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Banking on Creativity?

Abstract:

Creativity is now everywhere: it is present in schools and universities, in governing bodies, social institutions, and in cities where it flourishes at work and on play-grounds alike. In the current socio-political climate, creativity is trivialised, commodified and commercialised. Though creativity remains a deeply vexed concept that conjures up issues of creation, knowledge, power, responsibility, and even life-style, it is now essentially valued for its prospective economic return. What does this mean for writers and for both creative writing students and teachers working in the corporate University? In particular, if creativity is a form of knowledge and mode of knowing inherent in practice-led research, should one bank on it? This paper tackles the topic of creativity in seeking to identify some of the pedagogical and ethical uncertainties that arise in the discipline of writing when artistic, economic, and political agendas compete with each other.

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Creative and Professional Writing - Creativity – Global Discourse

Biographical note:

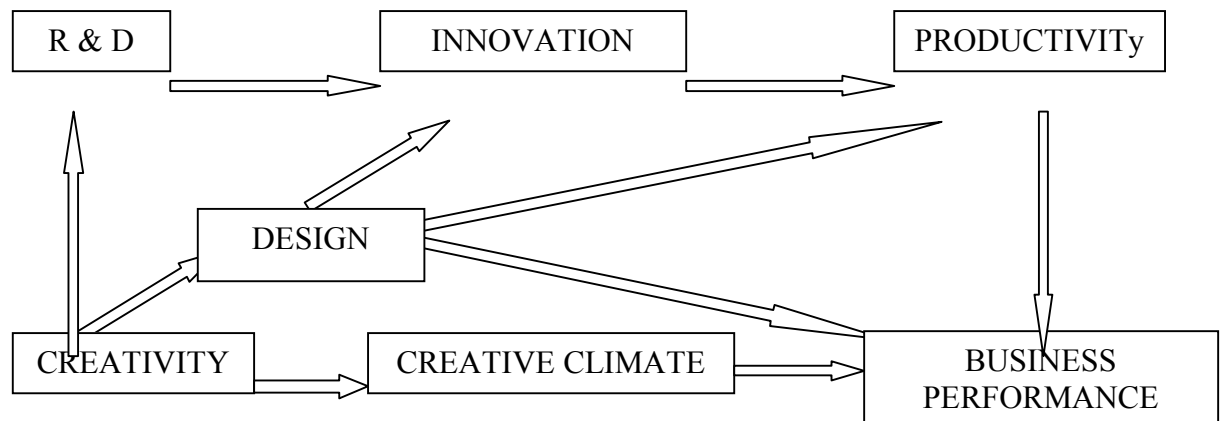
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In the post-globalised world, creativity is pervasive and its uses multiple. It not only figures in aesthetic theory, but also in managerial programs where it is presented as a resource for problem-solving and successful marketing, in self-help books where its value as a means to psychological well-being and success is highlighted, and in government policies where it is the mainspring of innovation, productivity and business performance. In our corporatised Universities, the talk is all about innovation, particularly in the Creative Industries, and about prospective economic returns of degrees. With regard to Creative Writing, the talk is about producing marketable artefacts rather than about the worth of Creative Writing Courses or benefits gained from the ethical and ontological journeys that writing a PhD entails. In fact, the term creativity is increasingly demoted in favour of 'innovation', which befits the rampant instrumentalist and economic discourse of Higher Education policies.

Although debates have been vigorous for some time on the topic of globalisation, the knowledge economy and the dangers of corporatisation (Readings 1996, Margison and Considine 2000, Currie 2002) it nonetheless needs to be reiterated that Universities are also sites of knowledge production. Further, since knowledge has become the global goal of a struggle for knowledge capital that positions PhD candidates as mere players in a game aiming at national prosperity through innovation, it needs to be said that this is, ethically speaking, not conducive to creativity. Within this paradigm, the production of new knowledge is indeed merely outcome driven and the PhD candidate positioned as a prospective profitable worker with no subjectivity and no desire to speak of. This may call for a radical redefinition of creativity as inherent in subjectivity, especially the subjectivity conceived by psychoanalysis. For indeed a psychoanalytical conception of subjectivity takes into account the work of the unconscious, a field not only banished by policy-makers, but also shunned by authors of recent studies of creativity (Carter 2004, Pope 2005, Runco 2007). Even Rob Pope, who critiques the instrumentalist use of the term in the knowledge economy, nonetheless condones the ubiquitous material return to a 'reality' dominated by consciousness and free-choice. Conversely, contemporary psychoanalysis offers a subjectivist model of creation *ex-nihilo* that takes into account the materiality of language and our inscription in symbolic systems.

