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The cult of creativity

Opposition, incorporation, transformation

Kirsten Drotner

Within the European Union, 2009 marked the Year of Creativity and Innovation. The tradition of defining annual themes as focal points of joint policy efforts may be seen as ways in which the European Commission seeks to facilitate processes of coordination and cooperation across member states, political domains and organisational boundaries. On a grander canvas, these annual themes serve as important indicators of wider discourses to do with Europe's position in the global economy and political landscape.

This chapter begins with an outline of the EU initiative in 2009, its key actors, documents and forms of organisation, as a way of mapping current themes in the discourses on creativity and its ramifications. It then goes on to review the conceptual development of creativity as it relates to learning, drawing on two empirical studies on young people's media productions which I undertook in the late 1980s and mid-2000s, respectively. I will pay particular attention to the ways in which children's and young people's creative learning figures in recent debates, because these groups in the global North have been seen as harbingers of the future since the nineteenth century, thus illuminating with particular clarity more general notions of social values and their inflections of power. Also, the review will explore European debates beyond Britain in an attempt to identify traditions of thought still resonating within, at least European, policy-making today. In the final part of the chapter, I reflect on current dilemmas in studying creativity and learning, and I argue for more attention to be paid in future to digital forms of creativity with a view to their implications for lifelong learning.

'Imagine, create, innovate'

The official website of the European Year of Creativity and Innovation states that the objectives of the initiative are 'to raise awareness of the importance of creativity and innovation for personal, social and economic development; to disseminate good practices; to stimulate education and research, and to promote policy debate on related issues' (<http://create2009.europa.eu/>). These objectives state the main areas of action, namely to raise awareness, disseminate good practice, stimulate education and research and promote policy debates. But they also illuminate the possible dilemmas inherent in fulfilling these objectives. First, they link the concepts of creativity and innovation; second, they assume a connection between these two concepts *and* personal,

social and economic development; third, they make no reference to ways in which these types of development may be prioritised or balanced through the advancement of creativity and innovation. Naturally, no brief mission statement can include nuanced arguments or logical deliberations. Still, the opening statement merits some reflection since it offers a condensed version of the rationale for launching the initiative as it emerges from its organisation, background papers and policy statements.

The main actors responsible for the year's actions are a mixture of public and private players. At EU level, the responsible bodies are the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture in association with the Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry. In addition, partners contributing to the year range from pan-European think tanks such as the European Policy Centre and the Lisbon Council, through major corporate stakeholders like EuroChambers, a trade association representing over 19 million enterprises, and the European Interest Group on Creativity and Innovation to private foundations and non-profit organisations such as the International Yehudi Menuhin Foundation and the European Federation for Intercultural Learning.

The organisational distribution of stakeholder groups – corporations, government agencies and NGOs – and the thematic mixture of culture, the arts, education and commerce also figure in the composition of projects. The project portfolio indicates that creativity and innovation are particularly to do with popular culture and media arts, and that children and especially young people are key participants in promoting these processes. In tandem with the overall objectives of raising awareness of economic as well as social and personal benefits to be gained from creativity and innovation, the diversity of projects also illuminates how the European Commission seems at pains to harness these processes as means of community building and cultural citizenship as well as means of more immediate corporate ends.

The slogan of the year, 'imagine, create, innovate', is clearly flagged on the main website. Again, the assumption seems to be not only a logical connection between the three aspects, but equally a temporal connection. Imagination is seen as the catalyst for creating new products and services that, in turn, may spur innovation, a term that is routinely associated with commercial competitiveness and gain. In addition to this neat logic, the slogan indicates a sequential link between individual capabilities and joint outcomes of wider societal and economic significance.

Taken together, the organisation and the substance of the EU initiative 2009 demonstrate two interlocking sets of relations. One is the link made between creativity, innovation and learning for the rising generation, a link that indicates not only that creativity is the precursor of innovation, but, perhaps more important, that creativity is a means to an end, namely competence formation that the individual as well as society may profit from. The other assumed relationship is the one set up between creativity, innovation and particular forms of production to do with culture and the arts. Introducing innovation into the equation makes a clear connection to an economic rationale, a connection that refashions traditional notions of creativity.

