

Setting a Framework: Defining a Creative Process

At the mention of the word 'creativity', the vast majority of people, young and old, reflexively think of something which is 'god-given'; a rare and mysterious 'talent' that an individual has been born with. This broad, gut, definition implicitly suggests that not all individuals are capable of 'being creative', that it is an exclusive rather than inclusive activity.

More specific definitions might suggest that 'Creative' means to be "characterized by originality and expressiveness, imaginative", or "generative, ground-breaking, innovative, original, handmade"; whilst the NACCCE report on Cultural Education of 1999 defines creativity as being "Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value."

Again, I think all of these definitions are inherently restrictive, being tied to outmoded models of production based on fairly strict delineations between 'Art' and 'Science'. Concepts such as 'imaginative', 'innovative', 'handmade' and 'ground-breaking' are restrictive, divisive, harmful and misleading, particularly in the Post-Modern, post-structuralist society we inhabit today, and in which young people particularly feel at home. Post-modernism by default rejects the very notion of 'originality', embracing instead the fact that all acts of (artistic) creation inherently involve re-evaluation and recycling of the past, to create something which may be new, but is most certainly not New (and has no problem with this fact). Originality in contemporary culture, as it might be argued it has always been, is almost entirely contextual and subjective.

Likewise, the word 'Imaginative' has become a word loaded with unhelpful meaning. The NACCCE report rightly suggests that "Imaginative activity ... is not the same as fantasising or imaging", and suggests instead that it is more to do with "making unusual connections, seeing analogies and relationships between ideas or objects that have not previously been related." This goes some way to helpfully defining 'Imaginative' but nevertheless stumbles by insisting on 'unusual' or the lightly cloaked reference to 'originality'. Instead, I would suggest that it is through Observation and not 'Imagination' that creativity largely stems, although naturally, not Observation in isolation.

Attempting to define 'creativity' as a single term then is loaded with potential problems, creating exclusions and dead-ends. This occurs I believe because, as the NACCCE report rightly points out, "creativity is a process, not an event." As such, definitions of the creative *process* prove much more useful.

Much of the early thinking and research done on the Creative Process had particular application to Science, or Scientific methodology, and it is useful to look at some of these definitions as a starting point.

One of the earliest models of the creative process is attributed to Graham Wallas, who in 1926 proposed that creative thinking proceeds through four phases, namely:

Preparation (definition of issue, observation, and study)

Incubation (laying the issue aside for a time)

Illumination (the moment when a new idea finally emerges)

Verification (checking it out)

Whilst I feel there is some positive content in the idea that creative and analytical thinking are complementary, I nevertheless personally dislike these defined stages, since once more they tend to imply that creative thinking is a mysterious process involving subconscious thoughts beyond the control of the creator; thoughts that cannot be directed or managed.

More useful to me is the Seven-Step Model for Creative Thinking put forward by Alex Osborne in the early 1950s. Osborne, the developer of brainstorming, embraced a theory that strove to balance analysis and imagination thus:

Orientation: pointing up the problem

Preparation: gathering pertinent data

Analysis: breaking down the relevant material

Ideation: piling up alternatives by way of ideas

Incubation: letting up, to invite illumination

Synthesis: putting the pieces together

Evaluation: judging the resulting ideas

I particularly like the idea here of 'piling up alternatives by way of ideas' (developing alternatives for shots and narrative sequence in film, for example) and 'putting the pieces together' (which in film could essentially be the editing process itself).

Definitions of the Creative Process such as those mentioned above are particularly aimed at Scientific and Business roles, and there is a tendency for the models to insidiously lead to the contemplation of Things, Products and answers to Scientific or Business 'problems' rather than the development of the self. The models tend also to suggest a defined start and end point; that the process is a collection of stages moved through in a strict linear manner, and it is this apparent insistence on linearity which I think is a flaw in applying such models to the creative process in arts in contemporary culture.