In the global knowledge economy, innovation occurs where science and technology intersect with art and design. At the heart of this intersection is creativity. Recent management and policy discourse draws attention to the importance of artistic flows in business strategies, as well as in national and regional innovation systems (Brecknock 2004, Florida 2005, Wallis et al 2005, Higgs et al 2007, Holden 2007, UN 2008). In the latest CHASS report aptly titled 'Between a Hard Rock and a Soft Space', John Howard speaks of 'embedding design and creative practice' (Howard 2008: 3). Innovation policy is indeed increasingly concerned with innovation in design and creative practice, and there is growing recognition of the role played by the Creative Industries in the economic growth of cities and regions. In this context, design is seen as the creative synthesis of the disparate functions involved in the innovation process: 'recognising the importance of creativity, firms and policymakers' are now giving priority to investing in 'talent' and 'skills' as a base for 'innovation performance' (Howard 2008: 3). What is concerning

here, though by no means new, is that this model (even when applied for community use) relies upon an economic paradigm that equates creativity with outcome. There is no creative agent here, and therefore no creative process. Rather, the creative nexus is collapsed into one concept: ‘design’ as fostering production within the economic cycle. Further, the emphasis is on the marketability of goods and products rather than on services. Let us, for instance, see how, drawing upon a document from the UK Treasury (2005), Howard conceptualises creativity and design in business practice:



[Swan, P and Birke, D 2005]

Creativity is here the generation of new ideas, innovation the successful exploitation of new ideas, and design the link between the two. In fact, design is ‘creativity deployed to a specific end’ (Howard 2008: 10). The rationale underlying this view of creativity is purely economic, as it concerns the economic return of the Creative Industries. Though applied to the Australian situation, this is a global rationale that echoes recent European reports, i.e. a report by John Holden (Demos, UK) arguing that public funding for culture directly generates economic activity in the Creative and Cultural Industries (Holden 2007: 22) and a report on the European Capital of Culture (2008) providing evidence of the predicted economic impact of an ‘urban renaissance’ driven by cultural regeneration. Incidentally, this is also the thrust of a hot off the press study of the European innovation scene: *Innovation in Public Sector Services: Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Management* (Windrum and Koch 2008).

The outcome of this CHASS report is an economic re-framing of the long-lasting ‘two cultures’ debate between the sciences and the arts (Wandor 2008: 64), one which erases the subject from its discourse and seeks not so much to find a common language as to acknowledge the importance of ‘natural knowledge’ and ‘creative art’ to both disciplines. This is hardly useful: generally, within the historical and critical context of the Humanities; and in particular, within the contemporary context of creativity in the academy. So, let us look at how aesthetic, economic and political agendas compete with each other in the academy and how this impacts on the status of the PhD in Creative Writing, i.e., what ought to be both an ontological (Barnacle 2005) and ethical journey (Hecq 2008).

Over ten years ago, Bill Readings (1996), alerted us to the risks involved in adopting neo-liberal globalisation practices, such as managerialism and a user-pays philosophy when these rely upon a corporate ethos that sits uneasily with scholarly values. Despite more recent and sustained warnings voiced by Currie, as for instance, in ‘Australian Universities as Enterprise Universities: Transformed Players on a Global Stage’ (Currie 2002: 3), pressures are still mounting for Australian universities to become more instrumentalist in the wake of globalisation.

