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Creativity as Resistance

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> Controversy is part of the nature of art and creativity – Yoko Ono
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> The most destructive thing that could happen in any educational system is that creativity be subjugated to neoliberal or capitalist values and deployed rhetorically in instrumental ways – Shakuntala Banaji

We (the Deep-Play Research Group) have been writing an ongoing series, "Rethinking Technology and Creativity in the 21st Century" around issues of creativity in 21st century educational contexts. We recently began a new thematic run for this series by choosing to focus on one scholar of creativity at a time. Our process is simple. We select top-notch scholars and thinkers about creativity and interview them. Our goal is to make their work accessible as well as to connect what they do to the broader themes that underlie this series. We continue this series here, with an interview with independent scholar and writer Dr. Shakuntala Banaji.

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Introduction

Dr. Shakuntala Banaji's work spans multiple areas of research and instruction, including creativity, cinema, civic participation, and critical examinations of media. She is currently Associate Professor and the Program Director for the *Master's in Media, Communication, and Development* at the London School of Economics. She teaches courses on Media and the Global South; Film Theory and World Cinema; and Critical Approaches to Media Communication and Development. Dr. Banaji was the winner of the 2015 London School of Economics Students' Union Award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching, and has contributed to and led research projects on media, education and civic participation amongst youth in Europe, Turkey, India and the Middle East and North Africa region. She was the Lead Researcher on the "Creativity and Innovation in European Schools" project. Prior to her entrance into academia, she taught English and Media Studies in London schools. Her recently co-authored book *Youth Participation in Democratic Life* (Bruter et al. 2016) examines the participation of young people in European institutional politics and civic cultures. Her perspective on creativity as it relates to multiple national educational systems, complemented by her research in multiple disciplines, is what led to our approaching her for this project.

In this article, we provide a discussion of the major themes that emerged through her written responses to our interview questions. Due to her wide areas of expertise, the implications and influences she noted in relation to creativity extend the topic in ways that are both impressive and thought-provoking.

Through our conversation, it was clear that the trajectory of Dr. Banaji's work, research goals, and perspective complement each other. Her research applies a critical lens to various power structures in both schools and society as a whole, with creativity considered for and in itself and also seen to be playing a role in resistance against authoritarian systems. Her critiques and prescriptions for the modern educational system in the U.K. and elsewhere are straightforward and unapologetic. While many teachers worldwide strive to give their students a thorough grounding in their disciplines, and some are outstanding in their innovations, she has found many aspects of these systems to not only be lacking in their capacity for developing creativity, but suggests that they are actively aimed to discourage thinking and encourage conformity. Her goal of contributing to changes in these systems requires her to confront structures that support and expand inequalities.

Dr. Banaji has found that her approach and critiques are welcomed by many students, teachers, and teacher trainers that have also struggled with recent neoliberal reforms. Her perspective of critique of conventional systems, and push for more creative development in education, has also made these people her most stalwart supporters. While she has found some policy makers that support her efforts, she has also found that the powers that control educational systems across the globe are often uninterested or resistant to the nature of her work. In response to this, Dr. Banaji says "I hope I will never become someone who waters down my findings on creativity in order to persuade rightwing governments to adopt a sliver of creativity in the curriculum" (2016).

Creativity and Authority

Dr. Banaji came to study creativity through her training and work in a handful of London schools as a teacher of English and Media studies over twenty years ago. Her students' work showed her ways in which cross-curricular, playful, anti-establishment work could allow for these students' voices to be heard. The students' use of multiple mediums and working across disciplines allowed them to develop their skills in media analysis and critique, providing a language and vocabulary for thoughts they did not previously know how to express. As her work continued, she saw how educational policy in the UK enacted a "sustained and continued assault on every aspect of creativity, criticality, and independence in teaching and learning, by successive UK education ministers. This continues today" (2016). Having observed an authoritarian style of education in India, Dr. Banaji sees a similar trend in Europe and parts of the UK, which is leading to these systems losing the opportunity to teach and nurture creativity in their students. Her work as a teacher, author, mentor, researcher, and lecturer, has been part of her efforts to counteract these constraining movements within education.

Dr. Banaji published an extensive review of the creativity literature in *The Rhetorics of Creativity* (Banaji et al. 2006) offering an overview and analysis of nine rhetorics surrounding creativity, and reflecting her own multi-faceted description of creativity. As she says, "I do not subscribe to a single definition [of creativity], but see it as a term which has served different interests and purposes over time…" (Banaji 2016). She acknowledges that the most common depictions of creativity are as a collection of skills or practices, alongside some form of inspiration or flow. In describing traditional cognitive definitions of creativity she says:

> It seems to me particularly difficult for those trained in a quantitative or experimental psychological mould to move beyond the boundaries of creativity scales and tests. This is not at all to say that cognitive theories of creativity are not fascinating and insightful. They are, and I have found them enormously enlightening in understanding, for instance, relationships between emotion and experience in the field of creativity, or play and imagination. (2016)

However, she finds that while these conceptualizations of creativity offer some truth, they are too limiting and do not always honor the amount of time required to enact creativity or the context in which it is developed. She is uncomfortable with definitions of creativity that are purely instrumental in nature, preferring to focus on forms of creativity that allow for independence, playfulness, and criticality.

Dr. Banaji takes issue with the way in which many modern educational structures (curricula, teacher evaluation criteria, lesson plan templates, standardized assessment tests) do not allow for the use of extended time, often focusing education on goals that reinforce existing power structures of age, gender, ability, race, and economics. This focus, on how creativity in the classroom is at odds with elitist views of society, is a theme throughout Dr. Banaji's writing and is central to the critical lens she applies to education systems. By allowing for the expression of students' experiences that are often meaningful in their own lives, if not in society more broadly—there is a resistance to the idea that education is about purely instrumental goals, such as careers or wealth-making. Creating an environment that encourages this expression is important, and best summed up by her statement, "creativity is categorically not a solution to unhappiness, social inequality, war and mental illness. But the conditions which allow for creativity would also be conditions which could potentially reduce unhappiness, social inequality, war and mental illness – or at the very least lower anxiety, stress, unhelpful competitiveness, fear and distrust" (2016).

