Exploring creativity through freelance journalism: Testing out the systems model

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Abstract

Creativity is frequently credited as the source of humanity's greatest achievements, yet the meaning of this term remains widely unexamined. Popular use connects creativity to the mysterious and the divine; however current research indicates that creativity is a rational process that can be explained as the result of conscious hard work and the interaction of systems and structures. Using practitioner based enquiry, I aimed to test out current research by undertaking my own creative project. In particular, I examined the operation of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity. The research took the form of four profiles on creative practitioners from the areas of music, art, science and journalism, and allowed me to explore my own creative practice, to compare my experience to that of other cultural producers, and to combine this knowledge with existing research to investigate the nature of creativity as a whole.

Creativity is frequently credited as the source of humanity's greatest achievements and yet for a word invested with such importance, its real meaning remains widely unexamined. Popular use of the term connects creativity to the mysterious and the divine. It is viewed as an unexplainable force, quality or gift and any attempt to understand it is seen as destructive at worst, futile at best (Boden, 2004; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Pope, 2005; Runco & Pritzker, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). However current research indicates that the reality of creative practice is far removed from notions of divine inspiration and innate genius. Instead, creativity is a rational process that can be explored and explained as the result of commitment and conscious hard work, as well as the continuous interaction of identifiable stages, systems and structures that creative practitioners must interact with and operate within (Boden, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1997, 1999; Giddens, 1979, 1995; Howe, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Wallas, 1926, 1976; Weisberg, 1993).

For the purposes of this research, the concept of creativity is based on the Aristotelian notion that "whatever comes to be is generated by the agency of something, out of something, and comes to be something" (Aristotle, 1960, p. 142). Creativity is thus defined as an:

> Activity whereby products, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions by the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of human knowledge. (McIntyre, 2006, p. 202)

Using the methodology of practitioner based enquiry, I aimed to explore creativity as a rational process and to test out current research by undertaking my own creative practice. In particular, this research examines Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity and its operation in my own creative practice and that of four other cultural producers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1997, 1999). The research itself took the form of a

creative project, consisting of a series of four profiles such as those found in weekend newspaper supplements, focused on four prominent creative practitioners from the fields of music, art, journalism, and science. I selected these professions as they represent areas traditionally associated with creativity (music, art) and two that are not (science, journalism). Also, these particular categories already have a grounding in existing literature on creativity (Sawyer, 2006). The particular individuals interviewed were sculptor Mikala Dwyer (art), Wally "Gotye" De Backer (music), former ABC *Four Corner*s journalist Chris Masters (journalism) and population health researcher Dr Paul Bolton (science).

These profiles formed the basis of my research as I examined creativity through both the process of freelance journalism and the product of this activity. In writing the profiles—the process—I was able to examine my own creative practice and this was documented in a research journal in accordance with the project's methodology of practice based enquiry. At the same time, I was able to examine the creative practice of other cultural producers through the content of these profiles—the product. By comparing my own experience of the creative process with that of the four creative practitioners documented in the profiles and through the application of previous research to these findings, this research was informed by a multidimensional approach to the study of creativity and cultural production. It is this approach, through practitioner based enquiry, that has allowed me to test out and validate evidence of the rational nature of creativity, specifically as it is demonstrated by the operation of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1997; 1999).

Practitioner based enquiry is a methodology of self-reflection in which the researcher explores specific activities through participation in, and reflection on, their own practice (McIntyre, 2006, p. 4; Murray & Lawrence, 2000, p. 10). In this case, the subject of practitioner based enquiry was creativity as it was explored through my personal experience engaging in and reflecting on freelance journalism in order to gain insight into the creative process as a whole. Practitioner based enquiry incorporates a process of "reflecting-in-action" and reflecting "on" action and promotes the value of the practitioner's personal experience, explored both during and after the particular activity (Johns, 2006; Schon, 1983). One of the distinguishing features of practitioner based enquiry is the use of a personal research journal detailing the process and practitioner's experiences while engaged in the activity being studied (Bolton, 2001; Fuller & Petch, 1995; Hinds, 2000; Johns, 2006; Murray & Lawrence, 2000). Murray & Lawrence stress the importance of the learning journal as a valuable research document: "it is a literary device through which the problematic nature of . . . enquiry is rendered intelligible, first to self, and subsequently to significant others" (2000, pp. 14-15). For this research, the learning journal kept while writing the profiles provided evidence for my own creative process, which was then compared with the creative processes of the profile subjects.