Creativity in universities is offered up as a generic skill, no longer limited to practices involving the arts. It has espoused the political agenda that drives the economy to renaissance heights. It is tied in with development, new ideas and, above all, innovation. Productivity, output, cost effectiveness are here buzz-words, not creativity. Thus neo-liberal globalisation remains a significant challenge facing universities and the creative industries increasingly need to play the game of economics in order to be included in the system. Most governments across the globe expect universities to serve their national interests in the global marketplace and there are increasing tendencies to emphasise the practical and technical value of Higher Education, for Universities, like transnational companies, are forming alliances to deliver education on a global scale using internet technology. Moreover, private universities are taking advantage of this technology to expand their services. Not only does this mean that the Humanities are devalued in favour of the Sciences, but this impacts negatively on student diversity, inclusion and well-being. Further, it denies students’ desire, the main spring of creativity and it devalues the form of knowledge implicated in Creative Writing doctorates in particular.

‘Globalisation is about “being at home in the world” in a wholly unprecedented manner’ says the novelist Amit Chaudhuri, i.e. ‘in a way peculiarly sanctioned and authored by the market’ (Chaudhuri 2007: 104). Though this may be true for those doctoral students who belong to the ‘hard rocks’ paradigm of the hard sciences and who may thrive in a free-market economy, this may not be true for ‘soft spaces’ Humanities doctoral students, particularly those creative writers with little interest, if not contempt, for the forces driving the book market. First, because ‘as an act of acquisition and exchange’, creative writing praxis, is ‘informed by critical understanding of a specific kind related to creative achievement, but not always to notions of “the market”’ (Haper and Kroll 2007: 6). Second, because a PhD presupposes a performative contribution to knowledge (in this sense it is also qualitative rather than quantitative), and I believe that the type of knowledge achieved in practice-led research overlaps with creativity. As such it is both subversive and subjective, and it would be unethical to drive candidates towards ‘a way peculiarly sanctioned by the market’ (Chaudhuri 2007: 104).

Creative Writing is a way of knowing. It is a way of ‘knowing how to manipulate, dispose, and place’ words that constitutes a way of acting in the world that pries open the strategies set up by the dominant power (Certeau 1984: 79). Creativity is that which produces new knowledge. Thus, creativity is an event, i.e., a process as much as an effect, and therefore also a product. In Creative Writing, it is that which sends us

back ‘endlessly to a truth outside of literature’ (Blanchot 1995: 2). This truth is about subjectivity, particularly the subjectivity conceived by psychoanalysis. Even at the level of the conscious and preconscious, as an author writes, the process of writing itself surprises her, unearthing tensions and vulnerabilities inherent in the event of creation she herself might not be entirely conscious of. Re-reading her own words reinstates this event as it surprises her anew and thereby forces her to take a new perspective on her system of knowledge, use of conventions, and make-up of subjectivity. For indeed, creativity and knowledge are also rooted in unconscious processes that include, as the late Lacan demonstrated, the intertwining of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, and as such these are about layering and expanding, rather than restricting, fields.

This particular subjective dimension of creativity, i.e., the one that includes the real and symbolic dimension of the unconscious, is what is missing from the plethora of books that exploit the very concept of creativity evoked in my opening paragraph. This is not surprising, after all, as lifestyle and self-help books privilege the imaginary dimension of subjectivity while management thinking and Higher Education Policies bank on symbolic exchanges. What **is** surprising, though, is that subjectivity is missing from recent authoritative works on aesthetics and aesthetic processes (Pope 2005, Krauth, 2006, Runco 2007).

For instance, Pope’s *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* starts with an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of ‘creativity’ from Modernity onwards. It then questions current understandings of the term. In particular, Pope professes his frustration with the ubiquitous ‘employment oriented and economy-based’ applications of creativity which in their instrumentalist use of the term restrict its function and thereby deny its playful, as well as subversive, implications (Pope 2005: 27). In post-modern mode, Pope rejects stereotyped conceptions of *ex-nihilo* ‘Romantic’ creativity including “the hyper-individualistic notion of solitary genius: the lone artist in his garret or the isolated scientist slaving away in his laboratory” (Pope 2005: 66), which then leads him to reject the associating of inspiration with the unconscious, the conception of the genius as mad or obsessive, or alternatively as divinely inspired. Pope’s view of creativity is, he claims, much broader: it can be communal as well as individual, and in fact, can be enhanced by collaboration. Creativity, Pope insists, ‘is a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields interact’ (Pope 2005: 67). Absent from this complex intersecting of fields is the whole domain of subjectivity, and of the unconscious in particular, for the ‘self-indulgence’ and ‘solipsism’ this may entail (Pope 2005: 68). By totally ignoring the Other, Pope’s hypothetical proposition that: ‘we need to be more attentive and sensitive to difference’ in terms of communications, falls flat (Pope 2005: 190).

