

Learning the “lessons of the arts”¹: creativity, creative arts education and creative arts educators today

Donna Lee Brien, School of Creative and Performing Arts, CQUniversity Australia,
d.brien@cqu.edu.au

Abstract

In *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink proposes that right brain (creative, non-linear) thinking will be paramount in the coming economic and working reality of what he terms the new ‘Conceptual Age’. Pink’s ideas follow a recognition that has been growing since the late 1990s of the contribution of the creative industries sector in sustaining the growth momentum of advanced economies. In such an environment, it is perhaps no surprise that employers list creativity among the attributes they seek in potential employees and that, in turn, creativity is becoming widely recognised as a valuable personal asset. In this context, creativity is regularly identified as a skill/attribute that students will gain during their secondary or tertiary education. Yet most of the discussion in higher education around creativity focuses on students, and how teaching can develop and enhance their creativity, with little about the creative arts educators who will supposedly foster this attribute. This paper, therefore, investigates creative arts education in terms of the importance of creativity for students and educators’ creativity and its relationship to academics’ personal job satisfaction.

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Introduction

Contemporary educators in higher education have a remit to prepare work-ready graduates who will also have the necessary transferable skills to cope in a largely unknown future working world. This preparation is important to enable future graduates to:

survive and thrive in a world different from one ever known or even imagined before ... In this vein, students will need to master new cognitive abilities leading to a cultivated mind that is disciplined, able to synthesize, be creative, respectful, and ethical, along with the capacity to integrate ideas from different disciplines and an appreciation for those differences (Sandell, 2009).

Vanada (2010) notes how, in the USA as early as 1991, education policy determined that “21st century students would need excellent skills in the areas of creative thinking, problem solving, reasoning, and decision-making skills”. In his

book, *A Whole New Mind* (2005), Daniel Pink goes further to propose that right brain (creative, non-linear) thinking will be paramount in the coming economic and working reality of what he terms the new “Conceptual Age” and that, therefore, training in creative, flexible, synthetic thinking is essential. This is the type of deliberation that is often characterised as “big picture” thinking.

Pink’s ideas, like those of Sandell, Vanada and others, intersect with a number of recent views about creativity² and its importance in both the personal and working lives of individuals, as well as the collective fortunes of cities, states and nations. One of these is the proposition, current since the late 1990s, of the importance of the creative industries sector—the knowledge-intensive creative arts-based industries that rely on creativity and talent as core attributes—in sustaining the growth momentum of advanced economies (Caves, 2002; Florida, 2002, 2005; Landry, 2000). As a result, many developing economies are also aggressively pursuing development in the creative industries. The Hong Kong government, for example, supports the creative industries through legislated programs of support, industry clustering and event staging. This began when, in his 2000-2001 Policy Speech, the Financial Secretary started to redefine Hong Kong’s economic policy approach to one of “maximum support, minimum intervention” (HKSAR, 2000, para. 23-28). The term “creative industries”—so ubiquitous it seems barely credible it was coined only a little over a decade ago in 1997 (CITF, 1998)—is today widely utilised and, it seems, understood. This includes a wide adoption of the term’s central proposal that the creative arts are not a discrete realm of society, relevant only to an elite group of artists and connoisseurs, but make a significant contribution to national economies and local communities as well as individual lives. Although recognised before Richard Florida popularised the term (see for example Landry, 2000), Florida’s influential analysis of the ways in which creative individuals both contribute to a nation’s economy and reinvigorate the locations in which they live, set a new international agenda with such statements as:

Any country that doesn’t keep building its creative strengths—with broad support for creative activities, and with policies that bring more citizens into the creative sector rather than under-employing them—will fall behind (Florida, 2004, 2002: xxvi).

Following this argument, creativity is valued for the product it creates (often known as ‘creative content’), and if countries do not want to “fall behind” as per Florida’s dictum, they must foster the arts in order to stimulate this production. The Australian government, like those of New Zealand, the United States, Britain, Europe and much of Asia, thus states that it is committed to promoting and developing national culture including creative/artistic production, as a way of stimulating the economy and generating innovative and creative responses to national and international markets (see, for further discussion, Webb & Brien, 2006). This imperative was clearly expressed by Jennifer Bott, then CEO of the peak funding body for the arts in Australia, the Australia Council: “we’re seeing worldwide that economies—national, regional or even local—that encourage and emphasise creative talent are winning, and those without creative talent are slipping behind” (2004).

