Can Creativity Be Taught?

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Management

The usual image of how creativity happens: A composer inadvertently hears a melody rising from a babbling brook, or an ad agency creative director crumples page after page of aborted ideas ripped from the typewriter until the right one lands. But creativity, some claim, can come from a far less elusive muse — from a structured process, one that opens up the ranks of the creative to a wider swath than the Steve Jobs, Jonas Salks and Franz Schuberts of the universe.

“I think there are individual differences in our propensity to be creative,” Twitter says Wharton marketing professor Rom Schrift, “but having said that, it’s like a muscle. If you train yourself, and there are different methods for doing this, you can become more creative. There are individual differences in people, but I would argue that it is also something that can be developed, and therefore, taught.”

Wharton marketing professor Jerry (Yoram) Wind has in fact taught a course in creativity at Wharton for years, and says that “in any population, basically the distribution of creativity follows the normal curve. At the absolute extreme you have Einstein and Picasso, and you don’t have to teach them — they are the geniuses. Nearly everyone else in the distribution, and the type of people you would deal with at leading universities and companies, can learn creativity.”

Does creativity need the right conditions to flourish? Jennifer Mueller, a management professor at the University of San Diego and former Wharton professor who has researched creativity, sees evidence that it does. “Every theorist that exists today on the planet will tell you creativity is an ability that ranges in the population, and I think in a given context, creativity can be shut off — or turned on, if the environment supports creativity.”
John Maeda, former president of Rhode Island School of Design, believes creativity can be taught — though he qualifies that belief. “I wouldn’t say it can be taught in the normal sense of adding knowledge and wisdom to someone. I would say instead it can be re-kindled in people — all children are creative. They just lose their capability to be creative by growing up,” notes Maeda, now a partner at Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers and chair of eBay’s design advisory board. Creativity in a child, he adds, “is the ability to diverge. In a productive adult, it’s the ability to diverge and converge, with emphasis on the converging.”

Anyone called upon to tap creativity has his or her own method, but photorealism painter and photographer Chuck Close suggests the matter is actually less mysterious than the muse-chasers might believe. “Inspiration,” he has said, “is for amateurs — the rest of us just show up and get to work.”

Working with Boxes, Inside and Out

In whatever the sector or discipline — product development, exploitation of networks, music or education — creativity shares certain traits, experts say. Jacob Goldenberg, professor of marketing at the Arison School of Business at the IDC Herzliya in Israel, says creativity has more than 200 definitions in the literature. “However, if you ask people to grade ideas, the agreement is very high,” he notes. “This means that even if it is difficult to define creativity, it is easy to identify it. One of the reasons why it is difficult to define is the fact that creativity exists in many different domains.” Still, he says: “Most creative ideas share a common structure of being highly original and at the same time highly useful.”

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In Inside the Box: A Proven System of Creativity for Breakthrough Results, Goldenberg and co-author Drew Boyd make the case that all inventive solutions share certain common patterns. Working within parameters, rather than through free-associative brainstorming, leads to greater creativity, the book says. This method, called Systematic Inventive Thinking, has found application at Procter & Gamble and SAP, among others. “We shouldn’t confuse innovation and creativity,” Goldenberg says. “Creativity refers to the idea, not to the system [product, service, process, etc.] that was built around it. For example, online banking is a great innovation, but the idea [of using the Internet to replace the branch] was not creative. It was expected years before it was implemented.”

Similarly, he adds, “cell phone technology is one of the most innovative developments, but the need was defined years before, and we just waited for the technology. In my view, a creative idea that is still changing our lives is the concept of letting users develop the software they need on a platform [that a particular] firm sells: the apps concept. This means that consumers develop and determine the value of the smartphone and tablets.”

This example, Goldenberg says, fits one of the templates for creativity described in Inside the Box: “Where you subtract one of the resources” — such as engineers and marketers — “and replace them with a resource that exists inside a closure (box), in this case your consumers.”

