

Uncreativity: a Discussion on Working Creativity Before and After Ideation with Dr. Chris Bilton

William Cain¹ · Danah Henriksen² · The Deep-Play Research Group^{1,2}

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You keep looking at something and in the end, a shape forms out of the shadows.

Dr. Chris Bilton

Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.

Pablo Picasso

Introduction

A central thesis in this article series on creativity and 21st century education from the Deep Play Research Group, has been the role of transdisciplinary thinking. In our most recent articles we have explored creativity along multi-faceted disciplinary lines, by engaging in a series of interviews with noted creativity researchers, each with unique and varied

perspectives on creativity. Each of these researchers' perspectives have enriched the conversation on creativity in the field, by considering a range of issues. These perspectives on creativity have ranged from psychological approaches (Richardson et al. 2016), to neuroscience (Mehta et al. 2016), to social and collaborative views (Henriksen et al. 2017), to social justice stances (Good et al. 2016), to imaginative play (Keenan et al. 2016), and more. In this article, we share ideas from an interview with Dr. Chris Bilton, who in many ways embodies a transdisciplinary approach in his own thinking, and in viewing many of the management contexts he researches.

Dr. Chris Bilton is currently a Reader at the Centre for Policy Studies at University of Warwick. Previously, he was the Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies from 2008 until 2014. He worked in the cultural sector for 10 years before coming to University of Warwick, touring Britain and Europe as a writer, performer, and manager with Balloonatics Theatre Company, and working as Arts Development Officer for City of Westminster Arts Council in London. Dr. Bilton is also the founder of the MA in Creative and Media Enterprises, was Course Director from its inception in 1999 until September 2008, and is author and editor of a number of publications on creativity and management, including a recent article on what he describes as “uncreativity”. Bilton credits this body of professional and personal experiences with helping him develop his perspective on organizational and policy initiatives to promote and foster creative industries. He notes:

I started teaching creativity and management in 1999 and I was finding that there was some literature on creativity, mostly from a business management perspective. My background, however, was from an arts/humanities perspective so I previously worked in theatre and arts management before I became an

The Deep-Play Research group is a loose collective of faculty and graduate students at Arizona State University and Michigan State University. Participants include: Kristin Elwood, Danah Henriksen, Sarah Keenan, Rohit Mehta, Punya Mishra, & Carmen Richardson.

✉ The Deep-Play Research Group
punya.mishra@asu.edu

William Cain
cainwill@msu.edu

Danah Henriksen
Danah.Henriksen@asu.edu

¹ College of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

² Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

academic. I became interested in the relationship between creativity and management and the big research question was, “Can creativity be managed and is there such a thing as a creative approach to management and is there a kind of managed or manageable version of what we mean by creativity?”

New and familiar topics emerged in our conversation with Dr. Bilton, including how transdisciplinary thinking can disrupt the false dichotomy between creatives and managers; how to nurture creativity in students, groups, and organization; and how “uncreative” routines and activities are essential the creative process. The following is a synthesis of this discussion.

Bridging the Gap Between “Creatives” and “Management”

One of our first topics of conversation concerned the so-called tension between creatives and management. From Dr. Bilton’s perspective, the notion that artists or creative people are in one camp, and management is something different and unrelated to creativity, is a familiar but problematic narrative. He comments:

I’ve known lots of people who were artists and creative people—writers, filmmakers, actors, musicians and they would use that as an excuse really for opting out of things and passing the buck. It becomes an excuse for kind of disengaging and becoming quite self-centered. I don’t think that’s necessarily a good thing, especially in an organizational managed type context because you start to entrench two positions...It becomes an anti-social and dysfunctional position which in the end is very damaging on both sides.

Dr. Bilton noted that because he actually comes from more of an arts and humanities background, he became fascinated by the business narrative on creativity as he entered into research within that domain. He has described how teaching courses that involved both students in the arts and students from business required him to start thinking more about breaking this myth of creativity as a process only entrenched in the arts. He began thinking about navigating the tension between the arts and business in more transdisciplinary ways.

