

5 Students' experiences of creativity

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Introduction

This chapter describes the first of two studies in two universities undertaken within the Imaginative Curriculum project whose purpose was to illuminate the way in which students and staff experience and understand creativity. In this chapter the views of students are examined.

Methodology

Given the lack of an established, commonly agreed framework for interpreting perceptions of creativity, an exploratory approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at two sites (the same institutions as studied in Chapter 6); in addition, one focus group was conducted using the same structure, to see whether interaction with other students would lead to further elaboration. Students were invited to explain what they thought 'creativity' was, to contextualise this by identifying and describing creative people or things (both within and outside of formal education), to discuss their experiences of creativity in the curriculum (and particularly assessment) and to speculate on whether they thought their course would develop their creativity in ways that might be useful to them in later life. A total of 25 students were interviewed (including four as part of the focus group). They were sampled so as to represent a broad spread of disciplines (including Anthropology, Architecture, Arts, Biomedicine, Clinical Psychology, Earth Sciences, Education, English, Fine Art, Geography, Humanities, Library and Information Sciences, Medicine, Molecular Biology, Psychological Sciences, Social Sciences and Urban Design). Participants were selected so as to provide an even distribution by gender, age (classified as 18–21 or mature; there was a slight imbalance towards the 18–21 age range) and year of study (first, second, third or post-graduate). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a constant comparative categorisation carried out to analyse the data. The categories that emerged from this are reported in the following section.

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The study

Conceptions of creativity

When asked, many students found it hard to explain what they thought creativity was. Rather than giving one coherent, integrated account, they typically drew on a number of different discourses, often presenting contrasting or even inconsistent positions at different points in the interviews. Several attempted to dismiss their inconsistency by saying they were talking ‘rubbish’ or by being apologetic; others were hesitant in their responses.

Creativity was discussed not just in terms of what it was, but also in terms of how it worked or how ‘intense’ it was. These ideas have been grouped together, to show the contrasts that were present. Rather than being explicitly defined, creativity was typically described, using ideas such as:

- *Freedom from routine* – not being bound by conventions, schedules or expectations.
- *An expression of imagination* – this was often associated with the idea of creativity as personal; it was also used to describe things that were done or invented ‘in the head’.
- *Personal* – something that could only have been created by that person; linked to this was the idea that creativity was subjective.
- *Independence* – that it is associated with an escape from social conventions, rules or forms, and was thus primarily an act of individuals.
- *Risk* – something felt to be ‘synonymous’ with being creative.
- *Superficiality* – not always in a negative sense. This conception was primarily concerned with being free from having to justify decisions or creations.
- *Commonplace* – this suggests that everyone is creative, every day.
- *Infectious* – something that can be caught by being with others (teachers or students) who have it.

It was also felt that creativity could differ by degree.

- *Incremental* – this relatively common conception recognised a limit on creativity, suggesting that small improvements rather than a radical break with tradition are what should be expected (‘You can’t be completely creative in what you do, cos there’s a huge background to it, which you can only build on slowly’). This included the idea of bringing existing things up to date.
- *Original* – the sense that creativity was something more than just repetition. This was also associated with ‘novelty’, and the suggestion that what was created was in some way personal or a break from tradition, or with ‘progress’. It was also associated with seeing a problem that others could not see, which allows new development to take place, or with serendipity, which prompts new connections to be drawn.
- *Radical* – the belief that something creative should be entirely new and original, being unique or ‘groundbreaking’, but certainly not ‘obvious’.