The overarching logic, binding together the two sets of relations, is as simple as it is well rehearsed in current policy-making. Europe is part of a global knowledge economy dependent upon the shaping and sharing of intangible forms of production such as information, entertainment, services and knowledge. In order to survive and thrive within this competition, it is argued, Europe needs populations endowed with competences that may facilitate innovation within these areas. Cultural industries and cultural creativities figure prominently here, because intangible forms of production fundamentally involve the generation, modification and exchange of signs – images, text, sound and numbers. Such semiotic processes are meaning-making cultural practices in the sense defined by Stuart Hall: 'meaning ... is constructed through signifying – i.e. meaning-producing – practices' (Hall, 1997: 28). Viewed through the

policy prism of the European Commission, there is a close fit between competitive knowledge economies, social coherence and cultural production and exchange.

This logic is evident in the background reports and EU policy statements that have fed into the Year of Creativity and Innovation. For example, in 2007 the European Commission issued a communication on the central importance of culture in Europe in order to promote three key objectives: cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs; and culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations (European Commission, 2007: 8). This harnessing of cultural creativities for knowledge societies is spelled out in a report by the Brussels-based consultancy KEA aiming to explore the educational importance of what is termed 'culture-based creativity ... that finds its source in art and culture' (KEA, 2009: 31). This broad-based remit is arguably an objective for all member states, because in an 'increasingly complex world, creativity and the ability to continue to learn and to innovate will count as much as, if not more than, specific areas of knowledge liable to become obsolete' (European Commission, 2008: 3).

The European Union's initiative the Year of Creativity and Innovation sums up key economic, social and policy moves since the early 1990s to position culture and creativity at the heart, not only of individual and social life, but of the economy at large (Sales and Fournier, 2007). It equally offers a prism through which key dilemmas deriving from this foregrounding may be viewed: is creativity a lever of economic advancement or of socio-cultural development? Are creative learning processes specific to the arts and the cultural sectors? Or can, and should, such processes be mainstreamed at all educational levels and in all disciplines? The central positioning of creativity in socio-economic discourse, I would argue, marks a decisive shift in thinking about the relationship between creativity and learning. Creativity is now becoming widely accepted as a key social demand, not a unique, individual gift or a general human capacity that one may choose to nurture; nor, even, a social capacity to cope imaginatively with everyday challenges (Craft, 2000). In order to situate the current situation, and substantiate my argument, I shall revisit recent developments in forging a conceptual nexus between creativity and learning, developments that have impacted on young people's creative practices – and my own possibilities of studying these.

Creativity as a means of social inclusion

In the late 1980s, I conducted a one-year study of 14–18-year-old Danes making video in their leisure time. The group met at a youth club that had recently begun to offer courses in video production along with more traditional courses in, for example, photography, dance, metalwork and dressmaking. The course was extremely popular and attracted a mixture of very engaged young women and men, few of whom had any previous experience with visual practices. I made participant observations during the entire production process, conducted two rounds of individual in-depth interviews with the participants and analysed their final products, which were proudly presented at a public event at the end of the club season. In retrospect, the study was an early example of media ethnography (Lull, 1978; Bryce, 1980; overview in Schröder *et al.*, 2003), although this term was unknown to me at the time.

What was clear, though, already during my long spells of observation, was the participants' creative use of existing narrative and formal repertoires of which they had an intimate knowledge from film, television, magazines, popular music and, to a lesser extent, the arts. In my resulting study, I sought to identify the contexts conducive to these creative practices and to spell out the characteristics of the participants' modes of production and interaction (Drotner,

1989; 1991/1995). These characteristics included aspects well known from theories of creativity: learning and training in the conventions of the medium were interspersed by attempts to explore their boundaries; phases of intense and self-forgetting involvement were followed by spells of disengagement, disagreement and frustration; individual ideas were picked up, discussed and sometimes discarded within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that operated as both production and evaluation team. Sudden insights resulted from wrestling with the semiotic resources at hand, and these articulations fed into iterative processes of joint exploration and reflection.