Schrift has used a different template from Inside the Box in his classes: The idea of building a matrix of characteristics of two unrelated products, and creating new dependencies. Such examples, he says, include an air freshener that changes scent every 10 minutes (remixing the concepts of time and fragrance), or a gym with a fee that is structured to increase if you don’t work out enough (fitness and incentive). “A lot of the time, looking for a new dependency gives you a creative idea,” Schrift notes.

Wind says that in whatever discipline, creativity is primarily “an ability to challenge the status quo and come up with new and better solutions. In art, the most creative figures are those who came up with new perspectives — Brancusi, who broke away from Rodin; Picasso, who broke away from the Impressionists; Duchamp, who took readymades
Making Space for the Troublemakers

Corporate culture is no less hungry for creative leaders. Or is it? Any company would eagerly embrace the next iPhone, but it is far from clear that companies tolerate the cost of doing business when it comes to generating creativity. In an IBM survey of 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries in 33 industries released in 2010, creativity was cited as the most important organization-wide trait required for navigating the business environment. And yet, as Mueller found in a 2010 study published in Psychological Science, people often espouse creativity as an abstract goal, but then, when presented with it, spurn it. In The Bias Against Creativity: Why People Desire But Reject Creative Ideas, co-authored by Mueller with Shimul Melwani and Jack A. Goncalo, experiments suggest that the desire for creativity is often overshadowed by a need to reduce uncertainty — even as subjects rate their attitudes toward creativity as positive. Moreover, this bias contributes toward people being less able to even recognize creativity.

Additional research underway by Mueller suggests that creative personalities are often dismissed as trouble. “They are seen as difficult, not as efficient or able to present their ideas with focus, and are also seen as naïve,” she says. “People, either rightly or wrongly, have this stereotype that creative people are high maintenance and emotionally volatile. Twitter And where it gets problematic, the moment the organization suffers, is when creative people are discounted for not being seen as team players. And that is the dark side of being tagged as a creative type.” And yet: “Why would you want somebody who doesn’t produce creative work [just because] they are less trouble to manage?”

“The stereotype is that creativity just has to be unleashed, and it’s not true. It has to be tightly managed. You have to know how to foster it.” —Jennifer Mueller

The bias against creativity even extends to the classroom, Mueller says. “There is the reality that any teacher needs a rubric in order to give a good grade, and creativity in being new or different creates uncertainty in the mind of the students about whether it fits the answer the teacher is looking for,” she notes. “Teachers think of creative students as disobedient. There is lots of focus on reducing ambiguity, especially in college where the student is your customer. You now have to answer to what the customer wants, and what the customer wants is to get a good grade — and the best way to get a good grade is to reduce ambiguity.”

Americans are not showing the kind of creative expression that might otherwise be bubbling away — in college, but also grade school. Scores from the widely administered Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking have been declining since 1990 among the nation’s youngest students, according to a study by College of William & Mary assistant professor Kyung-Hee Kim of nearly 300,000 test scores between 1968 and 2008. “The decline is steady and persistent, from 1990 to present, and ranges across the various components tested by the TTCT,” the study finds. “The decline begins in young children, which is especially concerning as it stunts abilities which are supposed to mature over a lifetime.”

“There is an understanding that this is happening in China and India as well,” Mueller adds, “and the fact that it is happening in the U.S. is troubling people, but I don’t think they know what to do about it. I, myself, have tried to do stuff students don’t like, and they will hate you. If student ratings aren’t high, then you’re not going to get tenure.”

One environment Mueller admires for its healthy creative process is IDEO, the multinational design consulting firm. Creativity is begun in brainstorming sessions — which is certainly not novel — but it is then shepherded through a more structured route. “They have their initial session, called ‘deep dive,’ and that session is very short. Then they
break the problem apart by assigning people specific pieces. Then there is a focus session, so there is chaos and focus, and interplay between these two things is always going on. There is a person whose full responsibility is to structure it, and I think in that process you learn, you ask the customer certain things, you tweak it some more,” Mueller notes. “The stereotype is that creativity just has to be unleashed, and it’s not true. It has to be tightly managed. You have to know how to foster it.”