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1 The process of creativity was also discussed. These discussions drew on ideas
2 such as the following:

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- 4 • *Being struck by the muse* – ‘something that you get at moments’, outside of
5 personal control (‘you don’t try and force it’), almost viral or like lightning.
 - 6 • *Metacognition* – that being creative requires the ability ‘to step back and
7 look about what you’ve done, kind of a personal grace, almost.’
 - 8 • *Escape from reality* – creativity was sometimes associated with a sense of
9 detachment from day-to-day concerns; ‘everything else leaves your mind
10 and you’re just in the moment.’ Sometimes this seemed to be a side-effect;
11 at others, this was presented as the point of being creative. This was gener-
12 ally associated with a sense of relief and with happiness.
 - 13 • *Framed expression* – linked to the idea of incremental novelty, this concep-
14 tion suggested that to be creative involves working within some kind of
15 framework. It suggests the idea of creating something that other people can
16 recognise as being of a type. Where ‘rules’ were mentioned, these were
17 usually seen as negative, in the sense of being rule-bound.

18 *Nature or nurture?*

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21 As well as talking about what creativity was and how it worked, students
22 described how they thought people ‘had’ it. Broadly, three models of creativity
23 were used:

- 24
- 25 • *Innate* – something inherent to people, often something that is intuitive rather
26 than (like a muscle) something to be activated or exercised. The capacity for
27 creativity was not described as being the same for everyone, however.
 - 28 • *Nurtured* – something that can be developed, perhaps through exercises or
29 upbringing. One student suggested that creativity was all nurture, and that
30 ‘people can learn anything at all if we want’.
 - 31 • *A potential* – this combined nature and nurture by suggesting that people
32 had some upper limit to their capacity for creativity, but that they could
33 work towards achieving this. This was presented as a process of discovery.

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35 These different models have implications for pedagogy. If students see creativity
36 as innate, it makes little sense to teach it; if they see it as potential, then they
37 may excuse themselves (or others) for poor performance on the basis of biology
38 rather than effort. Nonetheless, they did see creativity as being associated with
39 academic success – or at least, with success in some academic disciplines.

40
41 I do think it is associated with intelligence. I think creative people are bright
42 people. I don’t think that all intelligent people are creative. But I think that
43 all creative people are intelligent. I think you can be a professor of biology
44 but not be necessarily be creative. But I think that if someone who’s fantas-
45 tic at the arts, or the music or drama or what have you I think, I would say,
46 it was given that they were intelligent but not the other way around.

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The conception of creativity as something that can be nurtured is where the notion of pedagogy becomes most important. Even here, however, the scope for teaching as a kind of intervention was seen as limited. Far more important, several students felt, was age. This reduced the value of any planned intervention in favour of deterministic, typically biological changes. However, students were not consistent on how they felt that things like age influenced creativity:

I think it's harder to be creative when you're younger because you're not sure enough of yourself and I think its confidence as well to be creative. And I think that when for example you're a teenager or late teens any way of standing out is bad and being too creative is bad you know, you just want to be the same as everyone to fit in.

I think all children are quite creative and kind of exploratory.

This inconsistency may result from the differences described above about what 'creativity' is. Where creativity was believed to be amenable to development (of a non-deterministic kind), study skills and other techniques related to learning were mentioned, but these were not considered to have great impact. Far more important, students felt, was wide life experience.

If you are good at learning, you are more likely to take on new information and you can use that to expand your creativity. But it's not that much of a difference because there is a lot of creativity from the travelling and just experiences that's the main thing but there's a little bit from learning.

These perceptions raise questions about whether students will see any value in courses that claim to be about the development of creativity.

Creativity and role models

Since the concept of creativity was understood variously and used complexly by students, they were invited to identify and discuss individuals (both from within and outside of academia) whom they believed to be creative. This was intended to help them to elaborate the notion of creativity through reference to specific cases.

Outside of academia, an incredibly broad range of people were described. These included family, friends, sportsmen, musicians, people in the media and so on. The explanations offered were equally diverse, including:

- Being subversive, for example by rejecting convention.
- Not having had a traditional upbringing (so that their creativity arises from the lack of 'fit' with the dominant culture).
- Being able to 'read' social developments, so as to predict (and then influence) emerging trends.

