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# Creativity as a Function of Open Secretiveness, Denial and Euphemisation in the Transactions between Art and Design Teachers and their Students

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on aspects of the author's current ethnographic study of creativity in art and design education. The study examines the transactions between students and their teachers as students make temporal and graphic works using digital and photographic media in their final year of schooling. These works are publicly assessed in the high stakes NSW Higher School Certificate matriculation examination. Following Pierre Bourdieu's theories of the habitus, symbolic capital and misrecognition, the study mounts a challenge to more conventional theories of creativity as, for instance, the result of genius or creative process. It argues that the micro-history and peculiarities of the cultural context as well as the linguistic exchanges between teachers and students at moments of creative origination are highly significant to concepts of creativity. It asserts that in the exchanges of symbolic capital between teachers and their students, differing levels of social tact, expressed in open secretiveness, euphemisation and denial are a necessity in efficacious exchanges. The paper provides a brief account of the design and methods. Results are retrieved from observations and interviews, augmented by visual means, using a form of semantic analysis and triangulation. An interpretation of selected results is provided. The paper concludes by questioning the extent to which creativity can be 'taught' and learned' as if it were reducible to the delivery of a set of axiomatic propositions. Rather it proposes that the subtle social reasoning transacted in the context with all of its trust and riskiness is the most likely guarantee of shoring up creative outcomes. The findings have an application beyond the case and should be of interest to tertiary art and design educators.

## I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study seeks a resolution of the dilemma of how modernist expectations of the student as an intentionally originating artist can be reconciled with the obligations of teachers to meet instructional outcomes. Attention focuses on the transactions between a Visual Arts teacher and students in a Year 12 classroom as they make temporal and graphic works using digital and photographic media as part of their course work. This is assessed in the Higher School Certificate Visual Arts Examination (Board of Studies 1999).

## A. Theories of Creativity

Theories of creativity focus on the creative subject as genius (Kant C18), the revolutionary (Nietzsche C19th), and experience (Dewey C19-C20). Creativity is also theorised variously as a process — as an instinctive capacity for self-expression (eg Lowenfeld 1947, Read 1958), a set of psychological traits or behaviours (eg Guilford 1966, Eisner 1966), a predictable observable process (eg Wallas 1926; Tomas 1979), visual thinking (eg Arnheim 1962), qualitative problem solving (eg Ecker 1966), and problem finding (eg Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976). Some recent theories propose a confluence of factors is more likely to cause creativity (eg Gruber and Wallace 1989, Schön 1989; Gardner 1993, Csikszentmihalyi 2004, Florida 2005). Others focus on the product. It is the product that presents itself as novel, intelligible and of value to a field of practice retrospectively encountered by a knowledgeable audience that anticipates the likelihood of creativity (eg Glickman 1978, Hausman 1981, Best 1983).

Historically, theories derived from experience and the creative process have been appropriated by art and design education and adapted for the purposes of representing the Visual Arts in syllabuses and in the curriculum (Weate 1990: 241).

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the socio-cognitive framework of the Realist philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. In particular, Bourdieu's central concepts of social competency: the *habitus* and *symbolic* capital (Bourdieu 1997: 56, 112). Misrecognition provides a critical subset of these (Bourdieu 1997: 113-114). Bourdieu's theory challenges the assumption that 'the intentional actor is the sole originator of the cognitive resources that people bring to the practices of their lives' (Brown & Thomas 1999: 1).

## A. The Habitus

Bourdieu explains the habitus as a socially constituted: *'system of cognitive and motivating structures that generate and organise practices and their representations that can be objectively adapted*

to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends' (1997: 52).

The habitus is an 'embodied history' although forgotten as history and an 'accumulated capital' (Bourdieu 1997: 56). It is full of 'improvisation' like the actions and thoughts of players who have a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1997: 57, 67).

