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TOWARDS CREATIVE EXPRESSION

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Part 1 - Literature Review.....	4
Introduction.....	4
Mindfulness	7
Self-Awareness	11
Uncertainty/Control	16
Evaluation and self-improvement.....	21
Environment	27
Gender and Gatekeepers	32
Part 2 - Curricular material.....	37
Introduction.....	37
More about the course.....	39
On the textbook.....	40
Lesson 1 Cultivating Mindfulness.....	42
Reading:.....	42
Comments:	42
Practice:.....	46
Discussion Questions:.....	46
Supplemental Reading:	47
References.....	47

Abstract

In this Final Project for my Master of Arts in Integrated Studies, I have examined the internal and external barriers to personal creative expression. As part of this project, I have written an annotated bibliography, a literature review, and developed a six-week course for adults on this material. I have included below in part one, the literature review, and in part two, the introduction and the first lesson of the course material, including some reflections on my personal barriers to creative expression, and the creative process I went through to develop the course.

Part 1 - Literature Review

Introduction

Creativity has been an object of study among academics for several decades, now. Psychologists have extensively studied the creative personality, trying to discover personality traits that make one person more creative than another. Academics in business and management have studied organizational creativity and innovation, to discover why one company or organization comes up with highly creative products and processes, and another does not. Sociologists have occasionally looked at creativity in a social context, but this topic does not seem to have been a fashionable topic to pursue for some time. Interestingly, there seems to be very little academic literature in education on teaching creativity, or how to teach more creatively.

This paper is primarily a literature review, regarding the internal and external blocks to individual creative expression, rather than organizational or social creativity, though I will be discussing environmental and social contexts. I will also focus on individual creative expression, mostly in an artistic context such as writing or visual art, rather than the business and management view which tends to conflate creativity with problem solving. Having been born and raised, and having received all my education in a Western country and Western context, I acknowledge that my perspective of creativity and creative expression is grounded in the Western view, however I will attempt to acknowledge and integrate other cultural views.

The fairly scattered history of research into creativity has resulted in a number of different definitions of what creativity is, and how one might identify and/or measure its expression, most of which have been based in psychological research. Most often, creativity is given the basic definition that the product or process must have some sort of originality or novelty, and some sort of social

usefulness. This definition, however, presents some problems. First of all, originality or novelty to whom? If something is only creative if it has never been thought of before, then someone re-discovering old ideas or techniques is not creative, someone who independently re-invents an old idea is not creative, and it is not possible to learn existing material creatively. This does not make sense within my experience, and I will go out on a limb and say that it does not make sense within most people's lives. Secondly, social usefulness is indeed a good thing, but it is problematic when applied to a definition of creativity. It implies that if my creativity only enriches my own life, such as creative expression that I never share with anyone else, is inherently not creative, and that artists such as van Gogh were not actually creative until decades after his death, when society finally acknowledged the beauty of his paintings. The logical paradoxes of this definition I find problematic.

A problem that psychologists have also found with this definition is the difficulty in operationalizing it to measurable standards - how does one actually measure novelty or social usefulness, as part of research into how or why creativity comes about? A different measure was developed by psychologists, defined by three interrelated components; flexibility, fluency and originality (Reitzschel, De Dreu & Nijstad, 2007). Flexibility is defined by the number of semantic and cognitive categories that a person can access, that is, whether he or she can think about the issue at hand in more than one way. Fluency is how well the person can think within the categories he or she can access, usually measured by the number (not the quality) of ideas within each category. Originality is the ability to come up with new thoughts, without relying on routine or habitual thought. Though this definition is fairly useful in terms of being able to operationalize and offer an approach to measure creativity, there is still a tendency to assume that creativity equals problem solving.

Another psychological view of creativity is that of four interrelated concepts; the creative product, the creative press (by which is meant environment, but it is called "press" for alliterative purposes), the creative person and the creative process, though Lemons (2005) would also add creative

passion, or purpose at the fifth concept, on the grounds that creativity does not happen without passion or purpose. In general, Western researchers have focused on the creative person and creative product, intensively studying the personality traits of creative people, and emphasizing the product sometimes to the exclusion of all else. Eastern approaches tend to emphasize the creative process and the creative process, often viewing the creative process to be very similar, if not the same, as the process of attaining enlightenment (Sundararajan & Averill, 2007).

This view is most similar to the approach that I will be taking in this paper, however I have divided my approach to six concepts, rather than four or five. All six involve both internal and external factors, though the first four are more internal, and the last two are more external. The first concept is that of mindfulness, or the opposite, mindlessness. Like creativity, mindfulness has many different definitions, some focusing on the process, some on the product, some on the spiritual context. No matter the definition, however, a lack of attention to why and how you are doing things, including artistic practice, as well as the assumptions, structures and approaches involved, is a significant block to creativity.

The second concept is self-awareness, or the lack thereof. It is very easy to create internal creative barriers through negative self-talk, avoidance behavior, or simply lack of awareness of one's own habits and patterns. A person cannot even begin to address these issues without awareness of his or her own thoughts, emotions and sensations.

Third is uncertainty and control issues. In Western culture, with our emphasis on the empirical approach, we are taught to be afraid of and to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity, and to pursue control of people, situations and oneself. This leads, however, to rigidity and unwillingness to question and explore. There is a great deal of creative power in uncertainty and ambiguity.

Evaluation and self-improvement issues are the fourth concept. Creative, artistic people must always be looking for ways to improve, and work hard in a daily practice to increase skills, and

produce creatively. But fear of judgment, fear of being shown to lack talent, and fear of success all combine to frequently cause creative paralysis, inability to produce, and unwillingness to show creative products to anyone. To counter this, a creative person needs to distinguish between constructive feedback and subjective criticism based on another person's needs and biases.

The fifth concept is the creative environment, both internal and external. Our environment consists of not just our physical surroundings but our relationship to ourselves and the people around us, and our physical bodies. All of these aspects need to be acknowledged and cultivated to free creative expression.

Finally, all artists have to contend with gatekeepers who have the power to give or withhold access to money, time, and other resources that are crucial for the full development of one's artistic life. However there is a long history of men and women having different access to creative resources, and expectations of time and energy that can be devoted to creative expression are different for each gender.

Mindfulness

Langer (2005) defines mindfulness as being present in the moment, aware of moment-to-moment sensations, and engaged in and with our present circumstances. She says "Mindfulness is an effortless, simple process that consists of drawing novel distinctions, that is, noticing new things. The more we notice, the more we become aware of how things change depending on the context and perspective from which they are viewed. Mindfulness requires, however, that we give up the fixed ways in which we've learned to look at the world. Most of us confuse the stability of our mind-sets with the stability of the underlying phenomena, and we come to think that things are, will always be, and even need to be a particular way without recognizing how they may also vary. It isn't as though we

need or want to be so rigid. We celebrate as creative those who show us how the commonplace may be made different." (2005, pp 5-6).

In the context of this paper, mindfulness is defined as awareness and attention on and for the people, processes and things that are around us, as differentiated from self-awareness, which is awareness and attention of our internal environment. Self-awareness will be discussed in the next section, below. This differentiation between mindfulness as external awareness and self-awareness as internal awareness is not usually made by others who use the term "mindfulness" including some of the researchers and writers cited below, but I believe the distinction is necessary for a clear discussion about these two aspects of awareness.

Langer (2000) points out that mindlessness - that is, lack of awareness and uncritical acceptance of everything around us - is not a felt experience, because a felt experience requires mindfulness. As a result, many people spend more time being mindless than they realize. Being mindless isn't inherently a bad thing; we simply don't have the physical and cognitive resources to be mindful every moment of every day. We likely can all think of times when we have done a task, such as traveling a route to school or work we've done many times before, and found ourselves at our destination with no recollection of how we got there or what happened on the way. That is the essence of mindlessness. The problem, as Langer (2000, 2005) sees it, is that we spend too much time in mindlessness, and not enough time being mindfully aware, and mindfully questioning our normal ways of seeing and doing things. As she states in the quote above, creative people are able to make us see the commonplace in new ways, and this starts with the creative people seeing in new ways themselves. That is, being mindful.

