

Creativity: Not the economics, but the art, of living

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Abstract

Creativity has become part of the everyday through a usurping of the term by fields of power. It is requisite for an innovative, mobile, advancing society when annexed by an economic and political agenda rather than an artistic one. Creativity is now a necessary and generalisable skill in the field of higher education. Creativity has become an attribute that can be measured, and must be synonymous with innovation if it is to be taken seriously in the current climate.

In the past, universities played an important role in critiquing the notion of creativity as solely an artistic, elitist pursuit. With economics increasingly dominating all fields, contemporary concerns in universities need to execute an equally important role in critiquing the notion of creativity as a cog in the economic machine. In the everyday, creativity is specifically *not* economic. It is part of the everyday as something fundamentally uncertain. Regional universities, through community engagement, can be more responsive to the everyday of their communities. Creativity is an imitation of the limitless world that is the human condition. This paper seeks to show the importance of regional universities for the conservation of *this* notion of creativity as part of the everyday.

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Introduction

Since the massification of higher education in the Western world in the late twentieth century, there has been increasing interest in the connection between universities and the broader community. This is reflected not only in urban but also in rural and regional settings. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is currently investigating the responses of higher education institutions to the economic and social objectives of the regions in which these institutions are located (see also IMHE, 1999). This area of research has also been undertaken by others (Goddard, 1997; Sunderland, Muirhead, Parsons & Holtom, 2004; Wallis, Wallis & Harris, 2005), but largely with an emphasis on economic growth and development. The terminology used to highlight this developmental process harnesses, amongst other things, ‘creativity’.

In the current climate, creativity, as a term, is used to describe processes in management, new innovations, discoveries and visions that link to the progress of

society or the individual, anything out of the ordinary, and more and more often, just anything. Being creative is almost a person's right (with the possible exception of creative accounting). The increasing popularity of creative courses in universities reflects this trend. But creativity harnessed in this way produces economic ends (commodities in the form of students and knowledge) without recourse to other outcomes. Creative disciplines in universities continually have to fight for a piece of the economic pie, but the practitioners in these disciplines have differing regard to the importance they place on their work as solely an economic contribution to knowledge. The Romantic notion, though, of creativity as divine inspiration is outmoded and, with it, the idea that the creative genius needs to work in isolation.

The corollary of these changes in the social construction of creativity has two opposing effects. In one direction, the deduction is that creativity is a generalisable skill that can be on tap and put to good economic use. It is a 'marketable' creativity. In the other direction, creativity (a skill of inexplicable origins) is seen as an outpouring from the unconscious self and so is unpredictable (Brophy, 1998). The notion of creativity I am exploring in this paper is in between these two positions, a part of the social realm: it helps explain it, expand on it and captures insights into it. It is creativity that is a response to community life.

The arts, as I refer to them here, are forms of expression of this social realm. They include music, dance, film, painting, photography, sculpture, and writing, and are always more than a decoration or a craft. The arts are works that involve the imagination in the practice of creative expression.

I argue that the strengthening links between regional universities and their broader communities in relation to creativity requires more than just an emphasis on economics. It requires the valuing of creativity for its cultural and social aspects, which include the arts, local culture and identity. It means valuing creativity that is a reflection of the values in the local community, rather than following a trajectory of economic progress imposed at state, federal or global levels (Eversole, 2005).

Data and method

This paper is based on the findings from my PhD, which looked at creative writing in Australian universities. The purpose of the study was to investigate the status of creative writing in the area of university research in relation to research equivalence, and examine the terminology, the social structures and individual experiences surrounding creative writing as a form of research.

For the study I chose to conduct focus groups with academics and postgraduate students from a mix of old and new universities throughout Australia. Although not the focus of the PhD, one aspect that emerged from the discussions was the different responses in the field from regional and metropolitan areas. The theoretical approach was based on Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) work, especially identifying, defining and analysing how fields are divided into autonomous and heteronomous poles and how these relate to cultural and economic capital respectively.

My interest was with autonomous positions, as my concern was for creative writers whose legitimisation in the field of research depended on acceptance of their creative product rather than on heteronomous principles such as gaining economic reward. The focus groups were analysed by drawing themes from the data. Firstly, a close

reading of the transcripts drew out relevant phenomena. I found examples of these phenomena within the transcripts then analysed the emerging themes for similarities and differences.

