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Learning to manage creativity: An occupational hazard for the UK's creative industries

Dr Nick Wilson

Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries

Email nick.wilson@kcl.ac.uk

Tel +44 (0)20 7848 1052

King's College London

Culture, Media and Creative Industries

King's College London

10D Chesham Building

Strand Campus

London

WC2R 2LS

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Learning to manage creativity: an occupational hazard for the UK's creative industries

Dr Nick Wilson, CMCI, King's College London

Abstract

Our ability to manage creativity is pivotal to future economic prosperity and social welfare. A fit-for-purpose education system that can enable this is then a 'must-have' for policy-makers and practitioners alike. However, the provision of appropriate learning is subject to a number of fundamental structural and cultural challenges. Drawing on empirical evidence from a master's programme in the Creative Industries & the Creative Economy in the United Kingdom, I outline some of the problems facing those involved. The article argues that we should shift attention away from occupational roles and towards the behaviours, knowledge and skills that successful creatives and managers in the creative industries exhibit, and of the specific contexts in which they interact. In particular, we need to provide the space and the environment in our educational institutions, as much as our cultural and creative industries organizations, which can enable interaction and (co)-creation to flourish.

Introduction

I begin this article with a thought experiment. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the education system that prepares individuals for work in the creative industries (DCMS 1998, 2001) is wholly fit for purpose. What must the world be like in order for this education system's approach to managing creativity to be appropriate? To start with, it is a world comprising separate domains, knowledge and cultures. People inhabit particular disciplines (akin to schools and faculties) where they do different things differently (and often in physically different locations). Creativity is recognized as almost exclusively the domain of creative specialists (i.e. specially talented individuals) who are involved in activities of artistic and cultural authorship (artists, musicians, filmmakers, designers). Those involved in managing creativity, on the other hand, are altogether of another stock. They are business-minded organizers or entrepreneurs, out to control and to make money. The motivations of these two groups of individuals could not be more different. The t-shirt-wearing creatives are motivated by the creative act itself (art for art's sake); the be-suited managers are motivated by more profane riches such as money, fame, glamour and status. The world of the creative is colourful and sensual. He or she lives in a studio space (i.e. art and design school) with coloured door frames, intriguing shapes and mysterious smells. The world of the manager is grey and rational. His or her monochrome environment (i.e. the business school classroom) is punctuated only by the occasional PowerPoint presentation or colour-coded histogram. Both sets of individuals are as aware of each other as they are mistrustful. In recent years, however, this mistrust has grown, fuelled by rumours that their separate existences are increasingly under threat by something called creative economy (Howkins 2001; BERR 2008).

Of course, this is a deliberately polarized representation that pokes a little fun at well-versed stereotypes – the apparently exceptional artist or creative (Abbing 2002), the faceless managerial bureaucrat, or the money-grabbing entrepreneur. However, I will argue in this article that, in fact, our education system is structured in such a way as to unwittingly reinforce traditional nineteenth century cultural values, unhelpful stereotypes, the status quo and what Bilton (2007: 13) refers to as the 'great divide' between creativity and commerce. Universities remain largely unprepared to adapt to the changing work environment of the creative economy (even where individuals within them want to), despite the many policy incentives and funding opportunities that are driving change at this time. Those working in the universities, after all, are themselves products of this institutional environment.

The key issues for this article, therefore, are to establish what kind of world the so-called creative economy really is, and to question whether our existing education system is currently meeting the needs of those preparing to work within it. After an introduction to the creative industries and the creative economy in the United Kingdom, the article considers to what extent creatives and managers undertake a form of 'labour of division' (Cooper et al. 1997) that

maintains some kind of separation between them. Drawing on empirical evidence in relation to a master's programme in the Creative Industries & the Creative Economy, I then discuss some of the challenges being faced in higher education, particularly in respect of attempts to bring creatives and managers together. I put forward the view that some of these challenges can be overcome by undertaking a clearer conceptualization of creativity (and management) in the first place.

