

Musings of a Bemused Author - Creativity in Practice

In this musing I will look at how creativity works, briefly exploring how this can be identified and assessed in a theoretical formulaic manner, and whether this systemic examination makes any sense to me as a practising writer.

To assess how creativity works, first, we should attempt to define what creativity is. However, theorising or defining such a concept proves difficult. When asked about being creative, the author Andy Brown stated he is “not very interested in theories of creativity; I just know that I recognise and love creativity in others and in myself” (Brown, 2012, p.55-56). I argue that while the disinterested view of creativity theories appears to be a common one, the statement begs the unanswered question of creativity recognition. I suspect each writer, if asked to do so, would provide a plethora of aspects to identify creativity and that while there would be overlaps in thinking, there would be little agreement.

In attempting to define creativity, the American psychologists, James Kaufman and Robert Sternberg, postulated that “there are two main aspects. The first is novelty [...] The second aspect is variously called quality” (Kaufman and Sternberg, 2010, p.467). A third aspect of usefulness was also considered for measurement.

I argue that regardless of whether usefulness is included or not, all three of these measurements are applied to the output within its given environment. For example, a child’s audience (parents, teachers, peers) may see as highly creative, a simple drawing by a child at school. Equally, a café barista’s customer may see their output laid bare in the milk froth as creative. However, the above examples, if viewed

by alternative audiences, may not be judged as creative, as it depends on the lens they are seen through and how creativity is measured.

While discussing the evolution in biology and culture, the Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states that, “creativity results from the dynamic operation of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognise and validate the innovation” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.6). This attempt at a systemic process of creativity perception allows the craft of creativity to be assessed in a formulaic way, regardless of creativity aspect such as painting, sculpting or writing for example.

Csikszentmihalyi, goes on to state that, “creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between people’s thoughts and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than individual phenomenon” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.23). As a creative writer, this feels like it could provide an avenue worthy of discussion. On the plus side, when I develop a work of fiction, having this assessed in a sociocultural systemic way feels like it could provide a route for validation of the work. Of course, the negative side of this could also lead to countless rejections of my creative works, especially if I am pushing against sociocultural boundaries.

In itemising his systems model, Csikszentmihalyi defines domain as the ‘cultural rules’ component. He states that, “Each domain is made up of its own symbolic elements, its own rules, and generally has its own system of notation” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.37). From my perspective, while creating deliverables in the University of Bolton, Creative Writing domain, I have a set of rules such as word count, line spacing, citations/referencing, font, deadlines, etc. Each of these rules is there to guide students on an acceptability criteria and boundaries for each

deliverable. Post-grad, I expect to have those criteria set by the various publishing houses I may be attempting to get published by.

From a field perspective, Csikszentmihalyi defines this audience as “necessary to determine whether an innovation is worth making a fuss about” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.43). From my examples earlier, these field/society reviewers are the audience they are created for, such as a parent, teacher and/or café customer. From my under-grad perspective, the field I create for includes lecturers and external examiners. From a post-grad perspective, this could be publishing house staff.

Finally, Csikszentmihalyi discusses the person who brings novelty into the domain. He states that there is a tendency for investigations to “focus on the creative person, believing that by understanding how his or her mind works, the key to creativity will be found” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.45). I argue that, of all the elements in the system, this is the most flawed. I agree with Csikszentmihalyi when he states that “perhaps being creative is more like being involved in an automobile accident [...] There are too many variables involved” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.45). From my own creative writing individuality, I argue that many influences and experiences from my past and present shape my creativity.

In Summary, I argue that even though we have a potential system to aid us, creativity and the definition of such will remain a discussion point in sociocultural constructs. As Csikszentmihalyi hints at, humans and therefore creativity assessments are in a constant evolution.

823 Words (excluding title, footnotes and bibliography).

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