The alienability of creativity

Creativity in universities today is offered up as a generalisable skill, no longer limited to practices that only involve the arts. It has become part of the political agenda that strives to drive the economy further. It has been tied in with development, new ideas, innovation, and human progress, and all these terms are becoming so entrenched as part of the doxa that creativity is hardly imaginable without ‘drive’ and ‘determination’. This sets up a teleological framework for creativity, analogic with a doctrine of manifest destiny, that we are being propelled, inevitably, into a better future and that creativity is an important tool in the movement of society towards its good end. It also means creativity is valued differently, tied to technological advances rather than artistic expression and hence it has stronger links to economic, rather than cultural, agendas.

The imperatives that drive the economy increasingly permeate contemporary higher education. Economics becomes the way everything in the world is judged. Creativity is commodified and commercialised. It is valued for its economic worth. Creativity and the arts are not valued unless they can stimulate economic growth. “It is now not uncommon to see university programmes setting aside the label ‘arts’ for the more up-to-date and supposedly marketable term ‘creative industries’” (Eversole, 2005). As Hannah, a participant in a metropolitan university focus group stated:

I’m in favour of teaching creative writing at undergraduate level for universities purely to make money, for English departments to make money in a situation where access to other sources of money is precluded in so many cases now, and where just about every second member of the general public regards themselves as potentially a creative writer. I think that’s a cash cow that we should all be using. (North, 2004, p. 133)

If reduced to a “cash cow”, then creative expression as social worth is lost. “The shifting notions of culture from aesthetic excellence to the whole way of life of a community” (Flew, 2002, pp. 127–8), does not promote creativity as social worth when only linked to industry, as in the ‘creative industries’ of which Flew speaks. The associations here are to productivity, output and cost effectiveness that could well reduce creativity to a mere branch of marketing, becoming a promotional site for commercial activity.

This is not to deny the potential for economic value that may exist in a piece of creative work. Although creative works generate ideas, they necessarily also generate economic capital in the exchange of these ideas just because of the nature of a capitalist system. “The physical market determines the work’s economic value, the market for ideas determines its cultural value” (Throsby, 2001, p. 104), but in order to have cultural value, creative pursuits also need to produce economic value. Creative work increasingly needs to ‘play the game’ of economics in order to be included in the system.

This aspect of creativity, albeit an important one in many instances, is also detrimental if it is the only way creativity is addressed. A material-based and

increasingly globalised economy is annexing terms traditionally seen as pertaining to (relatively) autonomous pursuits. Karl Marx predicted the move from exchange of products to a time when things that had “been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought—virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.—when everything finally passed into commerce” (Marx, 1976, p. 113).

Marx’s summary of the economic stages of the Western world charts a transformation from exchanging only what was excess to needs, to deliberate production of an excess for exchange, to the ‘selling of one’s soul’. This utilitarian function posits creativity as something to be utilised—a product. And both the product and the subject who labours well at it can be put to good use (Taylor, 1999, p. 5). Not all university practitioners in creative disciplines agree with creativity being used for this end. How can regional universities subvert this economic domination in order to continue offering to their broader communities creativity as a cultural contribution?

What is creativity?

‘Doing’, not ‘knowing’

Creativity began to be investigated during the Enlightenment through the philosophy of aesthetics. This discipline helped divide creativity from knowledge and knowing, and did so in two ways. Aesthetics explained art as a craft, a practice, a skill, a form of play, or inspired genius—it was a ‘doing’, but never a form of knowing. This understanding of creativity still resonates with current understandings of creativity, thereby imposing limitations for those working in creative disciplines in universities. A focus group member, whose Masters thesis had been a creative work, stated:

You can write a novel without doing a skerrick of specific reading. You’re obviously drawing on what you know about the world but that’s quite different ... But I couldn’t have sat down and written my PhD off the top of my head. (North, 2004, p. 129)

Here, Tom promotes a corollary between art and doing without allowing that art needs detailed prior knowledge. Creativity, expressed in art, is ‘doing’ only. Kant writes of art being different from science because it is a practice rather than a theory, an “ability” rather than a “knowledge” (1952, §43). Although Kant goes on to say that “the possession of the most complete knowledge does not involve one’s having then and there the skill to do it”, thereby giving to art a skill that knowledge does not have, he sets up practice as being something that can be done without the necessity of knowing.