My access to the club was easy and my study met with immediate interest from the city council and local head teachers as well as from social workers at the club. This interest was undoubtedly spurred by recent domestic moves in cultural and social policies. The minister of culture, Ole Vig Jensen, exercised his political visions according to the credo of his liberal party, which in highly publicised newspaper adverts of the late 1980s claimed that ‘the best social policy is an effective cultural policy’. When Jensen later became minister of education, he slightly modified the slogan into ‘good educational policies are the prime social policies’. Culture was not seen as an end in itself defined in terms of high art and according to normative criteria of taste. Rather, culture was thought to be a means of democratic participation and social inclusion, both of which might be facilitated through education. The diversity of course topics at Danish youth clubs, which at the time attracted about two-thirds of those in the age-band 14–18, testifies to one of the ways in which these ideas were put into practice.

A range of policy initiatives to explore the connections between culture, social inclusion and education were set in motion in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. Several of these focused on creative processes in general, and aesthetic experiences in particular. For example, a Danish report feeding into a revision of primary and lower-secondary education defined ‘aesthetic competences’ as one of five key competences with the argument that ‘it is increasingly understood that aesthetic values may play an increasingly important role in the next century’ (Lund *et al.*, 1988: 44). A major grant scheme was launched to transform Danish primary and lower-secondary schools into cultural resource centres for local communities; and soon after, reforms of upper-secondary schools increased students’ options for choosing subjects such as design, film, visual communication and advertising. Interestingly, these options were taken up primarily by students in vocational streams, while students in the academic streams focused on core subjects such as maths and languages. Conversely, the academically inclined groups were more active in out-of-school practices involving music-making, singing, design and video production. My own study confirmed that middle-class students, envisioning an academic career, downplayed the importance of creative leisure pursuits while at the same time being the most active in engaging with these activities.

Conceptual trajectories: from Scandinavia to Germany and back

The initiatives launched in Scandinavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s may be seen as the epitome of a long and conflicted development in relating creativity, learning and education. Emblematic of early efforts is the work of the Swedish author and philanthropist Ellen Key, whose *The Century of the Child* saw timely publication in 1900. Two of her main arguments in the bestselling book were to have a lasting impact on cultural and educational discourses in Sweden and abroad. As is indicated by the title, she made strong claims to defining children as independent beings to be understood and respected on their own terms, not measured by adult standards. Also, she considered an attention to aesthetic simplicity as a means to enhance the quality of everyday life and advocated that children be actively involved from an early age in, for

example, exploration of natural phenomena, woodwork and drawing in order to nurture their imagination and creative capabilities.

Key's ideas were picked up by the so-called child-study movement and by progressive education, particularly as these trends evolved in Germany at the time (Röhrs, 1991). Here, creativity is understood as an individual capacity that can be developed. Children and young people are therefore regarded as key agents in training these capacities. Moreover, creative practices are seen to encompass areas beyond the arts, following a romantic notion that manual skills and use of tools are more natural to the uninitiated. Particularly in Germany, the promotion of creativity and aesthetic practices is seen as a necessary antidote to the perceived negative effects of industrialisation and urbanisation. These perceptions serve to underpin arguments for educational reforms based on the German idea of *Bildung*, to denote a rounded character formation involving emotional, rational as well as practical aspects.

Through much of the twentieth century, cultural and educational reforms in Scandinavia and elsewhere play out these ideas. Importantly, proponents of the reforms see their efforts as part of a wider social critique. Notably after the Second World War, education and culture become pillars of the Scandinavian welfare states. Through the 1960s and 1970s there is a clear policy development from a democratisation of Culture on to cultural democratisation, playing out two very different notions of culture that in the United Kingdom are epitomised by Matthew Arnold and Raymond Williams, respectively. In a Scandinavian context, Arnold's normative view of culture as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world' (Arnold, 1869: viii) and Williams' more anthropological understanding of culture as 'a whole way of life' (Williams, 1958/1975: 18) are intimately bound up with different ideals of societal, and indeed human, development in modernity. While the normative view sees culture as a civilising force and a lever of personal betterment, the anthropological view largely disbands normative assessments in favour of embracing human diversity.

