

What do we mean by “creativity” in the business curriculum in Further Education Colleges?

Introduction

Action research into development of creative thinking skills on BTEC Business Studies courses in Further Education Colleges, conducted by Mahil (2013) highlighted the need to ensure that teachers and learners share the same concept of “creativity”. When learners were asked to produce a “creative poster” as part of a classroom activity designed to stimulate creativity skills, many students expressed their understanding of creativity to mean colourful posters with images. On the other hand, the teacher expected to see creativity as an expression of ideas in the content and presentation of the posters. So what exactly do we mean by “creativity” in the context of the business curriculum in Further Education (FE) Colleges in England?

There is a wide spectrum of definitions of creativity as researched by Banaji and Burn (2010) who note that:

“Academics, policy-makers and arts educators deploy a range of claims about creativity which emerge from different theories of learning, different contexts, different artistic traditions, different academic or quasi-academic traditions, and different policy contexts.” (Banaji and Burn, 2010: 10)

From this plethora of viewpoints, this paper will discuss a range of definitions and explain their relevance to the business curriculum for young adults in Further Education (FE) Colleges

Popular definitions of creativity

One of the most popular advocates of creativity in education is Sir Ken Robinson (2011), author of “Out of our minds”. In August 2014, his YouTube video entitled “Do schools kill creativity?” (Robinson, 2007) has already been watched almost 7 million times, indicating the international appeal of his views on the subject of creativity. His message is that creativity, which he defines as “the process of having original ideas that have value”, is as important as literacy and that both can be learnt and should be taught in compulsory school education.

Robinson highlights collaboration as being a key element in creativity and that:

“Creativity is a process more often than it is an event. To call something a process indicates a relationship between its various elements: that each aspect and phase of what happens is related to every other. Being creative involves several processes that interweave within each other. The first is generative. The second is evaluative.” (Robinson, 2011: 151)

Process, originality & value

In the context of a business curriculum, it seems perfectly reasonable to accept Robinson’s suggestion that creativity is a process in which original ideas are generated and then evaluated.

Action Research by Mahil (2013) based in a typical FE business curriculum setting, used a similar definition by Krathwohl (2002) suggesting that the “create” level in their Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) involves “Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product.”

Based on this definition of creativity, classroom activities designed to stimulate a process which allows students to generate ideas, evaluate them and choose those that have value, seem

appropriate for development of creative thinking skills. However, Mahil (2013) found complexities in this overt simplicity, such as misunderstandings between teacher and students, caused by lack of shared meanings of concepts such as creative and unique.

The popular notion of creativity advocated by Robinson (2011) as being simply a “process of having original ideas that have value” does not address the questions of “Original to whom?” and “Of value to whom?” which are implied in the work of another popular author on creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013) who argues that,

“If by creativity we mean an idea or action that is new and valuable, then we cannot simply accept a person’s own account as the criterion for its existence. There is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards, and there is no way to tell whether it is valuable until it passes social evaluation. Therefore, creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon.”
(Csikszentmihalyi, 2013: 23)

Who decides whether an idea is new or has value?

In the business curriculum, a combination of the definitions of creativity suggested by Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi is pragmatic. A simple definition of creativity being a process of having original ideas that have value, seems easily applicable in establishing a learning environment that fosters effective development of creativity skills. However, we must bear in mind the **standards**, and the necessary social evaluation that will decide whether the ideas generated are in fact original and whether they have value.

Edexcel (2012) the Awarding Body for BTEC business qualifications, provides external standards to judge the quality of work produced as evidence of students’ progress and achievement and they propose that:

“Young people think creatively by generating and exploring ideas, making original connections. They try different ways to tackle a problem, working with others to find imaginative solutions and outcomes that are of value.”

Edexcel’s pedagogical guidance about creative thinking skills is that young people:

- Generate ideas and explore possibilities
- Ask questions to extend their thinking
- Connect their own and others’ ideas and experiences in inventive ways
- Question their own and others’ assumptions
- Try out alternatives or new solutions and follow ideas through
- Adapt ideas as circumstances change

This analysis of creative thinking corresponds with Robinson’s definition of creativity, involving generation of ideas, making original connections and finding outcomes that are of value. However, it does not adequately address Csikszentmihalyi’s concern about the systemic evaluation of the creativity expressed in ideas, connections and outcomes. The Awarding Body tells us **what** students

are expected to do but it fails to clearly indicate **how** we evaluate whether an idea is indeed creative and whether the outcome has any value and **who** judges it to be so.

This lack of clarity about **who** and **how** we evaluate an idea to be original and of value, remains a huge challenge in development of creativity in the business curriculum.

Can everyone be creative?

In a business context, the notion that creativity is ubiquitous is supported by Craft (2001) cited in Banaji and Burn (2010: 29) who states that in education, the definitions of creativity that have had most purchase in the last 50 years have been those that marry creativity and imagination, and take an inclusive approach by suggesting that everyone has the potential for creativity as it is a fundamental aspect of human nature." Craft has a very broad concept of creativity which she calls "the ability to cope effectively with changing life in the 21st century. She distinguishes this clearly from creativity in the arts and from the paradigm shifting creativity of 'great' figures."

Arguments against this ubiquitous concept of creativity, such as those put forward by Thomson and Hall (2006) cited in Banaji and Burn (2010: 30) rejecting the notion of 'vulgar creativity which everyone is supposed to possess in equal measures' seem pertinent to creativity in arts and culture rather than a business curriculum. For example, it is clear that not everyone can aspire to become a 'creative genius', which is one of the rhetorics of creativity described by Banaji and Burn (2010: 15) .

