Developing Creativity in Higher Education

Our ability to imagine and then invent new worlds for ourselves is one of our greatest assets and the origin of all human achievement, yet the importance of creativity in learning and achievement is largely unrecognised in a higher-education world that places more value on critical and rational thinking. It is a vision of a higher-education world in which students’ creativity is valued alongside more traditional forms of academic achievement that provides the driving force for this book.

Developing Creativity in Higher Education has grown out of the Imaginative Curriculum network-based collaborative learning project. It is the first book to systematically address the issue of creativity in higher education. It features:

• an analysis of the problem of creativity in higher education and rich perspectives on the meanings of creativity in different teaching and subject contexts;
• illustrative examples of teaching and assessment strategies, augmented by web-based curriculum guides and aids to encourage teachers to examine their own understandings of creativity in order to help students to develop their own creativity;
• practical advice on how to foster creativity at an individual and an institutional level.

*Developing Creativity in Higher Education* will appeal to teachers, educational developers and institutional managers who want to enrich the higher-education experiences of their students and enable them to develop more of their potential.

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Developing creativity in higher education
An imaginative curriculum

Edited by
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**John Cowan** In 1997, when John retired from full-time employment, Sir John Daniel as the Open University’s VC, told the degree ceremony that John was ‘someone with a passion, which some might describe as an obsession, with student learning’. Not a bad obituary for someone whose academic career has been, and still is, characterised by a constant search for innovative ways of enhancing the learning experiences of his own students. In the context of this volume, his contribution comes from being one of the original signatories to the Education for Capability Manifesto, who has worked for 40 years, gaining a number of awards in the process, to develop problem-solving and
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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is one of the world’s leading authorities on creativity as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon. His life’s work has been to study what makes people truly happy. Drawing upon years of systematic research, he invented the concept of ‘flow’ as a metaphorical description of the rare mental state associated with feelings of optimal satisfaction and fulfillment. His book, Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience (1990), has been translated into 15 languages. His analysis of the internal and external conditions giving rise to ‘flow’ show that it is almost always linked to circumstances of high challenge when personal skills are used to the utmost. He is currently the C.S. and D.J. Davidson Professor of Psychology at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University and Director of the Quality of Life Research Center, and also Emeritus Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago, where he chaired the department of psychology.

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Norman Jackson began his professional career as a ‘hard rock’ geologist, holding teaching, research and industrial posts in the UK and Saudi Arabia. Although education is now his chosen field of endeavour, he still explores it as a geologist might – using his eyes and his imagination! After completing a stint as Her Majesty’s Inspector for geoscience education, he forsook the world of geology in 1993 for higher education, working for a number of national bodies in policy, research and development. In 2000 he joined the newly formed Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) as a senior advisor and transferred to the Higher Education Academy when it formed in 2004. In December 2005 he became Director for the University of Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTrE). In January 2001 he initiated the Imaginative Curriculum project – an emergent programme of research and development work formed around the idea of creativity in higher education, the fruits of which are synthesised in this book. Norman is a Visiting Professor of Higher Education at the University of Hertfordshire. His research interests and publications embrace change and evaluation in higher education and how people, organisations and systems learn. This book and the Imaginative Curriculum network are a testament to his strong commitment to network-based collaborative learning in order to promote large scale cultural change.

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Contributors

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Christine Sinclair has a background in philosophy, education and (temporarily) mechanical engineering. She became an engineering student to find out more about students’ experience of higher education, and discovered that students frequently have to behave creatively to cope with new practices that are strange and sometimes alienating. This natural tendency in students can be positively and usefully exploited, while making the environment more conducive. As a lecturer in the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Christine works with staff and students, and values approaches that recognise the joy of learning for both. She is the Scottish co-ordinator for the Imaginative Curriculum network.

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In the sort of emergent and socially constructive knowledge-building process we are engaged in, it is sometimes very difficult to associate an idea with an individual, a conversation or event. Throughout the Imaginative Curriculum project, people have been very generous with their ideas and opinions in order that we might all advance our understanding. This book is dedicated to every academic, student, staff and educational developer, manager and researcher who contributed to our project; without your contributions this book would not have been possible. We would particularly like to pay tribute to the members of the Imaginative Curriculum network who have participated in email conversations and network events, or who have provided personal accounts of their teaching, and the 94 National Teaching Fellows, 100+ academics and 100+ students who contributed to our five research studies.

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Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has inspired many people with his thinking and writing on creativity, and influenced our approach to exploring the idea of creativity in higher education. Thank you for adding your voice to those of the other contributors.

In keeping with the idea that creativity is a socially constructed phenomenon
we must also recognise that it is a socially supported phenomenon and acknowledge the enormous contribution made by our families to giving us the time and space to turn our imaginations into reality. You thought we were mad but thank you, Taraneh, Navid, Yalda, Neda, Ben, Jodie, Gemma, Kathy, Elizabeth, Daniel, Jenny, Jasmine and Jake for putting up with us.

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Abbreviations

CACE Central Advisory Council for Education (England)
CETL Centres of Excellence for Teaching and Learning
CPD Continuing professional development
DCMS Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DFEE Department for Education and Employment
DFES Department of Education and Skills
DTI Department of Trade and Industry
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council England
ILTIE Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education
LTSN Learning and Teaching Support Network
NACCCE National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education
NCSL National College for School Leadership
NESTA National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts
OFSTED Office for Standards in Education
SEDA Staff and Educational Development Association
QCA Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
QAA Quality Assurance Agency
Foreword
Developing creativity

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Doctoral students drop out of universities before graduation not because they cannot pass exams or get good grades in courses, but because they cannot come up with an original idea for a dissertation. They are bright and know an enormous amount, but all their academic careers they have learned how to answer questions, solve problems set for them by others. Now that it is their turn to come up with a question worth answering, all too many of them are at a loss.