These opposing views on culture also serve to position education very differently. If culture is defined as a source of social and personal advancement, it is open to elaboration and refinement through training, which is a less evident perspective if culture is defined in inclusive terms as a dimension of life. Danish educational objectives speak to these oppositions when in 1975 a 'rounded character formation' of the individual pupil is introduced as a main aim of primary and lower-secondary education in tandem with the time-honoured objective of training specific skills. Particularly subjects within liberal arts and crafts are strengthened within the curriculum as means of securing this character formation, but increasingly as optional courses with no assessment or evaluation, unlike core skills such as science and Danish language and literature. The young people I met at the youth club in the late 1980s were educated within this framework and personalised, as it were, the conditional success of Ellen Key and the movements of educational reform set in motion nearly a hundred years previously. Imagination and creative processes explored through arts and crafts were no longer oppositional signs of societal critique but had become incorporated into the very fabric of education.

Developing digital creativities

In 2005 I co-conducted an ethnographic study in a provincial town of Denmark where students, aged 12–13 and 15–16, from two school classes and over a period of three weeks, produced their own narratives by means of computer animation, the software programme Photoshop or stop-motion animation. The digital animation project formed part of a larger cultural venture, incorporating also professional drama, oral storytelling and museology. As a partnership across education and various cultural sectors, the project was funded by the Ministry of Culture and

aimed to empower young people in all parts of the country through exploratory cultural practices. Two key conditions made this project different from the one I had conducted nearly 20 years previously. It was positioned as part of an explicit cultural strategy, and it was defined as a school project while being facilitated by professional animators and storytellers and with students working both on the school premises and in out-of-school workshops. In scholarly terms, the research design of the two studies was very similar. We observed the participants' individual behaviour and group interactions; we conducted individual interviews with teachers and professional animators after the storyboard phase and did focus-group interviews with pupils after the production phase. In our analysis of the narratives, we focused on material properties, thematic elements and formal aspects such as multimodal re-combinations, editing and the use of sound (Nyboe and Drotner, 2008).

Our results confirmed other studies, including the one I conducted on video-making in the late 1980s, in documenting the various phases of creative media production, its basic dimensions in terms of technical affordances, skills constraints and importance for identity work (Sefton-Green, 1999; Kearney, 2006; Goldmann, *et al.*, 2008). Unlike my video project, the animation study illuminated ways in which digitisation and the technical convergence of all sign codes into one platform serve to foreground post-production in the overall process, and make mashups, or cut-and-paste practices, key aesthetic dimensions (Gilje, 2008; Perkel, 2008). Moreover, the two studies are set within different institutional contexts. In the youth club, the video course was led by a young film professional, and the participants defined their activities as leisure-time pursuits. The animation project was led by a joint team of animation professionals and the students' ordinary teachers. Also, the young participants defined the project as school-based while its subject and the work processes involved clearly challenged their received notions of schooling, as is indicated by their extensions of their spatial and temporal routines.

Indicative of this dual positioning were the teachers' choices of roles. From early on, they disengaged themselves from the actual work processes and only stepped in at moments when they saw student discussions and conflicts in need of pedagogical intervention. Unlike the students, they did not challenge their professional self-perceptions or modes of work during the project. When interviewed they were nearly all at pains to define the importance of the exploratory and creative processes involved in the project, while at the same time signalling an inability, or unwillingness, to facilitate such processes as part of their professional tasks. To be a maths or mother-tongue teacher seemed incompatible with undertaking digital experiments.