In my view, Pope heralds one response to post-modernism in the form of a material return to ‘reality’, i.e., a reactive response in the form of a call for concrete historical and empirical research which entails an often virulent rejection of theory (as some of the papers presented at this conference illustrate) as well as in the rise of genetic and

biological explanations of consciousness, behaviour and sexuality. Although espousing some of postmodernism's tropes (e.g., in(ter)vention) that seemingly disrupt binary dichotomies, Pope is caught in a kind of oppositional thinking that harks back to the Enlightenment as if Freud had never existed. I am personally inclined to favour a psychoanalytically inflected definition of creativity, for psychoanalysis develops an account of the limit and insufficiency of discourse, thereby doing justice to the concrete historical effects of symbolic life, not by disregarding language in favour of a return to empiricism, but by recognising the material effects of the symbolic itself, particularly with respect to that which resists and eludes representation, i.e. the real. Psychoanalysis indeed teaches us that the real is an effect of the symbolic and thus a product of the Other. It alerts us to the symbolic dimension of concepts such as emotion, body, race, affect, sexuality and mood as well as to the ethico-political implications of representation. For psychoanalysis, creativity has nothing to do with the paranoid subject of neo-liberal globalisation as the trademark of capitalistic and scientific civilisation at the service of free-enterprise.

As a matter of fact, for psychoanalysis, indeed, there is nothing like free-enterprise. Nothing like free-will. For Lacan, for instance, creativity and alienation are two sides of the same coin. Scandalously, Lacan would probably even argue that the whole field of human symbolisation takes place *ex-nihilo*, for his conception of creativity is a subjectivist conception. Crucially, it is also an ethical conception (Lacan 1992 [1959-60]). Thus Lacan's conception of creativity differs from that of Romanticism and Humanism in that, instead of transferring the creative power from God to the autonomous subject, Lacan has moved it onto the signifier itself. For Lacan, creativity is the only way speaking beings can attempt to recapture the lost *jouissance* sacrificed upon entering the social world of language and thereby upon articulating need in demand. It is also the only way speaking beings can capture a glimpse of the impossible real which is by definition outside of signification. Since this attempt can only take place through symbolisation (through symbolic articulation and imaginary representation), and since furthermore the symbolic is not a closed field, but rather an inherently lacking space, ultimately unable to bridge the gap which separates it from the real except via body events, creativity entails a profoundly alienating dimension. There is no creative gratification without alienation, any creative process, or indeed outcome, which is not alienating. Poets know this in their bones—and so do, more tragically, psychotics. In this sense, there is no point glorifying creativity. By its own measure, by the mere fact that creations rely on a medium that is unable to realise our fantasies of wholeness and autonomy, creativity loses all its Romantic and Humanist sheen. That is why instead of the creative psyche or autonomous subject, Lacan keeps returning to the lacking subject. The subject is lacking precisely because it is unable to recapture her lost real fullness through symbolic creation or imaginary representation, because individual autonomy is constantly deferred by its dependency on language and speech. It is this deferral; however, that keeps desire alive and creativity open to multiple possibilities.

To return to the question of binary dichotomies regarding the concept of creativity raised in Pope's book (craft, art; science, humanities; social, individual; conscious,

unconscious; etc), one can see that these are seen either as irreconcilable oppositions or as indiscriminate fusions of concepts. In view of this problem, psychoanalysis suggests options that help in thinking about these particular dualities as well as other dualities inherent in the notion of subjectivity shunned by both Pope and the policy-makers and managers invoked above in order to redefine creativity with regard to the notion of production of knowledge.