Introducing the creative economy and the creative industries

The underlying premise of our creative age is that for the first time in history, knowledge and creative individuals' new ideas are the primary source of economic productivity (Seltzer and Bentley 1999). There has been a shift from manual work to 'thinking' jobs that emphasize a whole new range of skills. According to John Howkins (2001), the author of *The Creative Economy*, 'creativity is not new and neither is economics, but what is new is the nature and extent of the relationship between them, and how they combine to create extraordinary value and wealth' (p. 8). The creative economy is therefore a broad concept that can embrace sweeping economic and social change whilst ensuring that the individual (and their creativity) remains firmly at the centre of the picture.

The distinguishing feature of the creative economy, of course, is the premium we place on creativity. Notwithstanding the many different definitions applied to the term creativity, there is general agreement that it depends on two central characteristics that are rooted in a Western philosophical tradition (Bilton 2007). The first of these is difference (or novelty). Creativity can be understood as the generation of new ideas (Cox 2005) or as the ideation component of innovation (West and Farr 1990). The second characteristic is individual talent or vision that is expressed through creative individuals. The UK Government picked up on this second characteristic when defining the creative industries as being those that are founded on 'individual creativity, skill and talent' (DCMS 1998, 2001). This individualistic model of creativity perpetuates the notion that creativity is the exclusive property of a particular type of talented individual. This notion is enduring (despite being persuasively debunked as the 'genius myth' – see Weisberg 1993), not least because of our eagerness to present artists (i.e. musicians, actors, visual artists) as in some way different from the rest of us.

Perhaps precisely because artists and creative people are still regarded as special, there is something rather beguiling about the democratizing potential of the creative economy. As Richard Florida states, it [...]

holds out the promise to relieve the mental drudgery that now consumes a vast chunk of so many people's work and lives. Given the room and the resources to flourish, it might massively increase the wealth of society and the economic situation of the many, even as it allows us to more fully develop our unique human capabilities.

(Florida 2005: 37)

The lure of harnessing creativity for sustained economic growth has spawned a frenzy of activity in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere), both in terms of increased policy attention (e.g. BERR 2008; Work Foundation 2007; NESTA 2007, 2008; Cox 2005; DCMS 2001) and skills development (e.g. the launch of specialized degrees and master's courses in universities across the United Kingdom). The notion of creativity as a prime driver of our economy is now accepted as, more or less, self-evident.

Beneath the surface, however, there is a lurking fear that can be seen to have its roots in Adorno and Horkheimer's famous critique of the cultural industry ([1944] 1979). The concern for the alienation of those involved in the commodification of creativity now manifests itself in terms of the fear that the creative industries and the wider creative economy are little more than a political front for the instrumentalization and exploitation of creativity. At its most extreme, this sort of fear can unwittingly turn the art school, which must surely rely on the permeability of ideas for its very existence, into a fortress. Those manning the battlements are unlikely to make forays into the enemy business school's camp (and *vice versa*).

At the heart of the UK government's agenda for the creative economy is a commitment to the notion of building individual creativity (see Work Foundation 2007). This commitment is most recently defined in the government's strategic document titled 'unlocking' [...] 'new talents for the

new economy' (BERR 2008). Indeed, one might suggest that the focus has shifted from mapping the creative industries as a sector of economic activity (in 1998 and then in 2001) towards giving 'everyone the opportunity to unlock their creative talents' (BERR 2008: 1). This focus down to the individual is surely to be welcomed. However, one of the difficulties faced by those engaging with this agenda of creativity is to be consistent in respect of the unit of analysis. For example, the *Foreward* to the latest government report (BERR 2008) comments on 'Britain's creative talent' in one paragraph, the ubiquity of creative talents in 'every young person' in another, and the move of the creative industries 'from the margins to the mainstream' in another (BERR 2008: 04). Whilst there is nothing wrong, in principle, with moving the focus between individuals and society in general in this way, there is a tendency, within policy circles, industry and academia, towards conflationist theorizing, where the relationship between the individuals and market structures and institutions involved reduces social structure to action, or action to structure, or as in this case, merges both together (see Archer 1995). It can be argued that this arises in this context as a consequence of inadequately conceptualizing the notion of creativity itself, and of failing to conceptualize precisely *whose* creativity it is anyway. There is a danger that conventional definitions of creativity lead us to the unappealing conclusion that the very existence of creativity is itself reliant on the judgement of *others*, who determine what is novel and valuable (Martin 2007, see also Csikszentmihalyi 1999). This, of course, calls into question the underlying assumption that 'every young person' in 'Creative Britain' possesses creative talents or potentials as and of themselves.