Aesthetics also explained how art becomes divorced from knowledge altogether and set up instead in its own domain of judgement, that of feeling. And feeling, operating on a different plane or trajectory from knowing, is something that knowing can never have under its control and so is considered dangerous to knowledge. This mystique arises from the idea of art as play, as something that arises from within: the genius, the ‘wild subject’, unheeded by thought. Consequently, this idea of genius undermines art’s ability for “greater perfection in knowledge” because it does arise from within, and not from contemplation of other knowledge already formed (Kant, 1952, §47).

Freud expressed this dark, unruly image of creativity in his explanation of the psychoanalytic session. The wild, unspeakable part of the human psyche always finds a way to be heard, and Freud said of creative writers that they “are apt to know a whole host of things ... of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream” (1959, p. 8) because the creative writer draws their knowledge from the unexplored unconscious.

The corollary of these philosophical approaches to art is that creativity is separated from knowledge, either as a form of practice without theory (i.e. play), or as an eruption of feelings (again, play). Both of these approaches limit the creative act, and the way this is enacted in higher education institutions (which mirrors to some extent the broader social field) is by either reducing creativity to a generalisable skill that anyone can learn (like a craft), or as a talent or skill that arises inexplicably.

An expression of the everyday

Creativity need not be a necessary attribute for everyone—but it is necessary for anyone determined to produce significant work, and in terms of art and the aesthetic, it can't be ‘performed’ as an everyday function like multiplication or writing a memo. I see creativity as having another, equally important use—as a way of expressing an understanding of the everyday, and this is part of its appeal in the university at the local level.

Creative writing is a valuable form of expressing social ideas and opinions while making use of the imagination as well. It is a tool of communication that reinforces, or upsets and disturbs the status quo. Creative writing is a way of knowing that has validity outside its own field because it does not try to tell the “real”, but in moving away from the “real” into “fictional space”, it does more than describe. It is a way “of knowing how to manipulate, dispose, and ‘place’” words that constitutes a way of acting in the world (through becoming a tactic) that pries open the strategies set up by the dominant power (Certeau, 1984, p. 79). Creative writing can add to new knowledge. In a regional university focus group one participant stated:

Presumably your whole idea would be that you're creating a new cultural artefact that can tell people something about our histories or who we are or how we perceive ourselves, which I think is a really valuable contribution to make. (North, 2004, p. 222)

By telling people about yourself you cement a connection with them. People respond to commonalities.

Whereas academic experts in metropolitan universities are hired for the day by businesses and organisations to teach (for example, army personnel having a ‘writing day’), universities in regional areas lend their skills to the local community in more accessible ways. Charles Sturt University’s (CSU) Faculty of Arts various activities in 2006 included a 3D animation workshop open to the public that tied in with a touring international animation festival that was travelling to the region. Making this kind of creative connection with the local community gives that community an opportunity to make connections with areas outside their region.

Getting back to my focus on creative writing, a similar experience can be attributed to a reader when they are taken away from the physical world into the world of the story. It also brings the reader back into everyday life because stories elucidate the

everyday through their very social function. By way of making a detour—that is, through moving away from the real—literature can “make a hit”, as Certeau says; it “produces effects, not objects”, it has a way of telling the real without ever having to resort to description (Certeau, 1984, p. 79). Literary works “send us back endlessly to a truth outside of literature” (Blanchot, 1995, p. 2). A creative piece of fiction is not solely written to be admired or enjoyed. In the act of contemplating it the reader can be taken past this to a realisation of action that the reading has invoked. The writer is “the creator of a new reality, which opens in the world a wider perspective” for the reader and “reality in all its forms is enlarged because of it” (Blanchot, 1982, p. 212).