Although the most significant feature of practitioner based enquiry is the subjective insider position occupied by the researcher, it is also the main source of criticism. Critics assert that in being so close to the activity of study practitioners may allocate personal ownership to the subject, leading to bias and misrepresentation of results (Fuller & Petch, 1995; Hinds, 2000, p. 52; Murray & Lawrence, 2000; Zuzanek, 2005). Similarly, all practitioners bring specific ontological leanings to their research and, as a result, may only discover confirmation of patterns they already subconsciously expect to find (McIntyre, 2006; Murray & Lawrence, 2000; Zuzanek, 2005). However, these

criticisms arise from a primarily objectivist ontology and epistemology that tends to disregard the validity of conclusions drawn from subjective experience (McIntyre, 2006). The objectivist tradition holds that truth exists within objects independently of consciousness "waiting for us to discover it" and thus rejects the notion that meaning can be derived from interaction between the two (Crotty, 1998). However, practitioner-based enquiry operates within a primarily constructionist ontology and epistemology where:

> There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of the world . . . Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9)

Thus, as practitioner based enquiry operates on the constructionist premise that the primary value of such research lies within the subjective experience that arises from interaction between practitioner and practice, objectivist criticisms of this methodology are rendered problematic. In fact, from this standpoint, the primary strength of practitioner based enquiry is allowing the researcher to gain a unique and arguably essential insider perspective of the practice being researched. Not only is this knowledge valuable in its own right, it may also be added to the wider body of research from all methodologies in order to gain a truly comprehensive understanding of a particular subject, in this case, creativity.

Perspectives on creativity are generally divided into three categories: romantic, inspirational and rational, with most current literature giving an overview of all three (Boden, 2004; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Pope, 2005; Runco & Pritzker, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). The majority of current research into creativity falls into the category of rationalism, yet popular use of the term remains connected to the "mystical approaches" of inspirationism and romanticism (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999).

The inspirational view describes creativity as the result of an external force or being and originates in concepts such as ancient belief in "divine madness", the artist's muse, and Judaeo-Christian beliefs about the creation of the world (Albert & Runco, 1999; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Sawyer, 2006; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Advocates of this view describe themselves as passive vessels for inspiration and all creative works come into being without any conscious effort on their part (Albert & Runco, 1999; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). However, *something*—i.e. creative ideas or products—simply cannot emerge from *nothing* and in this way current research wholly rejects the inspirational view of creativity (Aristotle, 1960; Boden, 2004; Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994).

The romantic perspective also emphasises the mysterious nature of creativity; yet in contrast to the inspirational view's theocentricism it contains specific beliefs about the individual as creator. With origins in the Renaissance and the English romantic movement of the 1700s, romanticism is centred on the notion of genius. Genius in this case refers to exceptional individuals with almost superhuman capacity to be creative, and also to the ambiguous quality these people are said to possess (Albert & Runco, 1999; Boden, 2004; Howe, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 1993). In all cases, genius is viewed as something you must be born with and cannot be learned (Boden, 2004). Romanticism is also associated with specific beliefs about the state of being associated with creativity. For the romantics, creativity occurs in a heightened state in which the individual is operating free from conscious thought and rationality (Sawyer, 2006). Consequently, this idea spawned a belief in causative links between mental illness,

drugs and creativity, and as it was embraced many poets and artists feigned madness or promoted false stories about drug use (Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 1993; Zolberg, 1990). Like the inspirational view, romanticism is flawed. Scientific study of creativity has found that creative success is more likely the result of ordinary thought processes, deliberate effort and commitment rather than the prerogative of a privileged few (Howe, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 1993). In other words, "creative geniuses are not born. They are made" (Clydesdale, 2006).

Today, most of the growing area of creativity research lies in the concept of rationalism—i.e. the theory that creativity is a rational process that can be explored and understood. Attempts to explain creativity have emerged from disciplines such as psychology and sociology using a range of methods and accompanying theories (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993; Sawyer, 2006; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Weisberg, 1993; Wolff, 1981; Zolberg, 1990). However, many of these approaches have aimed to attribute creative ability to one particular source. As Sternberg and Lubart state, "Unidisciplinary approaches . . . have tended to view a part of creativity as the whole phenomenon, often resulting in what we believe is a narrow vision of creativity" (1999, p. 4). For this reason, most current research into creativity tends toward an approach that combines theories from multiple disciplines. These are referred to as confluence approaches and provide a vehicle for examining and explaining the diversity of creativity. This particular research is situated within a confluence approach and, in particular, aims to test out Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1997; 1999).

