary for the production of fine art, a capacity characterized by originality, and opposed to imitation. Frequently, for its proponents, 'novelty' is viewed as a negative – almost dangerous – attribute when proposed by those who do not possess the

requisite skill and inspiration to maintain a link with what is regarded as the best in the past.

Significantly for the rhetorics *Play and Creativity and The Creative Classroom*, some commentators write as if there are two different 'categories' of creativity, which have been dubbed, variously, 'high' and 'common' (Cropley, 2001), or 'historical' and 'psychological' (Boden, 1990) (or 'special' and 'everyday'). The former comprises the work and powers of those who are considered 'geniuses', and is pursued via studies of the work and lives of 'great' creative individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and regarded as 'absolute', while the latter is far less well defined but clearly relative and can be fostered, increased and measured. The latter can also, broadly, be split into two traditions: one grounded in culture or subculture and the other based on notions of 'possibility thinking' and dubbed 'little-c' creativity (Craft, 1999) in ordinary situations.

The rhetoric of *Democratic Creativity and Cultural Re/Production* provides an explicitly anti-elitist conceptualization of creativity. Most familiar in the academic discipline of Cultural Studies, it sees everyday cultural practices in relation to the cultural politics of identity construction, focusing particularly on the meanings made from and with popular cultural products. This rhetoric provides a theory derived from the Gramscian perspective on youth subcultures developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. It constitutes practices of cultural consumption (especially of films, magazines, fashion and popular music) as forms of production through activities such as music sampling, subcultural clothing and fan activity (Cunningham, 1998), and thus belongs to an influential strand of cultural studies which attributes considerable creative agency to those social groups traditionally perceived as audiences and consumers or even as excluded from creative work by virtue of their social status (Willis, 1990).

Similarly egalitarian, but without the basis in cultural politics, is the rhetoric of *Ubiquitous Creativity*. Here, creativity does not only entail the consumption and production of artistic products, whether popular or elite, but involves a skill in terms of responding to the demands of everyday life. In this discourse, being more creative involves having the flexibility to respond to problems and changes in the modern world and in one's personal life (Craft 1999, 2003). While much of the writing in this rhetoric is targeted at early years' education with

the aim of giving young children the ability to deal reflexively and ethically with problems encountered during learning and family life, examples used to illustrate 'everyday creativity' include attempts by working-class individuals or immigrants to find jobs against the odds without becoming discouraged. This too is a highly resilient strand in commentaries on this subject and has a strong appeal for educators (Jeffrey 2005; Cohen 2000).

Clearly for those even nominally in favour of retaining a *particular* link between creativity and the arts and culture (Negus & Pickering, 2004), who see creativity as something 'special' (or indeed who see it as being about challenge and social critique rather than conformity to rules), this approach raises the question: Is this view of creativity as an ability to be *flexible in meeting the demands of life* incompatible with the notion of creativity as something that adds a *special quality* to life? It seems that there remain tensions between activities, ideas and creations that are dubbed 'creative' in particular social contexts or historical moments and those that are rejected for fear of their playful, disruptive or anarchic potential.

Creative socialization and 'successful' societies?

The rhetoric of *Creativity for Social Good* is characterized by its emphasis on the importance for educational policy of the arts as tools for personal empowerment and ultimately for social regeneration (Robinson et al. 1999). It stresses the integration of communities and individuals who have become 'socially excluded' (for example by virtue of race, location or poverty) and generally invokes educational and, tangentially, economic concerns as the basis for generating policy interest in creativity. This rhetoric emerges largely from contemporary social democratic discourses of inclusion and multiculturalism. In this view, a further rationale for encouraging creativity in education focuses on the social and personal development of young people in communities and other social settings. In this view, 'creative and cultural programmes' are seen to be twofold mechanisms of social cohesion, 'powerful ways of revitalising the sense of community in a school and engaging the whole school with the wider community' (Ibid, 26). Although Robinson's NACCCE[1] committee team accept that exceptionally gifted creative individuals do exist, their report favours a 'democratic' definition of creativity over an

'elite' one: 'Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value' (1999: 29). Here, culture and other cultures are things to be 'dealt with' and 'understood'. While this somewhat reductive view has been criticised (Marshall, 2001; Buckingham & Jones, 2001), it has a broad appeal amongst those who see creativity as a tool in the project of engineering a strong national society.