Managing in the creative economy

As we have seen, the notion that artists, musicians and other creatives are different from the rest of us remains a deep-seated perspective that, one might suggest, has implicitly (and in some cases, explicitly) penetrated the economic analysis of creativity. For example, John Kenneth Galbraith's observation about the relationship between art and economics is revealing in its double-edged jibe:

Art has nothing to do with the sterner preoccupations of the economist. The artist's values – his splendid and often splenetic insistence on the supremacy of aesthetic goals – are subversive of the straightforward materialist concerns of the economist. He makes the economist feel dull, routine, philistine and also sadly unappreciated for his earthy concern [...] Not only do the two worlds never meet, but the regret in each is evidently negligible.

(Galbraith 1963: 50)

With the benefit of hindsight this appears to do little service to either economists or indeed to those who seek to understand art's wider significance in our lives. Given the thought experiment undertaken at the beginning of this article, we might a little mischievously suggest that if 'economist' is replaced with 'manager' in the quote above, there are many artists and managers who would not notice any substantive loss of meaning.

At this point, it is worth turning the tables and rather than focusing on the particular difficulties thrown up by the context of creativity, reflect on just how much we know about management itself. Whilst the appearance of managerial hierarchies for the coordination of economic activities is one of the most distinguishing features of late capitalism (Williamson 1975), and the importance of managers as an occupational category for organizational decision-making has long been recognized (Taylor 1911; Fayol 1949; Barnard 1966), it is still not easy to answer the question 'what is management?' (Tsoukas 2000). Management, after all, is inherently ambiguous, designating both a collective institutional process and a set of individuals distinguished by a set of activities they carry out. There is a clear tension in the field of management studies between managers conceived of in abstract terms, and those individuals in occupational roles we refer to as managers. In this respect, as I will explore in more detail shortly, there are strong parallels with our difficulties in answering the question 'what is creativity'? Whilst it might be attractive to conceptualize management in terms of what people *do*, this empirical perspective runs the danger of seeking to explain purely in terms of observable characteristics (so ignoring the crucial issue of what managers could or might do, given different circumstances).

Unlike Galbraith's artists and economists, of course creatives and managers do indeed meet. They do so in 'hybrid and emergent organizational spaces' (Jeffcutt and Pratt 2002: 231)

where multiple stakeholders interact. The challenge of coordinating such a diverse set of individuals with different skills (the 'motley crew' – Caves 2000) is often held up as what makes the complex, ambivalent and contested context (Hesmondhalgh 2002) of the creative industries so distinctive. Notwithstanding definitional issues, we remain somewhat unsure about what precisely is the nature of the relationships and networks that enable and sustain the creative process in our knowledge economy (Jeffcutt and Pratt 2002: 228). How are these relationships and networks managed? As Leadbeater and Oakley (1999) point out, the creative process is volatile and dynamic and is 'shaped by important tacit skills (or expertise) that are frequently submerged (even mystified) within domains of endeavour' (p. 228). Clearly, where one group of individuals is either unable or unwilling to share knowledge with another group (for whatever reason) there is bound to be the potential for misunderstanding or worse. The prevailing view that many arts organizations simply lack good management, or that traditional businesses have something to learn from creative businesses (what Jeffcutt and Pratt 2002, refer to as unhelpful essentializing dualisms), perhaps stems from this kind of mystification of domain-level knowledge.

Of course, we might ask whether this kind of mystification is really so very different from that relating to other professional occupations. All professional society depends on authority, and that authority is gained by professionals being elitist, in the sense of knowing more in their particular field than we do (Broadbent et al. 1997). Cooper et al. (1997) explain how professions create and maintain division through 'visibilization' techniques, such as having examinations or criteria for entry. One might suggest that in the case of some artistic and cultural professions, in particular, where this sort of 'labour of division' does not rely on paper credentials *per se*, the role of mystification is all the more significant for maintaining authority.