Csikszentmihalyi's systems model is founded on the premise that creativity is not only a rational process but also that it is never the product of an individual alone. Creativity is not singularly the result of specific cognitive processes, motivations or personality traits, but rather the result of a systemic process involving the interplay of social systems and cultures as well as the individual. As Csikszentmihalyi states, the fundamental principle underlying this system is the idea that "we cannot study creativity by isolating individuals and their works from the social and historical milieu in which their actions are carried out" (1988, p. 325). Instead, Csikszentmihalyi's systems model indicates that creativity is a combination of the shaping influence of three main forces: the individual, the field, and the domain (1997, p. 27).

The Domain in Csikszentmihalyi's model refers to specific areas of creative practice, including all existing creative products and the rules and structures through which they are made. Pierre Bourdieu uses the term "field of works" to describe the same concept in reference to cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). Domains are essentially knowledge systems and, together, they form cultures (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). According to Csikszentmihalyi, creativity occurs when someone introduces a change or variation to a domain (1988; 1999; Weisberg, 1988). However, before an individual can do this they must first develop sufficient knowledge of the inherent structures of that domain (Bourdieu, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Giddens, 1979; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 1988; Wolff, 1981). As Weisberg states:

> Creative products are firmly based on what came before . . . This might mean, perhaps paradoxically, that in order to produce something new, one should first become as knowledgeable as possible about the old. (1988, p. 173)

Although they did not use the term "domain", each of the practitioners interviewed for the profiles spoke of the importance of gaining an understanding of the rules and

structures of their professions. Mikala Dwyer emphasised the importance of her time at art school while Paul Bolton completed a Bachelor of Surgery and Medicine, a Diploma of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, a Master of Public Health and a Master of Science before being able to engage in his creative practice (Coffee, 2007a). Chris Masters also expressed the importance of discovering what has already been done in a particular domain before making your own specific contribution, saying "you'll do as much reading as you can to understand what's on the record and then you'll seek to discover what isn't understood" (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 17)(quoted in Coffee, 2007a, p. 17). This echoes Aristotle's assertion that "whatever comes to be is generated by the agency of something, out of something, and comes to be something" (1960, p. 142). In other words, something, such as a creative artefact, cannot be generated out of nothing. Similarly, Wally De Backer's music as Gotye is based almost entirely on taking artefacts that already exist in the domain—records—and using them as the basis for his own musical contribution. De Backer said:

> The way that I'm creative is usually necessarily stimulated by consuming, by collecting records and in some way listening and processing and then borrowing/stealing depending on how you look at it, and finding inspiration from that to find creative ideas of my own. (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 22)

Similarly, in order to work in the domain of journalism and specifically profile writing, it was necessary for me to familiarise myself with the rules and structures of the domain of feature writing. I had already begun this process while studying a Bachelor of Communication at the University of Newcastle. However, to further my knowledge I did additional reading of the numerous "how-to" guides for journalism and profile writing (e.g. Conley & Lamble, 2006; Maskell & Perry, 1999), as well as studying the multitude of profiles published in newspapers and magazines every day. During the period of research, I also completed an internship at the *Newcastle Herald* where I was placed in the feature department. At first I was concerned that the time spent away from my research would be detrimental, however I soon found that the practical knowledge and experience gained from directly engaging with the domain of journalism significantly helped my profile writing skills (Coffee, 2007b). However, knowledge of a domain alone is not sufficient for an individual's work to be deemed creative. Another component is needed to recognise it as such, and this is the role of the field.

The field in the systems model refers to the experts or "gate-keepers" who are responsible for making decisions about whether or not works will be accepted as part of the domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1997; 1999). A work may exist, but without verification from the field it cannot be accepted into the domain, certainly cannot alter this domain, and thus it cannot be deemed creative. As Csikszentmihalyi states, "If you cannot persuade the world that you had a creative idea, how do we know that you actually had it?" (1999, p. 314). The field has the power to shape the domain by determining which changes will be accepted and which will not, while the nature of the field is determined by who is attracted to the domain at any particular time. In his discussion of the field, Pierre Bourdieu emphasises the influence of economic and power relations between sub groups in the field, and certainly all fields vary in their willingness to accept additions into their domains (1993). However, if an individual is to succeed in making a creative contribution, interaction with the field is unavoidable.

