Dying in the Arts: Creativity as Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

The idea that organizations need to adopt structures and practices that facilitate ‘creativity’ has become a central theme in theories of managing organisational innovation and success. This idea has been deployed in organisational theory, HRM, marketing and other domains of organization studies. We argue, however, that in the process of being appropriated from the arts, the concept of creativity has been ‘hollowed out’ and refashioned to suit the structures of organization as institution, and its needs as a business organization (to make money and establish ‘competitive advantage’). This devalued idea of creativity has, in turn, been imposed on arts organisations, which are impelled to see themselves as ‘creative businesses’. Creativity, has been defined as a set of imaginative practices intended to express original ideas, and is in need of defence.

Key words: metaphor, creativity, creative arts, organisational creativity, arts industry

“talk about creativity has spread at such a pace that, if it were a plant, it would be tagged a weed and marked for immediate eradication” (Scanlon, 2005)

MANAGEMENT THEORY, CREATIVITY AND THE ARTS

The idea that organizations need to adopt structures and practices that facilitate ‘creativity’ has become a central theme in both the academic management literature on organisational innovation and success (Summers and White 2001; Unsworth 2001; Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999; Sternberg 1999; Ford 1996; Woodward, Sawyer and Griffin 1993; Mumford and Gustafson 1988), and popular business press (e.g., Levitt 2002, Fast Company 2004). This idea has been deployed in management, HRM, marketing and other functional domains of organization studies (e.g., Farmer, Tierney and Kung-Macintyre 2003; Dennis and Macaulay 2003). The attributes of ‘creative organizations’ (e.g., Oldham and Cummings 1996), ‘creative groups’ (e.g., King and Anderson 1990), ‘creative team’s (e.g., Feurer, Chaharbaghi and Wargin, ‘creative individuals’ (e.g., Amabile 1988, Farmer, Tierney and Kung-McIntyre 2003) and ‘how to become one’ (e.g., Albrecht 1987) have been the subject of countless books and articles.

The concept of creativity derives from the visual and creative arts, in which creativity is seen as an individual act of imaginative practice intended to express original ideas. This concept of imaginative and idiosyncratic creativity has, however, been refashioned and, we would argue, ‘hollowed out’ and devalued by the imperatives for creativity to suit the structures of organization as institution, and its goals of making money and gaining a ‘competitive advantage’. This devalued idea of creativity has, in turn,
been imposed on arts organisations, which are increasingly urged to define themselves as ‘creative businesses’ (Amabile 1988). Creativity as a set of ‘imaginative practices’ with its own intrinsic value is in need of defence; for without it, creative arts organisations will themselves be devalued as centres of creativity.

Our critique of the concept rests essentially on three arguments. First, as we have noted above, its appropriation from the arts has involved an untenable refashioning of the concept in relation to its original meaning. To make this point we briefly consider ways in which the concept of creativity has been used in the creative arts and in management theory. Then we make an argument as to why creativity in its original sense is inconsistent with organizations whose primary purpose is making money, and whose primary mode is working through rules and institutionalised practice. Creativity, we suggest, is a process based on intrinsic value and motivation, is often spontaneous, ‘rebellious and chaotic’, generally individualised, beyond rationality and can tolerate loss and failure in a way inimical to business organization. A final argument, then deals with the insidious way in which the concept of creativity has been used to recast arts organizations as ‘arts businesses’ and their administrators as ‘creative managers’.

Our critique is decidedly polemic in orientation. This is so in a number of respects. First, the paper does not provide a comprehensive account of the literature on creativity – deliberately – to avoid over complicating the argument. Second, in order to critically interrogate the concept of creativity we go beyond the use of metaphor implicit in this literature which assumes the characteristics of the artist are like the characteristics of the manager or employee (see Morgan 1997). As Oswick, Keenoy and Grant (2002: 294) suggest, a range of other tropes beyond metaphors, including “sarcasm, hyperbole, satire and humour”, provide appropriate tools to undertake this task. As polemic, ‘it is reliant on being persuasive “at the level of meaning” for… its validity depends on being perceived. If the argument does not resonate with the readers’ experience… it will not work’ (Keenoy 1999)
CREATIVITY IN ART AND BUSINESS

This section provides the foundation for our central assertion that the meaning of the concept of creativity, as it has been appropriated from a creative arts context, has been hollowed out and devalued. We begin with a brief discussion of how it has been used in a creative arts context and then consider how the concept has been applied to business organisation.