These ideas have also been adopted by individual businesses. In an interview in 2008, Jeff Bezos, CEO of global online retail site Amazon.com, stated the importance of creative thinking for businesses in the current global financial crisis: “One of the only ways to get out of a tight box is to invent your way out ... with thoughtfulness and focus” (2008). Another example is how international advertising giant, JWT (rebranded in 2005 from the J Walter Thompson company),

no longer sees its core task as that of selling products, instead its global remit is to “create stories our customers want to spend time with” around the brands it profiles (JWT, 2009). Research on how emotional factors are becoming more important in the creative economy underscores the parallel importance for businesses in being able to create compelling narratives around the goods and services they provide (Yagi, Sugio, Yogo, Akama, & Azuma, 2010).

The necessity for, and specialised labour involved in, the creation of such narratives acknowledges a link between creativity, innovation and success. In the workplace, for instance, employee creativity is acknowledged as the key factor in creating or otherwise providing innovation (Petty, & Guthrie, 2000), just as innovation is acknowledged as a key factor for organisational success (Ford, & Gioia, 2000), particularly in terms of global competitiveness (Thompson, Jones, & Warhurst, 2007). A number of studies also link levels of employee engagement at work with their creativity and the subsequent success of the organisation they work for (see, for instance, Turnipseed, 1994; Keyes, & Haidt, 2002).

The value of creativity

In such an environment, it is perhaps no surprise that employers in a number of fields outside those directly related to the creative arts list creativity among the most important attributes they seek in potential employees (Malakate, Andriopoulos, & Gotsi, 2007). Within the creative industries themselves, creativity has also been found to be a key skill/attribute not only for those employed in acknowledged creative roles. It is also key in a range of positions outside of those traditionally thought of as requiring any significant levels of creativity. For example, in the fashion/apparel industry, creativity was recently found to be important not only for (the obviously, necessarily creative) fashion designers, but also for those working in the merchandising and sales parts of the industry (Karpova, Marcketti, & Barker, 2009). In the personal realm, creativity and happiness have been linked, with moreover, the opportunity to have access to creative environments reported to have a positive impact on happiness (Di Giacinto, Ferrante, & Vistocco, 2007).

In response, creativity is becoming widely recognised as a valuable professional as well as personal asset. On the individual level, this recognition is evidenced in the significant number of self-help books that purport to provide ways to develop and enhance personal levels of creativity. Creativity is also increasingly being identified as a skill/attribute that students will gain during their secondary or tertiary education. This creativity will, moreover, not only be gained by studying the creative arts, with a number of disciplines—including science, law, business and economics, and information and communication technology—claiming creativity as a core skill/attribute. The creative arts are also discussed in such terms of generic skill building, that is, in terms of the benefits their study offers beyond training in specific art forms. Often the benefits are described in the enhancement the creative arts offer for the creative ways these students can think as a result of undertaking their study. The following is indicative of much such musing:

For students living in a rapidly changing world, the arts teach vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking. If our primary demand of students is that they recall established facts, the children we educate today will find themselves ill-equipped to deal with problems like global warming, terrorism, and pandemics. Those who have learned the lessons of the arts, however—how to see new patterns, how to learn from mistakes, and how to

envision solutions—are the ones likely to come up with the novel answers needed most for the future (Winner, & Hetland, 2007).

The US Department of Education recently put this more baldly, proclaiming that the creative arts are an essential part of (school—primary and secondary) education, due to their ability to produce “tenacious, team-oriented problem-solvers who are confident and able to think creatively” (2009, p.1). Writing about visual art and reflecting upon studio practice, Hetland, Winner, Veenema and Sheridan (2007) agree, asserting that the benefits of art education go far beyond learning to make art or respond to it. Instead, these learners develop studio “habits of mind” that help them continue to learn and engage in creative thinking after their studies. These mind habits are the ability to: develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, as well as understand the art world.

