



Creativity as Perspective Taking: An Interview with Dr. Vlad Glăveanu

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Wisdom begins in wonder.

– Socrates

At the core of creativity, I think, is this idea of how we expand possibility.

– Dr. Vlad Glăveanu

Introduction

As we share what is now our 21st article in this series featuring creativity researchers from around the world, we are immensely grateful for the wide breadth of conversations we have engaged in and shared with readers. The scholars we have spent time with not only conceptualize creativity in a diverse range of scholarly and practical ways, but also use it to examine many different social and structural issues.

In this article we share our discussion with Dr. Vlad Glăveanu, who is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Psychology and Counselling at Webster University Geneva, Associate Professor II at Bergen University, and Director of the Webster Center for Creativity and Innovation. His work focuses on creativity, imagination, culture, collaboration, and societal challenges. He co-edits the book series *Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture* for Palgrave Macmillan. Dr. Glăveanu is editor of Europe's *Journal of Psychology* (EJOP), an open-access peer-reviewed journal published by PsychOpen (Germany). In 2018, he

received the Berlyne Award from the American Psychological Association for outstanding early career contributions to the field of aesthetics, creativity, and the arts.

Given his interest in culture and experience as a world-traveler, Dr. Glăveanu's research in creativity extends beyond the individual to consider the role of social and cultural forces on creativity. In this article, we share how he understands creativity beyond individual creative actors, the importance of *wondering* as part of the creative process, the possibility of creativity and social transformation in online spaces, and how we can better scaffold students' use of technology to enable openness. We bridge between Dr. Glăveanu's established and written scholarship as well as direct quotes drawn from conversation with him, to provide readers with a broad sense of his work and thinking around creativity.

Situating creativity within a sociocultural framework

Dr. Glăveanu's interest in creativity grew from his experience in cultural psychology — understanding that creativity “is not the product of a ‘disconnection,’ but of deeply rooted ‘connections’ between person and environment, self and others, creator and culture” (Glăveanu 2010, p. 147). Weaving together threads from many different scholars including Keith Sawyer, Lev Vygotsky, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Mikhail Bakhtin, Dr. Glăveanu has worked to develop an understanding of creativity that is “social in nature and located in the space ‘in between’ self and others” (Glăveanu 2011, p. 480). His view on creativity as inherently rooted in the social world provides a rich and interconnected perspective on the construct. It offers something important and distinct from some of the more individualistic views which often dominated psychological studies of creativity in the latter half of the 20th century.

The power of this perspective lies in its positioning of creativity as a byproduct of “symbolic mediation through cultural

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artefacts, at the role of activity and social practices, and the co-construction of knowledge and self through social interaction” (Glăveanu 2011, p. 480), expanding what is important and helpful to examine when considering creativity. His focus shifts away from examining only the “creative individual” to consider interactions between individuals and the systems they operate within.

In thinking about creativity, Dr. Glăveanu highlights the importance of considering the “representational space” that creativity takes place within; a space where cultural norms and systems of thought are played with—where representational elements turn into symbolic resources.

Each individual, when confronted with a creative task (whether alone or in a group), first starts from representing the situation s/he is in and framing this representation in the wider system of cultural models that are activated by the specific creative task. In other words, the person is guided in his/her creative process by a broad cultural frame which is the *personal representational space*. At the same time, in a collaborative situation, individuals communicate and therefore build a *common representational space* (Glăveanu 2011, p. 483).

People are therefore often navigating a tension between their own understanding of a creative task and all of the relevant associations or connections, sometimes including the perspectives that others bring to a collaborative task. Dr. Glăveanu explains the importance of considering this space as a way of highlighting how multiple belief systems, divergent assumptions, and tensions can be accommodated through communication and the combinatorial power of language:

By exploring/communicating...unique representational spaces members come to “realize” other ways of understanding or doing things. It is by communicating or *sharing such resources* (in the form of ideas, experiences, procedures, etc.) that unique representational spaces open themselves (although never completely) to the common representational space. This “fusion” facilitates the emergence of a *new representational space*, the space of the creative solution (action or material outcome), a space that is “new” since the solution or creative idea (or ideas) are dissimilar to the current knowledge of the participants. The novel outcomes therefore emerge from the common representational space and end up enriching it as well as the personal representational spaces of each participant (Glăveanu 2011, p. 484).