### B. Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capital is the currency of a social economy. Bourdieu likens the exchange of symbolic capital to an archaic economy (Bourdieu 1997: 112). In this economy, 'economic activity cannot explicitly recognise the economic ends ... to which it is objectively oriented' (Bourdieu 1997: 113). It is precisely because symbolic capital's economic value is *misrecognised* that its social value is collectively recognised as legitimate. And yet, within a symbolic economy reciprocity of transactions entails expectations about the motives of other social agents. To be respectful of others is to possess subtle social reasoning, which reveals the agency of the social order hidden within the agents' actions.

### C. An Application of Bourdieu's Explanation of Misrecognition to Art and Design Classrooms

Bourdieu's explanation of misrecognition is demonstrably relevant for understanding the dilemma posed in this study. It assists in formulating the hypothesis that transactions between teachers and students in the habitus of art and design classrooms will become sites for the exchange of symbolic capital. These transactions will be misrecognised as capital. Misrecognition will occur in various forms of open secretiveness, denial and euphemisation. The students' artworks will evidence degrees of creativity that vary consistently with the emergent subtlety of misrecognition that they and the teacher are capable of exchanging in transacting symbolic capital.

## III. DESIGN AND METHODS

The study is an ethnographic and qualitative study augmented by visual means that has an emergent qualitative design. It seeks to capture and reveal how misrecognition is at work in the classroom. It is not the object of the study to expose the tacit misrecognitions with the purpose of exposing them as hypocrisy. Rather, to understand and celebrate them and the complex social reasoning that is exercised and which makes the artworks, the teachers, the students and the institutions of art education.

As a study of the complex detail of social transactions, the design uses multiple approaches to uncover what is recognised and misrecognised in creative transactions. Fieldwork involves the collection of data from observations and unstructured and structured interviews of an expert Visual Arts teacher and his Year 12 class. A digital video camera is used to capture actions, events, material culture, students' diaries and emergent artworks and the verbal and non-verbal language of the teacher and students. Protocols of confidentiality are observed. Thus, few details are offered

about the teacher, students and the school in which the study was conducted.

### A. Semantic Analysis

Results are developed from transcripts of the data using a form of semantic analysis augmented by the digital video records. Semantic analysis is based on Spradley's relational theory of meaning (1979, 1980). The method enables the systematic recovery of local definitions used in the cultural context. Spradley argues that the meaning of any symbol is its relationship to other symbols. Cultural knowledge — intricately patterned symbol systems within a culture — is made up of the meanings of symbols related to other symbols within the same culture (Spradley 1979: 97). The method is extended by reference to speech act theory (Austin 1979, Searle 1984). These theorists shed light on the importance of the linguistic force of utterances, which contributes to their practical and symbolic use.

The method involves selecting episodes from verbatim transcripts of observations and unstructured interviews. Words or short phrases used by a teacher or particular students are systematically recorded on separate index cards (Carroll and Brown 1998). Each of these is analysed and cards are reconstructed into emergent patterns or domains under the guidance of their shared local meanings.

### B. Triangulation

Triangulation subjects the qualitative methods used to crosschecking and mutual reinforcement.

## IV. RESULTS

Six domains of cultural knowledge are retrieved from the analysis. With their included terms these domains offer an insight into the cultural logic of the classroom. Results include amongst others:

- The domain of *advising* where the teacher advises on how adjustments to the artworks and their look which are believed to be in the students best interests
- The domain of *warnings* where the teacher warns that if the students were to proceed as they had intended it would not be in their best interests.
- The domain of *requests and commands* where the teacher asks certain things of the students because he knows they can do what he asks of them.

Results reveal the importance of the micro-contextual history of events in the classroom and the conventional force of language.

## V. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Four distinctive functions are converted from the results and interpreted with reference to the meanings of events and the motives of the protagonists. These functions work as self-regulating mechanisms. While not objectively known to the respondents, they structure and organise their practices and act as a kind of embodied history that is forgotten as history. By a kind of symbolic alchemy their realisation and incorporation permits what appear as opposing forces to work

towards the same ends. Thus the narrative of the autonomously originating students can be reconciled as if by alchemy with the teacher's professional obligations. Open secrets, collective denial and euphemisation provide the smokescreen and act as the buffer for these forces to be reconciled (Taussig 1999: 63).