I found my arts students from theatre backgrounds almost wanted to get really into hard core business management. They didn’t really want to talk about creativity and art...And all the management students were much more open minded and said, oh, that’s interesting. How

does that work? So that was quite an interesting thing, teaching.

Dr. Bilton described how encountering this tension between creativity in different fields pushed him to think about his own definition of creativity, and to define it in terms that have resonance across fields. He does subscribe to common definitions of creativity as involving elements of “novelty” and “effectiveness,” which are two definitional components that have often served as bulwarks for the field of creativity research (Cropley 2003; Fox and Fox 2000; Oldham and Cummings 1996; Zhou and George 2001). But beyond this, he reflects on some of the subtleties and tensions within that realm, stating it as such:

The conventional definition is new and is valuable. So it has to be something that is different from what’s happened before, but it also has to be, to add value to solve a problem. But what is interesting is there is a sense that those two tendencies work against each other a little bit. If you are too new, then you start to become too far off, move too far away from the problem. But if you are too fixed into the idea of solving a problem, you’re less likely to think laterally and come up with new ideas. So I became interested in this bisociative idea of creativity...the idea that in order to be creative, you need to be able to do two quite different, even contradictory things simultaneously.

As Dr. Bilton talks about his vision of creativity, and there are strong connections to transdisciplinarity, in the way he speaks of working across different areas for problem solving. Perhaps even more so, this connects to the notion of combinatorial creativity, which we have written about previously (Mishra et al. 2012). Combinatorial creativity involves the inception of new ideas or things by combining two or more different and distinctive ideas to create something novel. Such creativity requires that a person have a range of different experiences and knowledge to draw upon, to enable those experiences and ideas to combine in their minds in unique ways (Hofstadter 1985; Simonton 2004). Dr. Bilton thinks a transdisciplinary approach may hold the key to how to approach this kind of thinking. Indeed, artists like Shakespeare, who were able to frame and transcend traditional themes and genres in new and exciting ways, provide a model for how transdisciplinary thinking manifests. Dr. Bilton speaks of this in the experiences of great creators, noting:

Great artists, people like Shakespeare—what they are able to do is mobilize, draw upon different parts of their brain and bridge between different types of thinking simultaneously. Rather than being good at one thing, they’re good at many things. So this idea became the

core of what I wanted to look at in my research about creativity. That translates into interest in organizations and teams because if it's about different types of thinking, you're more likely to find that in a group, perhaps than an individual, or certainly you can start to think about configuring teams in ways that collide different types of thinking in interesting ways. That's something that also applies with students and in relationship to management and organizations.

For those of us exploring the role of transdisciplinary thinking in creativity, this is a familiar refrain. We can look upon the works of great artists and scientists and see that creativity benefits not only from fluency in different domains, but also from an ability to think about problems across those domains with knowledge and perspectives intact. Of course, bringing such discussions of creativity in organizations, groups and with students, also brings us to the topic of if and how creativity can be developed, supported or nurtured. Dr. Bilton believes that it can be, and he speaks of it in terms of allowing people to be creative.

Nurturing Creativity: The Power of Permissions and Perspectives

Dr. Bilton thinks nurturing creativity may begin with the simple act of permission. When asked whether he thought creativity could be taught, he was clear that helping people allow for their own creative potential was crucial:

I think it's partly about that permission giving, and of allowing people the space to do things... I've had many experiences in which, you go into a room, you're doing a presentation and you say, "so who in the room thinks they're creative?" And everybody's embarrassed, if it's the UK, everyone's embarrassed anyway by that question and very few of them put their hands up. By the end of it, you want them to realize that everybody has got something in them. Everybody can contribute creatively in some way.

Consider the role of permission in creative identity and activities opens up interesting possibilities for both managing creative processes and learning to access creative potential. As Dr. Bilton sees it, creative people are often reluctant to talk about their own creative impulses and processes, sensing that any discussion might dilute their claims to authenticity and independence. Yet, many people, whether they view themselves as creative or not, seem to benefit from getting both internal (self) and external (e.g. from parents, instructors, or the field) permission to think and act outside of established norms and practices.