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1 Within academia, examples often focused on key figures from a field (Darwin,
2 Einstein, Wegener, Hawking, etc.); such people were singled out for the 'leap'
3 they made. Creative academics were also described in terms of creative pedago-
4 gies, such as making insightful but surprising links between areas of content.
5 (The relationship between creativity and teaching is considered in more detail
6 later.) However, there was a contrast between creativity and students' percep-
7 tions of academic professional identity. For example, a Medicine student sug-
8 gested:

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10 If you've got someone who's quite dogmatic or someone who's only inter-
11 ested in basing things on an evidence and research basis it's just not going
12 to happen.

13
14 Students made it clear that it was easier to assess the creativity of the dead, since
15 there had usually been more time for their contribution to be recognised and
16 valued.

17 Additionally, some students made it clear that, although such individuals
18 might serve to exemplify what it meant to be creative, they were not 'role
19 models' in the conventional sense because their example rarely inspired action.

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21 Watching something about somebody who is creative and then thinking,
22 wow, they are amazing! But then it doesn't really normally go further
23 forward. I kind of think wow, that day, and the next day I'm like yeah but
24 I've got to do all this stuff. I think for me to suddenly be creative I'd have to
25 [. . .] have a different lifestyle, so it's not going to happen. Not in the sense of
26 being really creative.

Creativity outside of study

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29 Another way of eliciting examples of creativity from students involved asking
30 them about creativity outside of the context of their studies. The participants
31 found this both easier and more positive than their discussion of creativity within
32 the curriculum. Some comments identified things that students felt were creative.
33 These included artistic activities (music, drawing, film, poetry, acting, etc.),
34 cooking (when varying or working without recipes), competitive sports (focusing
35 on tactics and out-manoeuvring opponents, or receiving cups, medals and
36 awards), running a small business, making money, home improvements, playing
37 practical jokes and so on.

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40 I'm quite creative in ways to get money. I mean I hate working. I hate work.
41 No, I'm not lying about that. I hate working in pubs or offices or anything
42 like that. And recently I've been doing the medical trials and stuff like that,
43 so I get money for like sitting on my arse basically. [Laughs]

44
45 I'd say my housemate Caroline is very creative because she plays practical
46 jokes on my next door neighbours. Like putting gnomes in their garden.

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The arts were so dominant as a point of reference that some participants felt the need to make their awareness of other contexts for creativity explicit.

Creative is not just arts things.

Other comments were concerned with things students felt helped with creativity. These included physical exercise (as a way of reducing stress), being with creative people and reading or watching something inspiring. Some students suggested that study pressure was squeezing activities such as these out, either because it took up too much time or left students feeling tired. With cooking, for example, 'I'm busy and tired I don't want to experiment, I just want to do something that is simple and quick and done for me.' Creativity was seen by one student as something to be 'indulged'; it was an extra, and life and study would survive without it.

Doing the degree appears to be about creating space rather than creative space.

There were also examples that focused on social or cultural contexts. One student talked about 'countries where it is less kind of regimented' in formal education, for example, citing pressure to perform for relentless examinations as something that impeded children's ability to develop their creativity. Others discussed friends and family, particularly the influence of parents, suggesting that being around people who were creative encouraged or inspired personal creativity (almost like a virus). Common to many of these examples was a concern with 'whether creativity is valued or is not valued' by those around you.

Motivation

The interviews were often animated, sometimes passionate; the topic was emotive, and students provided a rich picture of the ways in which creativity and motivations interacted. There were, for example, diverse reasons why students sought to be creative. Some concerned personal expression; others, competition or ambition. Some suggested that creativity arose from situations, such as problems that had no obvious solution. Other reasons were less expected, but entertainingly frank.

Money makes me creative.

Getting no sleep, drinking lots [laughs]. Cos in the middle of the night I find that I'm most creative. And alcohol induced I'm most creative.

Predominantly, however, it was felt that being creative made things more interesting and more satisfying, suggesting a positive link between experiences and creativity. This was not universal, however; some students saw creativity (and

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1 the expectation or valuing of creativity) as a source of great pressure, leading to
2 anxiety and requiring courage to overcome.

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4 Anna used to introduce her own ideas into essays and then she would get a
5 first, whereas I always felt frightened to do that so I didn't really do that
6 very much.