One hears the same story in industry and the business world, in civil service and scientific research. Technical knowledge and expertise might abound, but originality and innovation are scarce. Yet the way our species has been developing, creativity has become increasingly important. In the Renaissance creativity might have been a luxury for the few, but by now it is a necessity for all.

There are several reasons for this, some that are in conflict with each other. The first is the undeniable increase in the rate of change, mainly spearheaded by technology but also involving lifestyles, beliefs and knowledge. Today’s technical marvel is obsolete tomorrow; the diet so many swear by today turns out to be unhealthy after all; the scientific specialty one has trained in for many years no longer provides a stable career. Great nations collapse, wealthy corporations dissolve in bankruptcy. It takes creativity not to be blinded by the trappings of stability, to recognize the coming changes, anticipate their consequences and thus perhaps lead them in a desirable direction.

A second trend is the rapid globalization of economic and social systems. Ideally, this would lead to a better distribution of labor and of resources; a better integration of beliefs, values, and knowledge. At the same time, globalization involves a great deal of what Schumpeter called ‘creative destruction’ – without a certainty that the destruction will actually result in a creative outcome. It will take a good dose of creativity to avoid the result that the division between rich and poor will not replicate on a global scale the former division between capitalists and proletariat; that the valued traditions of less powerful cultures will not be lost, but integrated with the Western patterns so as to enrich the future instead of impoverishing it.

Another emerging trend is the specialization of knowledge, leading to new forms of fragmentation based on knowledge rather than tradition. A great number of breakthroughs in science of the past century have come at the interface of disciplines: between physics and chemistry, between chemistry and...
As each discipline keeps becoming deeper and more complex, it is easy to lose sight of those neighboring branches of knowledge that might help transform one’s own. Any society, any institution that does not take these realities into account is unlikely to be successful, or even to survive in the coming years. On the other hand, individuals who see the opportunities in this new scenario are going to be in a better position to add value to their communities, and prosper in the process. But this requires the ability to recognize the emerging realities, to understand their implications, and to formulate responses that harness the energy of evolution to build products, ideas, and connections that add value to life. And that requires creativity.

How is education preparing young people for this creative task? So far, not very well. The culture-lag between what is needed in the present and what the schools offer has always existed; now it threatens to grow ever larger. Schools teach how to answer, not to question. They teach isolated disciplines that, as the years pass, become more and more difficult to integrate. Reference to the present, let alone to the future, is lacking in most school curricula which are dominated – understandably, perhaps – by a concern with transmitting past knowledge. Yet the past is no longer as good a guide to the future as it once had been. Young people have to learn how to relate and apply past ways of knowing to a constantly changing kaleidoscope of ideas and events. And that requires learning to be creative.

The present volume, edited by Norman Jackson and colleagues, is thus very timely. To my knowledge, this is the first volume addressing the role of creativity in higher education. It is a difficult but essential project. Difficult for several reasons, some more easily avoidable than others. The most obvious danger is that of reducing creativity to a facile routine of exercises in ‘thinking outside the box.’ These days the popular view of a creative person is someone who spins off original ideas left and right, a person one would like to hang out with at a cocktail party so as to be amused by a constant stream of witty apperceptions.

But if one is to go by the evidence of the creative individuals of the past, creativity requires a focused, almost obsessive concern for a clearly delimited problematic area. Neither Isaac Newton nor Leonardo da Vinci would have been great hits at a party. Neither Johann Sebastian Bach nor Dante Alighieri were known for their witty repartee or fluid imagination – except in their own work. There are occasional exceptions: Benjamin Franklin was more like the current conception of what a creative person should be like, as apparently he was the life of the party at the French court during his residence there. But within their domain of interest, all creative individuals love the task that engages their whole energy. They all echo the words of Paolo Uccello, the Florentine who was one of the first to learn how to use perspective in painting, who according to his wife used to walk up and down the bedchamber all night, shaking his head and muttering: ‘Ah, what a beautiful thing is this perspective!’

So if one wishes to inject creativity in the educational system, the first step might be to help students find out what they truly love, and help them to immerse themselves in the domain – be it poetry or physics, engineering or...
dance. If young people become involved with what they enjoy, the foundations for creativity will be in place. Vittorino da Feltre, who at the turn of the 1400s started one of the first liberal arts colleges in Europe, well understood the relationship between enjoyment and creative learning. He called his school La Gioiosa – The Joyful Place – and many of his students ended up among the leading thinkers of the next generation.

But how can the joy of learning be instilled in modern universities? There are several approaches one can take: First, making sure that teachers are selected in part because they model the joy of learning themselves, and are able to spark it in students; second, that the curriculum takes into account the students’ desire for joyful learning; third, that the pedagogy is focused on awakening the imagination and engagement of students; and finally that the institution rewards and facilitates the love of learning among faculty and students alike.

But even this is just a first step, a setting of the stage, so to speak. When students are eager to immerse themselves in learning because it is a rewarding, enjoyable task, the basic prerequisites for creativity are met. What next? That is where the readings of this volume come in. They present a variety of perspectives on the stimulation of creativity, on how to support and nurture it. Taken together, they provide a much needed cornerstone for the systematic introduction of creativity into higher education.

Claremont, December 2005