The Arts are about a great many things, and many artists since the end of the 19th century have been increasingly interested in exploring the more abstract and esoteric edges of their chosen media. There remains, however, a sense that at core, the Arts are essentially about personal development, and I think this idea is particularly useful as a starting point for young people searching for their place in the world. Taking this core of the Arts as a launch pad, we can see the creative process not as a means to creating some object, but as a means of discovering something about ourselves as individuals and about how we strive, as artists, to make sense of ourselves in the world: to contextualize ourselves, if you will. And since that world does not stand still, we are forced to continually re-contextualize ourselves, thereby ensuring that the creative process is not linear, but rather

circular, or elliptical. The creative process eternally loops around on itself forever, from birth until death. Whether we like it or not.

The movement of the Creative Process from linear to circular or elliptical seems to be implicitly post-modern, and embraces those notions of time as being non-linear which are so well affected through film. Fine Art film-maker Doug Aitken talks about how we “stretch and condense time until it suits our need”, and just as we are familiar and comfortable with the visual re-interpretations of time in film, so we now need to explicitly modify our ideas of the creative process, allowing increased flexibility, a more elastic, or plastic notion of the importance of each stage we might pass through (and acknowledging that sometimes we will by-pass some of the stages altogether).

In his 1983 book *Personal Being*, Rom Harre helpfully suggests a circular sequence of operations that mirror the creative process:

Conventionalisation – appropriation – transformation – publication – conventionalisation

Harre’s model is not only nicely circular, but it also insists upon the continuation of the process, as the individual strives to learn more about themselves and their place in the world. Indeed, it might best be described as a kind of spiral, for as we develop ourselves through the stages on the loop, we also ‘grow’ outwards, like rings on a tree; each loop we make adding more to our substance and knowledge. Naturally too, the growth is not constant, as we meander our way through ideas, revisiting previous thoughts and observations, modifying or re-interpreting them in light of newer experiences.

To put this momentarily into the context of the contemporary classroom, it strikes me that as teachers we too often fail to recognise (or rather are restricted from recognising) the importance of these meanders, of these continual self-referencing aspects of our development as individuals. It strikes me that in the classroom situation we often lose sight of the processes and at best, take the creative processes comprising our students learning for granted. At worst, our clichéd and outmoded definitions of ‘creativity’ mean that we fail to identify the important value of the processes in our lessons and continue to plod wearily along the path of essentially memorizing ‘facts’ that are useless and meaningless for developing a thriving, forward-looking contemporary culture and society.

We cannot realistically expect anyone to fully appreciate the scale of their achievements (which may be stigmatized as being ‘unsatisfactory’ according to many assessment criteria) if the individuals are not at least made aware of the things they are actually doing. In other words, learners (and teachers) must be made aware of the processes that are at work in activities, and to make those processes as visible as possible. They ought not to be left as transparent entities, existing in some kind of hazy mythic sub-conscious, but must be made obviously apparent, each ‘stage’ explicitly referenced as it is entered into. Indeed, much more can be learned through the very process itself rather than from any abstract, arbitrary end-point of production.

Finally, I have attempted to draw from various sources and define my own model for the creative process, with particular application to Visual Arts, and perhaps film-editing in particular. This process is outline below:

Observation (this might alternatively be called Preparation / Appropriation – the gathering pertinent data) (In film-editing terms this would mean to look at the material – film stock - available)

Intent (alternatively Idea / Purpose - Analysis: breaking down the relevant material) (what do you want [the film] to ‘say’)

Ideation: piling up alternatives by way of ideas (storyboards, alternative sequences of shot etc)

Synthesis / Transformation: putting the pieces together (editing on a finalized edit decision list)

Publication – (show [the film])

Evaluation: judging the resulting ideas; this in itself is Observation, which loops us back to the beginning.

Overlaying this process is the idea of ‘Incubation’. This notion of letting up, to invite illumination rolls over all the process, permeates the structure at all points. The amount of ‘incubation’ will of course be determined largely on how much personal control the individual might have over the time-scale of any particular project.