This is an interesting development after decades during which creative arts educators have had to justify their subjects’ place in the curriculum. As early as 1978, Clark and Zimmerman wrote how art educators have provided rationales for their programs and courses, in the process embracing what they called “a myriad of viewpoints” (1978, p. 34). These included “creativity, art therapy, self-realization, perception training, environmental awareness, cultural awareness, social equality, special education, projective techniques, and mastery of communication media” (1978, p. 34). Since at least the early 1990s, assertions that experience in the arts could boost academic achievement in other areas (see, for instance, Du Pont, 1992; Moore, & Caldwell, 1993; Luftig, 1993, 1995; Hamblen, 1993) have often been mobilised in such discussions. In 1998, however, Eisner reviewed the literature on this subject from 1986 to 1996 and found that it was difficult to ascertain the basis upon which such claims had been made. He, moreover, concluded that, “we do the arts no service when we try to make their case by touting their contributions to other fields” (1998, p. 59). Winner and Cooper’s (2000) study similarly found no evidence for any causal link between study of the creative arts and academic achievement in other areas.

Thus, while some have criticised the creative industries’ instrumentalist approach to the creative arts, the discussion around the key importance of creativity and innovation over the past decade has, at least, looped educators back to Clark and Zimmerman’s point of view that it is important for art educators to concentrate on “the unique contribution art may make to a person’s education” (1978, p. 34). On this, many commentators now agree that creative arts programs can be justified purely in terms of “the unique and prized contribution to that which is indigenous to art” (Clark, & Zimmerman, 1978, p. 34), and not for its effects in other discipline areas. In 2010, therefore, Vanada could state that:

Quality art programs have the potential to develop students’ capacities to think in critical, creative and practical ways, to consider multiple viewpoints, and to reflect on and revise their own views. ... [C]ritical thinking competencies and dispositions are made visible through inquiry-based interactions with works of art. Students’ skills for problem solving, investigation, analysis, synthesis, and reasoning with evidence increase through art-based inquiries. The higher order thinking skills of conceptual problem-solving and decision making are developed in the process of artmaking (Vanada, 2010).

The focus here is clearly on the key facets involved in the study of the arts themselves as the arts: “interactions with works of art ... art-based inquiries ... [and] the process of artmaking” (Vanada, 2010).

Focusing on creative arts educators

In the context of higher education, much of the discussion around creativity concentrates on students, how their creativity can be developed and enhanced, and what the workplace wants and/or needs. Surprisingly little attention has, however, focused on the educators who will supposedly foster the development of such skills and knowledge. Indeed, as recently as 2009, Gallos noted the “lack of attention to the important nexus among leadership, creativity, artistry, and innovation” (2009, p. 79) in the tertiary sector.

Many creative arts educators feel their purpose (in the workplace and sometimes in their lives as a whole) lies in dual areas—their teaching/research and their creative practice (see, for instance, Scheib, 2006). In this, the development of their own potential as an artist is a key component of their identity as an educator (see, for instance, Kroll, 2006 on writers). Reflecting this orientation, learning and teaching in the creative arts in higher education is often characterised as a kind of joint venture between students and teachers (see Kroll & Brien 2006). Terenzini and Pascarella (1991) have reported that teacher-student relationships are extremely important to university-level student development, and learning has indeed been described as “a three-legged race” in the postgraduate context (Dibble & van Loon 2004) and as “a kind of exchange” by tutors at the University of the Arts in London (Shreeve, Sims, & Trowler, 2010). In the London study, learning and teaching was seen by educators as a collaborative activity, where “tutors engage in exchange of ideas, conversation, knowledge and expertise with their students, rather than adopt didactic approaches based on certainty of expert knowledge” (Shreeve, Sims, & Trowler, 2010, p. 125). With this in mind, many creative arts programs have purposefully embedded Lave and Wenger’s “communities of practice” model of collaborative interaction (1991) in their curriculum design and learning activities. In this, various aspects of a community of practice approach are understood as centrally important because such learning communities allow the refining, communication and shared use of knowledge that is essential to “the kind of dynamic ‘knowing’ that makes a difference in practice” (Wenger, 1998). It is, indeed, the striving for excellence in creative practice that often provides the overriding rationale for such programs, as well as a commitment to this striving by both students and teachers. Lesser and Everest point out the importance of a whole of community input for such dynamic learning environments:

the community tends to set its own agenda ... continually defining itself by the needs of its members. Communities typically take part in a number of formal and informal activities, ranging from education sessions ... to day-to-day interaction designed to solve specific work problems (2001, p. 38).