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8 There's an infinite amount of possibilities; it's really, really daunting. [. . .],
9 I'll do whatever I want and it might be something completely different,
10 which is incredibly satisfying but it's terrifying as well.

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12 By contrast, though, some saw it as comforting, almost therapeutic, or at the
13 least, escapist.

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15 When I was about 14, I used to write a lot of poetry. And I wanted to be cre-
16 ative because it helped to understand a lot of what was going on in my head.
17 And to get that feeling down on paper in that kind of way helps you to
18 release feelings. [. . .] I guess it kind of gets you away from reality and pro-
19 vides this fantasy land that's just a break from normal life.

20
21 Students talked about being scared, feeling inadequate and even being con-
22 cerned about becoming socially alienated. They also pointed out that when expe-
23 riencing such feelings, or when feeling unhappy or depressed, people were less
24 likely to be creative.

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26 I think people are happier when you don't deviate too much from the
27 norm. Because creativity can sometimes be stuck together with being eccen-
28 tric and being a bit bizarre and sometimes [people] don't like it when you're
29 too creative. It can be threatening I think for other people who aren't as cre-
30 ative.

Creative teaching

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33 Students explicitly discussed kinds of teaching that they considered to be cre-
34 ative and, in relation to this, identified things that they felt limited their scope or
35 desire to be creative themselves.

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37 Some comments were simple suggestions for teaching techniques that could
38 be used to provide a contrast to current teaching. (Such contrasts typically por-
39 trayed current teaching as transmissive and dull; however, in context, it seems
40 likely that this is a rhetorical description rather than a judgement about their
41 courses.) Examples of techniques included role playing (by the teacher, not the
42 students), debates and creating posters that were then presented to the class or
43 displayed in a public place.

44
45 Students on vocational courses pointed to work placements, often as an
46 explicit contrast to their academic study. They identified the people they encoun-
tered and the problems that arose in that situation as requiring the new solutions

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to be created, or existing ones to be adapted; it was also suggested that personal style could be expressed in such situations in a way that was not always possible within the formal educational component of the course.

How am I being creative in my course? Well not academically, but we do [...] work three days a week, so when I'm at work I'm working with [clients]. Then you are being creative because you are tailoring an intervention to them and the changes that happen throughout time. So you're constantly modifying. It's not really creative because to some extent there is a protocol. I guess I'm most creative when I've got the protocol and I put a bit of myself into the [work] that I'm doing.

Some conventional forms of teaching were also felt to support creativity. These were inevitably dialogic, and focused on opportunities for discussion that addressed students' current understanding or beliefs. Some students did talk about free-for-all ideas generation sessions such as brainstorming, although there were also reservations about these:

Everyone likes that. And you feel free to say whatever you want to say without having to back it up so yeah so that's sort of being creative. [...] Just thinking I can just say something, it's my idea, it's, maybe it's a bit off the wall and it isn't substantiated and in that informal setting you can do that, but [it's] nothing you would ever hand in on paper.

Generally, though, students discussed things with more obvious structure and purpose, akin in many ways to the conversational model of learning proposed by Laurillard (1993). Seminars and tutorials were mentioned several times, for example. One-to-one tutorials were felt to be particularly valuable, since there was scope to try out ideas without worrying about how peers might perceive you. Informal group work and projects were also identified positively, as were fieldwork, case studies and other situations in which the discussion focused on artefacts or situations. Other comments concerned qualities of the teacher, rather than techniques. For example:

If a teacher is passionate about what they are talking about, what they are lecturing on then that really inspires the pupils I think.

Other things that were identified seemed to fall between values and techniques – providing encouragement, for example, giving examples or offering feedback. Whilst these are all techniques, it was the *use* of these (rather than just their existence) that was stressed. These were valued not just because they were present, but because they were introduced by the teacher in response to students' needs in an attentive, supportive way.

