

Chapter 7

Distributed Problem–Solving: How Artists’ Participatory Strategies Can Inspire Creativity in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to deconstruct some persistent myths about creativity: the myth of individualism and of the genius. By looking at literature that approaches creativity as a participatory and distributed phenomenon and by bringing empirical evidence from artists’ studios, the author presents a perspective that is relevant to higher education. The focus here is on how artists solve problems in distributed paths, and on the elements of creative collaboration. Creative problem-solving will be looked at as an ongoing dialogue that artists engage with themselves, with others, with recipients and with materials, in asynchronous or synchronous relationships. The empirical background draws on qualitative narratives collected in 2011-2014 and based on interviews with recognized artists. The questions guiding the present chapter are: If creativity does not arise from talent but from exercise and hard work, what can educators at higher education learn from the ways creative groups solve problems? How can artists contribute to inspiring higher education?

BEYOND THE CREATIVITY MYTH

A number of approaches to creativity emphasize talent and individual processes as the basis for the generation of creative output. Guilford (1956) and Torrance (1962), for instance, come to the conclusion that individual talent is essential to creativity. The talent-approach to creativity has essentially two ontological consequences: first of all, creativity is something individuals are born with, a psychological trait that individuals do or do not “have”; secondly, creativity occurs at individual level. The myth of the lonely genius is still very rooted in Western mind-sets and has a long history (Chemi, Jensen & Hersted, 2015). Several contributions have conceptually and empirically challenged these assumptions. Creative processes are essentially based more on motivation and sustained hard work (Amabile, 2011) than on talent, individuals are actually creative against the background of continuous collaboration (Sawyer, 2012)

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and the craft implied in solving creative problems is based on and nurtured by challenging, meaningful, engaging work done with, for and among others. Discovering the workings of the ways in which creative individuals and groups practice collaborative strategies is still a challenge. This is partly because creative processes can be tacit (Polanyi, 1962), experiential (Dewey, 2005) or internalized (Vygotski, 1997) and therefore can be difficult to explain in words, but also partly because studies looking deeply at creativity as collaborative, distributed and relational are still young in their broader dissemination. In other words, even though the pluralistic perspective can count at least 15 years of contributions, these studies have not been fully integrated into common knowledge about creativity, which still is perceived as the act of geniuses and specially gifted individuals. Clearly, the distributed and collaborative perspective must deal with myths going back to the nineteenth century that are deeply rooted.

This chapter aims to deconstruct such myths by looking at literature that approaches creativity as a participatory and distributed phenomenon and by bringing empirical evidence from artists' studios, looking at how artists solve problems in distributed paths. The implications of the elements of creative collaboration for education are several. If creativity does not arise from talent but from exercise and hard work, this means that creative techniques can be learned and taught. If educators can engage learners in creative training, what is the consequence for higher education? What can educators at higher education learn from the ways creative groups solve problems? How can artists contribute to inspiring higher education? These will be the questions guiding the present chapter.

LOOKING AT AND LISTENING TO ARTISTS SOLVING PROBLEMS

The empirical background of this chapter draws on qualitative narratives, which were collected in 2011-2014, in collaboration with colleagues from the research group ARiEL (Arts in Education and Learning), based at Aalborg University. In this study, professional artists' narratives were gathered on the topics of cognitive, emotional and relational elements of creative processes (Chemi, Jensen & Hersted, 2015). The focus of data collection was on the specific qualities of creative and learning processes as interconnected to each other. Although this research was not originally intended to focus on understanding higher education issues, it became clear afterwards that adult and higher education could draw a great number of insights into creative learning and teaching from the collected data, for instance, by discussing the study's consistent findings on creative processes, motivation and identity. This chapter will focus on one specific element of the creative process - problem-solving, especially in participatory settings. Digging specifically into the artists' compositional strategies could provide new insights and inspiration for innovative approaches to higher education.

Creativity is not to be understood here as a phenomenon exclusive to the arts, just because the main focus is on the domain-specific form of artistic creativity. Many different professional fields cultivate and need creativity. However, because studies on creativity show the necessity for more focused attention on the specific domain of artistic creativity, this chapter will look at the clearly delimited strategy of problem-solving in artists and artistic communities. These communities seem to cultivate and nurture creativity as one of the basic means and ends of their learning, communication, expression and engagement in relationships and collaboration (for the debate on domain-specificity see Baer 2010). Within artistic professions, creativity is not only a basic need but also a well-acknowledged expectation. Not only does one accept acts of creativity from artists, but also one expects artists to solve problems creatively. Therefore, the research behind this chapter sampled full-time professional artists (the so-called Pro-C

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