The writing presents for the reader a picture of some human concern, “often in the form of a complex picture embracing the conditions out of which these arise” (Farrell, 1952, p. 18–19). Storytelling helps mould our social context. Emily, from another regional focus group discussion said, “That’s one reason people choose to write fiction.” She mentioned Umberto Eco:

The number of people who read his scholarly writings is minuscule compared with the number of people he can reach with his fiction writing. And people will absorb ideas and think about them while they are enjoying the fiction without even being conscious that they are absorbing an idea and being influenced by it. And that’s a very powerful and seductive thing. (North, 2004, p. 223)

A ‘doing’ and a ‘knowing’

Creative writing has the possibility of opening up areas of knowledge rather than just being aesthetically pleasing (as Kant argued), but only if ‘doing’ and ‘knowing’ are kept together. An important relationship exists between doing and knowing. As Virilio states, it is how we have arrived at this socio/cultural place we occupy in the world today. In a “quest” for the “unknown”, knowing and doing are the “initial foundation[s] of the formation of meaning” (Virilio, 1994, p. 27)

What Virilio points to is that linking knowing and doing will lead to far greater experiences than those only using one or the other. People who demonstrate creativity do not separate knowing from doing. Separating knowing from doing, and vice versa, leads to harm: people do not realise their potential, or their place, in the world; they go mad. The relationship between the concrete and the abstract is one of complementarity, and this needs to be appreciated and accepted in the university for creative writing and other creative disciplines to be valued for their cultural contributions to knowledge rather than as an economic contribution to the university. For creative writing to be separated from theory would mean creative writing would only be recognised as a concrete task, a ‘doing’. One academic in a regional university said, “That whole thing of theory and practice working together, that’s been my bag for years and years.” Sandra went on to point out that the value of academic work is realised in practice (North, 2004, pp. 219–20).

Creativity in a regional context

If creative writers are to be equipped to write from a basis of knowledge, they need to be trained in an awareness of where they are situated in the social world and to understand how their ideas fit with surrounding ideas and discourses. They need to know why it is possible to say some things and not others, and the triggers for the motivation to speak of them. This approach “offer[s] ways of thinking through both

the necessarily political act of creative writing, and the frameworks that delimit our creative possibilities” (Webb, 2000, p. 4). Knowledge of the physical and the social worlds comes about through the application of reason and creativity, two different but related modes of thought through which we come to understand and explain the world. This knowledge is not self-evident—we can only come to our understanding of it through human consciousness, within a framework of dominant knowledges and taxonomies (the current episteme). Nick, a focus group participant said, “I happen to think a really important way of dealing with creative writing is by seeing what it does for the culture” (North, 2004, p. 235).

Creative works that make a cultural (and economic) impact are often the product of sustained thoughts on a particular issue: this is an important part of the creative process. The need to have time to think is important in moving ideas forward. The need is for time to play, and here I propose ‘play’ in a different sense from that mentioned earlier which separated ‘doing’ from ‘knowing’. Play is having the time to explore an aspect of something without economic profit as the main goal. Even Richard Florida’s polemic, *The rise of the creative class*, which espouses the virtues of a creative economy, agrees with the detrimental effect of forced creativity:

Intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity, but extrinsic motivation is detrimental. It appears that when people are primarily motivated to do some creative activity by their own interest and enjoyment of that activity, they may be more creative than when they are primarily motivated by some goal imposed upon them by others. (2002, p. 34)

Many universities engage with their local communities throughout Australia in creative ways that revolve around intrinsic motivation. CSU, which has campuses across a number of regional centres in New South Wales, has made a commitment at its Bathurst campus to “encourage and foster cultural development” in collaboration with the Bathurst Regional Council. “Culture is created by people meeting and talking and then making”, said the acting head of the School of Communication, Bill Blaikie (CSU, 2007a). At its Wagga campus there is an annual exhibition of fine art from graduating students (CSU, 2007b) as well as many other exhibitions in fine art, film and theatre throughout the year.

Conclusion

Creative writing, as well as other creative pursuits, is a way of identifying what is going on, and what social problems are absorbing people and demanding official attention. Not all social knowledge can be “camouflaged as facts, data, and events” (Certeau, 1984, p. 185), able to be neatly parcelled up. Much of what goes on in a social and cultural context is only explicable through creative expression and needs to be understood for the successful functioning of society. Regional universities can forge connections with their local communities in order to accomplish this. If human meaning is part of the knowledge universities seek to produce, then creative work is a specific form of knowledge that achieves this end. Creativity has the capacity to unfold an understanding of our social and cultural space. Creative practice that is not economic does have an important place in the cultural and social structure of our world. We tell ourselves through story, we come to an understanding of others place in the world through story. Story, whether produced through words, dance or visual art, is an expression of doing and knowing.

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