Creativity in the Arts

The ‘creative act’ within the creative arts context provides the basis for the idea that individuals and business organisations can develop creativity as a means to establish a competitive advantage. As we outline below, the management literature posits that creativity can be found in individuals, groups, and organisations. From a creative arts perspective, the creative process is embodied in the innate capabilities of individuals and in many contexts, their interaction with other artists, the subject and audience (Strati 2000). At an individual level, creativity is viewed as a process by which individuals develop and express original ideas in new or novel ways. As such, the idea of creativity is viewed as a highly idiosyncratic process, subject to play and spontaneity (Kavanagh, O’Brien and Linanne 2002); is ‘rebellious and chaotic’ (Prichard 2002); as ‘beyond adult rationality’ (Faass 2000). This conception ties the act of creativity to the individual beyond their technical skills and capabilities, seeing creativity as an act of imaginative practices associated with the formation of an idea and the expression of that idea in some artistic form. As such, once expressed a creative idea cannot be reproduced without being devoid of creativity (Kavanagh et al 2002). Moreover, creative acts by their nature are wrought by the intrinsic engagement of the artist in the creative process (Amabile 1988), and are not necessarily of themselves motivated by anything beyond the expression of the idea. As such the calculus of costs and benefits associated with creative acts is not a primary motivator or something which sustains the creative process.

Creativity in organisation theory

Creativity is a complex construct that is defined according to the level of analysis and the domain in which it is considered. Within the management and organisational studies literature, the concept of
creativity is defined as ‘the production of novel ideas that are useful and appropriate to the situation’ (Unsworth 2001: 289; Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999; Ford 1996; Oldham and Cummings 1996; Woodward, Sawyer and Griffin 1993; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby and Herron 1988). Productive creativity is, in this sense, the precondition for innovation where innovation is ‘the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organisation’ (Amabile et al 1988). Thus in an organisational context, the idea of creativity is viewed both in terms of being an ‘output’, and as something that has use value or is appropriate for the enterprise in responding to the changing environment in which it needs to remain competitive (Amabile et al 1988; Levitt 2002). Creative output can be viewed as the product of individual, group or organisational processes (Drazin et al 1999).

Individual level creativity within organisations has been pathologised as the perfect employee: highly committed, flexible, curious, persistent, and with a requisite need for variety, autonomy and recognition (Minahan and Hartel 2005). At the group level, creativity is embodied in the idea of dynamic teams capable of generating innovative and useful ideas which contribute to enhanced performance, incremental improvements in work processes and new ways of doing what needs to be done (Amabile 1988). Even the routinised process of solving problems for which there are already available answers is, in this context, viewed as creative (Unsworth 2003). In this sense, creativity is a ‘phenomenon of degree rather than a category’. For example, it may be found in the conception of sculpture, the composition of a symphony or the removal of a stubborn stain’ (Feurer et al 1996: 6, emphasis added).

In their seminal work on establishing the organisational conditions for creativity, Amabile et al (1988) posit five dimensions of the work environment which contribute to the capacity of individuals and groups to be creative (also see Woodward et al 1993). Organisations must be able to encourage creativity, through the policies and reward systems, through the role of supervisors as nurturers of the creative spirit, and in the way that work groups function and value creative effort. The organisational environment also needs to provide individuals and work teams with ‘autonomy and freedom’ in their day-to-day work and ‘a sense of ownership and control over their own work and their own ideas’ (Amabile et al 1988, 1161). Individuals and teams also need to be provided with adequate resources to engage in creativity, as well being provided with adequate time for such activities, and in a way which balances work pressure with challenging work. Lastly, organisations need to consider the nature of
internal impediments to individuals and groups being creative in their work. These impediments are said to come in the form of ‘internal strife, conservatism, and rigid, formal management structures’ (p. 1162).