This idea that that part of the creative process includes building a space where perspectives are shared, perhaps in tension but also co-existing in dialogue, brings forth the

importance of factors like emotions, empathy, and trust—factors that, because they may seem more subjective, variable and subtle, are not often featured in creativity research.

During our conversation Dr. Glăveanu pointed out the conceptual challenge that this sociocultural perspective poses to dominant forms of creativity research which are often quantitative and examine only a small part of this larger system. For example, neuroscientists who might examine an individual’s ability to engage in divergent thinking are attempting to examine creativity—but they are doing so in a much more narrowly focused way, wherein Dr. Glăveanu’s social perspective aims to consider creativity existing in a system of social connections and factors that drive and change it.

Dr. Glăveanu’s expansive view on creativity opens up the possibility of exploring additional cultural systems that influence creativity, like linguistics, discourse, and art. He explains, “Even when you create alone there is such a web of connections with other people and culture that should be recognized.” This helps us not only situate individuals as social beings within systems, but begin to think about how systems operate differently on different people. It recognizes that creativity does not occur in a vacuum, but rather emerges within a system of people, groups, tools, symbols and ideas in the material and ideational spaces we inhabit. This potentially results in an understanding of how unique and variable perspectives come to bear in creative collaborations across contexts.

Wondering: Engaging with the possible

A thread of research Dr. Glăveanu has been developing recently involves the relationship between creativity and wonder, again weaving in the thread of perspective taking. Dr. Glăveanu summarizes how he conceptualizes wonder as related to creativity, stating:

Understood as one of the main ways in which we engage with the possible, wonder presents us, upon closer inspection, with a paradox typical for creativity—experiencing what is present (the here and now) through the lenses of what is absent (the not-yet-here). Wondering is grounded in the possibility of adopting multiple perspectives on a certain reality; many of which are yet unknown to the creator while anticipated and actively looked for (Glăveanu 2019, p. 171).

When we consider what it means to *wonder* we find that this is first a reaction based in either curiosity or surprise that quickly evolves into the motivation to pursue a new thought or line of inquiry. The fact that this is an often-un-seen precursor to creative thoughts is one of the reasons Dr. Glăveanu finds the process so fascinating. He elaborates:

How we can escape the here and now—imagine the future, remember the past, construct alternative futures, and plan ahead to guide our actions in ways that free us from the immediate. That's really what captivates me about creativity. The way in which people can become agentic and turn some of these possibilities into actuality. A lot of creativity work is about the actual - which is the product - but my interest is in the process. How do we actually do it? And I think wonder is one of these key elements.

In Dr. Glăveanu's description, wonder occurs in the present or is evoked by something in the present, yet is also an escape from the immediacy of the present. This reveals an interesting capacity that the experience of wonder has, in that it allows us to escape the concrete bounds of 'what is' to either re-imagine what was, or imagine what is not or what could be. Building from this idea that imagining the "not yet" can guide future actions, Dr. Glăveanu developed a model of this "space of possibility" that represents how he understands being able to hold a metaposition—which is a psychological position in which one recognizes multiple perspectives of reality. He explains that:

... Metaposition goes beyond relating position/perspective 1 and 2 and their object—it actively makes us look for a third position/perspective which exists in the sphere of the possible...To occupy a metaposition means, in other words, engaging with the possible; it means...experiencing wonder (Glăveanu 2019, 173 – 174).

His schematic rendering of this process can be seen in Figure 1.

This process of metaposition, wherein holding two perspectives inspires someone to seek out or imagine additional alternative perspectives, helps distinguish wonder from its psychological sibling, *curiosity*. Dr. Glăveanu explains this:

In curiosity you want to know [something] and you use your previous knowledge to understand what's happening now and to find out. You settle down, you feed your curiosity - you *get to know* through it. In wonder, the key of this phenomenon is that you *never fully get to know*, you always remain within a sense of tension that new things could be possible, there are things beyond my knowledge. This stage of tension and conflict and excitement is so fertile for creativity and I think wonder can play a huge part; it's a trigger to the creative process but also it's the outcome of it. Sometimes we get to wonder and say "Look what we've done! What else could have been, what else is possible?"

