Creativity in Transformative Education: An Exploration in Doctoral Education

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Abstract: The online doctoral program in *Transformative Studies* at California Institute of Integral Studies, an independent private university in California, was designed explicitly to address and elicit creativity in students and faculty. This paper discusses the underlying premises for the program, the philosophical underpinnings, and the way creativity has been highlighted.

Introduction

In the end, knowledge has to be about choices, and therefore about innovation, imagination, and possibilities. (Wallerstein, 2004, p.56)

While there is increasing agreement about the importance of creativity for the future, a parallel movement in education has increasingly stressed standardized testing and assessment at the expense of creativity (Amabile, 2010; Florida, 2002, 2004; Friedman, 2009; Gidley, 2010; Jensen, 2001; Montuori, 1989, 2011a; Robinson, 2001, 2009; Sardar, 2010). Educational systems from K-12 through doctoral studies show signs of a move away from creativity and towards what I call Reproductive Education (Montuori, 2006, 2011c). Reproductive Education stresses the acquisition of established ways of addressing existing problems in what is an essentially stable world. It does not prepare the learner to deal with complexity, contingency, and the unforeseen, in a world that is rapidly changing (Banathy, 1987, 1992; Montuori, 1989; Schön, 1973; Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011). Truly critical and creative thinking are largely ignored (Giroux, 2007, 2010), as are dimensions such as authenticity and spirituality (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Reproductive education also reproduces existing ways of thinking and behaving, existing approaches to problems, and reproduces the socio-political status quo and ideologies. Reproductive Education perpetuates longstanding oppositions such as knower and known, teacher and student, theory and practice. It is increasingly a process designed to ensure students can faithfully reproduce the material presented by the instructor for success in the final exam. Reproductive Education is unsuited for the complex, networked 21st century where innovation is essential in all areas and creativity has become a central dimension of the lives of many individuals (Bauman, 2008; Florida, 2002; Pink, 2006).

Creativity and the Ph.D.

The focus of this paper is on the development of creativity doctoral studies, where the culminating project is the dissertation, commonly defined as an original contribution to one's field (Montuori, 2010). In doctoral studies the expectation is that the course of study cultivates the ability to do independent researcher in order to make such an original contribution (Association of American Universities, 1998). Research shows that in the United States this goal is often not being achieved. Lovitts convincingly argues that students are being prepared to be good *course-takers*, but not good independent researchers (Lovitts, 2005, 2008). She goes on to argue that central to the development of independent researchers capable of doing original work is creativity. But many doctoral students are unable to be creative, it seems, and the recent educational trends are certainly not preparing them to do so. A further key indicator of the problems at the doctoral level is the inability to think of an appropriate research question, or to perform work that is heuristic rather than algorithmic,

meaning work that involves more autonomy, flexibility, and ambiguity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996).

Creativity

The Transformative Inquiry Department at California Institute of Integral Studies offers two online degrees, the M.A. in Transformative Leadership (TLD) and the Ph.D. in Transformative Studies (TSD). The foundational premise for both degree program is that education can be viewed as a creative process. The programs are an explicit effort to both address and elicit creativity in students and faculty. In this essay I will focus on the online Ph.D. in Transformative Studies, which attracts individuals who want to research a topic they are passionate about, in an innovative way, without being confined by traditional disciplinary boundaries (Montuori, 2010). Many are already faculty at universities. The program offers them an opportunity to do research in an area and in a manner that reflects their maturity and capacities. The program was started in 2005. As of 2011 it admits between 30 and 40 doctoral students a year.

In the doctoral program the focus on creativity is reflected in a number of ways. In the first semester, a core course called Creative Inquiry creates the essential frame. It begins by inviting students to explore their own assumptions about academia, creativity, and inquiry. Much of this initial phase involves developing an awareness of their own assumptions, comparing and contrasting them with their fellow students and with the literature. There is much "unlearning" that needs to occur in this time because we find a number of recurring and very limiting assumptions about creativity, academia, and inquiry. Many of the problematic assumptions we find in students' implicit assumptions about creativity can be traced back to the Romantic view.