Such thinking, therefore, results in educators and students working in an environment where all participants are learning (and often performing their individual or collective arts practices) alongside each other. This is a style of learning and teaching that recognises Heift and Caws’s findings in the creative arts area of creative writing, that learning is “fostered when less knowledgeable students work with more knowledgeable peers” (2000, p. 213), but where the definition of student and peer is somewhat fluid.

Academic job satisfaction

In terms of the important role that art educators in all creative disciplines thus perform, and need to perform in this engaged manner, it is worrying that job satisfaction among academics of all kinds is on a widely reported decline across the

Western world. This trend is especially important as low job satisfaction has been cited as a possible direct cause of the UK's teaching crisis (Crossman, & Harris, 2006). It is not surprising to learn that research has proved that job satisfaction is directly related to employee motivation and performance (Ostroff, 1992), and has implications for both an individual's productivity in the workplace as well as their personal well being. Although individual job satisfaction in various professions and positions has been studied for at least half a century, and Locke's 1976 study found more than 3,000 articles on the subject, university academics were not studied in these terms until relatively recently. It also seems that there has been little interest in drilling down through the higher education sector to particularly sample and investigate creative arts academics and their feelings about their profession.

One enduring aspect of this area of study is that most researchers have accepted Hertzberg's (1968) well known "dual factor theory" whereby job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction are separate entities, caused by different factors and not necessarily influencing each other. That is, a lack of job satisfaction does not necessarily result in job dissatisfaction (discussed in Lacy, & Sheehan, 1997, pp. 306-7). Hill, for instance, found that academic job satisfaction was related to internal, core, job-related factors (in particular, teaching and other academic work tasks), while dissatisfaction depended upon external, extrinsic factors (1986). While some studies of specific countries and disciplines have found that overall job satisfaction increases progressively with academic position level (Oshagbemi, 2003 on the UK; Holden, & Black, 1996 on medical academics), others have disagreed with these findings (for example, Eyupoglu, & Saner, 2009 on academics in Cyprus). Studies such as those by Pearson and Seiler (1983) and Manger and Eikeland (1990) indicate that the 'climate' or 'culture' of the academic workplace and work environment have a significant influence on feelings of personal satisfaction, and these findings have been reproduced in more recent studies. Lacy and Sheehan's 1997 study of academics' job satisfaction in Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Mexico, Sweden, the UK and USA, for instance, found that those in the Humanities, Education and Mathematics disciplines cited higher levels of satisfaction than academics from the Physical, Biological, and Health Sciences. In their Australian case study, however, they found that elements of the working environment unrelated to discipline—including university atmosphere, morale, sense of community and relationships with colleagues—were the greatest predictors of job satisfaction. Terpstra and Honoree's 2004 study of American academics, which interestingly focused on academic job satisfaction by both discipline and geographic location, did not, however, have the creative arts as a discipline group.³

Over the past decade, a number of studies have noted the deterioration of working conditions and a subsequent decrease in job satisfaction in Australian universities although, again, none of these have generated any specific data for the creative arts. A national survey conducted by the National Tertiary Education Union in 2002 under Australian Research Council funding found that the features of work that staff were the most satisfied with included "freedom to choose your own method of working", "variety in your job" and "the amount of responsibility you are given" with almost two thirds of staff, nationally, satisfied with these three features (Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, & Hapuararchchi, 2002, p. 37). The study noted, however, that Australian university staff (both academic and general) were "experiencing very high levels of occupational stress, and only moderate job satisfaction" (Winefield *et al.*, 2002, p. 97), with academic staff reporting the lowest levels of job satisfaction. Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure, & Meek's (2010) recent analysis of the sector confirmed these findings, with the summary that the

response of Australian academics to the international Changing Academic Profession survey indicating that they are “among the least satisfied academics in the world”. Bellamy, Morley and Watty (2003) have, indeed, noted the disconnect implicit in these findings, observing that it was “an intellectual puzzle” why academics remained in the profession despite this dissatisfaction (2003).