Ryback (2006) has given a good overview of the connection between neurology and mindfulness within psychology over the last couple of decades. Research has shown that mindfulness, and mindfulness meditation such as taught in a medical context by Jon Kabat-Zinn, among others

(though Kabat-Zinn's teachings are much more self-awareness within the definitions used in this paper) can physically change the structure of a person's brain, creating better communication and balance between the hemispheres, and increase creativity and intuitive thinking.

Ansberg and Hill (2003) also found that people who were more creative problem solvers than their fellow subjects had more diffuse attention. That is, they paid more attention to information that did not seem relevant to the problem at hand at the moment, but as the experiment was designed, the additional information often became relevant to subsequent problems. A more diffuse attention, therefore, resulted in a slightly longer response time, but better and more creative solutions. This would seem to indicate that the current emphasis on speed and focus that is often found in both school and the workplace is counter to the time and wandering needed by creative people.

What Ansberg and Hill (2003) specifically do not address is whether the diffuse attention and greater creativity can be taught or learned. However, Begley (2007) offers an interesting perspective on this question. Her book centers around the neurology research presented to the Dalai Lama over the last few decades in his Mind-Life conferences, and she documents how neurologists and other brain researchers have come to understand that our brains and how we think and perceive is not hard-wired, but is actually highly plastic and able to change with training. She describes several experiments which compared average Americans with no attentional training, Americans with a few weeks of meditation training, and Tibetan Buddhist monks with at least a decade (and up to five decades) of intense meditational training. They found that Buddhist compassion meditation (which is a form of mindfulness meditation) significantly increased the gamma wave output of the person's brain, the state associated with perception, problem solving and consciousness, and lowered activity in the area of the brain associated with negative emotions such as anxiety and fear. Both of these conditions are important for long term creative production.

As will be discussed later, there are different ways of looking at the world; an empirical as

compared to a constructivist approach to knowledge, an individualist as compared to a collectivist approach to psychology and society. As Westwood and Low (2003) state, these can be generalized to the Western, linear, individualist and product-oriented approach to creativity and creative production, and the more Eastern, circular, collectivist and process-oriented approach. The authors point out that most of the Western academic literature on creativity and creative production assume the Western model as the one and only legitimate approach to the subject, however as has been stated, mindfulness and creativity requires a consideration of different ways of doing things.

Coombs and Krippner (2007) took this idea further in their discussion of personal and cultural development in terms of moving from less creative to more creative stages. In Piaget's stages of personal development, he identified how a person moves towards more complex and abstract thinking, from an infant's sensorimotor explorations of the environment, to an adult's theoretical reasoning. Coombs and Krippner drew parallels between these personal developmental stages and the stages humans as a species have gone through, from an archaic consciousness when humans were only just starting to explore the possibilities of art, through to a stage that could be called constructivist postmodernism, or to extend Piaget's stages, a post-conventional person, in which a person is not limited to a certain point of view or approach, but can tap into and use whichever one seems to be appropriate for the moment.

Though Coombs and Krippner do not go on to explain and explore the idea, they state that it is mindfulness, and specifically mindfulness meditation that seems to be the best tool for allowing people to advance to this stage of personal and cultural development. Though meditation per se may not be necessary, it is indeed the mindfulness mindset that seems to be the key, in that one cannot move between views and approaches without an awareness of one's own views and assumptions.

Self-Awareness

It is a fundamental tenant of cognitive-behavioral psychology that all behaviors (including thoughts and self-talk as behaviors) make sense and fulfill a function from the actor's point of view. If the behavior does not, the actor wouldn't engage in that behavior. Therefore, even self-destructive behavior such as excessive alcohol consumption, performs a function such as easing or distraction from emotional pain. Cognitive-behavioral therapists, on the basis of this tenant, try to discover the main functions filled by an unacceptable behavior, and introduce an acceptable and more constructive behavior that will fill the same function (Follette, Linnerooth & Ruckstuhl, 2001).

But what does cognitive-behavioral psychology have to do with creativity? Cognitive-behavioral psychologists have collectively spent decades studying how and why people can change, and they have come to the conclusion that you have to know what is going on in your own head before you can change both mental and physical behavior. In short, one cannot change in the long term without self-awareness.

An early example of the relation between self-talk and creativity is a study done by Boice (1985) in which he found blocked and unblocked academic writers, based on both self identification and the number of published and submitted papers over the previous year. Boice had both groups of writers write down their thoughts before, during and after writing tasks, and he coded and compared them. He found that both groups had thoughts he categorized as working apprehension, that is, thoughts about writing being difficult, demanding and complicated, fears of running out of ideas, and worries about writing interfering with other important obligations.

The significant difference between the two groups, however, was that the productive, unblocked writers had a fairly high proportion of psych-up thoughts, centered around encouragement and determination, and the blocked writers had very few of these. The blocked writers instead had a high

number of thoughts in the six other categories of maladaptive thoughts. These six categories are;

- Procrastination - justification for avoiding or relating writing, awaiting inspiration or external motivation.
- Dysphoria - thoughts reflecting burnout, anxiety, panic, groundless worries, disillusionment with the context, fear of losing control.
- Impatience - thoughts about wanting to achieve more in less time, anger or annoyance with deadlines and/or competition, high expectations for impressing others, resentment of doing prewriting tasks because they are not finished products.
- Perfectionism - the internal critic that allows no mistakes or imperfections, thought of how every paper must be a major contribution to the literature.
- Evaluation anxiety - thoughts about fears of disapproval and rejection, fears of complications brought by success.
- Rules - beliefs that good writing must be spontaneous, original and clever, or other rules about editing and writing strategies.

Boice did not extend this study to examination of whether simply being aware of their own self-talk made any difference for either group of writers, and he does not address the issue of the blocked writers potentially changing their negative self-talk to un-block themselves.

The issue of using self-awareness as a stepping-stone to changing habits and patterns is addressed by Watson and Tharp (2002). They list five basic steps for self-change:

1. Select a goal, develop a commitment to change, specify the behaviors to be changed.
2. Make observations about the target behaviors in a structured manner, and record them. Try to discover the antecedents and rewarding consequences of the behaviors.
3. Work out a plan for change. Change thought patterns, change rewards, change one behavior

into another.

4. Re-adjust the plan as needed. Analyze yourself and your behavior and modify the plan to deal with changes, and with unexpected situations or results.

5. Take steps to ensure you maintain the gains.

In this type of five step plan, the self-awareness of self-talk surrounding writing that Boice required from his respondents would fit in step two. Watson and Tharp emphasize that self-awareness is the key to self-change, as feedback is necessary to determine first what needs to be changed, what functions the behavior has, as well as what cues and rewards the behavior you want to change. Self-awareness and feedback is also important for tracking progress, identifying what is going right, and what needs to be adjusted. As will be discussed later in the context of other authors, Watson and Tharp emphasize that self-modification and improvement takes a great deal of work, practice and dedication over time; this requires a belief that one can change over the long term, and a lack of unrealistic expectations regarding the time and effort required.

This five step plan is a tested, scientifically-based approach to change, and no doubt is very effective, but only to a point. Watson and Tharp admit that avoidance behavior is difficult to identify and change. It is difficult to observe and record a behavior that you are *not* doing, and if a behavior is avoided because you assume that there will be negative consequences, you can't learn that the consequences aren't negative, or aren't as bad as expected, if the behavior that brings about the consequences is always avoided.

Watson and Tharp also point out that one of the more common reasons for failure to change is a result of short-term goals, such as pleasure or relaxation, interfering with long-term goals. They state that this must be counteracted by increased self-observation, and renewed determination to practice the behavior that brings about goals.

However as Follette, Linnerooth and Ruckstuhl (2001) point out, there is a difference between

goals and values. Goals are specific outcomes that people are trying to attain, such as changing a specific habit like quitting smoking or increasing studying behavior. Theoretically, people with goals will choose the behavior that will allow them to attain the goals, though the goals or the reasons for the goals may or may not be consciously chosen or beneficial. It is also inherent in the concept of a goal that it will at some point be achieved - or abandoned - and that particular goal-seeking behavior will stop. Values, however, are not about outcomes, like goals are, but about the process, and performing the behavior because the behavior itself is important or valuable, rather than for the purpose of attaining the end result. Follette and his colleagues note that value-based behavior is generally more positive and beneficial than goal-seeking.