Harnessing creativity for knowledge economies

Without making too easy comparisons, it seems evident that the differences encountered in the two studies are to do with technological changes, with different relational compositions and institutional positioning. Moreover, the wider policy circumstances are different. While my video project was framed by a widely accepted discourse on cultural democratisation, the animation study was carried out at a time when Danish education and cultural discourses were deeply influenced by two conflicted discourses. One the one hand, the 1990s saw an intense pre-occupation with defining core skills and subjects and with quantitative indicators of student performance at all educational levels. On the other hand were heated debates on national identity formation and the perceived risks to cultural, not social, coherence. The indicator discourse was spurred by international comparative surveys, such as PISA and ROSE, in which Danish students fared rather poorly in terms of spelling and maths, for example. That they did very well in terms of collaboration and problem-solving went almost unnoticed in public debate. Conversely, the national identity discourse served to reinvigorate normative perceptions of culture, culminating in

a major initiative taken by the Ministry of Culture in 1995 to define seven cultural canons that should operate as educational guides of cultural coherence.

The teachers in the animation project were positioned at the intersection of these dominant discourses that directly cut across the domains of education and culture and indirectly highlighted tensions within the social domain. When mapped onto this discursive framework, the teachers' ambivalence may be seen as attempts at manoeuvre within these tensions. The indicator discourse foregrounds the importance of defining core subjects, and hence a core professional identity, that downplays explorative learning processes and new (digital) means of expression. The national identity discourse, however, makes much of narrative, of identity work and of the key importance played by culture in promoting civic engagement and social coherence, all of which the teachers recognised as positive elements in the students' practices.

On a grander canvas, the animation project bears witness to current dilemmas in defining a position for creative practices in education in general and for digital production practices in particular. The EU trends towards harnessing creativity as a lever of innovation and competitiveness for European knowledge economies at one and the same time serve to expand the remit of creativity and narrow its perspective. If knowledge is an engine of societal survival, obviously new knowledge is its fuel. This makes creativity and innovation critical competences in virtually all areas, as we have seen, but competences that sit ill with established traditions of evidence-based learning and assessment, and hence are notoriously difficult to implement in a systematic fashion. One answer to this dilemma is to define creativity as a means to specific ends which are more easily defined. Economic expansion and competition are such ends. The link made between creativity and knowledge economies serves to narrow the range of creativity while at the same time making claims to its wide range of applications.

Digital creativities as transformative learning

The harnessing of creativity for knowledge economies is part of a neoliberal paradigm that takes many forms and inflections. Questions have been asked about the empirical validity of knowledge economies, the conceptual vacillation between knowledge societies and knowledge economies, and the epistemological relations between knowledge societies, learning societies and information societies (Garnham, 1998; Sales and Fournier, 2007; Hearn and Rooney, 2008). In more concrete terms, the contested nature of priorities, policies and practices has usefully been outlined and reviewed in terms of its implications for creativity and learning (e.g. Loveless, 2002, 2007; Banaji *et al.*, 2006). However, we still need more systematic and empirically grounded analyses of the ways in which digital means of expression may facilitate future developments and organisations of creativity. So far, some headway has been made along two lines of enquiry. The first, and in policy terms most influential, defines digital means as ICT technologies, and it is often situated within a socio-cognitive tradition of thought. However, no clear correlation can be found between ICT use and educational attainment, including creative outcomes (CERI, 2007: 15). The second line of enquiry defines digital means as media for meaning-making and tends to follow constructivist traditions of learning. While no large-scale review of this tradition exists, major case studies indicate that digital media can play a formative role in creative development (Reid *et al.*, 2002), but authors caution against simplified equations between intense activity and creativity (Buckingham, 2007; Drotner and Schröder, 2010).

In some sense, the latter approach is more in line with recent EU claims to an inclusive educational application of creativity in order to enhance civic engagement and social coherence. Here, the storage, shaping and sharing of knowledge are increasingly implicated with digital processes. While these processes enhance distributed forms of knowledge generation and

challenge the sites and settings of learning (Drotner, 2008: Drotner *et al.*, 2008), they equally serve to highlight basic issues to do with the aims, means and outcomes of learning: is education a resource for all or a few dimensions of life? Can creativity be dissociated from its applications and contexts of use? Should creative learning facilitate personal or social forms of development? The interweaving of digital media and forms of communication into everyday life in many parts of the world merits revisiting old questions in the hope that we may come up with new answers.

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