Creative Safe Haven

The willingness to “foster it” is a challenge in many corporate environments. According to Schrift, one way to manage creative forces is to manage talent wisely. “Maybe we don’t want creative people in certain positions,” he says. “One of the obstacles for innovation is not necessarily the process of coming up with the idea, but is more cultural — a lot of companies do not incentivize employees to do things differently.” Sometimes, workers are evaluated on a relatively short cycle, and “when you are innovating, that involves a lot of failure.”

“Mind-wandering seems to be essential to the creative process, and I don’t think a lot of businesses are aware of that fact.” – Scott Barry Kaufman

Changes in corporate culture, such as giving workers permission to question authority, can be efficacious, says Scott Barry Kaufman, scientific director of the Imagination Institute at Penn’s Positive Psychology Center. The salient question isn’t whether creativity can be taught, notes Kaufman, since everyone is creative, but rather demonstrating faith in the creativity of workers. “I am not talking about rebelliousness, but giving people time for constructive internal reflection and even daydreaming. A lot of research is suggesting that the more that you demand people’s external attention, the less chance you are allowing them to dip into the default mode where daydreams and reflection happen — and lot of great ideas are not going to come from the brute force of work but from personal life experience. Mind-wandering seems to be essential to the creative process, and I don’t think a lot of businesses are aware of that fact.”

Neither are most multitaskers — which means, these days, most people. In a recent New York Times op-ed piece, neuroscientist and musician Daniel J. Levitin made the case that tweeting, Facebooking and emailing your way through the day saps creativity. “Daydreaming leads to creativity, and creative activities teach us agency, the ability to change the world, to mold it to our liking, to have a positive effect on our environment,” wrote Levitin, author of The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload. In other words, we need time to hear the music in a babbling brook.

Measuring Creative Success

Is commercial viability the only gauge of creativity’s success? Wind points out that there are innovations in the arts whose value is best judged by other artists, and Goldenberg says peer expertise is sometimes required. “The only way to measure creativity is to use judges who grade many cases including the idea you want to grade,” notes Goldenberg. “This is a complex process and usually done in a research setup and not in practice. This means that a creative person repeats his or her success, and this is not an after-the-fact judgment of one random event.”

But Wind points out that in general, newness and usefulness are the main indicators of acts of great creativity. “I would take the extreme position that creativity has to have value to be successful,” he says. “You can come up with a lot of ideas, but if you are not adding value to the stakeholders, then they are not creative ideas.”

Airbnb certainly meets the criterion of adding value to stakeholders, and, according to Maeda of Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, the self-listing lodging clearinghouse stands an example of spectacularly creative thinking. “There are more people staying in Airbnb lodgings on any given night than all Hilton hotels combined,” Maeda notes of the company founded by the young and now-wealthy trio of Brian Chesky, Nathan Blecharczyk and Joe Gebbia. “It showed plasticity in their creativity that went beyond their design training in making physical goods. They recognized
the excess capacity available in everyone’s home, and they designed a scalable service to enable anyone to access that capacity. Their successful design for a service solved the trust barriers inherent to a peer-to-peer economy.”

Wind cites Uber as his example. “Uber is a truly creative approach as opposed to the traditional taxi,” he says. “How wonderful it is that you could leverage the network idea and create a new business.” The Uber model is now being emulated and adapted to other sectors — Ubers for laundry, snowplows and even wine delivery. But while imitation might be the sincerest form of flattery, Uber’s success is actually a cue for the genuinely creative types to move on to other ideas. Says Wind: “The first one [to establish the model] is the example of creativity. The secondary companies following Uber — they are not.”