Due to the nature of a global business environment, the business curriculum tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive and does not normally suffer from the "vulgar elitism", rejected by Thomson and Hall (2006) and also Willis (1990) who complains that:

"The institutions and practices, genres and terms of high art are currently categories of exclusion more than of inclusion. They have no connection with most young people and their lives. They may encourage some artistic specialisations but they certainly discourage much wider and more symbolic creativity ... (Willis 1990: 1 cited in Banaji and Burn (2010: 21)

Even though it is tempting to accept Craft's broad brush concept of ubiquitous creativity, where 'it is possible for every person, child or adult, to learn to make choices about their lives which are creative or not creative', Negus and Pickering, cited in Banaji and Burn (2010: 30) argue that:

"...we cannot collapse creativity into everyday life, as if they are indistinguishable To say that all our everyday actions are in some way creative might have a certain polemical appeal, but that is all. What we're arguing for instead are the intrinsic connections between creative practice and everyday life, for it's important that we don't forget how the heightened moments of creativity are always linked to routine and the daily round, and how a particular artwork or cultural product may catch us within the midst of ordinary habitual life. (2004: 44-45)

In a business class, both these viewpoints are relevant. On the one hand, we can assume, as Craft agrees, that everyone is **capable** of being creative and generating new ideas that have value, but on the other hand, as Negus and Pickering highlight, not all the ideas they generate will be new and not all of them will have value.

The question remains however, who decides what is creative and what is not; and how do we measure the value of a new idea and therefore, how creative it is?

Is creativity individual or collective?

We began with a simple pragmatic definition of creativity, taken from Robinson (2011) stating that creativity is the process of generating original ideas that have value and took into consideration Csikszentmihalyi's (2013: 27) concern that the value of these original ideas has to be judged by experts in the field and within the "domain which consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures". In Csikszentmihalyi's view, the individual person is merely the third component of the creative system (the first being the domain and the second being the field). Robinson (2011) agrees that "Creativity is about making connections and is usually driven more by collaboration than by solo efforts." (Robinson, 2011: 211)

Therefore, in a business curriculum, it seems fair to assume that creativity is collective rather than individual. An idea may seem highly original and valuable to the individual who generated it but in business, the value of an idea is judged by those willing to buy it in some shape or form.

How important is the context in defining creativity?

An idea may be creative because it has value in one context, but in a different context, the same idea may have no value at all and therefore it would lack creativity (defined as a new idea that has value). For example, the price people are willing to pay for an idea, at any point in time, is an indication of its value, although the value may increase or decrease over time. So, the simple definition of creativity being the process of generating original ideas that have value needs to be understood within the various dynamics of collaboration that create the context in which the idea emerges. An idea cannot be said to be of value unless someone, within a particular context in time, evaluates it as having value.

What is the difference between 'creativity' and 'learning' in a creative classroom?

The 'creative classroom' rhetoric, reviewed by Banaji and Burn (2010: 63), seems "to promote forms of learning that are generally held to improve the experience of children in education – holistic learning, active learning, expanded notions of intelligence, attention to social and cultural contexts, social learning and ethical human development". However, if all learning takes place in a creative classroom context and we accept that everyone is capable of generating creative ideas that have value, what is the difference between creativity and any other learning that leads to a valued outcome?

Starko (2005: 19) cited in Banaji and Burn (2010: 66) insists that 'creative teaching' (where the teacher is creative) is not the same as 'teaching to develop creativity'.

In a 'creative classroom' students may be encouraged to play games, use pictures, the internet and multimedia technology to work in teams, on projects designed to stimulate learning to meet a variety of appropriate learning objectives. Even though each of these activities may lead to spontaneous insights and learning, they may do so without any evidence of creativity as we have defined: *generating original ideas that have value*. These ideas may be new and of value to the students themselves so we could say that learning has taken place. However, although they have learnt something, **creatively**, they have not necessarily developed their capacity to generate original ideas that have value. This is one of the most common misunderstandings around creativity in the

business curriculum. Teachers mistakenly believe that the creative activities they use to foster a 'creative classroom' teaching approach is synonymous with development of creativity whereas what often happens in the best of these classes is that learning takes place which does not always include creativity as imagined.

Summary

To sum up, a popular and pragmatic definition of creativity is one offered by Sir Ken Robinson (2007, 2011) where he simply states that creativity is a process of having original ideas that have value. This definition dispels the myth that some people are creative and others are not and it emphasises that in a business curriculum, we can **all** be taught how to be creative, in other words to generate ideas that add value. In the business environment, the context is highly important in determining whether an idea is valuable. It has to be innovative and of benefit. The tendency is to confuse creative teaching (where a teacher uses innovative teaching methods to inspire learning) and useful learning in general (where a student is able to practically apply new learning) with creativity that entails a learner discovering new ideas that add value, either implicitly or explicitly in collaboration with others. In the business curriculum, one of the most pressing concerns is highlighted by Csikszentmihalyi (2013) when he reminds us that "If by creativity we mean an idea or action that is new and valuable, then we cannot simply accept a person's own account as the criterion for its existence. There is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards, and there is no way to tell whether it is valuable until it passes social evaluation." These standards may notionally be set by stakeholders such as the Awarding Bodies for the qualification, Ofsted and PGCE teacher training courses. How well these standards are understood and communicated effectively so that all concerned in the business education process, have a shared understanding and strategies for development of creativity is an area that needs further exploration and clarity.

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