At any rate, the enduring strength of the essentializing dualisms associated with the creative industries and the creative economy stem from something more fundamental than professional boundary making. As I will argue, it arises also from our inability to explain how creativity appears to exist in different contexts – the more mundane everyday creativity we all possess (including managers), alongside a type of creativity that is associated with historically significant cultural and scientific contributions (see Boden 2004).

Higher education and the creative economy

My focus now turns to considering the role of education (and specifically higher education) in preparing individuals for the creative industries. In reviewing how students learn about the organization of the creative process, we can draw a distinction between those approaches on the one hand that focus on the individual's creative skills, and their contribution to the creative process, which I would argue represent the general *default* position with respect to creativity learning, and approaches, on the other hand, which focus explicitly on the interaction between individuals in certain creative contexts. These latter approaches have probably received less attention, because of the perceived difficulties in generalizability, but also because of the prevailing viewpoint that creativity is a specialist skill of certain individuals. In the first category I would include the identification of complex thinking skills associated with creative problem solving (see Puccio et al. 2007). In addition, students learn about psychological diversity and their creativity styles (e.g. Kirton's Adaptor-Innovator theory, 1976, 1994). In the second category, focus is drawn to the conditions that might be necessary (or sufficient) to encourage creativity. Amabile's work on the stimulants and obstacles to creativity (see Burnside et al. 1988; Amabile et al. 2002) is important in this respect. Jones et al's. (1997) work on the conditions of informal network governance (including social embeddedness, uncertain demand, high human asset specificity, frequent exchanges, and complex tasks under intense time pressure) is highly instructive in terms of creativity in a market context (i.e. where creative labour power is exchanged). Elsewhere, particular attention has been drawn to the role of intermediaries, brokers, and interfaces as being crucial to the organization and management of creative practice (Jeffcutt and Pratt 2002; Towse 1995; Hargadon 2003).

There is no doubt that the rhetoric of the creative industries, and now the creative economy, is having a profound impact on how the management of creativity is discussed and taught in higher education in the United Kingdom and abroad. There has been a significant shift towards business and creative disciplines working closer together in education. The Design Council is not alone in highlighting the role of the education system as where business and

creative disciplines need to be brought closer together, so that 'tomorrow's companies will be run by managers who understand creativity and creative specialists who understand the business environment' (Design Council website 2007).

This challenge of bringing together apparently separate disciplines is at the heart of a particular master's programme development being undertaken at my former UK University. This development sees students coming both from a variety of creative backgrounds (including media, design, visual arts, built environment and performing arts) and from both creative and management/business backgrounds. In its first 2 years the programme has involved staff from eighteen creative subject areas, seven schools and three faculties. My own role was to oversee and coordinate this programme, where I was course director to over 40 students. In using this as a mini-case study from which to draw out a number of critical pragmatic issues, I now outline some of the major (predominantly internal) challenges the course team encountered. It should be stressed from a methodological point of view that the 'evidence' presented here is not based on any systematic and representative sample, but rather it is informed by my observation and active involvement in the programme as it developed.

Specific problems in course development

Occupational hazard – labelling issues

Academic and administrative staff are used to treating students in 'their area' in particular ways. Students are either arts, design or business people, and therefore they belong in either one faculty or another, as do those teaching them. The idea that there could, for example, be *creative* managers (or conversely *uncreative* designers) is difficult to reconcile with an educational culture that links creative discipline so rigidly to occupational status, as opposed to specific individuals' talents and needs.

Institutional barriers to learning

The institutional realities of a school- and faculty-based university (e.g. enrollment within a single faculty, fee income allocated to host faculty, quality assurance assessed by faculty with external examiners being tasked to look after particular disciplines etc.) presents real challenges to the advancement of truly inter-disciplinary teaching and learning. Arguably, modularity – the ability to build up a programme of learning from individually self-sufficient chunks – whilst offering the promise of flexibility and bespoke learning, also reinforces a separation on disciplinary grounds that may ultimately be proving counter-productive. This is especially the case if, as seems likely, this system is partly responsible for students' focus shifting onto the 'hidden curriculum' of assessment management, rather than towards genuine learning.