Before my profiles were deemed appropriate for the domain of journalism and indeed before I could begin writing them, I was required to engage with members of this field. In order to speak to Wally De Backer, I had to contact his publicist and negotiate the

date and time of a phone interview. In July, I wrote in my research journal, “I had to go through his publicist Clare Collins, which is the way things generally work when setting up interviews, especially during particularly busy times—he’s [De Backer] just started a tour—and something I’ll have to get used to as a journalist” (Coffee, 2007b). I also encountered the same experience of the publicist as gatekeeper during my time at the *Newcastle Herald*, where almost every interview with members of the entertainment industry was negotiated through media managers and publicists. Thus, without cooperation from such members of the field, I could not have obtained any interviews and subsequently could not have written any stories appropriate to the domain of journalism. Similarly, over the course of my internship, I was surrounded by editors and journalists from whom I received advice about the changes needed to ensure my work was suited to the domain. I was then able to apply the advice from these field members to the process of writing the profiles for my research. I became aware of the need to take on the recommendations of the field and to change my profiles accordingly to create work that would be acceptable to the domain (Coffee, 2007b).

Vera Zolberg argues that “understanding how people become and remain artists is possible only on the condition of examining the larger support structures of society and how they impinge on the artists themselves” (1990, p. 135). Mikala Dwyer affirms this in her experience of the influence of the field on artists’ success. For example, she says, “Curators can really propel an artist’s career . . . I can decide it’s art but it doesn’t mean that it’s going to make it into the world. It has to be an agreed upon thing” (cited in Coffee, 2007a, pp. 10-11). Similarly, Dwyer admitted that, before being accepted into the Sydney College of the Arts, she had no previous experience in that domain and, thus, if the field members had not accepted her into the program she may have never entered the art world. As it states in Dwyer’s profile:

> It was because those who are partly responsible for deciding who is allowed to make art and who gets left out in the cold could see just how ready she was. (Coffee, 2007a, p. 4)

Wally De Backer had a similar experience in his dealings with the field in the domain of music. As written in his profile, his regular interaction with the field includes:

> Liaising with music directors at radio stations, dealing with the media and working with what De Backer refers to as the “network” of people involved in releasing an album. Even though it’s time-consuming, De Backer knows that without engaging in such a process no one would get to hear his music. (Coffee, 2007a, pp. 26-27)

The field may also ensure that creative works and ideas are “recognised, preserved, and remembered” through the presentation of awards (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 28). For example, the Walkleys, Logies, Public Service Medal and Centenary Medal given to Chris Masters are representative of the field’s recognition of his status as a “good journalist”, while the scholarships given to Dwyer, De Backer’s ARIA awards, and industry funding given to Bolton are the field’s way of distinguishing these individuals as successful creative practitioners (Coffee, 2007a).

Thus, the field has enormous influence on an individual’s ability to enter a domain, the shape of their work by determining what is considered appropriate for that domain, and the recognition and longevity of that creative work as well as the practitioner’s success within their chosen creative profession. Therefore, it is vital that, in order to operate successfully within the system that comprises creativity, an individual must understand

the interrelationship between the domain and the field, and also, the nature of their interaction with them. As Csikszentmihalyi states:

> A person who wants to make a creative contribution not only must work within a creative system but must also reproduce that system within his or her mind. In other words, the person must learn the rules and the content of the domain, as well as the criteria of selection, the preferences of the field. (1997, p. 47).

It is only when these three components work together as a system that creativity can occur and be recognised. The achievements of creative practitioners are frequently attributed to some individual quality of creativity that cannot be learnt or understood, a perception manifest in the notion of "genius". Yet as existing research shows and is supported by my own process and the experiences of the four cultural practitioners in the profiles, being successfully creative requires hard work and commitment (Howe, 1999; Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 1993).

My research journal documents the constant planning, drafting and re-drafting that occurred all throughout the creative process of writing profiles. For example, on 21 September I wrote, "I always do a thousand plans which change regularly and have scraps of ideas and half-paragraphs all over the place. Eventually they get pulled together, changed or deleted to make one profile" (Coffee, 2007b). Chris Masters' repeated declaration that he takes his job "seriously" and his obvious disdain for journalists who lack this commitment reveals his own respect for the value of hard work, while Wally De Backer asserted the importance of perseverance in succeeding in the music industry: "You can send your music to a lot of people and you can be polite and you can be persistent" (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 27).