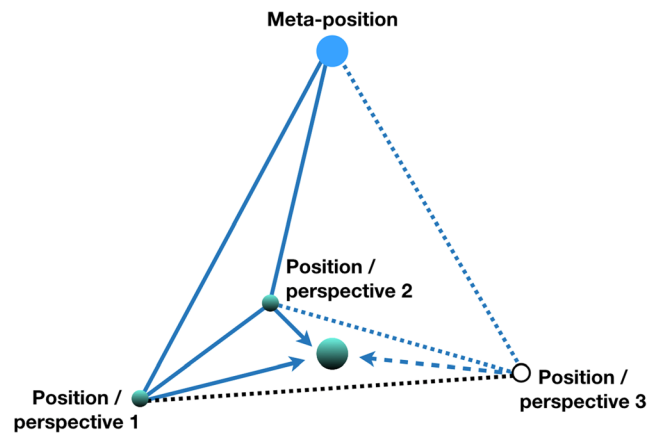


Figure 1: Vlad Glăveanu's schematic representation of "the space of the possible" (Glăveanu 2019, p. 174)

This is more than just a theoretical contribution with potential practical implications. It has real world impact already in the ways that Glăveanu is studying it. Dr. Glăveanu and colleagues from the University of Brasilia are working to understand when, if, and what students wonder about in their university classrooms. He also has a book coming out entitled *Wonder: The Extraordinary Power of an Ordinary Experience*, which offers a comprehensive overview of his wondering work.

Social media as enabling creative social transformation

Dr. Glăveanu's dedication to a sociocultural model of creativity has led him to examine unique and contemporary personal and social representational spaces where creativity takes place, such as social media. Social media offers a unique space to examine how digital communities take content and ideas and interact with them to transformative ends. Dr. Glăveanu explains:

When you create, you basically communicate something, you use cultural material, you transform it, you interact with others...I'm trying to see how creativity contributes to society. We have spent decades thinking about how society makes creativity possible, but how does creativity transform society in and of itself?

One way in which Dr. Glăveanu is working to understand this phenomenon is by examining pro- and anti-immigration sentiment posted on Twitter. He notes that he is "...not idealistic—I'm not thinking that creativity is always good and that it will always lead to personal growth and positive societal outcome." His study of online creativity around Twitter, with Constance de Saint Laurent of the University of Bologna, looks to see how new discourse and identities

emerge from linguistic creativity cultivated within hashtags and memes. He explains that this study has shown them disquieting things, including:

...how people use creativity to actually promote an anti-refuge, anti-immigration discourse and how they do it kind of successfully, sadly, in the environment of Twitter where echo chambers are created by creatively altering hashtags... It has very little content but a lot of linguistic creativity to it and it's very catching.

This exploration of the “dark side” creativity is a relatively recent movement in the field, but it becomes ever more important in a time where technological capabilities are increasing at a multiplicative and accelerating rate—meaning that there is not always time allocated to being deeply thoughtful and reflective about ethics in real-world creative invention practices and processes. Cropley (2010) presents an edited book with chapters exploring a range of perspectives on the abuses of creativity. They look at a range of cases of the dark side of creativity, from carelessly negative creativity to malevolent creativity, across a variety of settings, with a variety of theoretical lenses. Recognizing the varied and negative impacts that creativity can have on society, Cropley (2010) seeks to better define and differentiate multiple aspects one could expect to see in abuses of creativity, such that society might work to minimize their impact. Dr. Glăveanu relates this conversation back to his framing of creativity as a social process that relies on new perspectives, again returning to the need of being in dialogue with new perspectives and thoughts:

Creativity, like any kind of process, can be derailed and can lead to negative outcomes. If you think about the mindsets needed to be creative and the kind of embracing of uncertainty—otherness, other ideas, other views—that to me is the core of creativity.

While Twitter and other social media platforms can certainly provide a space for like-minded individuals to communicate only with each other, they can also offer space for new ideas that spark enthusiasm and motivation. To this end, Dr. Glăveanu has also examined “protests and forms of activism...forms of collective wonder, where people wonder together what might become possible in a certain situation. In protest or revolution for instance, I think people get fired up because they wonder collectively.” As we discussed what it means to wonder collectively and how online spaces have contributed to not only the wondering process, but to actions that been borne from such processes (such as in the recent Hong Kong protests) Dr. Glăveanu explained:

It's this creative spur of energy that activates people in some ways...But I think what we also see is that

without strong leadership, creativity often disbursts meaning. It diverges and goes into many ideas, many possibilities—but you need the convergence as well. What a lot of social movements are missing is getting on the same page. There is a fine balance there because of course you don't want to give closure to a collective event way too soon because you wouldn't get people on board. But then a lot of times, as with the Arab Springs—a lot of them lose steam because they disburse into creative ideas that never fully get to go anywhere. So, you need a balance between divergence and convergence somehow, even in the creative process.