Additive rather than emergent approach

The master's programme is founded on a varied curriculum that includes specialist creative modules (e.g. architecture or spatial design) and 'core' creative economy modules relating to issues of managing creativity, cultural policy and entrepreneurship. The underlying rationale of the master's programme is underpinned by a philosophy of integration – with a view to overcoming the perceived communication gaps (see Cox 2005). There remains an underlying concern, however, that some students will take what amounts to an additive approach to the degree, rather than an emergent one, where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Arguably, continued separation along disciplinary lines is made ever more likely by the structural constraint of academics needing to belong to a particular research discipline or subject grouping (especially if relevant for funding purposes – e.g. in relation to the Research Assessment Exercise).

The creative economy – what's in a name?

In specifically referencing 'the creative economy' in the award titles there is a problem of *appearing* to buy in-to an instrumentalist ideology that draws people away from art for art's sake and towards capitalism and financial gain. The suspicion that universities and higher education providers in general have simply been jumping on the bandwagon, fuels a concern about this instrumentalization of creativity. Paradoxically, perhaps, it could be that by being explicit about the term creative economy (in fact chosen specifically to draw attention to the need for people to

work together) some of those involved in delivering learning might entrench their positions still further.

There are obviously distinctive practical issues arising in this effort to adapt teaching and learning to fit the needs of the creative economy. Whilst some of these issues relate to path-dependent structural factors (such as the way in which fee income is employed in a public sector education institution), and therefore have no obvious link to more conceptual matters, there is a sense in which greater conceptual clarity can and should offer a better way forward.

Discussion

At the outset of this article I put forward a thought experiment to provoke a re-evaluation of the creative economy and the suitability of the way in which we educate those individuals who will play key roles within it. I have pointed to an endemic misconception about those working in the creative industries and the wider creative economy, which sees them as being defined not by their individual (creative) emergent properties and powers (including their human relations), but by their being representative of particular occupations and disciplines (e.g. creatives or managers/entrepreneurs). In presenting some evidence from a new master's programme I have shown that the way in which our higher education is generally structured is a further contributory factor in sustaining this misconception. In this final section I propose that we need to find a way forward for helping people to manage creativity that is based on a more solid theoretical foundation, which recognizes both the universal commonality of creativity and also what makes it so special and worth nurturing. Such a 'practically adequate' (Sayer 1992) explanation of creativity is not of interest to theorists alone. Recalling Lewin's (1951: 169) famous remark, after all 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory'.

The key issue for creative organizations and those working in the creative economy must be to establish the value of the discoveries being made, not to argue what (or who) is or is not creative. This, I suggest, focuses attention very firmly on the context of creativity and cautions against stereotypical labelling (i.e. creatives or managers).

The move away from an exceptionalist perspective (i.e. 'creatives' are specially talented individuals) is important because it opens up the territory of creativity to those otherwise marginalized by their occupational role (i.e. implicitly, if not explicitly, regarded by education or industry as 'non-creative'). Here we might usefully revisit the literature on the creative industries and creative production that makes a feature of distinguishing between creatives and others. For example, whilst much is made of the autonomy and self-determination of the artistic worker 'in order to be a real and genuine expression of creative labour power' (Shorthose and Strange 2004: 47), I would suggest that individuals' actions will always be constrained (and/or enabled) by other pre-existing structures and agential powers. Furthermore, whilst the distinction is drawn between artists' intrinsic motivation (i.e. their drive to create) and others' extrinsic motivation (i.e. pecuniary rewards) (Frey and Pommerehne 1989), motivation is, in fact, a complex and emergent human attribute and not a quasi-function of occupational status or role.

In drawing particular attention to the emergent nature of creativity, the scope for others to influence any one individual's discovery (thereby actualizing creativity) is highlighted. This, of course, has a strong resonance with the innovation and entrepreneurship literatures that highlight the importance of interaction and technology brokering (Hargadon 2003), entrepreneurial teamwork (Stokes and Wilson 2006) and the entrepreneurship dynamic (Schoonhoven and Romanelli 2001; Baronet 2003).