Naturally too it is important to note that this process, as with any successful Creative Process, is fractal. In other words, within one specific stage there will be elements of others (notably Observation and Evaluation)

In the next part of this paper, I apply this process in a real environment and use it to assess whether or not the editing process in itself can help to illuminate the very processes at work in learning, and in developing as creative individuals.

Observations of Students' Digital Video Editing Experience and Creative Processes

In the first part of this paper I attempted to lay down a theoretical framework for Creativity and the Creative Process. In this section I hope to make connections between that framework and the activities I observed students undertake involving digital video editing on the Avio Casablanca machine during June and July 2002.

This practical editing activity was undertaken by groups of Year 9 students during their weekly Art lessons. Two teaching classes were involved in the project; one group having two separate 45 minute lessons per week, and the other having a double lesson, allowing them about an hour and a half's unbroken working time per week. The video editing activity was planned as part of larger project titled 'Unreliable Evidence' which was aimed at exploring local history through a variety of media, including moving image.

In their Art lessons, students worked within groups of three or four, researching a range of characters from a variety of periods in history. Some of these characters were generic, such as 'train driver', whilst others were specific individuals, such as J.D. Salinger. In their groups, students made broad edit-decision lists and storyboards for thirty second films. These were informed in part by a lesson spent analysing a thirty second segment of 'Wisconsin Death Trip', a film which was itself partly an inspiration for the entire project.

Before undertaking the editing, students were asked about their perceptions of creativity. In small group discussion it became clear that students had little clear concept of what creativity actually was, or what it might mean to 'be creative'. When asked how creative they felt themselves to be, they typically thought themselves to be 'a bit' creative, and although not asked to use a marking system, would award themselves a score of 'six' on a one to ten scale. Whilst this suggests that they were probably unwilling to make anything more than a safe response amongst their peers, it also shows that they were unsure of what it was they were actually measuring. When asked if they felt there was any creativity in school, they invariably replied that school was not a place for creativity, and that it could not be taught. The exceptions tended to be in activities such as soccer and sometimes the Arts subjects. The fact that students thought of soccer being an area in which they could show creativity is interesting, and perhaps reflects the fact that the word has entered the vernacular of the commentary of sport without there being a clear definition of what it actually means in that context. This in itself is a further blurring of the meaning of the word, which is surely not helpful in allowing students to develop a clear sense of their own creativity and their creative potential.

Whilst observing the students at work on their editing tasks, I looked for what I saw as evidence of the students either following, or indeed not following, the theoretical stages I mapped out in my model earlier.

In my theoretical framework I suggested that 'Observation' and 'Intent / Purpose' were the first two stages in the creative process. However, because of the way in which the project had been introduced, and because students were unable to view any stock footage before working together to develop initial ideas, it could be argued that the 'ideation'

stage was in fact the first stage of their creative process in this particular situation. I would contend, however, that 'observation' and intent had in fact taken place before the project even began, with students experience of moving images in their everyday lives, and in particular the analysis of the thirty second segment of 'Wisconsin Death Trip' during lesson time. This 'observation' experience led to the students making informed decisions when they drew up their broad edit-decision lists. 'Intent' meanwhile, was largely defined by the client (in this case me as the teacher, and the broader project aims), and this is an area of particular interest which I will come back to later.

Since most of the footage available to the students for making their films was from archive material, students were encouraged to think in very broad terms about the kinds of shots they wanted to use when drawing up their edit decision lists. For example, they would specify simply 'picture of a middle aged man' rather than being more particular. In hindsight, it would have been more productive to have had a whole class viewing session of all archive clips prior to this planning stage.