In this sense, creativity in social media or other online spaces may offer something unique, based upon the unique affordances of digitality. Affordances are cue or clues about how a thing should be used, or what purposes it can best serve, typically provided by the thing or its context. For instance, Norman's (1988) work in design notes that a doorknob affords turning, a pencil affords writing, a video affords watching, and so on. Objects, artifacts or ideas exist in the social and the material world and their different characteristics afford creativity in different ways. Of course, this is not guaranteed, since a doorknob will not be turned if a person does not want to enter and a pencil will not write if a person has nothing to say. But the affordances do make certain things more possible, opening up creative potential that can be spurred on by other factors. Given the immediacy, communication and interactivity affordances that are readily found in the digital world, and its ability to remove the constraints of physical distances and space, this can translate to creativity in real time action and change. The examples of Twitter protests Dr. Glăveanu shared reveals the mind shift and the potential for change that can be encouraged through a creative digital culture.

Technology as a potential enabler of openness

As our conversation shifted to the role of technology, more broadly, in the creative process, Dr. Glăveanu came back to the importance of technology in terms of offering new venues for collaboration and perspective taking, tempering that possibility with a need for intentional intervention. Leading back to the notion that affordances can enable but do not guarantee an outcome, he describes the need to account for other factors that set the social stage upon which creativity plays out—such as the cultivation of certain habits of mind:

Technology is a great enabler of creativity, but in and of itself cannot solve or lead to more creativity unless *other things* are set in place. One of these other things is

openness—openness to difference, openness to alternatives, openness to other people, the capacity to wonder about others, and other points of view...we need to cultivate in people a mindset that opens them up to difference and to the perspectives of others. And that is the job of education...I think that it is in this triangle between education, creativity and technology where I see a brighter societal future.

The idea of openness is well associated with individual creative ability. It is an important trait within the Five Factor Model of personality, which psychologists regularly find predicts creative accomplishments. Indeed, a *lack* of openness can overcome an individual's creative ability, leading them to report relatively fewer creative accomplishments than their "more open" peers (King et al. 1996; Silvia et al. 2009). Understand openness as an interest in engaging with varied experiences and willingness to reflect on emotions associated with that journey, Dr. Glăveanu recognizes the challenges associated with openness, explaining "is very emotionally taxing to wonder about others, to be open to others because it makes you vulnerable; you open yourself up to the possibility of being wrong." This sense of vulnerability often leads to a resistance to failure (which is often essential to creative processes), based on the social risks and discomfort involved in being wrong or making a mistake and having to try again. Nonetheless, openness to difference (Glăveanu and Beghetto 2017) is an important skill that Dr. Glăveanu thinks is important to support students in learning. He suggests three practical steps that can help cultivate an open mindset: awareness, valuing, and acting.

The first one is becoming aware that other people think differently than you do, and it sounds very basic but it's one of the most difficult skills. If you're an educator in the classroom or if you're a student or just a normal person in everyday life, it's much easier to either ignore—not pay attention to—or trivialize differences.

Awareness of difference is certainly challenging because it requires a reflection into or upon one's own self (Grant et al. 2002; Webster 2010). Indeed, this is often a universal first step for teachers interested in developing culturally relevant or culturally sustaining pedagogies (Gay and Kirkland 2003). Understanding oneself, biases, opinions, and how one is located within multiple systems is a challenging but necessary first step to becoming aware of difference.

According to Dr. Glăveanu, after becoming aware of difference, people must learn how to value perspectives that are different than theirs:

There is an important distinction between valuing and agreeing. I think people often get the two confused.

Understanding the difference of perspective with someone doesn't mean agreeing with that person. It means you understand where they're coming from and then you can have a more fruitful disagreement with them based on that. But I think people don't do enough today to try and understand the logic of certain people... who don't believe in climate change or vaccines, for example. But there is a logic they have, and if there's a chance of correcting, adjusting or building communication, you need to show people that you value the fact that they have a view and then engage with that view. And a lot of creativity comes out of disagreement, but a respectful type of disagreement.