The next part of the paper sketches a characterisation of *Authoring*, one of these functions.

## VI. AUTHORING

As a function when authoring is realised the teacher is like an auteur. With a legitimate and protective authority he assumes an authorial control and the creative direction of the temporal and digital works of his students. He takes on the responsibility for attracting the audience to what the students make through his capacity to predict and anticipate how the artworks may be assessed.

### A. *The Public Face of Authoring*

The teacher as a matter of routine gets caught up in publicly telling the students what to do and how to go on as events unfold in the classroom. His proposals have an intensity and urgency which students find difficult to refuse when faced with a situation that is beyond their know how or which appear so matter of fact that it would be foolish not to take up what is on offer.

The teacher does what he does as the moment arises without the need to explicitly ask students what has to be done. Nor does he need to explicitly know what the students will do in return (Bourdieu 1998: 98). The students know that it is worth their while to act on what the teacher suggests. Wanting these benefits contributes to their submission and obedience in what is wished for (Bourdieu 1998: 104).

These transactions occur within the logic of surprise binding friendships and building cohesion amongst the group. This makes participation in these everyday encounters all the more irresistible (Bourdieu 1997: 103). What is proposed is responsive to collective expectations and act as signs of recognition of the underlying social values. 'Weave[ing] social relations' they contribute to the reproduction of the group (Bourdieu 1998: 100). Considerable effort also goes into keeping up appearances of the students' autonomy. Collectively, these are the open secrets of the classroom. 'Everyone knows but doesn't want to know that everyone knows the true nature of the exchange' (Bourdieu 1998; 192).

Students take ownership of what the teacher proposes with the effect that their thinking and actions are transformed. Being recognised leads them on in having sense of purpose, which is validated by the group. Students are charged by a dynamism that is brought about by their relations with the teacher and heightened sense of purpose, which infuses them with a confidence in their own abilities. The teacher recognises and trusts them and they in return trust in him.

Retrospectively, students take the credit for their actions and their artworks. They claim their good fortune in their experimentation with materials and feelings for artists or mediums as causes of their creativity.

### B. *Denial and Euphemisation in Authoring*

The teacher assumes control over the direction of the students' artworks. Those students who are most adept at negotiating the social reasoning at work in the classroom are most susceptible and favored. As a consequence the materiality and conceptual qualities of their artworks align over time with their teacher's goals.

The whole group is tacitly encouraged and rewarded for their collusion. They are obliged to repress certain operations and representations of these. Students deny or euphemise their increasing dependence. The teacher keeps implicit how he operates shrugging off the control he exercises and the tacit obligations he places on the students to respond to his desires (Bourdieu 1998: 99, 101). He expends energy on elaborating these euphemisms and suggests that it is the students' personalities and innate abilities that are responsible for their creativity.

Bourdieu sheds light on their mutual concealment. To say what had really occurred would be to destroy the exchange. 'Everything occurs as if there were an agreement [between the teacher and students] to avoid reaching an agreement about the relative value of the things exchanged... by refusing the price' (Bourdieu 1998: 96).

## VII. CONCLUSION

The authoring function as characterised in this paper casts doubt on the possibility of 'teaching' or 'learning' creativity. Axiomatic models of creativity like those proposed in psychological theories of a staged process and taken up in a different guise in the precision of prescribed outcomes and standards used commonly in syllabuses assume a universal and mechanistic model of teaching and learning. They ignore or deny the consequences of social reasoning in causing creativity with its negotiated actions and iterative effects. What is revealed in authoring is irreducible to a formulaic definition. What emerges is that the likelihood of creativity is contingent on trusting relations which, by necessity, are adjusted and reframed over time as events unfold. They are sustained by the capacities of the protagonists to nuance the meaning of their own and others motives and events while tactfully denying, euphemising and overlooking the evidential truths of the practical exchanges that take place. It is through this negation that the material, symbolic and social profits are more likely to be assured.

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