In addition to these practices that either are creative or which are felt to support creativity, students identified many things that limited or inhibited

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1 creativity. As before, some of these point to a perceived contrast between cre-
2 ativity and acceptable academic work:

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4 Our course is widely known to be academic, consult the literature, base your
5 practice on the evidence, bang, bang, bang, tick all the boxes, thank you
6 very much. So my view of our course is that it is a conveyor belt.
7

8 Several comments described similar situations, perhaps best summarised as 'rule
9 bound'. It was not even that creativity was absent from these courses – however,
10 it could be perceived as 'token' creativity, or creativity as a reward for enduring
11 the 'proper' part of the course, which simply served to highlight by contrast the
12 limitations on creativity within the curriculum. Other reasons tended to be more
13 prosaic. Time, unsurprisingly, was mentioned repeatedly. For some, this meant
14 that the schedule of the course meant that they could not wait for creativity 'to
15 happen'; instead, they had to perform to deadlines (of which they generally felt
16 there were too many) or to apparently arbitrary rules introduced for the conve-
17 nience of the teacher, whether or not they felt inspired.
18

19 My deadline would be my deadline, it would stop when I felt that I was
20 finished, or I felt that I was happy, rather than because I've got to stop
21 this piece of work now, I've got to wrap it up, because I've reached my
22 word limit, or because the deadline is tomorrow and I've got no more
23 time.
24

25 For others, this concerned the intensity of life, so that time cannot be set aside
26 to be thoughtful and reflective. It was this sense of pressure, of being 'stressed
27 out', that they felt inhibited their creativity, constantly forcing them to con-
28 sider practicalities and details. As one student summarised, 'you need time and
29 space in your mind to be creative and if your mind is full of studying and this
30 that and the other then there's no space for it.'

31 Failings of lecturers were mentioned, but not extensively. If a lecturer was
32 not inspiring, this would not prevent students being creative in their own studies
33 (see below), for example. However, lecturers who were 'dogmatic' or rule-
34 bound were felt to limit students' capacity to express their creativity.
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Creative study

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38 Just as students described creativity in their teachers' practices, they also dis-
39 cussed their own. They deemed this to be particularly important, since they felt
40 it was learning, not teaching, that was central to their academic success; bad
41 teaching might not inspire, but it did not prevent learning.

42 One particularly common strategy used by students involved making links
43 across different contexts – for example, by applying principles learnt when
44 studying a different discipline, by contrasting contemporary and historical per-
45 spectives on a topic, by expressing personal perspectives (something contrasted
46 with accepting facts), creating artistic designs or images as part of study and so

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on. One student highlighted the whole area of interpreting texts as a creative endeavour:

I think reading books means you go off into this other world of the book, which is not reality, so you are using the creativity of the writer. And also when you are writing about books you have to think about ideas about things and ideas about the book, is being creative.

Books were not the only resource deemed to help creativity; case studies and videos were mentioned too. The Internet was also mentioned, as much for the thought-provokingly unpredictable results of search engine rankings as for the volume of material available. Such comments did not tend to show the discriminating selection of resources that many information literacy courses now seek to inculcate, however (e.g. SCOUNL, 1999).

The Internet, I know it's quite general to everywhere but I think it can help to be quite creative. [...] For example, the other day I went on the Internet to do some research for an essay and I don't know, I typed in mirror, because that's what I'm doing my essay on, and there's like loads and loads of sites on 'mirror'. And I don't know it's just a fountain of knowledge really.

The environment in which study took place was felt to be important. Several students stressed the importance of comfort ('a big, comfortable chair or something'), and many identified 'distractions' such as music, exercise or a window to look out of as being important.

I think breaking things up is relaxing – I need a mix of physical and mental – that for me helps the ideas along.

However, other participants spoke of exactly the same distractions in negative ways; the key to this was in whether the student had the *choice* to distract themselves in such ways. Similarly, both being alone (because it provided space to reflect) and being with others who were creative (because this inspired) were mentioned as things that supported creativity. These two areas combined to highlight a problem in the design of libraries:

The architecture of the libraries – it doesn't work to be open plan – it's difficult to concentrate there. Talking things through – say new IT – can be a big help, but there are too few really quiet study areas where you can concentrate.