The content of the profiles on Mikala Dwyer and Paul Bolton present an interesting portrait of the somewhat paradoxical relationship between playfulness and hard work in creativity. Dwyer's artworks are often described as playful and she states that being able to think playfully is not only important to her own creative work but also "really seriously, politically, absolutely necessary" (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 8). Similarly, Paul Bolton likens his creative work in science to being a child playing with blocks:

> It's just an extension of being a little kid and playing. You've got your blocks and you think "well maybe if I can build this, maybe I can build that" and you try it and it works and it's fun and this is sort of the adult version of that, whereas to me non-creative work is like no play. (cited in Coffee, 2007a, pp. 32-33)

However, as Csikszentmihalyi states, "this playfulness doesn't go very far without its antithesis, a quality of doggedness, endurance, perseverance" (1997, p. 61). In addition to their love of play, both Dwyer and Bolton exhibit such qualities of commitment, as well as recognition of the importance of this commitment to their creative work. Paul Bolton underwent years of study before he could be accepted as part of the field of population health and now, as a practitioner in this area, the development of interventions involves months and sometimes years of intense research, planning, implementation and evaluation. Dwyer also supports this idea, saying "you can't get to the creative moment without some sort of seed bed of hard work" and, in addition to the work behind each sculpture or installation, she also underwent years of formal education in the art world (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 8)

Despite the claims of those in the romantic and inspirationist camps, the ability to learn to be creative and to improve at this practice is something all four interviewed creative practitioners agree is possible. According to Boden, "creative artists (and scientists) are

said to be people gifted with a specific talent which others lack", an ability that cannot be learnt (2004, pp. 14-15). However, Bolton's career is largely focused on teaching others to engage in the same creative processes as him, and he is surprised that most people don't see creativity as a skill they can learn. He said, "I just reject the idea that some people can do this and some people can't" (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 34).

> They don't think "how can I learn to be creative?" they just assume it's something they don't have because they've never experienced it. So you have to actually convince people that this is something most people can do before you can try and help them to do it. (cited in Coffee, 2007a, p. 34)

Similarly, Dwyer had no previous training as an artist before art school and Masters had no initial interest in being a journalist; yet after undergoing training and immersion in their relative domains each practitioner is now recognised for their creativity in their chosen profession. Also, De Backer had been learning music in one form or another since he was fifteen years old and since then has maintained a high level of involvement in that area (Coffee, 2007a).

While Csikszentmihalyi outlines a set of possible personality characteristics attributable to creative people he does so with extreme caution (1997, pp. 55-76). He initially states, "I am not sure that there is much to write about, since creativity is the property of a complex system, and none of its components alone can explain it" (1997, p. 65). From this perspective, a supposed personality trait or quality of creativity alone is not, by itself, sufficient for an individual to become successful in their chosen creative practice. Instead, the individual must maintain a strong commitment to creativity, invest a corresponding level of effort and hard work and, most importantly, understand the vital role played by the interrelationships between the field and the domain in the recognition, communication and promotion of creativity.

Using practitioner based enquiry, and working within the theoretical framework of Csikszentmihalyi's systems model, this research has allowed me to explore my own creative practice, to compare my experience to that of other cultural producers, and to combine this knowledge with existing research to investigate the nature of creativity as a whole. The research indicates that creativity occurs through the interaction of a domain in which the work can be understood, a field to determine which works are appropriate for this domain, and an individual to commit to the creative task and recognise the influence of these components and their own place within the system. From my own experience of the creative practice of the freelance journalist, I discovered the importance of domain acquisition in learning to work within the rules and structures of feature writing and how to use these to my advantage. I also experienced the necessity of listening to the field and the influence of these gatekeepers in determining which activities a creative practitioner can engage in. More significantly, during the process of writing the profiles I discovered manifest similarities between my experience and that of the creative practitioners I was writing about. As prominent cultural producers from diverse creative professions, Mikala Dwyer, Paul Bolton, Wally De Backer and Chris Masters exhibited corresponding experiences of interaction with the domain and the field. The structures and limitations that surrounded their work enabled rather than constrained their creative practice, and their collective experience of creativity was that of a rational process that could be committed to, learnt, practiced and improved. The similarities that have emerged from this comparison and the application of existing theories demonstrate the knowable, rational nature of creativity

and work towards validating systemic interrelationships as the foundations in which the creative process originates and evolves.

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