Though values will be discussed further in a later section, here the difference between goals and values puts a different light on self-awareness and Watson and Tharp's approach to self-change; changing because of values rather than goals is likely to be more positive and beneficial, and effective in the long term. Avoidance behavior might also spring from a conflict between goals and values. It also suggests, as will also be discussed later, that if an artist values the process of creating the art rather than the end product, it will likely be easier to do the art, it will be a more positive and beneficial experience, and as a bonus, the end product will likely be more creative and authentic.

Watson and Tharp's approach to change is grounded in Cognitive-behavioral therapy, which has indeed been proven effective in many clinical settings, however more recently, some psychologists are moving beyond cognitive-behavioral therapy to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) which does not focus on changing thoughts and feelings and subsequent behavior, but changing a person's relationship to their thoughts and feelings. Fletcher and Hayes (2006) describe how a person can sometimes fail to distinguish between thoughts and the process of thinking, which can lead to a need to control one's thoughts and environment, a cutting off and refusal to feel physical and emotional sensations, a strong attachment to one's own self-description and a need to be right about it, and a loss

of the present moment into justifications and explanations. For example, if a person fails to distinguish the thought "I must be perfect" as simply a thought and takes it as a literal truth, the person is not distinguishing between the thought and the process of thinking, what is called cognitive fusion in psychological terms. Traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy would identify, challenge and test the thought in order to change the content. ACT would approach it differently, and work to change the context of the thought, with techniques such as labeling their own process like "I am having the thought that I must be perfect." (Hayes, 2002)

Fletcher and Hayes point out that ACT is surprisingly similar to Buddhist thought, even though ACT was arrived at through empirical psychological research and therapy, rather than the long spiritual tradition of Buddhism. Both have concluded that human suffering or lack of happiness (including joyful creative expression) is usually a result of people getting entangled in thought, language and attachment, and the way out of this entanglement is mindfulness and self-awareness, which allows one to pay attention to thoughts, the process of thinking and physical sensations, which in turn allows greater flexibility, more possibilities, and actions in service to values. The main difference between the two approaches, is that the Buddhist tradition has a great deal of emphasis on the formal meditative practice of sitting and doing nothing but meditating as a means of training the mind, whereas ACT emphasizes informal practice, with the subject practicing mindfulness in daily tasks as much as possible.

Interestingly, ACT and Buddhism have both acknowledged that a significant part of their purpose is to help people be happier. Rowe, Hirsh and Anderson (2007) found that, despite the stereotype of the creative person as unhappy, even tortured, happy, relaxed people are more creative. Specifically, they found that negative or stressed emotional states narrowed a person's attention - the "weapon effect" - that is, when someone is pointing a gun at you, your attention narrows to the width of the gun barrel. Conversely, positive emotional states increased attentional breadth, and lowered the

usually cognitive filtering of adjacent information. As a result, the happy subjects took longer to process information and return responses than the unhappy ones, but they made more and better connections. In other words, they were able to be more creative, corroborating Ansberg and Hill's (2003) finding discussed earlier that creative people have more diffuse attention. This suggests that when internal or external stressors create pressure and unhappiness, or when employers or teachers stress speed, focus and negative discipline, they are specifically creating circumstances that lower creativity. Therefore, a creative person who is aware of his or her own internal state, and takes control of stress, anxiety and unhappiness, will over the long term be able to be more creative.

Finally, whether one uses formal techniques of self-awareness or not, mindfulness-based self-awareness allows one to be a little removed from one's own thoughts, assumptions and biases. Sundararajan and Averill (2007) point out that it is often the cultural "outsider", that is, someone who understands a culture, its memes and emotional life, but is not too immersed in it, who can be the most creative in terms of contributions that can substantially change the domain. This is ultimately the value of travel, reading, and self-awareness techniques such as mindfulness and meditation. Travel and reading allow one to become an outsider to other people's cultures and sub-cultures, and a little more of an outsider to one's own on return. Self-awareness allows one to be an outsider to one's own mind, and thus be more creative.

Uncertainty/Control

Issues of uncertainty and control are very much tied up with creative expression, though this may seem counter-intuitive. As Bailey, Ford and Raelin (2009) point out, Western society is dominated by scientific realism, also known as positivism, which looks at the world as being objective, observable

and static, driven by cause and effect, with all relevant knowledge in all domains "out there" to be known. Under this paradigm, uncertainty means that there isn't enough information, and more study is needed - with enough information, the "right" choice will be obvious. Therefore, if everything is objective and observable, with only one correct solution, disagreement between people simply means that one or more parties doesn't have all the relevant information, or they are putting too much weight on one fact over another.

A realist or positivist point of view has its place; indeed, this approach is what drove the scientific revolution in the first place. As it has come to be dominant to the point of being the *only* acceptable approach in many social contexts, however, it has come to stifle creativity, because it is a viewpoint that does not deal well with either uncertainty or dynamic processes. In contrast, an interpretive approach regards society and the world as constructed, contextual, complex and dynamic, based on subjective interpretations instead of objective and static artifacts and processes. In this approach, uncertainty offers control, rather than the lack of control, because if there is only one correct solution, then there is no opportunity for choice, and lack of choice is lack of control. Uncertainty offers the opportunity to take things in a different direction than what was done before, to perhaps get different, better, more creative results.

Walinga (2008) examined this from a change readiness perspective, and found that when a person is faced with a problem that is perceived to be beyond his or her control, the person tends to move from a problem-focused to an emotion-focused approach. That is, the person tries to control anxiety instead of solving the problem. This is perfectly understandable, but also not very constructive. Walinga found, however, that there was a third choice; acceptance of a lack of control and a tolerance for ambiguity was more important than increasing the perception of control for both reducing anxiety and increasing the probability of finding a workable solution. In other words, it was not the positivist understanding and control of a situation that proved most effective, but uncertainty that offered choice

and the ability to find a different solution.

Dollinger, Burke and Gump (2007) offers a different theoretical approach that nonetheless comes to the same conclusion as Bailey and colleagues. Previous research has determined 10 value clusters that seem consistent across cultures and time, that then fall into two sets of poles; openness versus conservatism (the values of self-direction and stimulation versus tradition, conformity and security) and self-enhancement versus self-transcendence (the values of power, achievement and hedonism versus universalism and benevolence). Dollinger and his colleagues cite a different researcher who, in studying vocational counseling, found that an affinity for artistic occupations correlated with high self-direction and universalism values, and negatively correlated with security, conformity and power values. In that case, the fact that valuing power conflicted with being an artist was surprising.

In Dollinger's study, he and his team surveyed university psychology students for their values orientations, using a proven tool that has been shown to accurately predict a wide range of behavior. The respondents were asked to also self-report their creative accomplishments, and submit creative works to be rated for their creativity. Dollinger found much as the previous researcher had; high creativity on the part of the respondents correlated highest with valuing self-direction, second with universalism, and stimulation third. The strongest negative correlations were with the values of tradition, security and power, with the value of conformity weakly negative.

Dollinger and his team found the opposition of universalism and power to be especially interesting, pointing out that it would seem to indicate that true creativity springs from a desire to enhance everyone's life, whereas power values motivate a person to enhance his or her own resources and status, potentially at the expense of others. All three of the negatively correlated values, tradition, security and power, are connected with control and certainty, and this suggests like Walinga's study, that if one is focused on control and certainty, it is very difficult to see the potentials and possibilities

offered by uncertainty and choice.

The authors also point out that they see this approach of studying values to be more useful than the plethora of research already done on creative personality traits, because traits are usually seen as inherent and unchangeable, whereas values are conscious and changeable. However, the authors do not go on to suggest or speculate how a person might go about changing his or her values - it is obviously not as simple as changing clothes or getting a haircut, or even necessarily as straightforward as the process of habit change described by Watson and Tharp (2002) in the previous section. Values can and do change over a person's lifetime, but how does one change them consciously and deliberately?