For students (as for the majority of the population) creativity is often associated either with unattainable with Einsteinian genius (in Reproductive Education), or a trivialized so that everyone is creative, but in the process all standards are lost so it doesn't mean anything anymore (in Narcissistic Education) (Melucci, 1994; Weisberg, 1993). Creativity in this view is the result exclusively of "inspiration," a function of what is popularly referred to as the "right brain." This, in turn, leads to a splitting between inspiration and perspiration, "right" brain and "left" brain. The latter are neglected or even demonized in the process. The "left brain" becomes the "wrong brain." Creativity is also associated primarily with the arts. The term "creative writing" is explicitly associated with writing fiction. This means that any writing that is done in an academic context, and any non-fiction writing, is therefore *by definition* not creative. Since doctoral students do most of their work in writing, that does seem to drastically reduced the opportunities for creativity. I have asked students all over the United States to discuss and give examples of creativity in academia, to name creative contributions and contributors to their field, and in my experience most find this very hard. They are simply not used to thinking of creativity as something that occurs in academia. They are unclear as to what constitutes an "original" contribution to their field, and don't see their field as a locus for original work.

Particularly for younger students brought up in educational systems that force them to obsess on tests and grades from an early age, often accompanied by the added stress of considerable financial strain (Kamenetz, 2006), "passing the test" has become central to the educational journey, often at the expense of real learning, personal development, and other, broader benefits of education. Their focus is very much on having the right answer. As Lovitts reports, students who are unable to come up with interesting questions have a hard time transitioning to independent research (Lovitts, 2008).

In the Creative Inquiry course, students explore what they are passionate about, with a view to developing questions that will pertain to their dissertation topic. The whole process of inviting students to get in touch with a topic they are passionate about, within the broad social science/humanities limits of the transdisciplinary degree, is designed to ensure that their work is intrinsically motivated. Research has identified intrinsic motivation as a key dimension of characteristic (Amabile, 1996; Robinson, 2009). An instrumental focus on passing the test to get the grade to get the degree is clearly extrinsic motivation, and unlikely to lead to much creativity. It is not always easy for students to get a sense of what they are passionate about. Since TSD is a transdisciplinary degree it gives the students a very wide range of possible choices. While this has clear benefits (Montuori, 2010), it can also open dizzying vistas that leave can lead students to a sort of existential crisis as they wonder what they in fact really care about in life. Quite often it becomes apparent that what students initially think they're interested in is not in fact what they're passionate about. And because passion is so closely identified with what one values, what one really cares about, one's very identity is put in question through this process. This questioning and exploration of identity is where the connection between creativity and transformative education becomes apparent. The educational journey becomes a journey of self-creation (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Debold, 2002; Kegan, 1982, 1998, 2000). Eventually the focus on passion and originality can also be subverted by an exploration of postmodern critiques of "creativity" and "originality," as well as of the "author" (Kearney, 1988, 1999; Pope, 2005; Rosenau, 1992). This can be used to lead students to understanding the plurality of voices, complexity, and ambiguity of much academic discourse, reflected in the world today, and to learn to continually reflect on terms and concepts, particularly ones directly related to their experience.

Students are introduced to the concept and practice of Creative Inquiry, and learn to differentiate it from Reproductive Education and Narcissistic Education. If Reproductive Education is a product of the Machine Age, Narcissistic Education is what I have called an alternative form of learning that defines itself in opposition to the Reproductive education, in the same way that members of the Romantic movement identified themselves in opposition to the "dark Satanic mills" of Industrialization and the Machine, and in the same way that popular psychology embraced the "right brain" as the source of all creativity and rejected the "left brain" (Montuori, 2011b, 2011c).