**Business Does Creativity**

It is a mark of the currency of the idea of creativity within business circles that the December 2004 issue of the American business magazine, *Fast Company*, is entitled ‘The Creativity Issue’. A raft of articles is included to inform and educate the business sector on how to work more ‘creatively’. The issue includes articles such as ‘What Makes Beautiful Minds?’, ‘Six Myths of Creativity’, ‘Getting Creative’ and ‘Brain Callisthenics: 3 exercises designed to stretch the imagination’. These articles promise to help the reader do everything from sorting out who the creative people in your company are, to building a creative work environment, and becoming a better employee by doing ‘creativity exercises’.

There are several ways to deconstruct the representation of creativity in this issue of Fast Company. First, while creativity is clearly seen to be of great and intrinsic value to the business enterprise, the various authors make little or no attempt to define it in such a way that it means something greater than merely being efficient or competent in your job. In this sense, in these articles creativity is actually a new euphemism for old ideas about the basic skills needed in any ordinary workplace. Second, while creativity may have provided organisational theorists with a tantalising metaphor to conjure with, it is reduced here to a set of exercises, maxims and handy tips to help even the most creatively challenged amongst us to come up with those breakthrough ideas. This is the discourse of creativity melding into the genre of self-help with its urgent insistence on the imperative to realise your potential at all costs. In his book *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?*, Frank Furedi (1994) argues that the notion of creativity has become another feel-good term, indiscriminately applied, and intended to transform the mundane actuality of work into something lofty and significant. Indeed, if the popularised versions of creativity can be taken at face value, anyone can be creative by following simple rules. For Amabile (1988) there are three secrets to components of creativity: knowledge-technical, procedural and intellectual expertise; motivation and passion for what one does, and creative thinking skills. Albrecht (1987) tells us there are five secrets to becoming creative:
The way to join the ranks of the creative, innovative thinkers is to find out what they do and then imitate them. In other words, by adopting behaviours of creativity, you become more creative. That’s all there is to it… There are five basic characteristics that make the difference for innovative and creative thinking. We all have these characteristics to some extent, but the great thinkers of the world really have them. They have made these attitudes and habits of thought a basic part of their approach to living…they are: 1. Mental Flexibility. 2. Option thinking. 3. Big picture thinking. 4. Skill in explaining and selling ideas. 5. Intellectual courage (pp. 66-67).

The key lesson from *Fast Company* and the management literature is that everyone has the potential to be creative, especially after intensive Brain Callisthenics training! Yet, as Raymond Williams (1976) reminds us, creativity must not only connote originality and innovation, it must also ‘distinguish certain kinds of work’. But the rapid conventionalising of the term threatens to blur these crucial distinctions. In particular, Williams argues that “the difficulty is especially apparent when creativity is extended…to activities in thought, language and social practice in which the specialised sense of imagination is not a necessary term” (p.84) Williams here is insisting that since there is a definitional link between creativity and imagination, it makes little sense to apply the term ‘creative’ to activities in which imagination does not play a key role. This sense of the special and distinctive attributes of the creative is entirely missing from *Fast Company*, as well as, for example, any number of issues of *Fortune Magazine* and *BRW* which, in the last few years, have featured multiple articles peddling the new religion of creativity and proselytising the benefits. It is an interesting exercise as one reads these articles to replace the word ‘creative’ with the word ‘efficient’ and discover that these are virtually synonymous. It is the critical assumption of this putatively happy marriage between creativity and business that one encourages and facilitates the other. However, nowhere is it acknowledged that creativity, in the arts, for example, is often apparent in state-subsidised theatres and community-based arts spaces far away from the exigencies of the marketplace. Indeed, as Scanlon (2005) has pointed out: ‘Creativity is in tension with the market and requires space to flourish outside of it’.

‘THE PROBLEM WITH CREATIVE TYPES’: THE LIMITS OF CREATIVITY

Theorists on organisational creativity are, however, concerned to place strict limits on the expression of creativity in organisational settings. Creativity not only needs to be nurtured and supported, but it also needs to be measured and controlled (Fillis and McAuley 2000). For creativity to be ‘productive’ it needs discipline over the ‘essential primacy of the creative impulse’ (Levitt 2002: 142). A key role for
managing the creative process is to channel creativity, to ensure ‘the creative genius’ alters their
behaviour to ‘suit the boss’s requirements’ (ibid: 142). Creative types can clearly be trouble for
organisations; unlimited freedom may result in dissonant creativity (Dennis and Macauley 2003: 181).
Creative people can be difficult to manage as individual creativity may be associated with personality
traits which are unlikely to conform, result in mood swings, and even depression and schizoid behaviours
(Minahan and Hartel 2005). Some managers find creative people to be ‘organisational pests as they
pepper their managers with intriguing but short memoranda that lack details about what is at stake or
how the new ideas should be implemented.’ (Levitt 2002: 137). This inevitably means that creativity
needs to be ‘structured’ (Dennis and Macauley 2003) and ‘channelled’ (Kamoche and Pina e Cunha
2001); freedom needs to be constrained (Amabile 1988: 81):