Indeed, it is interesting to compare behaviors looked at in terms of values with that of traits. Renn, Allen, Fedor and Davis (2005) compiled a list from the management literature of six self-defeating behaviors in self-management. They are:

- Procrastination - avoiding a task to avoid a threat in the short term. People avoid because of fear of failure, perfectionism, anxiety, irrational beliefs, attributions, distorted beliefs about time, and viewing a task as boring and undesirable. Tasks are put off until the person is under pressure; individuals working under pressure are shown to make more mistakes than non-procrastinators. They also often experience negative emotions and self-blame, and can set up a self-destructive cycle.
- Inaccurate self-assessment - different than self-monitoring; self-assessment is about identifying and selecting behaviors/skills to develop or improve, self-monitoring is tracking progress towards the identified objectives. Accurately assessing one's strengths and weaknesses is difficult, often distorted by preexisting cognitive beliefs and self-beliefs, asking the right questions, and protecting one's ego and image. This results in misguided objectives, actions, and poor or irrelevant outcomes.

- Self-Handicapping - actions that allow one to externalize failure and internalize success, by creating obstacles or finding external excuses, such as citing test anxiety or shyness, or obstructing one's own performance with alcohol or drugs, or lack of practice. It often happens when individuals are insecure about their own ability, or there are high expectations for success, along with fear of failure, social anxiety or when failure has more favorable social connotations in the peer group.
- Inability to delay gratification - In order to achieve larger goals, one must sacrifice immediate goals for the distant but greater pay-offs. It often involves conscious choices to abandon pursuit of longer-term goals for immediate rewards, but may also be from poor attention management, and lack of knowledge of how to avoid distractions.
- Emotional self-absorption - refers to excessive self-focus. Moderate self-focus is important and necessary for self-regulation and performance to a high standard, but become counterproductive when individuals focus too much on negative expectations or emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, embarrassment, disappointment and sadness. This causes poor performance in the short term, and in the long term can lead to depression and substance abuse.
- Escalation of Commitment - dysfunctional persistence, that is, excessive persistence at a failing course of action because of felt responsibility, sunk costs, a social need to finish what one starts, or faulty knowledge. Escalation of commitment is self-defeating when psychological inertia prevents one from abandoning a defective course of action.

The authors go on to talk about the correlation between personality traits and susceptibility to these behaviors, emphasizing that high self-efficacy and feeling in control of self and situation, that is, an internal rather than external locus of control, makes one less prone to these behaviors.

This approach seems simplistic and reductionist, however, and taking another look at these

behaviors through the lens of the values constellation described by Dollinger provides some interesting perspective. In each of these six cases, Renn and his colleagues seem to be describing a behavior consistent with the poles of conservatism and self-enhancement, rather than the poles of openness and self-transcendence, which were associated with creativity by Dollinger and other researchers. Renn also emphasizes that the correction for these behaviors is more feeling of control, rather than tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, though his description of procrastination, self-handicapping and escalation of commitment seem to stem from the fear of being wrong, and making a wrong decision. If, indeed, Renn's list of problematic behaviors is relatively comprehensive, then less stressed, happier and more creative people would more likely be the result if they are taught or encouraged to value self-direction and benevolence along with the opportunities available in uncertainty, rather than valuing security and power. This is much more difficult with employees in a business setting than an artist working alone, but that is a discussion for a different paper.

Evaluation and self-improvement

Evaluation is highly important for an artist's development, in that in order to improve, an artist of any sort must evaluate his or her work for its strengths and weaknesses, and find ways to improve the next project undertaken. Self-evaluation is important, but evaluation by others can give perspectives that the artist has difficulty seeing, and can greatly accelerate improvement. And of course if the artist intends to sell his or her work, there is inevitably evaluations by potential buyers, and perhaps critics, reviewers and commentators as well. The fear of these evaluations by others, and sometimes by oneself too, has long ago been identified as a significant factor in people's refusal to express themselves creatively, even when there is deep desire to do so.

Reitzschel, De Dreu, and Nijstad, (2007), for example, found that people with a high Personal Need for Structure (PNS) did not have difficulties with being creative, as has been thought previously, but instead it is a high Personal Fear of Invalidity (PFI) that did. When faced with a relatively complex problem, the researchers discovered that people with high PNS usually used a structured approach to break a problem down into component parts and solved each part individually, a tactic that is often highly successful. In comparison, people with high PFI tended to make a complex problem even more complex by thinking about possibilities and connections and consequences far beyond what was necessary and applicable for the problem at hand, and either refuse to make a decision because deliberation was never ending, or become paralyzed under the weight of irrelevant things to consider. As the name states, the behavior of people with high Personal Fear of Invalidity was rooted in the fear of being wrong, and other people's negative evaluation as a consequence.

Though this has not been studied, this perspective may have some interesting connections to the values constellation described by Dollinger and his colleagues, as it would be interesting to see whether a high Personal Need for Structure would correlate with valuing self-direction, which correlates with higher creative ability, or with the values of tradition and security, which correlates with lower creativity. The findings of Reitzschel and his colleagues would seem to indicate the self-direction correlation to be more likely, though they do not indicate whether the need for structure is for internally imposed structure, which seems consistent with self-direction, or externally imposed structure, which seems more consistent with valuing tradition and security. A high Personal Fear of Invalidity, however, seems to be quite consistent with Dollinger's described values of security and power, as often perceptions of being wrong and being negatively evaluated are connected with loss of social status and control, both of which are connected to the values of security and power, and correlate with lower creativity.

Langer (2005) points out, "The most common reason we hesitate when presented with the

opportunity to express ourselves creatively is our fear of other people's negative opinions. Studies show that people form evaluations based on their own needs, but we tend to accept other people's evaluations as though they were objective. (p. 43)" She points out that the central tenant of cognitive behavioral therapy is applicable here; if all behavior makes sense from the actor's perspective, or the actor would not engage in that behavior, than there is always a psychological function for the evaluation on the part of the evaluator, based on his or her personal perspectives and needs. This makes both positive and negative evaluations suspect. For example, from a combination of careful use of language and presentation, standardized tests such as the SAT or other acceptance tests are presented as purely objective tests that have the final word on a person's intelligence and academic potential. It is easy to forget that the tests have been devised by people operating from their own biases and assumptions about what is important and how that might be measured, and that these biases and assumptions can change over time.

The same is the case for art. There are many instances of artists such as van Gogh or Matisse who were viciously reviled by both critics and the public at the time they were painting, yet now they are seen as great, highly creative artists. In hindsight, it is easy to see that they were reviled because they were being judged by the assumptions and biases of the time - assumptions and biases about what good art should look like, how it should be done, what constituted art. If the artists who succeeded in changing our views and paradigms of art had accepted the critic's views and either stopped creating art, or conformed to their critic's expectations, there would be a great deal less beauty in the world. Creative expression is all about new ways of seeing, and new ways of seeing are always initially rejected (Langer, 2005 p 64).

Langer also goes on to point out an idea that is often generally ignored, both by academics and by the public at large; understanding that criticism is subjective is to understand that compliments are, too. One cannot dismiss criticism as subjective and irrelevant, yet accept and appreciate compliments;

to accept a compliment is to also validate negative judgments. It can be much harder to not accept compliments on our work than it is to not accept criticism, but compliments can be used (intentionally or otherwise) to control the artist as easily as criticism, and can keep us in an evaluative frame of mind, which is ultimately detrimental to artistic production (2005, pp 62-63).

Though Langer encourages her readers to try to understand how other people view them and their work, throughout her book she emphasizes letting go of evaluations and comparisons with others, describing the detrimental effect on happiness and art, and gives very little attention to constructive criticism from self or others, meant to help an artist improve. Silvia and Phillips (2004) echoed Langer in stating "[e]xpansive cognition is impeded when the person focuses narrowly on how the self stands in relation to personal and social standards. Furthermore, worrying about whether the self will live up to important standards reduces intrinsic motivation, a critical element in creativity." However they go on to say that self-evaluation reduced creativity only when the subjects felt unable to improve; when they felt able to improve on failure, it did not affect creative performance. They also found that expecting rewards for performance also lowered creativity, perhaps because rewards inherently mean that the work is being judged for some standard of worth. This again emphasizes the need for creative people to focus on the process of production rather than the end product, as it is the end product rather than the process which is usually judged and evaluated, and thus focusing on the process removes one from what is evaluated.