Creativity and Technology

Dr. Banaji finds that while technology has added to the repertoires of creative practices available, it has not changed how we think about creativity and its development. Particularly, the rhetoric we use to describe the phenomena of creativity has not changed much over the past few decades, and often offers a techno-centric discourse to describe the process of creativity. What she hopes is that we might find a way to look past commercial, securitized, military, and governmental interests' in shaping our use of the internet and communications, allowing for unimpeded sharing of ideas for science and design endeavors. This aligns with our previous work to suggest how technology alone does not change a curriculum, classroom, or epistemology without careful consideration of what new affordances and constraints that technology provides (Mishra and Koehler 2006; Mishra et al. 2011).

Educational Systems and Policy

With Dr. Banaji stating her position that creativity in education is both under attack and is also a bellwether of democratic health, the question of what can be done remains. Her overall strategy is to shift the "aspiration and commitment" of education from a system of encouraging compliance in service of a promised but usually mirage-like creation of wealth, toward a system that allows students to express their independent voices in support of a sustainable world. According to Dr. Banaji, her view "is clearly formed within an ideological tradition, as are all the other rhetorics and evaluations of creativity in circulation. As are the current ways of 'doing education'. No scholarly position is neutral. All involve a clear choice between different ideological models of education" (2016).

She sees this being possible through the creation of systems that allow students to critique the political, family and economic systems that sustain social inequality and geopolitical injustice. Creativity plays a role in these goals by allowing students the time to consider the problems presented to them in their daily lives—to search for explanations for their occurrence, and weigh possible solutions. A commitment to respecting their varied backgrounds allows students to intersect with others' needs and lived experiences, not simply seek a common history to comply with or common identity to celebrate.

The lack of a shift toward more creative practices within formal education structures and systems has both short and long term implications (Banaji et al. 2013). In the short term, Dr. Banaji points to growing evidence of both adolescents and teachers suffering from stress and mental health issues. Teachers are leaving the profession in the U.K., resulting in a loss of skills and knowledge being applied in the classroom. Other teachers who stay on develop strategies to survive which reduce the time they can spend listening to, joking with and scaffolding personal and social aspects of children's development. In the end, this correlates to unhappy students with lower levels of resilience. In the longer term, she foresees the reduction of critical thinking and risk-taking in schools presenting itself in the quicker spread of authoritarian and/or neoliberal national politics. Some of this can already be seen in the rise of populist and neofascist movements in Europe and other places, such as India. A curriculum that routinely discourages creativity decreases the likelihood of developing "challenging, divergent citizens who do not accept authoritarianism without question" (2016).

Changing Schools

Through civic engagement and critical views of social structures, Dr. Banaji offers instances when creativity can be found, even in the face of fierce opposition (Banaji 2015). For example, when describing her work in India she offers that:

> I have witnessed exhibitions of creativity amongst the poorest children and young people in deprived communities. Their facility in squeezing from the harshest circumstances some vestige of pleasure and dignity, and in particular in re-using and re-shaping the smallest items in their environments such as mud, soil, plants, twigs, insects, discarded objects, old tires, broken bottles, and left-over scraps of material to serve as toys, tools, art and objects of faith, has rendered me speechless with admiration, and humility. (2016)

She recognizes that some countries have tried to preserve more creative and socially interactive environments for their school systems, and a few private and state-run schools and universities in India have also created environments that not only offer more time for in-depth projects, but support their teaching faculty, allow for play, encourage risk-taking, and destigmatize the occurrence of failure.

To create environments that encourage creativity, Dr. Banaji lists multiple actions that can be taken. Students and teachers need physical and mental space to play and "mess around" without a fear of an external judgment of their work. This requires not just working to shift the mindset of children, but also the training of teachers in how to provide this space for students to work. Schools need to value students' existing knowledge from contexts outside of the school and classroom. These are the narratives and types of knowledge that have been historically silenced in formal education systems, yet are critical to challenging the existing status quo. According to Dr. Banaji, by honoring teachers' and students' languages, cultures, and experiences, schools can help students develop the skills needed to promote independence and confidence. Schools can encourage time for reflection and discussion, while also constantly working to connect emotion and intellect to aid in their development of both. The 'busy-work' and checklists of student tasks need to be replaced with open-ended, multi-sited, and multi-disciplinary work that reflects more realistically the world they live in and provides opportunities for creative production. For teachers, this is will likely be a large shift, which calls for retraining in how to deal with classrooms where openly questioning the material is commonplace. The school day would need moments of "controlled chaos", this would allow for play and laughter, and opportunities for coping with the unexpected. Enacting all of these recommendations in concert would help to transform schools from an environment that reinforces existing power structures to one that challenges those structures and empowers students and teachers.

Conclusion

Dr. Banaji implores us to examine creativity not as an isolated construct to be identified in a lab, but rather to be viewed in relation to the contexts in which we find it. Like any idea, creativity is subject to political and economic pressures that seek to control and define it. She is currently running a project which includes an examination of how creativity is viewed within participatory cultures in the Middle East, particularly in the form of local political songs, graffiti, and other street-based artwork. Her work compares how the work of different groups is being accepted, or not, based on the creators' positions in relation to political power. As she puts it "Creativity should not just be examined outside of the contexts of capital, power, inequity and justice which shape all of our lives in this profoundly unequal world" (2016).

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