In an allied rhetoric much in evidence since dot.coms came on the scene and in an era of flexible digital labour, *Creativity as Economic Imperative*, the future of a competitive national economy is seen to depend on the knowledge, flexibility, personal responsibility and problem-solving skills of workers and their managers (Scholtz & Livingstone, 2005). These are, apparently, fostered and encouraged by creative methods in business, education and industry (Seltzer & Bentley, 1999). There is a particular focus here on the contribution of the 'creative industries', although the argument is often applied to the commercial world. Again, this rhetoric annexes the concept of creativity in the service of a neoliberal economic programme and discourse (Landry, 2000). Instead of being about imagination or the motivation to learn and create, the imperative here is the requirement to assist the modern national capitalist economy in its quest for global expansion. But, realistically, we must ask questions about the variety of arenas and domains in which those who buy into this 'new' vision of creativity would be allowed to function. Would time for the playful testing of ideas be built into the working days of 'knowledge workers'? Or perhaps they would have to accommodate such necessary but peripheral business in their own personal time by giving up leisure. In what way might different skills lead to creative production? It seems unlikely that the mere acquisition of skills would be sufficient as a contribution to a greater collective or corporate endeavour. Clearly, while the newly flexible workforce – or student body – might be encouraged to manage themselves and their departments or sections, their control over the overall structures and practices of their organizations might remain as limited as ever (Pope, 2005). A final problem that arises with the use of the term creativity in this context is a definitional one. As with the generalized application of creativity to all teaching and learning in all subjects, the danger is that it simply becomes a more glamorous and appealing synonym for 'effectiveness', thereby losing its distinctive sense.

Serious or playful stuff?

The rhetoric of *Creativity and Cognition* can be seen as incorporating two quite different traditions. One includes theories of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and the development of models to document and increase people's problem-solving capacity (for instance, Osborn-Parnes 1941 CPS model) as well as explorations of the potential of artificial intelligence (Boden, 1990). This latter work attempts to demonstrate the links made during, and the conditions for, creative thought and production. The emphasis of all strands in this tradition is on the *internal* production of creativity by the mind, rather than on external contexts and cultures. The other tradition consists of more intra-cognitive and culturally situated notions of creative learning expounded by Vygotsky (1994), who asserts that 'If a person "cannot do something that is not directly motivated by an actual situation" then they are neither free nor using imagination or creativity' (1994: 267). The importance attributed to 'freedom' of thought and action and to non-goal-orientated playful activity in Vygotsky's writing about adolescent learning remains controversial in educational or work environments, where the ability to plan a project and execute it, solve a problem, or pass a test are markers of effectiveness. More flexible indicators of creativity, such as the various 'intelligences' described by Gardner, have been used on occasion in a positive manner to soften the harshness of traditional literacy and numeracy-based academic assessment. Sadly, however, Vygotsky's far more critical and unusual theorizing has been largely ignored.

A persistent strand in writing about creativity, the rhetoric of *Play and Creativity* turns on the notion that childhood play models, and perhaps scaffolds, adult problem-solving and creative thought. It explores the functions of play in relation to both creative production and cultural consumption. Some cognitivist approaches to play do share the emphasis of the 'Creative Classroom' rhetoric on the importance of divergent thinking. Sandra Russ (2003), for instance, argues that the ways in which children use language, toys, roleplay and objects to represent different things in play are habitual ways of practising divergent thinking skills.

But not all those who champion play do so in ways that are conducive to the freedom of thought, creative action, or divergent and critical

thinking. Dixon and Webber (2007) point to links between adults' nostalgia for a remembered context of play in their own childhoods and emerging, ingrained and often naturalized social rhetorics about play in modern children's lives. Taking to task those who mourn the 'death' of an era when play was outdoors, safe, free and unmediated, they note that '[i]n response to both panic and nostalgia, adults are increasingly organizing and regulating their children's play' (2007: 25). This discussion can be seen to mirror discourses that have emerged with regard to creativity, technology and (new) media. Cordes and Miller, for instance, assert that 'a heavy diet of ready-made computer images and programmed toys appear to stunt imaginative thinking' (2000: 4). But the fact that certain commentators, possibly with nostalgic memories of socially privileged childhoods and an exaggerated paranoia about 'modern' media, might overstate the case *against* digital playtime does not mean that all technology-based play and learning are either harmful or necessarily beneficial to children's creativity.

A digital 'creativity pill' or a damaging potion?

If creativity is not inherent in human mental powers and is, in fact, social and situational, then technological developments may well be linked to advances in the creativity of individual users. The rhetoric constructed around *The Creative Affordances of Technology* covers a range of positions, from those who applaud all technology as inherently creative to those who welcome it cautiously and see creativity as residing in an as yet under-theorized relationship between users and applications. But it is worth asking how democratic notions of creativity are linked to technological change in this rhetoric. Is the use of technology itself inherently creative? And how do concerns raised by opponents of new technology affect arguments about creative production?

For Avril Loveless (2002), thanks to a complex set of features of ICT (provisionality, interactivity, capacity, range, speed and automatic functions), digital technologies open up new and authentic ways of being creative 'in ways which have not been as accessible or immediate without new technologies' (2002: 2). Loveless (1999) argues that technology, which is being used in schools in varieties of ways, can enhance creative learning, but only if children's expectations and teachers' anxieties are handled sensitively. Challenging those who champion digital technol-

ogies as *inherently* creative, Scanlon et al. (2005) and Seiter (2005) also note that many computer programmes designed to increase children's knowledge and skills are not in the least bit creative, relying on rote learning, repetition and drill exercises. Thus, they argue that digital technology can – but does not necessarily – support the expression and development of creativity. In a society where technology is *not equally available to all*, children may well be enthusiastic and confident users of digital technologies when offered the opportunities for playful production, but they are still divided by inequalities of access outside school and across the school system. Ultimately, the social contexts of the use of digital technology may help or hinder its creative potential.