When it comes to granting freedom, the key to creativity is giving people autonomy concerning the
means – that is, concerning process – but not necessarily the ends. People will be more creative, in other
words, of you give them freedom to decide how to climb a particular mountain. You needn’t let them
choose which mountain to climb. In fact clearly specified strategic goals often enhance people’s
creativity.

Organisational creativity in this sense can be viewed as a ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault 1972); and a
means to an end. It is a device – both structural and discursive in nature – intended to enhance
productivity and assert control over both individuals and groups. Perhaps, too, this reification of
creativity can be read in ideological terms: the discourses of creativity are part of a management strategy
to mask the increasing emphasis on long hours and pay-for-performance. Working long hours and bonus
pay arrangements are just things that creative people are prepared to do, it seems, because they are
motivated by a superior ‘creative’ calling. In any case, the appropriation of creativity has been associated
with a distinctive diminution of its intrinsic meaning and value. Organisational theory has latched onto
the notion of creativity as an unproblematic, and unifying paradigm to theorise everything from
organisational change to modes of management decision making. And the rhetoric around creativity is
very attractive to business; after all it underwrites an ethos of individualism and self-direction, and seems
to hold out the promise of transforming the mundane nature of work into something exciting and
intrinsically valuable. The shift in the meaning of creativity as a discursive formation can also be read as
an expression of the inimical conflict between business organisation and creativity in its original sense.
Business organisations, as Levitt (2002) reminds us, cannot tolerate unadulterated forms of creativity. To do so threatens the ultimate logic and purpose of business organisations as centres of profit and competitive advantage. Profit requires a different discipline: one in which effort is tied to costs and revenues; a return on investments, such as those invested in creativity. Genuine creativity is unhampered by these concerns; even unfettered by any rational calculation of the end use value of what is created or its market value. Artists are typically ‘irrational’ in this sense, most privileging their artistic endeavours over material well-being, accepting the relative economic marginalisation that engagement with artistic practice brings, and the inevitable need to subsidise their profession through non-artistic work (Throsby and Hollister 2003).

**The Discourse of Failure**

In his inspired polemic, Osborne (2003) warns against the ‘potentially moronic consequences of the doctrine of creativity’. He argues that the compulsion to be creative, an injunction increasingly forced upon people across any number of areas of their lives, leads us to an essential conservatism brought about by: ‘compulsory individualism, compulsory innovation, compulsory performativity and productiveness, the compulsory valorisation of the putatively new’. Osborne’s response to the ideological imperatives of creativity is to advocate for the cultivation of what he describes as ‘an ethical philistinism’ (2003: 507). Arguably, here, Osborne provides an exemplar of the kind of radical re-reading of metaphor outlined by Oswick *et al*., as Osborne formulates a hyperbolic epistemology that incorporates inertia, philistinism and the rejection of the category of creativity itself.