Another researcher (Lundh, 2004) found similar results from a different approach. He found that those who are perfectionists are not creatively blocked by this mindset as long as they are willing to accept less than perfection in the final product. Those who demanded perfection and were unwilling to accept less than perfection tended to be very caught up in anxiety and creative and productive paralysis.

In connection with the study by Silvia and Phillips (2004), this seems to indicate that awareness

of personal patterns, as discussed in the section on self-awareness is important in terms of evaluation and perfectionism, too. Striving for perfection is indeed important for creative producers, but with awareness regarding acceptance of less than perfection, and the expectation of improvement. Both internal standards and external can be damaging to production and performance if they are not used with mindfulness.

It has become fashionable in the last decade or so for self-help and popular psychology books to declare that there is no such thing as talent, and exceptional performance is purely a matter of time and effort put into practice and developing skills (for example, Gladwell, 2008). This assumption is highly questionable, as any instructor will tell of many instances of some students outperforming others after the same or less practice and instruction. There is no doubt, however, that all questions of inherent talent aside, exceptional creative performance is not possible without a great deal of attentive practice.

Two notable and successful creative people, Twyla Tharp and Steven Pressfield, both emphasize the need for daily creative *practice* in their respective books. Pressfield, a bestselling author of numerous fiction novels as well as his classic book on creativity, *The War of Art* (2002), personifies the force that keeps a person from working on his or her art as Resistance, and calls on the Greek Muses as allies. He states that in order to defeat Resistance and court the Muse (much like one would court a potential lover), an artist must spend time daily working on his or her art, because the Muse only rewards diligence and determination. He says "When we conceive an enterprise and commit to it in the face of our fears, something wonderful happens. A crack appears in the membrane. Like the first craze when a chick pecks at the inside of its shell. Angel midwives congregate around us; they assist as we give birth to ourselves, to that person we were born to be, to the one whose destiny was encoded in our soul, our *daimon*, our *genius* (p. 123)."

Interestingly, he goes on to say that while Resistance can feel like a fear of failure, of criticism, of losing face and social status before our friends and family, it can also underneath be a fear of

success. If we succeed we will have changed our comfortable lives, left behind friends, and have to live up to the person we know we can be, rather than the poor slob from whom nobody expects anything. Pressfield speaks with the knowledge and passion of one who has been there and somehow managed to come out the other side.

Though she has a quite different approach and writing style, Twyla Tharp puts forward many of the same ideas as Pressfield. Tharp is an award-winning choreographer and dancer whose career has spanned decades, and has included writing and choreographing productions for the London Royal Ballet, the New York City Ballet, and several Broadway productions, among many others. Her book *The creative habit* (2003) stresses the title idea - that to produce creatively, an artist must get into the habit of working every day to both practice the necessary skills for the art, and produce finished works. She also emphasizes that an artist should cultivate self-knowledge in regard to abilities, style, skill set, what feeds your art and what kills it. Both of these highly successful artists state that above all else, an artist must keep working, and work hard, in spite of, or even because of his or her fears.

This is the other side of evaluation; an artist needs to realize that all evaluation is subjective and in many cases irrelevant, but the artist must also think critically about how his or her skills and products might be improved, and practice diligently at these skills, knowing that it often takes an outside perspective to see weaknesses.

Though there was not much discussion in the academic literature about techniques to enhance creativity, improvisation has been discussed within a few contexts. Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009) report on a study they conducted with 6 year old children in music lessons. One group was encouraged to improvise regularly during their lessons, the other did teacher-directed exercises and specifically not encouraged to improvise. Tests of musical creative thinking before and after the program showed that the children who were encouraged to improvise increased their creative thinking significantly, and the non-improvisational group did not.

In another examination of creativity, Lemons (2005) interviewed and did qualitative analysis on the responses of a number of artists in different fields who use improvisation as a foundation for practice and creativity. She found that when improvisation is done well, it is with a group of fellow artists who create a place of honesty and non-judgment, where the artists can take risks and show what they are thinking and feeling. It becomes an artistic challenge, because any contribution must be taken without judgment of worth or value and incorporated seamlessly into the whole. Lemons also found among her respondents that regular practice of improvisation increases tolerance for ambiguity, as it forces one to let go of expectations and constraints, and can also increase openness to experience and self-confidence, all important for creative expression. The respondents were also unanimous in stating that a good improvisation session is full of joy and laughter, and can create the feeling of "flow" described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996), as one must be fully in the moment, much like the mindfulness described earlier. There is a strong tradition of improvisation in some artistic media, such as jazz music, but there is potential for group improvisational practice in most media.

Environment

Much of the study of creativity has been rooted in psychology, and in the assumption that the individual is the unit of analysis, therefore to understand creativity is to understand the creative individual and why and how the person goes about creative production. It is becoming clear, however, that an individual's psychology and personal production is only one small piece of creativity, and a discussion of creativity cannot be complete without a discussion of the physical, relational and cultural environment.

Monturi and Purser (1995) wrote a very comprehensive discussion of the importance of context.

They point out that since the renaissance, creativity has been linked with the notion of mastery over self and environment, which has evolved into a notion of a lone genius working feverishly by himself, struggling against conforming cultural forces and authorities. Along with this is the assumption that a creative person is "gifted", meaning that one is born with the attributes of a genius (or not) and that those with this gift will simply and naturally display them without having to learn or be taught. Historically this has created the comfortable justification that little attention needs to be paid to creating a supportive environment, because genius will emerge no matter what. It also leads to the justification of mistreating, devaluing and removing resources from marginalized people such as the poor, immigrants and women, because by this reasoning, if they are "worthy" of resources, they will show themselves to be so, no matter what.

In contrast, Glaveanu (2010) and Monturi and Purser (1995) state explicitly that creativity is highly contextual, and the result of a dialogue or dynamic tension between an individual and the culture and cultural memes and symbols that are shared by the culture and the individual. Creativity, no matter the form, is about connection to other human beings, communication, and the social context it springs from. The relative influence of genes and environment may still be of some debate among scientists, but there is no doubt that an individual is a product of his or her environment as well as genetics, though the highly individualistic Western culture often has difficulty with this notion. Monturi and Purser note that "...it might be argued that Americans live in a society in which the self is socially constructed to believe it is not socially constructed."

As a result, the importance of a supportive environment should not be overlooked. To become a highly creative producer, a person requires access to teachers and instruction to gain skills, to the ideas and work of previous eminent people in the area, the resources and supplies necessary to do the work, and the time and space to practice and produce. If any of these are missing or denied, creative production, and especially outstanding creative production simply will not be possible.

An aspect of this environment which is often overlooked and ignored by Western society is that of the physical body of the creative individual. Physical movement creates and is created by our internal world, and thus paying attention to and understanding physical movement creates a different medium or channel to understand ourselves and others. Cancienne and Snowber (2003) have written on how, as dance instructors, they have used dance to physically explore the meaning of cultural gendered history and mathematics, and that exploring these topics through physical movement has given them an understanding that is deeper and more nuanced than a purely intellectual understanding. Sir Ken Robinson, in his TED talk about education and creativity, acknowledges that modern Western education devalues performance art such as drama, dance and music, and teaches children to live in their heads, ignoring all input from the neck down.

As Cancienne and Snowber (2003) state, however, echoed by Langer (2005), writing and other creative expression is about noticing particulars, details of experience and showing them to your audience in new ways. Therefore, attending to experiences means being aware of physical sensations, and the experience of being present in one's body, and the process of creative production is connected to the process of learning to be aware and attentive to physical experience.

This idea is held up by Davidson and Correia (2001) in the context of musical performance. The authors note that musical structures are derived from the laws of physics and physical movement, and that therefore a high quality musical experience requires more than just an intellectual and mental engagement. To test this, they describe and explore the practice and performance of the second author, as well as the perceptions and enjoyment of the audience he was performing for. They found that when the musician (in this case Jorge Correia) focused in both practice and performance on being fully in the present, and on the physical sensations and movements that he felt with the music, he was able to enjoy the music and his playing much more, and feel like he was performing at the peak of his ability. What is more, in performance he was able to bring his audience with him into the music, and create a more

satisfying and enjoyable performance for both himself and his audience. They found, in fact, that meaningful musical performance and perception was rooted in embodied meaning.