Evaluation, learning and pedagogy

Pertinently for those interested in creativity and communication, placing itself squarely at the heart of educational practice, *The Creative Classroom* rhetoric investigates questions about the connections between knowledge, skills, literacy, teaching and learning, and the place creativity occupies in an increasingly regulated and monitored curriculum (cf. Beetlestone 1998; Starko 2005; Jeffrey 2005). This rhetoric locates itself in pragmatic accounts of 'the craft of the classroom', rather than in academic theories of mind or culture. Creative learning is *interactive*, incorporating discussion, social context, sensitivity to others, the acquisition and improvement of literacy skills; it is *contextual*, and has a sense of *purpose* and thus cannot be based around small units of testable knowledge; however, it can also be thematic and highly specific, as it often arises out of stories or close observation, which engage the imagination and the emotions as well as learners' curiosity about concepts and situations. The Creative Classroom rhetoric is consistent in identifying holistic teaching and learning – which link playful processes to different types and domains of knowledge and methods of communication – as more compatible with and conducive to creative thought and production than the increasingly splintered, decontextualized, top-down and monitored content and skills which are favoured as being academically 'effective'.

There is, however, a tension in this work between what could be broadly defined as a rather romantic wish to view creativity as something that enhances the human soul and helps young people blossom,

and the need to give practical advice to trainee teachers, thus fitting them for the fairly chaotic but restricted milieu they will soon enter. At points this tension is productive, or at the very least practical, in the sense that it prevents the educational perspective on creativity from sidestepping issues, such as assessment and time management, that are of very real significance for practitioners in both formal educational and more unorthodox settings. Many educators have to walk a tightrope between institutional constraints and the fragility of their constructed 'creative' environment. However, at times the tension also appears to lead to contradiction or even paradox: risk-taking is to be encouraged, but it is also to be kept within easily controllable bounds; time is required for playful engagement with ideas and materials, but this time has stringent external parameters in terms of the school day. Work by Banaji, Cranmer & Perotta (2013) provides evidence that interventions by governments in education have created a culture of vocationalization, standardization and competition which is a barrier to creative pedagogy, playful exploration and creative work in the classroom. While it is clear that a number of students continue to work in imaginative and divergent ways, and that some teachers still encourage them to do so by valuing playful or subversive discussion and creative production with new or traditional technologies, the literature on creativity in contemporary classroom settings suggest that this is despite, rather than because of, most current education policies.

Although not considered in detail here, in response to such institutional realities, and setting a challenge to aspects of foregoing rhetorics, *Creative Arts and Political Challenge* sees art and participation in creative education as necessarily politically challenging, and potentially transformative of the consciousness of those who engage in it. It describes the processes of institutional pressure that militate against positive and challenging experiences of creativity by young people, regardless of the efforts of teachers and practitioners (Thomson, Hall & Russell, 2006). In previous work on this topic (Banaji & Burn, 2006; Banaji & Burn, 2007) this rhetoric is pursued further, with an emphasis on the questions it raises about creative partnerships, social contexts and political or philosophical presuppositions. If one wishes to retain the idea of cultural creativity as having an oppositional rather than a merely socializing force, it is important not to lose sight of the

ways in which broader inflections of discourses of creativity relate to the micro-politics of particular social settings. The very fluidity and confusion in talk about creativity in the classroom can mean that the term is used as window dressing to appease educators who are interested in child-centred learning, without actually being incorporated into the substantive work of the classroom.

Conclusion

In discussions of creativity, it is crucial that we understand and respond to the relationship between the *cultural politics* of talk about creativity or play and a *wider politics*. While there is evidence from numerous studies (Balshaw, 2004; Starko, 2005) that creative ways of teaching and learning, and creative projects in the arts, humanities and the sciences, offer a wider range of learners a more enjoyable, flexible and independent experience of education than some traditional methods, there is no evidence that simply giving young people or workers brief opportunities for creative play or work substantially alters social inequalities, exclusions and injustices. Creativity is not a substitute for social justice. There is a complex, and not always clearly identifiable, *cultural politics* behind many rhetorics of creativity, as there is behind educational rhetorics and the rhetorics of play. This is the case not only within discourses which explicitly address questions about power, and about whose culture is seen as legitimate and whose is not; it is also the case in discourses where constructions of power remain implicit, such as those which celebrate 'high art' as 'civilizing' and child art as being about an 'expression of the soul', or which see the development of workers' creativity as being 'for the good of the national economy' and the constant testing and attribution of levels of ability to children as a way of raising 'standards'. Some discourses explicitly legitimize certain forms of cultural expression and certain goals, and implicitly delegitimize others. Increasingly, such discourses aid gatekeepers within educational institutions by stigmatizing particular pedagogies and parenting choices. Talk about creativity is, then, always political, even when it appears not to be.

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Note

1. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, UK.

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