Concluding remarks

In *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), Richard Sennett argues that, although in the West we seem to have a great deal of freedom in the choice of a career, actual jobs in the modern corporately run and administered workplace (including universities) offer little real autonomy or agency and no security of tenure. As a result, Sennett reports, employees often feel little real loyalty to the organisations they work for. In these terms, the commitment that many tertiary-level creative arts educators make to their work—a commitment that is manifest in energy, time and creativity—could be explained by investigating how such an investment allows such employees to shape a coherent narrative around the personal development of their creativity. That this positive narrative is created in an atmosphere of collegiality and mutual helpfulness (the dynamic “community of practice” learning environment discussed above) may well induce a workplace allegiance/loyalty that Sennett suggests has largely been evacuated from the workplace in many other fields of work. Sennett, moreover, asserts that craftsmanship—which he defines as an “enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (2008, p. 9) and which is fundamental for individual well-being—is generally not valued in the contemporary workplace, and is contributing to employee demoralisation and a lack of job satisfaction. This aspect of working culture obviously has relevance for understanding those who teach in the creative arts, which has recognisable art forms (and values craftsmanship in them) as an underpinning focus. If it is, indeed, possible that being able to invest the “material consciousness” (the skill, commitment and judgment) of craftsmanship (2008) in the creative activities related to being a creative arts educator may, at least in part, encourage and validate the profession for those educators. In line with Sennett’s work, Reveley and McLean (2008) also believe that occupational identity is waning under managerial processes. However, they posit that some employees are not passively giving up their occupational identities, but are, in resistance, developing new ways to sustain these identities in the workplace. Such an analysis suggests that having a creative focus in their daily work may promote and foster a valuable stable occupational identity for creative arts educators. Clark’s groundbreaking work on academic staff found, indeed, that it was more likely that academics would identify with their discipline and professional communities than their institutions at large (see, for instance Clark, 1987, 1989).

Thinking about academic work in ways such as those discussed above may assist in explaining the disconnect between the low international rates of job satisfaction for academics and the high levels of personal satisfaction and engagement often attested to, and displayed, by creative arts educators in the Australian higher education sector.⁴ My own professional experience suggests that many creative arts educators are right brain thinkers—in Pink’s terms, “creators and empathizers”. Many also understand their personal approach to work in ways that could be expressed in terms of Sennett’s sense of “craftsmanship” in relation to the both their own creative practice, as well as the teaching of the creative arts. It could be that, for those working in the higher education sector as creative arts educators, expertise across a number of Pink’s six attributes—design, story, symphony,

empathy, play and meaning—provides a space for the development of an occupational identity and, in Reveley and McLean’s terms, a means for promulgating and sharing this identity through the opportunities these skills provide for developing and enhancing creativity in the workplace. Howard Gardner’s longstanding research on creativity places creativity as a function of the choices all people make, finding that, as Gallos summarises, “the potential for significant discovery, originality, and imagination is an innate human capacity, available to anyone fully engaged in a purposive life” (Gallos, 2009, p. 76). If educators are to continue to assist their students in making these choices, we need to invest in understanding their own choices, approaches and responses to creativity and the creative arts workplace.

Notes

1. Quoted in Winner, & Hetland, 2007.
2. In common with terms such as ‘excellence’ and ‘quality’, ‘creativity’ is often used in an unqualified or commonsense manner, and its meanings are taken for granted. In general discussion, the term creativity is used to convey one of the following: ‘what artists do’; ‘more innovative ways to generate economic production’; ‘the ability to see the world differently’; and ‘the ability to combine familiar ideas in unfamiliar ways’. In this discussion, I am characterising creativity in two ways. The first is the definition in wide use in the field of creative production, which takes account of the thinking and material processes that result in works of art (see, for example, Carter, 2004). The other, which is more widely used, is creativity as an attribute of thought and/or action based on the skills of perception, conceptual thinking and self-reflexivity, in Margaret Boden’s terms: “the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are new, surprising and valuable” (2004, p. 1).
3. Terpstra and Honoree’s (2004) discussion of satisfaction with pay rates also had specific relevance to the American context where rates of pay are mutually negotiated in a way that is not common in Australian or UK universities.
4. Evidence of this may be found in the conferences and published conference papers of the discipline specific peak bodies such as the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (see, <http://www.aawp.org.au>), Australian Screen Production Education & Research Association (see, <http://www.aspera.org.au>) and National Council of Tertiary Music Schools (see, <http://www.nactmus.org.au>).

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