Valuing the perspective of others then enables a person to step into the space of possibility discussed earlier, the metaposition where they are holding multiple perspectives within one reality, and imagining even more perspectives. As earlier, Dr. Glăveanu focuses on not staying complacent in this space of simply recognizing different perspectives, but rather, pushes for action based on those differences:

A lot of times we are just very happy with ourselves when we are very open, and we accommodate a lot of different views. We feel happy that we listen to everyone, but we don't do anything based on what we know. The actual act of creativity comes when through all the differences you are able to build something new, to propose something new, to create something new—a new bridge between people, to change your little sphere of society, in your context. So, acting on difference means understanding difference and making something out of it.

This idea leads us to recognize that the *novelty* aspect of creativity (understanding creative ideas as producing something novel, effective and whole, per Mishra et al. 2013) can truly not be conceived of without alternative perspectives. If creativity is bridge building, it is necessary to explore where the bridge leads to.

Considering how creativity, technology, and education can meet together to forge a path forward in getting to know other perspectives, Dr. Glăveanu suggests a few ways in which educators can work toward these ends:

In education we want to create more global citizens who are able to look beyond their national identity and their position in the world and to understand the world from the perspective of other people. So, there are programs or ways of thinking that are dominating some areas within education, but I think at the very basic level it's about cultivating empathy and perspective taking, and trying to understand situations and problems from the position of other people.

Indeed, initiatives to expand a sense a citizenship at a global level can be seen in organizations such as UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), which touts global citizenship education as one of their responses to the challenges of human rights violations, inequality, and poverty. The fundamentals behind such explicit commitment to peace and human rights have their roots in social cognitions around empathy, compassion and perspective taking. And in turn the ability to see and engage multiple perspectives, alternatives or divergent ways of thinking about the world are central to creativity. As with any sort of cognitive skill, there are differences and variance in individual's tendencies toward things like empathy, but as Glăveanu points out, it is a skill and a way of thinking and being that can be developed and strengthened.

Certainly technological tools and the internet do provide resources for enabling this exploration. They have affordances for communication and connection with others across the world, bridging boundaries of physical and temporal distance. While there are many critical concerns, cautions and dangers around the 'dark side' of creativity and technology, there is also potential in such tools depending on human use and purposes. It is possible to seek out or find alternative perspectives, stories, and connections with people that historically it would have been impossible to engage with or even meet. This is evident for instance, in the TED talk by Megan Phelps-Roper, a former member of the Westboro Baptist Church (Phelps-Roper 2017). She describes being raised since birth to believe dogmatically in this organization, which is known for its use of inflammatory hate speech against vulnerable minorities. Despite this ingrained background, through years of sustained dialogue and interactions with caring and empathetic people on social media—people who disagreed with the Church's beliefs and practices, yet aimed to engage her in human connection and expose her to different ideas—she began to question the organization's policies of hate, and ultimately broke from the Church and her upbringing. Her work now focuses on spreading empathy and discourse via social media, providing an example of how, when people aim to consider the perspectives (and logic) of others from different angles, it is possible to find the connection points in things that seem dissimilar. This is also a key aspect of transdisciplinary creativity—making connections across seemingly dissimilar cases, contexts or disciplines, and then creating something new out of these connections and differences.

Conclusion

Our conversation with Dr. Glăveanu ended with a very kind act on his part, (offering to meet again or chat through email about any additional questions) which, besides being

generous, was also a wonderful example of many threads of our conversation. Earlier he had said:

Encouraging collaboration and sharing is something that could be done very early on in education. It is something that can help us think more about the needs, the perspectives of others. I think a lot of the damages that technology can enable (in terms of the negative uses of social media) could be mitigated by us understanding that other people can be affected by our actions, which is something that often escapes us. You know, we live in our technological bubbles and we forget that at the end of that technology are other people with their own lives and needs. I think educating for empathy and perspective taking and cultivating a bit of a sense of wonder could help that particular mindset.

Participating in this interview was not only scholarly collaboration between the Deep-Play Group and Dr. Glăveanu, but sharing with this audience of readers builds out this experience even further, perhaps stretching the web of social creativity further still. Indeed, this sentiment is a helpful framing for many of the reasons we continue to produce this series—expanding us beyond our current bubbles and working to better understand new perspective in creativity research.

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