The idea that understanding oneself, and that much of creative expression is rooted in the physical body and sensations leads to the issue of trust. Monturi and Purser (1995) note that "[i]t is fairly clear that appreciation and trust of one's organismic experience is the underlying basis of psychological health and self-esteem." In other words, in a culture such as ours that tends to give many people very negative messages about their bodies, and blatantly prioritizes the intellectual over the physical, there is very little trust of one's body. Monturi and Purser go on to say "[t]his implies that in a society where males are systematically taught to suppress large areas of affective experience, we will not trust our self, our experience, and our environment, and the following strategy of domination may emerge: Self and the environment are perceived as hostile, and in order to feel safe and secure, we will want to control both." This leads to pursuit of power and security, which, as discussed in the previous section, tends to block creative expression.

Eisler (2007) points out that a great deal of research has shown that while in Western culture, stereotypically masculine characteristics such as conquest and domination are ranked higher in value than stereotypically feminine characteristics such as caring and nurturing, highly creative people can access both masculine and feminine qualities as needed, and are not limited to one or the other. Gender issues will be discussed further in the next section.

Eisler extended this idea of masculine conquest and domination versus feminine caring and nurturing to cross-cultural studies and he developed two models of personal, community and cultural interactions. One is the Domination Model, characterized by top-down, hierarchical structures maintained through physical, psychological and economic control. It is usually male dominated, and typically shows a high acceptance of abuse, violence and warfare. In contrast, the other is the Partnership Model, characterized by democratic and egalitarian structures, equality between men and

women, and a low degree of abuse and violence. It usually has a high standard of living, with few very rich or very poor, and a high degree of environmental consciousness.

Interestingly, Eisler found that the domination model was much more likely to appear when and where resources are scarce, when control of resources are more linked with survival, and there is often fierce competition for the resources. The partnership model is more likely when resources are relatively abundant, and it is possible to share without threatening one's own survival. The domination model does show up in resource-abundant cultures, however, when the domination model takes hold and becomes entrenched when a society goes through an extended resource-scarce time, like a long drought, or other natural disaster. A domination pattern can also move from a resource-scarce to a resource-abundant area through military or economic conquest.

Eisler (2007) goes on to point out that the domination model generates more stress in most of it's population. When people are exposed to chronic stress, their bodies release stress hormones such as cortisol that are associated with poor impulse regulation and propensity to violence, as well as stress-related health problems such as heart disease and diabetes. Chronically stressed people are thus less capable emotionally and physically to be creative. In a more partnership model community or society, there is more caring and empathy, lower chronic stress, greater flexibility, ability to work cooperatively, and greater productivity, as well as better health and higher creativity. Sheldon and Kasser (2008) offered confirmation when they found that when they put their subjects under psychological threat, such as reminding them of the prospect of their own death (mortality salience) or having them imagine an economic threat, their personal goals shifted to be more extrinsic than intrinsic. As discussed earlier, creative production is connected to intrinsic motivation and not extrinsic. The authors did not explore this aspect or possibility, but it seems likely that subjects who feel under psychological threat and move to extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals will also be less creative.

This research seems to indicate that to be deeply creative in the long term, a person needs to be

aware of their relational environment, as well as their physical one. A single creative person cannot do much to change the larger society more towards a partnership model, but the personal environment can be influenced towards a more supportive, empathic, egalitarian and cooperative approach.

Gender and Gatekeepers

A look through any description of eminent creative people - unless it is exclusively dedicated to women - will show that women have historically been, and in most areas still are, vastly underrepresented in producing culturally acknowledged creative products. Though men and women are equally capable of being creative and producing creative works, in Western society, at least, women do not produce at the same level as men.

As has been pointed out earlier, a common trait of highly creative people is that they are not caught in the traditional gender stereotypes, but are able to access both masculine and feminine traits as needed or desired, and often question cultural gender boundaries. Davees (1999) points out, however, that historically creative men have co-opted feminine traits such as 'inner-directed' and 'sensitive' as the qualities of male artists, and marginalized and excluded women from the creative space. Women are thus positioned as either the creation or the muse of the male creator, and unable to become the creator herself.

In his classic 1996 book *Creativity*, Csikszentmihalyi writes; "Another consequence of limited attention is that creative individuals are often considered odd - or even arrogant, selfish and ruthless. It is important to keep in mind that these are not traits *of* creative people, but traits that the rest of us attribute to them on the basis of our perceptions. When we meet a person who focuses all of his attention on physics or music and ignores us and forgets our names, we call that person 'arrogant' even

though he may be extremely humble and friendly if he could only spare attention from his pursuit. If that person is so taken with his domain that he fails to take our wishes into account, we call him 'insensitive' or 'selfish' even though such attitudes are far from his mind. Similarly, if he pursues his work regardless of other people's plans we call him 'ruthless'. Yet it is practically impossible to learn a domain deeply enough to make a change in it without dedicating all of one's attention to it, and thereby appearing to be arrogant, selfish and ruthless to those who believe they have a right to the creative person's attention (p 10)."

Czikszentmihalyi is certainly correct in his statements, as they have been confirmed and corroborated by a number of other observers and researchers. Perhaps because of the time of the writing and the fact that he is male, Czikszentmihalyi seems unaware of the larger ramifications of this statement when it comes to women and creative work.

First of all the statement that "...it is practically impossible to learn a domain deeply enough to make a change in it without dedicating all of one's attention to it..." Many researchers, including Pinker (2008) and Reis (2002) among others, have noted that while men generally enjoy throwing themselves into one domain or task or project to the exclusion of all else, women tend to deeply prefer a life of variety and the cultivation of many different interests and activities. In the West, our society is still patriarchal enough that there is still the assumption that the typically male model of life and career - that is, to immerse yourself into a single domain and keep working singlemindedly on bigger and bigger projects in that domain until retirement - is the only acceptable model of a successful career. As Pinker (2008) describes, this has caused a great deal of internal and external conflict and pain for many intelligent, competent and creative women. Knowledge has indeed proliferated to the point where it can take a lifetime to fully master a single domain. But the assumption that full knowledge and mastery of a single domain is necessary to make a creative change or contribution to it is questionable. The advent of many interdisciplinary and integrated studies programs from major universities is an indication that

it is increasingly recognized that the idea of domains in and of themselves can limit creativity, and the more female approach of a broad understanding that allows cross-pollination can be the source of a great deal of creative energy.

Secondly, the other half of Csikszentmihalyi's statement "...thereby appearing to be arrogant, selfish and ruthless to those who believe they have a right to the creative person's attention." What he does not go on to acknowledge, is that there are generally many more people who believe they have a right to a woman's attention than a man's, and that the perception and declaration of a woman to be arrogant, selfish and ruthless has far more social consequences for a woman than a man, up to and including physical beatings and murder, depending on the time and place. Even in modern western society, where many women consider themselves "liberated", women do substantially more housework and childcare, and increasingly are given the task to taking care of elderly parents. Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges that women have unequal social roles that take up a great deal of time and attention, and that a woman's desire to excel in creative work can create conflict with her husband and family (pp. 190-192), but despite his emphasis on a nurturing social environment for the blossoming of creative work, he still muses wonderingly on why he and his research team could find so many more highly creative men than women (p 14).

Though Csikszentmihalyi mentions in passing the advantage, especially for a woman, of having a supportive spouse, Reis, in her 2002 study of creative women went further, and stated that as a general rule, unless a woman is either single or has a husband who specifically gives her creative work a priority, her husband will co-opt her energies towards his own work, and any name or contribution she might have made will fall by the wayside. A classic example cited by Reis, is that of the wife of Albert Einstein, Mileva Maric Einstein. She was a highly competent mathematician in her own right, and had a great deal of potential to contribute to the field of mathematics, however after she married Albert, she spent her time working with and for him on his work, and no longer did any work of her

own. Now, about a century later, Albert Einstein is still a household name, and his wife is at best a footnote.