Although many students experienced limits or frustration over opportunities to express themselves creatively within their academic work, a few discussed the creative ways in which they 'played the game' of academic study. Some students talked explicitly about strategies for work avoidance, up to and including

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1 the deaths of fictitious relatives. Others talked about how they created an accept-
2 able image of themselves in order to progress, with one student admitting, 'I just
3 basically lied on my UCAS form.' Students sometimes said they felt shame
4 about such incidents, but some seemed to take pride in what they had achieved;
5 they were proud of their creativity, even if they felt some guilt about deceiving
6 tutors.

Creativity and assessment

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10 Assessment has long been recognised as being amongst the most important
11 influences on learning (Biggs, 1999). Unsurprisingly, it was also considered
12 vital to discussions about creativity. Criticisms of exams featured strongly in the
13 interviews. These were typically described in ways that linked them to transmis-
14 sive, rote-learning pedagogies (or at best to the application of standardised pro-
15 tocols), and these discussions stirred up considerable emotion.

16
17 Having exams, for goodness sake, it makes me so mad, most people on my
18 course have an average age of about 28, and that, I think I should mention
19 that, that we have to go into an exam and give them back what they have
20 given us in a year of lectures. I don't see why we have to do that when we've
21 proved ourselves academically. And that is something as well because you
22 just regurgitate information. Waste of time.

23
24 My learning environment is that it is pretty much one, two, maybe three
25 ways of approaching this but only three. So if you choose one of them
26 within a framework you're alright. If you don't tell us about one of these
27 then it's wrong.

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29 Essays were felt to be better than exams, since they were seen as offering
30 greater opportunity for personal expression. (This was not believed to hold true
31 for essays under exam conditions, where time pressures were felt to limit
32 opportunities for this.) It was suggested that students who valued creativity
33 would opt for essay-based courses because of this. Other students only partially
34 agreed, suggesting that although essays permitted self-expression the academic
35 context limited opportunities to use imagination, because 'there is a set way to
36 do it'. (This sense of frustration at having to conform to expectation pervaded
37 many discussions of assessment and will be returned to below.) Some also felt
38 that markers' expectations of authoritative writing meant that they could never
39 move beyond exploring existing arguments and into creating their own inter-
40 pretations:

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42 The idea of being creative when your trying to write an essay or something
43 that you don't know about is very difficult because [...] you don't know
44 enough about it, yeah. I think you need to be a bit of an expert perhaps to be
45 creative, because you have to be able to draw a lot of things together and
46 appraise them and then do something a bit more radical.

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However, essay-based coursework was felt to support creativity through collaboration, as some students discussed the use of peer criticism to improve their work.

There were two broad reasons why exams were seen as a problem. The first relates back to one of the conceptions of creativity, in that such scheduled assessments were seen as being at odds with being struck by inspiration.

It's also about spontaneity isn't it? So you can be creative and you've spent a month revising and your head is full of crap.

The second reason concerned forms of assessment. Students did not suggest that their work should not or could not be assessed, but they did express the opinion that alternative forms of assessment would be more appropriate. Suggestions included, for example:

- Being observed with clients or in the workplace, for vocational subjects.
- More coursework or project-based assignments.
- Expressive elements such as creative writing, graphic design, image/video/animation production, and so on.

Creativity, academia and the disciplines

In many students' comments there was a sense of frustration at a perceived conflict between being creative and being 'academic'. Many of the students experienced academic values as being controlling, conformist and inflexible, more concerned with producing 'clones' than supporting new ideas. These students framed their experience in terms of rote learning, spoon feeding and regurgitation.

Such criticisms are easy to sympathise with, but there were also comments that revealed a different side to students' experiences. There were complaints about being bound to topics and ideas raised by previous work, being restricted to using certain methods or protocols and being forced to use evidence rather than imagination.