Freudian thought contributes an interesting concept when it considers a non-conventional relation between opposites. Freud reminds us that in Latin, opposites are originally expressed by the same root. For example, *sacer*: both sacred and impious (1940 [1938]). Freud famously developed this concept in relation to the uncanny: what was formerly familiar emerges as unfamiliar and threatening (Freud 1919), which gives rise to the creative affect *par excellence*: anxiety (Hecq 2005).

In a similar vein, taking the etymological relation between ‘letter’ and ‘litter’ at the root of the French word littoral, Lacan in ‘Lituraterre’ discusses a new conception of the speaking being as speaker of metaphors, as incipient poet alone on the shore, her *littoral* (Lacan 2001 [1971]) The *littoral* is a conflictive space of mediation and erasure and *liaison*, and remaking. He suggests that the way of thinking about the limit in its negative dimension is worn out and considers it a space with its own legislation. He proposes an ethics of the limit that differs from both modern and post-modern conceptions. The subject is conceived in a space that is neither that of post-modern destitution nor that of the subject of consciousness, self-sufficient and rational; neither confined to the universe of reason nor in the space of the irrational. Indeed, the late Lacan subject has a foot in both universes, hooked as she is within the three registers of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. Lacan postulates a different logical space whose terms pose a problem to the self / other dualism. It questions the notion of difference at its very source. The extension of the concept of *littoral* to the conditions of constructing subjectivity allows us to think of intersubjectivity as an open system in a frontier space of intersections. In addition, considering the limit as a space with its own legislation allows us to depart from disjunctive ideas in which emotions and affects are tied to nature and the irrational, and knowledge to culture and reason—with the gender bias this classically entails. If letters are akin to litter for Lacan, this means that letters as such do not point to a pure void of signification, but produce a hole in which *jouissance* always lurks, more particularly in writing that is a ‘practice of the letter’ (Lacan 2001 [1965]: 193). Lacan returns to this text in his Seminar XX on Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, and points out its imprecision’s—which, interestingly enough, he attributes to his infatuation with poetry. He has this to say with respect to the solitude of speaking beings:

That solitude, as a break in knowledge, not only can be written but it is that which is written *par excellence*, for it is that which leaves a trace of a breaking in being:

That is what I said in a text, certainly not without its imperfections, that I called ‘Lituraterre’. ‘The cloud of language’, I expressed myself metaphorically, ‘constitutes writing’ (120).

Lacan's contribution generates ideas to work with the principles of coexistence, of exclusion-inclusion and of connection-opposition, to deal with the question of the interrelatedness between creativity and unconscious knowledge in relation to the field of subjectivity as embedded in other fields. His later writings, in particular, attempt to recover a dimension of heterogeneity opposed both to irreconcilable dualistic positions and also to the indifferent coexistence of notions, for as Guattari points out; the proposal of non-meaning sometimes fails to perceive the dimension of heterogeneity of other reference universes (Guattari 1992). The preceding considerations parallel my own itinerary through Higher Education policies, managerial reports, and contemporary books on creativity. I was fortunate enough to have to stop in my tracks. PhD candidates have a knack for taking problematic perspectives in relation to positive analyses and hasty theoretical closures—even when their ways are 'sanctioned by the market' (Chaudhuri 2007: 104), for then it is often, as it was in this particular instance, the exegesis, which fosters a need to contain the layering and expansion of knowledge. But this is clearly the topic of another paper.

I'd like to end this paper not with a conclusion, but with a metaphor inspired by Lacan's text 'Lituraterre' (1971 [2001]) that signifies creativity as an event, i.e., a process as much as an effect, and thereby a product as well.

A spring day by the ocean. A crisp breeze is blowing. Waves pound against the rocks to make fine spray of water-droplets floating in the air, sometimes making high columns of smoke. There are clouds in the sky. All around us in this scene are categories which the intellect recognises, but the imagination overrides. In the boundaries in between—the shoreline separating land and sea, the horizon where land and sea end and the sky begins, are the makings of metaphors. Some dead, some new. Here begins creativity.

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