Reis also points out that over and above constant social messages that a woman should give her time and attention to her husband and family, and that to give time and attention to her own creative work is selfish, women face more social pressure than men to conform and not question. As was discussed in the above section on mindfulness, an important factor in creativity is the ability to see and question norms and underlying assumptions about how and why things are done. As a general rule, such questioning is seen as much more socially acceptable coming from a man than a woman.

Both Pinker (2008) and Reis (2002), in their studies of creative women, also found that women seem to be much more prone to feelings of unworthiness, and an unwillingness to express themselves, assert themselves, and put themselves and their work "out there" from a profound lack of self-esteem. Neither author goes as far as to suggest a cause or a potential solution to this issue, but both offer examples of highly competent and creative women who are tortured by self-doubt over her work, as compared to similarly, or less-skilled men who confidently put forward their work, and reap the rewards and resources instead of the doubtful women.

As stated earlier, Davees (1999), Reis (2002) and Pinker (2008) all come to the conclusion that it is a major barrier for women that the only accepted model for a career and for creative production is designed for males; the singular focused hero's journey. Women have very different inclinations for designing her life, her career, and her creative work, and women will continue to find it difficult to live up to our full potential unless and until alternative career, life and creative paths are widely acknowledged as legitimate.

That being said, both creative men and women face the issue of gatekeepers. In the definitions of creativity discussed at the start of this paper, one of the major definitions of creativity is that it is culturally useful. However that raises the question - if creativity is defined by the use and acceptance of

the society, than there have been many people who cannot be considered creative until decades, sometimes centuries after their death, or they are creative in one year or decade, and not another. All of which makes that definition problematic.

There is still the issue, however, that though things are changing and continue to change with the advent of the Internet, many creative domains have a small but powerful group of people who determine what work will be published, produced or displayed, and thus determine what is considered high quality and creative, and what is not, and this often determines who gets money and other resources, and who does not. As discussed in the section on evaluation, these are people with their own assumptions and biases, and not an objective measure of quality or worth.

Richards (2007) gives a couple examples of scientists whose ideas were rejected because they did not fit into the current paradigm, but were later shown to be correct about the function of a biological mechanism, and their accepted and applauded peers incorrect. Langer (2005) gives the example of the first impressionist painters being derided and told that their work was not art, yet they now fetch extraordinary amounts of money at auction today.

In those circumstances, it is very easy to become bitter and discouraged, but as has been noted over and over again in this paper, a focus on the results of creative work, and on the rewards and social status that come with it, tend to diminish creativity. A focus on, and enjoyment of the process is the best approach for countering the effects of negative critics, and for maintaining creative production.

In general, the academic literature seems to fall into the six categories discussed, that of mindfulness, self-awareness, uncertainty and control issues, evaluation and self-improvement, the creative environment, and gender and gatekeeper issues. I have attempted to examine barriers to creative expression from as many disciplinary perspectives as possible, though the vast majority of the literature is written by psychologists holding the individual as the unit of analysis, a highly typical

perspective in western society. Though a great deal has been learned about creativity and creative expression in the last decades of research, the way forward will likely only become clear if a multidisciplinary approach is taken - a broader and more inherently creative approach - that takes into account the many different aspects involved, including the social environment, the body and gender issues, aspects which have gotten little attention as of yet.

Part 2 - Curricular material

Introduction

This course is about the barriers to creative expression, and some ways that those barriers might be gotten over, around or through. This topic is very complex and broad, so I have necessarily had to narrow my focus to some extent. I am speaking here about personal creative expression, such as creative writing or visual art, and not about creative problem solving such as in a scientific or business context. I also focus on individually produced art, rather than collaborations or social creativity.

I do not discuss the issue of discovering the art form that is truly "yours" but I am assuming that you, as a student, are either actively practicing an art, or sincerely want to, and are willing to explore and experiment in a variety of media. Whether you are actively practicing your art or not, everyone has difficulty sometimes with their practice. Sometimes the ideas aren't flowing, sometimes we resist sitting ourselves down (or standing, as the case may be) to work. The purpose of this course is to help you, as an artist, to understand a bit better what your personal barriers are, and to find ways to establish or enrich your regular, productive practice.

First of all, I would like you to think about what barriers to your creative expression you have encountered over the last months or years, and to describe them to the best of your ability. We'll be

referring to this description again by the end of the course.

I am a writer, in both fiction and non-fiction. There are two creative barriers that have plagued me the most through my career so far. The first is getting ideas to flow, the second is fear surrounding worthiness of my work, and of me as a creative person.

For getting ideas to flow, I know that I can come up with some good ideas, and they do come if I pay attention, practice mindfulness, and am patient with myself, because sometimes they come much slower than I would like. It reminds me of the line by the singer Meatloaf that goes "Some days it don't come easy, some days it don't come hard, some days it don't come at all, and those are the days that never end." That sounds to me like an artist who's been there and knows exactly what it's like. It's patience, especially, that can be difficult, because the more I try to rush and push the creative flow, the less likely it is to happen. It's kind of like falling asleep, the more you work at sleeping, the less likely you are to actually sleep. It isn't until you let go and let it happen that sleep comes. I know all this intellectually, but putting it into practice can be difficult.

For example, in the case of this project and course, I had amassed a great deal of data regarding barriers to creative expression and I needed to come up with a creative design and framework to organize and express the data in a way that would be useful both for me as the scholar, and for you as students. I had a time line and the pressure was on. Though I watched the deadline approach with frustration, ultimately I had to sit with the data, and simply let the process happen, trusting that the ideas would come in their own time, and hopefully with enough time for me to complete the work before the deadline. Obviously it did come in time, in this case. One of the risks of life as a creative person, however, is that sometimes it does not.

Fears involving worthiness are a very large barrier for me. I fear that my ideas aren't good enough. I'm afraid that I'm not good enough to make real that amazing, awesome and incredible visions

in my head. I'm afraid that I'll produce something that I think is really good, only to have someone I respect tell me that it is trite, cliché, inane, and just doesn't measure up. This worthiness demon sits on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, and it is very difficult to shut him up sometimes, to the point of being unable to work, because I can't hear myself over his words.

And inevitably, there are issues for me around finishing a work. I tend to be a generalist, rather than a specialist, many things interest me, and I can get bored easily. When I have a large project that requires intense work over weeks or months, it can become difficult for me to stay interested through to the end. But finishing work is important for creative expression, as it is a dialogue between the artist and the culture and community he or she is working and living in, and full expression requires the artist to put the work "out there" in one way or another for others to absorb, contemplate and respond.

That's what's most likely to prevent me from working. Other barriers we'll be discussing in this course aren't as much of an issue for me. But they might be for you. Each of us has our own personal set of barriers that we each have to deal with. In this course, I ask that you respect and accept both your own issues and barriers, and those of your classmates.

More about the course

There are six weekly lessons in this course. I have provided an introductory paragraph, and then listed the readings for the week. Please try to get through the readings as early in the week as possible (or even the end of the week before) so that we can discuss the reading through the week, along with the additional comments I have for each week, about the reading and other related topics. Below my comments, you'll see a suggestion for practice. Please give the practice suggestions a try, and I urge you

to journal about what you're doing, how it goes, and any realizations or epiphanies that come along. You don't have to discuss these experiences with your classmates, but please do if you're comfortable, as I expect the discussion will be valuable for both you and the others. If you are not familiar with keeping a journal, don't be intimidated about starting one, there's no right or wrong way to do it, it is simply a way to talk to yourself. If you have any other difficulties or questions, there are many excellent books on journaling available at public libraries and bookstores, or you can send me an email.

I have also listed a few discussion questions to get things going on the discussion board. Please think about and respond to at least one of the questions, and respond to at least one of your classmates with something of more substance than a comment like "I agree with you."

On the textbook

I have chosen *On becoming an artist: Reinventing yourself through mindful creativity* by Ellen Langer as the textbook for this course. Langer is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. This book is an examination of her experiences as she has begun painting, from her perspective as both an artist and a psychologist. She centers her perspective on art and becoming an artist around mindfulness and mindful evaluation; mindfulness she defines as learning to pay attention, and mindful evaluation is judging things by their appropriateness within their context, rather than non-contextual judgments of good or bad, right and wrong. Both mindfulness and mindful evaluation are simple concepts that can be extremely difficult to put into practice.