In my research project I'm addressing new questions trying to devise a theory but again it's tightly linked to what has gone before so I think you're stunted a bit. If you too creative that you are told that there's not enough basis to what you're saying and that you're talking rubbish.

This class of comment suggests a railing against *discipline*, the sanctioned forms of practice and participation that characterise particular academic 'tribes' (Becher, 1989). What this implies is that if Becher's characterisation is correct (and it is certainly widely accepted), then some students are opposed to what it means to be an academic. Without needing to resort to a value judgement, this simply reveals that there is a mismatch between what some students want and what higher education is currently like. (The politics of which party should be expected to concede ground are outside the scope of this chapter.)

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1 It is important to point out that not all students were dissatisfied with their
2 experience of academia. Indeed some came to appreciate the creative endeavour
3 of academic work, even if they tempered this with the suggestion that it was
4 somehow not for them:
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6 The more I learn about theories, even [...] strict academic ones are quite
7 creative as well, the thoughts that they had.
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9 Geography is a discipline, it is very progressive and because of creativity, a
10 hundred years ago, geography meant just exploring and mapping and
11 through a process of creativity someone has decided that has to change [...]
12 That's how it spread out into so many different disciplines from a very
13 limited spectrum of things to encompassing so much. [...] So you can get
14 cultural geography, you can look at ethnicity and how that affects people's
15 perceptions on life and the way they live. And similarly it has also been
16 pushed on the other side, the physical side of geography more. To more
17 imaginative ways of looking at past, to try and reconstruct histories of
18 climate and things like that. And that's the kind of creativity that keeps the
19 discipline going and keeps it a worthwhile discipline, but that's the kind of
20 thing that comes from the best geographers, not from undergraduates.
21

22 Students' experiences were, in fact, complex; their perception of the value of
23 creativity depended on the teachers they had, their own history and the subjects
24 they were involved in. Generally speaking, there was a perception that some dis-
25 ciplines were more creative (and consequently more valuing of creativity) than
26 others; unsurprisingly, this was portrayed as a contrast between Arts at one
27 extreme and abstract, rules-based subjects like Mathematics at the other, with
28 Humanities being relatively creative ('it's based on one person's experiences')
29 and the Sciences as well as many vocational subjects, such as Medicine or
30 Engineering, being relatively constrained, rule-bound and 'more about learning
31 facts'. Interestingly, one student suggested that this hierarchy of control and
32 conformance explained the unequal value attached to different subjects:
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34 Dance and drama – you know, they're not necessarily academic subjects,
35 they're certainly much more creative, but they're not given the same value
36 as an academic course.
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38 However, even within 'uncreative' disciplines, some students admitted they
39 found ways to be creative, such as developing short-cuts or quicker approaches
40 that helped them in their work.
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Creativity and students' identities

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44 Many of the discussions about creativity touched on how students see them-
45 selves, how they would like to be seen or how they thought academics would
46 like them to be. Such concerns have a direct relevance to curriculum designers;

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although some students would be sceptical that creativity can be ‘taught’ (see ‘Nature or nurture?’, page 00), studying for several years was felt to influence how students saw themselves.

I’ve been doing my course for over two and half years now, so I guess it’s involved me being creative and it’s involved my mind developing so it’s helped me become the person I am now.

As with all parts of this study, there were differences of opinion about how positive this experience was. Some students saw themselves as developing, increasing their capacity for creativity. For others, it was a struggle, confusing and unsettling even though it was productive.

It’s basically just conflicting personalities in one massive building. And it can get really jarring and you know its really exhausting. [. . .] I remember in the first year, why aren’t I more like him, or why aren’t I more like her. [. . .] The flip side of it is, that it is incredibly satisfying when you. . . I mean, it’s really character building, when you get, you find your, your, your voice.

For some, academic study was a process through which this aspect of their personality was ground down.

I don’t think they want us to be radical. Clones of one another. We’re all the same, people who are selected for the course. We’re all very similar. Similar backgrounds, no-one’s slightly wacky. They’ve selected people who are hard working, conscientious, will meet their deadlines, which are reliable, which isn’t to me necessarily creative people.