Permission giving/getting may be particularly important for both teaching, managing, and practicing transdisciplinary creativity. Dr. Bilton cites Teresa Amabile's seminal article, "How to Kill Creativity" (Amabile 1998) as a source of insight on the role of permissions for catalyzing creative thinking and doing. In terms of education aimed at creative thinking and outcomes, Dr. Bilton also sees value in creating spaces for different forms and styles of creativity to come together. He sees ample evidence for what he calls "multiple creativities" in how people are able and inclined to express new ideas in a given genre or domain.

This is the work I'm doing at the moment with Steve Cummings [Professor – School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington] and d.t. ogilvie [Distinguished Professor of Urban Entrepreneurship, Saunders College of Business, Rochester Institute of Technology] is about multiple creativities and ways of thinking... about there being more than one type of creativity. Therefore, if you want to be creativity, the key is to connect together different people's creativities. And that's something that again, one can do as an educator.

Bilton also sees value in acknowledging the different ways people bring their personal creativity to bear and in recognizing that both individual projects and broad domains benefit from multiple perspectives and ways of doing things. But it doesn't just happen. Leadership is required in guiding and accepting multiple creativities on a project. Culture clashes, work rhythms, and personal creative differences can be difficult to manage, especially when large groups of people are involved. For creativity at this level to happen, permission and acceptance are again key— as leaders must give permission to work in ways that are outside of established domain norms and to accept other forms of domain knowledge and creativity as complementary, not adversarial. Beyond, this Dr. Bilton also focuses on the work of creativity, as well as other less-recognized aspects of the construct, through his notion of "uncreativity."

Uncreativity: The Other Side of the Equation

We spoke with Dr. Bilton soon after he had published his paper "Uncreativity: The Shadow Side of Creativity". In terms of fostering transdisciplinary thinking and creativity, Bilton believes it is critical to consider the "uncreative" processes and activities that take place *before* and *after* the creative act has taken place. As he puts it:

Uncreativity at the individual level is trying to say that it's not all about being this kind of inspired, full-on, always-on genius. It is about the kind of crossing over

and switching between mental states, and even sometimes being in a trough of despair can actually be quite a good place from a creative point of view.

This takes us into the realm of domain knowledge and processes—the *work* of the domain—which is where Bilton spends most of his research efforts. There is often an accepted way of thinking and doing in a given domain, be it medicine, physics, education, the arts, etc. The creative act (e.g. coming up with a new surgical technique, a radical framework for conceptualizing the universe, or a unique pedagogical approach) may seem instantaneously transformational in hindsight. In truth, however, the act is almost always preceded by intimate, expert domain knowledge - it comes from a place of work and effort at understanding the problems and constraints of a particular way of thinking and doing (Mishra, Terry, and Henriksen 2013). Likewise, the creative act must be followed by attempts at replication and understanding, the work and effort of understanding the implications of doing something differently and how the effects of novelty can bring value to final products and outcomes.

Take, for example, the creative processes of improv artists. As Dr. Bilton sees it, enjoying the performance of an improv routine is not entirely about laughing at the content of specific jokes. The pleasure of the performance also comes from a recognition of the skill it takes to pull off the repartee between the performers - the timing, the balance of give and take between the artists, the skill in communication through words and body language, the clever use of vocabulary and phrasing to create intricate layers of meaning. For him, these are the outcomes of work - the mental and physical effort it takes to practice, understand, and hone one's craft over time. As he frames it:

Ideas are only part of the process. It's the framing of those ideas. Brainstorming does not really generate better ideas. It generates more ideas but not necessarily better ideas. The framing that happens before and after that process is what really works, trying to think of a way of articulating all the bits that are not about pure ideation of the creative process.

As we discussed earlier, in the field of organizational creativity studies there are a couple of durable, familiar and opposing narratives. In one narrative, creatives are free, spontaneous, untamed spirits driven to reveal the world around us, critique the human condition, and upend the systems that stifle creativity and expression. In this narrative, organizations are crushing, oppressive entities that destroy the creative spark. In the other narrative, creatives are undisciplined, unpredictable, wasteful dreamers unable to conform to reality and forever at odds with the demands of the organization. In this narrative, organizations offer structure, stability, accountability, and resources to guide unproductive flights of fancy into realistic, tangible products.

