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What is 'creativity'?

It is difficult and dangerous to talk about what creativity is (attempting to define it), but it is relatively easy to talk about how creativity might come about.

Creativity is a quality of certain people who act to express a remarkable way of seeing. The expression is usually seen by others as having novelty. The quality of creativity may be attributed to the person and the action: it is a result of a remarkable way of seeing, as understood through the expression of this way of seeing. It is not a logical outcome of a situation, nor is it emergent (in the older sense) from that situation, and it is not a property of anything.

The above is not a definition. It describes, I maintain, a necessary condition, but it is not yet sufficient. We may find examples we can fit to it, but would not like to connect to creativity. I do not know how to make it sufficient, and I am not sure I wish to.

That said, I like Margaret Boden's (2004) framing of creativity into that which is 'personally' creative, that which is 'historically creative', and that which is 'surprisingly creative'.

How does creativity present itself in your discipline?

Either I have no discipline, or I have many. I am not sure that creativity presents itself differently in different fields, except in detail. By this I mean that creativity presents itself in any and all disciplines. I see no fundamental difference in how I find creativity in any of the subjects I meet. There are differences of medium (of expression): in design I see creativity in drawings, models, writing, presentation, spoken words, performance. I see it in conversation and in groups. But most of all, I see it in approach, in research, and in the faces of my students. I am inclined to see creativity everywhere.

What role does creativity play in design?

I currently divide 'design' according to two approaches: the traditional approach, which I liken to a conversation held with the self through paper

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and pencil, and in which Vitruvius' notion of 'delight' is crucial; and a later approach in which engineers, having usurped the word design, try to make it 'scientific'. The traditional approach is tied in with creativity, which is a necessary consequence of holding a conversation. But a conversation is always between at least two people (or two personae accommodated within one 'mind') and within a context (for instance, the context of conversation). Thus, wherever the traditional approach is used, creativity will be apparent, because a conversation necessarily leads to novelty, which is one form that creativity can be seen in.

What makes a person's actions or the products of their actions creative?

This is an ambiguous question. I hope I am answering the correct disambiguation.

I believe creativity comes in the first place from seeing the world differently, each of us in our own way, and not being deadened by habit or applied uniformity. I do not know how or why some people have a lot of this quality, and others seem to have less.

One way of increasing this quality in people involves learning to listen: metaphorically as well as literally. What I can keep in my mind is much less than what everyone can keep in mind, and is very much less than what we might take as existing in the context we are in. If we open up to what others (including the context) offer us, if we reduce the level of control we wish to impose on 'that which is not us' so that it no longer has to fit the patterns we live by, we can benefit from what 'that which is not us' offers us, and thus find novelty.

Note, I am using a quasi realist way of speaking here for convenience and brevity: as a short-cut.

Can creativity be assessed and, if so, how?

Creativity can be recognised as present through its expression, growing out of a way of seeing. I have always been surprised at the unanimity of this recognition reached in almost all critical panels I have been on, no matter how different in view, experience or interest members are. I estimate I have found about 90% agreement in such judgements, including the judgements concerning creativity.

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I am disinclined to try a check-list approach. Creativity involves, by definition, stuff that is outside the box, the not yet defined, the inconceivable.

I am not sure that any judgement of creativity in students will hold true after they have stopped being students. Context is particularly important.