It would be rather hypocritical to expect you, the students, to accept unquestioningly a book that is all about noticing and questioning how things are done, and the underlying unspoken assumptions about how the world works. I don't entirely agree with everything Langer says, but I find her

perspective interesting and useful in defining what I think about the topics. Therefore I do not expect you to agree with her or me in all things, but I would ask that you think about and discuss why you do not agree, and perhaps offer an alternate view.

Lesson 1 Cultivating Mindfulness

Mindfulness - and its opposite, mindlessness - is the first aspect of creative expression we will be exploring. Keep in mind that in the context of this course, we will define mindfulness in terms of paying attention to things external to yourself, that is, other people, your relationships, your physical environment, and your larger social environment, its structures, biases and assumptions. In contrast, we define self-awareness as paying attention to your internal environment, which we will discuss in lesson 2. Many other researchers and writers (including Ellen Langer) lump these two - internal and external awareness - together under the label of mindfulness, but I am talking about them separately because they seem to me to be significantly different mindsets and processes.

Reading:

Ellen Langer, *On Becoming an Artist*, Introduction, chapter 1, chapter 2.

Jon Kabat-Zinn talking about mindfulness on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6T21cFoqQE)

[v=f6T21cFoqQE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6T21cFoqQE)

Comments:

Langer (2005) defines mindfulness as being present in the moment, aware of moment-to-moment sensations, and engaged in and with our present circumstances. She says "Mindfulness is an effortless, simple process that consists of drawing novel distinctions, that is, noticing new things. The more we notice, the more we become aware of how things change depending on the context and perspective from which they are viewed. Mindfulness requires, however, that we give up the fixed ways in which we've learned to look at the world. Most of us confuse the stability of our mind-sets with

the stability of the underlying phenomena, and we come to think that things are, will always be, and even need to be a particular way without recognizing how they may also vary. It isn't as though we need or want to be so rigid. We celebrate as creative those who show us how the commonplace may be made different." (2005, pp 5-6).

As Langer points out, most of the time we don't realize that we're being mindless, because to realize it would require mindfulness - which is exactly what we're not doing. Of course, being mindless isn't in itself a bad thing; we just don't have the energy or attention to be mindful every minute of every day, so we're always going to be spending some time in mindlessness. I can certainly remember times when I have been traveling a route I've taken many times before, to find myself at my destination without any recollection of how I got there or what happened along the way. As a driver I can only hope that the lack of horns sounding around me meant I didn't do anything too stupid or dangerous...

But with the realization that constant mindfulness isn't a reasonable goal, Langer makes a very good point that most of us could stand to be more mindful, aware of ourselves and what's going on around us, questioning how things are done and why we are doing them. As she says in the quote above, creative people are able to see and make us see the commonplace in a different way, and that can't be done without mindfully engaging with the commonplace in the first place.

In the last few decades a number of Western scientists - mostly psychologists and neurologists, have been studying mindfulness, and especially mindfulness meditation, which is a common Buddhist practice. Partly on the instigation of the Dalai Lama, research subjects have included Tibetan Buddhist monks with years, sometimes decades of daily mindfulness meditation practice. What researchers have found is that even in the short term, meditation can change the physical structure of your brain, create better communication and balance between the hemispheres, and increase the brain-state associated with perception, problem solving, consciousness, and creativity.

The material that's available on mindfulness generally comes from one of two sources - Western

science-based literature, usually psychology and/or neurology, or from Eastern religious/philosophical traditions such as Buddhism or Taoism based on a spiritual and experiential approach. Oddly enough, both Western psychologists (eg Ellen Langer, Steven Hayes and Susan Blackmore, among others) and Eastern spiritual leaders (eg the Dalai Lama) have concluded that these approaches are not incompatible, and in fact, can compliment each other.

Eastern approaches tend to put more emphasis on formal practice, that is, sitting down daily to practice mindfulness meditation, and nothing else for a period of time, though the program developed by Western psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn requires formal practice. Both approaches acknowledge the importance of informal practice, however, which is practicing being mindful, in the moment and paying attention to sensations as we are doing other tasks. Mindfulness is a skill, and like all skills, requires practice to improve and gain benefit.

One of the ways Eastern traditions teach mindfulness is by the deceptively simple technique of watching your breath, that is, sitting comfortably with a straight spine to open airways, and pay attention to the process and sensation of breathing, and nothing else. If you do this (or have done this) you will discover what Stephen Cope (*Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*) calls the Royal Secret - that people have a "monkey mind" that refuses to be still and remain in the present moment without a great deal of practice.

Langer gives a few examples of what and how to be mindful. Here's an expanded list:

Be mindful of:

Things - take another look at the objects around you, can you see them anew? Van Gogh painted everyday items like furniture. What qualities do the objects around you have that you haven't noticed

before? How can they be used in ways that you haven't thought of before?

People - it is very easy to get one idea of a person, and then never change your perception of that person, even though people change over time. Can you stop and truly see another person as he or she is, right now, regardless of how you perceived that person previously? How has he or she changed?

Relationships - as Langer points out in the readings, it happens frequently that we get caught in a script - as if our lives are a play and we act out the same scenes over and over again, with only slightly altered lines and characters. Instead of mindlessly following the same scripts in your life, can you be mindful, question the value and purpose of the patterns, and find another way to communicate and relate?

Society - Our relationships are part of a larger society that creates roles and expectations for us, along with assumptions about how the world is, what humans are like in general, and who we are in particular. Can you be mindful of the roles you play and the assumptions that are coming along with them? Can you see where expectations are stemming as much from society as from individuals?

As we'll discuss more in depth later in the course, your relationship with time and patience is also something to be mindful of. Various studies have shown that when people are required to do a problem solving task with speed and focus as compared to broader attention and a more relaxed pace, those with broader attention took longer to complete the tasks (no surprise there) but came up with much more creative solutions. In both school and work, in Western society, speed and focus are taught and rewarded far more than slower but more creative answers. We tend to be very much obsessed with speed, efficiency and productivity and ignore the fact that this may be short-circuiting our slower, more creative processes. This can make it very difficult for a Western-taught artist to be patient with him or

herself, and give time to things that are necessary for creativity, such as reflection and gestation of ideas, that don't seem to be "productive" to our Western perspective.

Practice:

Find an object in your home; a book, a vase, a plant, whatever you like. Look it over carefully, notice its weight, colour, texture, shape. Is there something about this object you haven't noticed before? Try writing about this in your journal. Has your perspective of this object changed? Has your liking of this object changed? This is informal mindfulness practice.

You can also try a formal mindfulness meditation practice; sit comfortably on the floor or on a chair, somewhere where you can put your knees on the same height or lower than your hips, and keep your spine straight and chest lifted to breathe (NOTE: do not do this if it causes pain or if you have medical issues that may be aggravated by this). Pay attention to the sensation of your breath, the sensations from your body, the feel of air on your skin. If you notice your attention wandering, don't judge or get after yourself, simply notice and gently pull your attention back to the present moment. Start with doing this for about two minutes, but try to do this every day this week. Shoot for being able to sit and pay attention to your breath for ten minutes, but if you don't manage it, don't worry. Formal meditation is much more difficult and takes more practice than many people expect.

Discussion Questions:

The advent of highly portable technology means that between cell phones, MP3 players, smart phones with internet access, and now iPads, we are very rarely giving one thing our full attention. All the electronic distraction in our world means that it has become even more difficult to be mindful. How big an issue do you think this is for you, personally, and for society in general? Will creative people

have to deliberately limit their use of technology?

What do you think it means to be more mindful of your relationship to time and productivity?

What might this change?

Have you tried doing your art more mindfully? What was the experience like, as opposed to a mindless session? How did your art change?

Supplemental Reading:

Begley, S. (2007). *Train your mind, change your brain: How a new science reveals our extraordinary potential to transform ourselves*. New York, Ballantine Books.

Cope, S. (1999) *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*. New York, Bantam Books.

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