These two perspectives represent the yin and yang of many creativity narratives across many disciplines, reinforcing notions of perpetual conflict between freedom and system that are as familiar as they are misleading. Dr. Bilton describes how “uncreativity” is an attempt to uphold all parts of the creative process, and break free from the constraining narrative on creativity. As he puts it:

It is important to think of a way of articulating all the bits that are not about pure ideation of the creative process. It involves trying to acknowledge those other parts of the process. And then at an organizational level, it's recognizing that the person who appears to be making no creative contribution to a team might actually be really important. It might be that their presence makes other people be creative. Or that they're very good at recognizing other people's ideas and moving them on just a bit in the way they respond or ask another question...(Uncreativity) is an acknowledgement of what's going on. You open the field up to people who say “oh, I'm not creative. I'm an uncreative person.” They're very important to the process, too. I think it's quite empowering to recognize that there's more than one way to be creative... We are talking about generative creativity, adaptive creativity, executive creativity. These are all types of creativity. Let's think about how they all fit together into a whole.

Luckily, when it comes to the subject of creativity in organizations, Dr. Bilton can be considered equal parts myth buster and peacemaker. And for him, it all begins with a closer examination of the *work* of creativity. “The moment of breakthrough thinking,” Bilton told us in his interview. “That's the exciting bit. That's the bit everyone wants a piece of but it's preceded by and followed by this quite boring stuff. This is more work than creativity, and most creatives are not so interested in talking about this part of the process.”

Democratizing the Process: The Potential of Technology

Throughout our discussion, Dr. Bilton shared his vision of creativity that aligns with notions of transdisciplinarity, and the value of upholding and exploring creativity across disciplines. While he noted some of the core aspects of creativity from a traditional perspective, in terms of its novelty and effectiveness, he also suggested there are inherent tensions in this—and that creativity is an inherently complex, multifaceted and effort-driven process. Within all of this complexity, it was also clear that Dr. Bilton believes that technology has changed much of the landscape of society and culture that creativity exists within, and through that, has democratized the process. As he noted:

Technology has democratized creativity. It allows more people more access to do things than ever before. So we're in a time when I've used content generated by other people, I've used a distributed content as well, people making stuff, showing stuff, sharing stuff. That is quite threatening to professional artists both in terms of their position and self-esteem, but also just in a very practical way in terms of their livelihood. If everybody's, if everybody's making stuff and everybody's sharing stuff and if content is basically free, as it increasingly is online, through technology, then how do they get paid? How do you earn a living as an artist? So technology is really, has really been a game changer in terms of it's allowing people to be creative, to share creative ideas.

Dr. Bilton noted that within this changing landscape, technology has opened up access to and sharing of creativity, which is a good thing, but not without problems—such as the challenges faced by the traditional arts or art venues. At the end of the day though, he reflected on the fact that it helps us to make connections and allows people to connect, collaborate and work together in interesting ways. He commented:

It allows people to share things in interesting ways. It allows people to kind of, yeah, cut through some of the barriers that we were talking about earlier institutionally. Technologies can allow that to happen. At the micro level certainly. And at the macro level as well a little bit. We're using technology now to talk, right?

Epilogue

There are profound implications for education and organizations in what Dr. Bilton has shared with us. Teachers and students, free to give themselves permission to be creative within their own domains of activity, can access untapped potential for novel and effective approaches to problems and situations. “Uncreative” activities, inherently transdisciplinary in nature and vital to the creative process, can be valued and

nurtured alongside ideation. Creatives and management, long viewing each other as necessary evils, can adopt more transdisciplinary approaches and incorporate their different perspectives as parts of the holistic creative process. We see more open acceptance of the ideas as part of the larger role transdisciplinary thinking can play in how creativity can be taught, managed, and nurtured.

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