The production of particular subjectivities (such as, in this case, ‘the creative student’) is an area usually considered in terms of individuals’ self-expression; here, however, the combination of teaching, assessment and ethos is intended to produce certain sanctioned subjectivities in others. Holmes (2002), however, has talked about the production of ‘graduateness’ as an emergent identity, considering how students come to make claims about their ‘graduateness’ in a way that others (such as potential employers) choose to affirm or deny. His analysis identifies four kinds of outcomes to such identity-forming processes:

- Agreed identity (claimed and affirmed by others).
- Failed identity (claimed, but not affirmed).
- Imposed identity (not claimed, but affirmed by others).
- Indeterminate identity (neither claimed nor affirmed).

This provides a constructive set of analytical tools to explain some of the claims made by students. For example, those who railed against the discipline of their course might be seen as having a failed identity as a creative student (in that they claim to be, but this has not been affirmed by their teachers), or even an

1 imposed identity (in that their teachers deny the relevance of their claims and
2 instead affirm that they are something else, such as studious, wilful or lazy).
3 This may explain some of the tensions experienced by students seeking to
4 express themselves within the context of academic study.
5

6 **Conclusions**

7
8 Students' experiences of creativity in the curriculum are complex and often con-
9 fusing. Participants typically drew on diverse, even inconsistent ideas about cre-
10 ativity to discuss their experiences, in some cases moving between incompatible
11 positions in the same sentence. This suggests that creativity is something that
12 students are not used to discussing and quite possibly lack a shared common
13 frame of reference to interpret.

14 Nonetheless, the range of discourses used does throw some light upon the
15 ways in which they might approach 'creative' learning. The aversion to con-
16 straints and deadlines, the denial of responsibility for instigating creativity (e.g.
17 discourses of infection or being struck), talk of subversion and the wish to be
18 free from routine or constraints all point to a desire to challenge the structures of
19 formal courses. This may be an attempt to escape from the duties of study or dis-
20 ciplines of higher education, but it could equally reflect the difficulty some stu-
21 dents expressed in reconciling their creativity with the need to produce
22 assessments on demand. Some ideas (such as creativity within contexts, or as
23 being incremental and commonplace) do fit well within structured notions of
24 curricula, but generally, there seemed to be a desire for spaces within the course
25 that were open to risk-taking, free from the need to justify decisions and where
26 failure was an opportunity for learning rather than a problem.

27 The participants were able to discern things or people they felt were creative.
28 However, these examples tended to operate as families with similarities, rather
29 than as illustrations of some well-understood concept. Nevertheless, students
30 were able to discern differences of kind (such as the nature/nurture discussion)
31 and degree.

32 Although there were many students who gave examples of creativity in acad-
33 emic contexts, the picture that was painted in these accounts involved frustra-
34 tion, a sense of control and restriction, and a lack of value of creative
35 endeavours. This was in contrast to their experiences outside of academia; inter-
36 estingly, but worryingly, some students had come to understand this as a reflec-
37 tion that creativity was essentially different to 'academic-ness'. A significant
38 majority of students had positive things to say about individual teachers, often
39 without prompting, and lecturers were often identified as the things that most
40 helped creativity; the problems they identified were mostly attributed to struc-
41 tures such as assessment conventions or the perceived hierarchy of subjects.
42 Many were also able to identify opportunities to improve current practice, such
43 as by the adoption of different assessment techniques.

44 Perhaps most interesting, though, are the tentative suggestions that even
45 where creativity was not taught, not considered teachable and not valued in
46 assessment, it was still relevant in defining how the students saw themselves.

58 *Oliver et al.*

The use of creativity as a discourse – currently so confused and inconsistent – becomes vital in this respect, since claims to an emergent creative identity can only be warranted if they can be articulated. In this sense, it may be possible that even a small change – helping students learn how to talk about creativity, particularly in the context of their study – would have an important effect, enabling students to lay claim to creativity in a way that currently eludes them within academic contexts.

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