When given the Avio machine to edit on, the students were required to return to a stage of observation, as they viewed the archive extracts and made decisions about which pieces of film would be useful to them. Browsing through the clips was a fairly protracted and cumbersome procedure and students often forgot which clips contained the footage they wanted. This was helped partly by the naming of clips and the simple use of a pen and paper to make notes. However students had to be reminded about the usefulness of this analogue technology for making notes! Perhaps this shows that the use of new/digital technology can lead to a certain degree of blinkering of thought processes in some individuals, or that the capability for on-screen note-taking needs to be improved. For example if editing on a desktop computer it would be possible to add more detailed notes to the stored clips within the editing program itself. This notation of work was perhaps less important in this particular project, where the films were very short, but it could be more problematic when making longer films. Also related to organisation, the groups found it quite difficult to order their own individual films within the context of the whole project. Because the Avio was being shared between departments, only one 'project' space was available on the machine for all of the short films (fourteen in all). It would have been immeasurably easier if each film could have had its own project settings. This would have been much easier using a PC based system such as Adobe Premiere.

It was evident in observing the students working that whilst looking through the archive clips they were also involved in the process of 'ideation' and 'synthesis'. There was a modicum of discussion amongst the groups about how best to trim and sequence shots, but this was fairly minimal, and it did not seem to be a natural group activity. It was largely the individual in control of the mouse who had the interaction with the screen. When not in control of the mouse, the attention of most other members of the group was frequently diverted by other things in the room. Arriving at a group aesthetic also seemed to be something that did not really happen; on the whole it appeared that one person would drive the 'vision' forward, and others would largely just benignly agree to go along with it. In this respect it might be said that the group was acting as staff under a director figure, although in fact it seemed more as though the leading individual was effectively acting as director/editor all in one. This is unsurprising, since the possibilities offered by digital editing systems such as the Avio are aimed largely at a home market,

where the user will most likely be involved in the whole film-making process from filming to editing.

As already noted, when faced with the technology, students almost immediately began to synthesise and transform ideas into reality, with these stages being blurred with ideation and purpose. Most groups assembled the form of their film very quickly from the stored clips and whilst doing so made a note of what extra pieces of film they would like to use in addition to the archive footage. They then filmed these short extra sections in class, downloaded them to the Avio and added them to their timelines. This was done without a problem.

Since the soundtracks for the films were being produced at a later date by year 10 students, the editors did need not to concern themselves with adding sound using the Avio machine. Synchronising the soundtracks to the films was, however, done at a later date by myself using Premiere on a PC, since the Avio system did give enough scope for making small alterations to synchronisation of sound and video. The Avio system also proved problematic when it came to outputting the final product. Since the project called for video delivery over the World Wide Web, the films had to be output to a PC through a video capture card, and then encoded on the computer. It would have been much easier to do the whole editing and outputting process on one machine, and here a PC would have been the better choice.

The 'publication' stage of the process was one that was particularly interesting. Since the project was not going to be made public until the end of the summer term, the students did not have immediate publication as a conclusion to their editing work. However, because of the nature of the work, they were almost continually in the position of fragmentary publication in front of their peers. This was particularly the case for the groups who made their films last. Because of having to sequence all fourteen films along one timeline in one project, the later groups had the ability to view the previous groups' films. All groups took advantage of this, although no clear benefit was observed in the quality of the later films. Nor was there any noticeable difference in the way the students in the later groups approached and executed the editing activity.

Finally, in terms of evaluation, there was similarly no immediate evaluation carried out of the work upon completion. However, there was evidence that there was a constant level of evaluation going on during all other stages of the process: indeed, observation and evaluation were inherent in the ideation and synthesis that students were involved in.

Formal evaluation did take place for several of the students in the form of small group discussion. The students who were most positive about the activity during this discussion were those who had been most vociferous and in positions of control when working within groups; they were the ones who had largely driven the process forward within their groups, and who would have probably arrived at the same results had they been working alone.

This raises the question about whether editing is an activity best done individually, and reflects the question as to whether this is also the case for the creative process. Can a group activity be a creative activity in itself, or is the creativity a by-product of the

combined outputs of individual's creative processes? The evidence of the editing activity seems to suggest the latter being the case.

Most of those who enjoyed the activity also tended to be boys who expressed little interest in other activities within the Art curriculum. They seemed to respond well to the technology and preferred using the machine over other more traditional media. Those who did not enjoy it tended to be those who were already getting good results in those more traditional materials within their Art lessons. This may be because the skills involved in the digital editing process are less visible, or more subtle than those involved in, say, drawing with a pencil on paper, and perhaps as artists they miss this obvious display of their skills.