Creative Inquiry integrates the learner and his/her experience, affect, and subjectivity in the learning process, and invites the exploration and if necessary unlearning of social and personal habituations that become unchallenged "givens" and thereby create implicit interpretive frameworks. Creative Inquiry also contextualizes and challenges learning. It situates inquiry in the social, cultural, political, and economic roots and matrices of knowledge, and explores the criteria by which some things are considered knowledge and others not, as well as the creative, constructive process involved in knowledge production. It therefore addresses the psychology and sociology of knowledge, as well the philosophy of social science.

Reproductive Learning begins with the assumption the learner is an empty vessel awaiting the delivery of correct knowledge from the instructor. This knowledge must be reproduced to the instructor's satisfaction. Creative Inquiry starts from an attitude of "not-knowing," a willingness to accept the illusion of familiarity that covers the vast mystery of existence, examine one's positions in the process of inquiry, and challenge fundamental and underlying assumptions that shape inquiry. The goal is not to conclude the process by having the correct answer, but to encourage a more expansive, spacious approach to inquiry that actually generates more potential inquiry rather than stopping at the one "correct" answer, and illuminates the creation of knowledge. As in a jazz group, "band members" are invited to make contributions that will make the overall sound of the band the most interesting and

surprising. The point of contributions is not to provide "the" answer, and thereby to stop the conversation. In the same way that band members can push a soloist to greater heights with a series of well-placed chords or percussive accents, or simply verbal encouragements, the object of these contributions is to push the dialogue to greater heights and to keep it going (Montuori, 2003).

Creative Inquiry recognizes the limitations of knowledge and the opportunities for different perspectives, frames, and approaches. This involves an attitude of epistemological humility and fallibility that recognizes humanity's always partial and limited understanding of the world (Bernstein, 1983, 2005). Even more importantly, it also recognizes that not-knowing is a fundamental starting point for creativity. The willingness to be open to the possibility that all knowers have a fallible interpretation of the world allows for the emergence of multiple alternative perspectives rather than the assumption of a fixed "given" world. Creative Inquiry encourages constant exploration and self-examination for attachment to positions, obsession with certainty and power, and a constant awareness of the threats of dogma and/or habituation. Above all, an attitude of not-knowing allows for the space and openness for novelty to emerge.

Creative Inquiry does not accept the common binary opposition between creativity and rigorous scholarship suggested by the Romantic mythology of creativity. This mythology's assumption of "genius without learning," so popular in the West, became Narcissistic Learning (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Understood in a wider perspective, the creative process requires and includes discipline, a foundation of skills, and immersion in the field, in the same way that a creative musician must practice scales and learn music theory. But these are not antithetical to creativity. On the contrary, the foundation in scholarship is essential in order for creativity to emerge (Montuori, 2006; Montuori & Purser, 1995).

CI stresses the importance of immersion and active participation in an ecology of ideas, in the existing discourse, literature, and research (Montuori, 2005b). It also recognizes that embodied and embedded knowing is grounded in existing cultural, social and historical assumptions, theories, facts, and beliefs, and that any action in the world is based on, and in fact cannot occur, without interpretations of the world and specific situations. This knowledge is necessary for participation in both discourse and practice. For Creative Inquiry this knowledge, in the form of paradigms, theories, etc., shared by communities of inquiry (fields, disciplines, research methods, and agendas), and the inquirer's own implicit assumptions and theories, is itself constantly the subject of inquiry, offering an opportunity to explore and understand the creation of knowledge, perspectives, positions, beliefs, theories, for purposes of wise and creative action.

In summary, CI's approach to scholarship is radical, in the sense that it goes to the roots of what is meant by scholarship (and the Ph.D. dissertation, in this case); it is conservative, in the sense that it retains what it finds to be best in the traditions of scholarship; and it stresses novelty in the sense that it brings the parts and the whole together in new ways, and with a focus on the centrality of creativity.

Conclusion

I have described an effort to create a doctoral program that is based on the fundamental premise that the doctoral degree should be a creative process culminating in a creative product. Reasons of space prevent me offering specific examples of how creativity can be applied to academic scholarship, and readers are referred to these discussions elsewhere (Montuori, 1996, 1997; Montuori, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008, 2010).

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