Turning to the development of appropriate education for the creative industries, I agree with Seltzer and Bentley (1999) that we must find ways of embedding learning in a range of meaningful contexts. It does seem to be the case that the dominant educational paradigm focuses on what students know rather than how they use that knowledge. It does also seem to be the case that the familiar structural boundaries of schools and faculties that mirror disciplinary boundaries are not especially conducive to truly inter-disciplinary approaches. For, as I have argued, in the context of the creative economy there is a danger that inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary approaches merely reinforce rigidly held beliefs rather than call for a re-evaluation of individuals' behaviours, knowledge and skills (and therefore a re-evaluation of disciplines themselves). It is clearly the case that individuals with different talents, backgrounds, and skill-sets should be given the opportunity to work together, because this is the working reality of the

creative industries and the creative economy, and it is through this interaction that (co)-creativity emerges.

By focusing learning on creative 'projects' (arguably one of the unifying features of the creative industries), it is possible to focus attention on the pursuit of a goal, or set of goals, and encourage a belief in learning as an incremental process, both of which are seen as key requisites for creative learners (Seltzer and Bentley 1999: viii). Specifically in the case of master's education, there is a strong rationale for offering a different educational paradigm here that sees the programme as a unified learning experience. Students would either pass or fail, rather than being required to pass multiple individual module assignments. This may have the benefit of encouraging a more experimental and risk-taking approach to learning (as advocated in the context of entrepreneurial education – see Gibb 2005).

There remains the issue, however, of how higher education provides the right sort of 'space' for students' creative potential to be actualized. The creativity literature broadly agrees that boundaries and constraints have an important correlation with the creative process (Bilton 2007: 89). However, there is no agreement on the extent to which creative thinking conforms to or deviates from existing boundaries and conventions. The industrial historian, Edward Constant, observed (1980: x): 'community practice defines a cognitive universe that inhibits recognition of radical alternatives to conventional practice'. Constant noted, for example, that 'No manufacturer of piston aircraft engines invented or independently developed a turbo-jet. No designer of conventional reciprocating steam engines invented a steam turbine, no manufacturer of steam locomotives independently developed diesel engines' (1980: x). Constant's observation is significant for its implication that academic disciplines, by virtue of reinforcing common beliefs and views about the world, are in some respects inherently inhibiting of creativity. The premise, then, is that the active pursuit of new ideas, essential to the creative economy, does not always take place at the heart of the pre-existing 'mainstream'. One might suggest that new ideas and discoveries emerge less from within explicit training and education programmes, as offered by colleges and university departments, and more from the opportunity and space that these sites provide for individuals to develop their creative potential and to *discover* their distinct ideas, and then to actualize them with the help of others, sometimes in spite of the status quo. This raises the intriguing and somewhat paradoxical notion that the *absence* of what one would intuitively regard as conducive to creativity (i.e. appropriate training, education, funding and so forth) may in fact act as a causal mechanism that enables creativity. At the very least it cautions us against advocating any mainstream rolling out of 'best practice' in new educational models, since these can themselves be inherently standardizing.

To conclude, the main argument of this article has been that we (i.e. society, industry and the education system) mistakenly continue to consider occupational roles (e.g. designers; managers) as synonymous with the people who occupy these roles, and therefore neglect to disassociate peoples' behaviours, knowledge and skills from their current or future job label. It will not be enough to merely transpose or superimpose cultural or artistic notions of creativity into the business domain (which is arguably what some of the key practitioner-focused initiatives in this area are about). What is needed is a fundamental review of the behaviours, knowledge and skills that successful creatives and managers actually exhibit, *and* of the particular contexts in which they interact. To this end, there is an opportunity here too for researchers (from different disciplines and working in separate schools and faculties) to work together on truly inter-disciplinary research projects. This, it is argued, will reveal something of our universal commonality and the extent to which our capacity to act in a creative (and individualistic) manner is itself a feature of this commonality, rather than a product of being special.

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