In terms of creativity, few students considered what they had done to be a creative act. They felt that they had simply used someone else's work (archive footage) and whilst they had undoubtedly made something 'new' from it, they nevertheless did not feel as if it was truly their own. This suggests an inherent connection between notions of ownership and creativity which could be explored further.

Indeed, this notion of ownership brings me back to the 'Intent' stage of my theoretical framework. It seems that students felt they had little ownership of the project because they had no input into deciding what the purpose of the films should be. This raises issues about connecting artefacts produced in school with artefacts produced in the 'real' world of work: the notion of 'intent' or 'purpose' in the world of work is most often delivered from a client position, and it is the task of the artist to take that purpose and deliver something new and interesting from it. This is something which needs to be addressed by teachers when planning schemes of work involving digital video editing, and indeed other media. It suggests also that perhaps the editing process is only truly a creative process when the role of editor is merged with that of director.

Through the use of digital video editing, students would appear to be involving themselves with a distinct creative process without being particularly aware of what it is they are in fact doing in terms of creativity. Whilst they are learning the technical process of editing, they also appear to be intuitively undertaking a creative process. Whilst this is a positive factor in itself, it is perhaps not enough.

From working on this project, it would appear that if we are to fully develop students awareness of their own creativity, we need to not only provide them with a range of media in which to explore their ideas, but also provide them with clear definitions and frameworks within which they can make sense of what it is they are doing. Students are often working through the creative process at a fairly advanced level, and yet appear unaware of their success. We must surely raise their awareness of their own achievements if we are to hope that they may be actively involved in creative activities in the future.

About The 'Unreliable Evidence' Project

Unreliable Evidence began life in 2001 as a project aimed at exploring the use of the moving image to explore local history with students in Tiverton High School (rural 11-16 years school situated in Devon). Originally envisaged as a cross-curricular project, it ended up being mostly delivered through Art and Music, across years 7, 9 and 10.

The Films and soundtracks:

Year 9 students worked in small groups during their Art lessons to produce short films about a range of local history characters. Some of these characters, such as the train driver, were generic, whilst others, like JD Salinger, were actual historical figures with a connection to the Tiverton area. Students did some research into the characters and the era in history in which they would have lived, and used this research in structuring the ideas for their films. Since most of the footage to be used in their work was to be from archive film and photographs, some artistic licence was needed in adapting ideas. Most groups decided that they needed a small amount of original footage, and this was mostly filmed in the school during lesson time. The archive footage was provided through the South West Film Archive, and from video material and still photographs provided by the Tiverton Museum.

Editing of the footage was done in small groups using the Avio Casablanca editing system, mostly by the students themselves working from their storyboards and edit-decision lists.

Soundtracks for the films were produced during a one day workshop led by Philip Robinson. He worked with a group of six Year 10 students and created music using a wide range of instruments and techniques.

The final soundtracks were added to the finished films on a PC, where each individual film was encoded for Web and CDROM delivery.

The Comic Strips:

The same Year 9 students who made the films also created comic strips about their characters. Sometimes the comic strips followed the students' ideas for their films, but more often they were more imaginative and slightly surreal, and came out as perhaps extreme examples of Historical Fiction!

Navigation Map Squares:

Year 7 students made maps of the Tiverton area using a range of symbols that they designed themselves. The symbols and maps were based loosely around the work of Australian Aborigines. Small sections from students' maps were scanned, and a selection appears on the main navigation page of the website.

www.unreliable-evidence.co.uk

Bibliography

National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) - *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*. Dfes 1999

Amanda Sharp, Daniel Birnbaum, Jorg Heiser - *Doug Aitken (Contemporary Artists Series)*. Phaidon 2001

Rom Harre - *Personal Being*. Blackwell 1983

<http://www.directedcreativity.com/pages/WPModels.html>

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~caveman/Creative/Brain/cps.htm>

Contact the author at: editor@tangents.co.uk