**THE IMPACT OF BUSINESS ON THE ARTS**

The notion of the arts as an industry emerged in Australia in the 1980s as an outcome of the impact of economic rationalism on public policy. From the 1980s onwards, the view that the arts were an intangible public good was superseded and, instead, the arts were increasingly forced to justify funding in terms of tangible benefits – in particular their service to the tourism, information and entertainment industries (Stevenson 2000). In response to this critical shift in discourse around the rationale for the arts, the Keating Federal Government released *Creative Nation* in 1994 (DOCA 1994). This document continues to be a significant and guiding policy statement for the funding of the arts, and it emphasises
that the arts should be understood as an ‘industry’. In a climate of reduced government expenditure, the arts must now look to private sponsorship, audience development, linkages with broadcasting technologies, and international marketing strategies (DOCA 1994: 13). Increasingly, then, cultural policies have required artists to determine their practices in cognisance of the wider commercial context. This is evidenced in the Australia Council’s priorities which emphasise the development of new audiences and the marketing of the arts (Australia Council 2000). In effect, this arts-as-industry paradigm forced a shift from thinking about artistic and creative production - the ‘supply’ side of the arts equation - to a new focus on audience development, consumption and demand (DOCA 1994: 13). This significant shift in cultural policy is seen by Horne as a function of the broader neo-corporatisation or ‘economisation’ of culture which has ‘turned citizens into consumers’ (Horne 2002). Business and the concerns of the market place have become key determining factors in shaping the arts sector. Government funding for arts organisations is increasingly tied to the adoption of business practices which, as Latham has pointed out, has put arts organisations into the hands of general managers, financial officers and boards which tend to be dominated by heads of business. This is a scenario which leads to ‘the dulling of creative ideas, and a reliance on safe comfortable models from the past’ (Latham 2004:6) The survival of creativity in this business-oriented arts environment deserves some urgent critical enquiry, especially given that artists themselves may insist that the end result of their creative endeavours – the product – is actually merely ‘the detritus of the creative process’ (Archer 2005: 32). Business wants creativity to be situated within, and to be defined by, the determinations of the market place. Artists, on the other hand, often create without an audience in mind (Archer: 32). Guillet de Monthoux goes further to outline the ways in which art-making differs from the principles usually associated with manufacturing arguing that art work, unlike other products, cannot be circumscribed by ‘the rational planning for attaining preconceived goals as economically and effectively as possible’ (Guillet de Monthoux 2004:52). Thus, creativity in the arts may be an unintended casualty of business’ love affair with creativity. As business has increasingly described its practices as ‘creative’, the arts have been encouraged to think of themselves as a business. Rather than this producing a mutual exchange with reciprocal benefits, we have argued here that the kinds of benefits the arts may draw from the business models they ape, are not necessarily of benefit for the arts they produce.
CREATIVITY: DYING IN THE ARTS

Writing in the 1970s cultural theorist Raymond Williams was nothing if not prescient when he identified the gradual leaching of meaning from the definition of creativity. In its original form creative ‘has a general sense of original and innovating [and is] also used to distinguish certain kinds of work, as in creative writing, the creative arts’ (Williams 1976:84) However, Williams points out, ‘a difficulty arises when a word once intended, and often still intended, to embody a high and serious claim, becomes so conventional, as a description of certain general kinds of activity, that it is applied to practices for which, in the absence of the convention, nobody would think of making such claims’ (Williams:84). The semantic shift in meaning identified by Williams is at the heart of our argument here. The term creativity, the notion of creative practice, has been conventionalised and generalised, and in the process has lost its specific tie to the arts in particular, and culture in general. Why does this matter? It matters because creative practice is the key and defining characteristic of the arts. There is no other unifying principle which the arts can sensibly lay claim to. Not all art is innovative, for example, or beautiful, or truth-seeking, or cutting edge. But, by definition all art, no matter its other qualities, is the product of creative practices. We argue that the appropriation by business of the discourses of creativity undermines the sole claim of the arts to its special and distinct capacities. And in the current climate of reduced and often precarious funding arrangements for the arts, the sector must reclaim the discourses of creativity. The category of creativity legitimately belongs to the arts where it is seen, invariably, as the outcome of processes of imagination, experimentation and (often) failure. It is precisely these definitional aspects of the practice of creativity that make its interpretation in organisational theory so specious. The metaphor of creativity, as it is used within organisational theory, not only disguises its ideological function, it also elides one of the defining characteristics of creativity which is its coexistence with market failure. Management theory has thus succeeded in ignoring the non-commercial properties of creativity, while at the same time promoting its potential as a mechanism for competitive advantage. Creativity has been diluted and devalued as a term that holds great value for the arts. We have argued that creativity is yet another example of organisation and management theorists colonising and diluting the value of the concept. We have demonstrated that this is the next in a long series of appropriations by organisation and management theorists. Oswick et al (2002) have called for other ways of looking at organisations and we
have used their model to discuss how business has inappropriately used the concept of creativity as a metaphor for efficiency and profit. Creativity is as much a process of failure as success; of imagination rather than procedure. We urge theorists to look more closely at their discipline to identify its absolute essence.

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