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Why Do We Need a Newer Vocabulary for Creativity?

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The second edition

It is both an exciting and daunting task to revisit work done years prior, especially when the book in question concerns creativity. As a forward looking and, most of all, forward driving phenomenon, creativity seems to be all about the future. This makes it even more bold of us to have used the word ‘new’ in the title of our book. Novelty is subject to the passing of time and what was a new vocabulary in the middle of the 2010s might seem slightly out of date close to ten years later. And yet, we can proudly say that this book stood the test of time. Its novelty is not as much temporal as it is conceptual. The vocabulary proposed then remains important today because the work needed to reframe how we think about creativity (and, alongside it, imagination, innovation, invention, human possibility; Glăveanu, 2023) is ongoing. The ‘new vocabulary’ proposed years ago is worth revisiting precisely because revisions are needed to stand as a still relevant contribution, and there is more to learn from it, more to do, more to challenge. Including the association between creativity and the future. Yes, creative processes are future-oriented, but they are also firmly rooted in the past, in lived experience, in the world as is and was. Similarly, this second edition is not merely a ‘newer’ vocabulary but a revisiting of past ideas in a changed – some might say radically changed – present, for the purposes of open-ended and yet-to-be written futures.

Since 2016, the world has known a devastating pandemic, several horrific wars, a continued migration crisis, an alarmingly rapid deterioration of the environment, and the birth of technologies – like user-friendly generative AI – that we are not sure we fully understand and control. In this markedly different context, talking about creativity is not a luxury but a real necessity. Creativity might not be ‘the cure’, as some marketing campaigns try to persuade us, but there is little hope of coping with these ‘postnormal times’ without it (Montuori, 2023). And yet, this is not the creativity of isolated geniuses, disembodied minds, and cognitive tests. The creativity that is reduced to thinking processes and the moment of insight. That is attributed to only some people, primarily artists, and not others, especially marginalised and oppressed communities. To stand a chance as individuals, communities and as humanity (a phrase that sounds less dramatic now than it would have done in 2016), we need to rethink what we mean by creativity, how and where we find it, how we study it, and why it matters to us. The present book, in its second edition, is dedicated, once more and with even more urgency, to this very aim. But, in order to understand where we are heading to, we need to start from the beginning.

On creativity and breaks

In the first edition we used Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) to argue that organisations eventually may begin to experience long-term underperformance and lack of creativity and innovation owing to intense workload pressures and stress. Constant speed makes you move forward; however, it may be in the wrong direction (towards failures, or even accidents) or it may be a short ride (stress and burnout). Experiences during the lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made these claims about time and space for creativity much more complex. Some experienced a much-needed time-out while others had to deal with workload pressures like never before in the health care frontline or in front of the screen at home (Wegener, 2021). Crises can be paralyzing, yet they are also potentially catalysts for creativity because it becomes so obvious that what we used to do no longer serve its purpose. Recent creativity scholars point to this fact (Beghetto, 2021 among others), yet, uncertainly as a driver for creativity can also be found in Dewey's (1910) and other early pragmatists' work. Creativity inducing breaks do not need to be of a magnitude that shakes the ground. Sometimes, a tiny break can be just what is needed for creativity to push through.

This book was initially conceived during a coffee break. One of our colleagues had his PhD defence in the afternoon. In the morning, the three of us had met to plan new activities at the department. Some people are comfortable in these formal idea generation meetings, some are not. In fact, Paulus et al. (2006) showed that face-to-face meetings for brainstorming or innovation might be less productive than most of us believe. It is stimulating to be with people who have many ideas and who are good at articulating them; however, some people become more silent than they normally are and possibly relevant contributions may be lost in such circumstances. Their strength is the breaks. And, on that day, the break turned out to be a moment of genuine creativity.

On the way to the coffee room, Charlotte told Vlad and Lene that she had a piece of writing which remained unfinished for almost a year. Its title: 'Upcycling'. Would they read it and make suggestions on how to move forward? Both immediately accepted, finding the topic quite intriguing. Jokingly, we all agreed not only that we creatively upcycle things, but that creativity itself also often involves upcycling and recycling objects, ideas, actions, and so on. On our way to the defence, coffees in hand, the three of us talked about the titles of academic papers. Many titles are too long, even boring. We have noticed that the menu at fancy restaurants often uses only one word to evoke a feeling for each main ingredient – maybe we need more simple, but expressive, titles for academic papers? Titles that make us hungry to experience what is actually on the plate? How many words could we use? Very few. In fact, one word might do. Just like in a dictionary! 'A new dictionary ...?' 'A new vocabulary ...?' 'Creativity ...?' 'Creativity – A new vocabulary!' The PhD defence was about to begin and the idea generation had to stop, or at least continue in silence. The result of that coffee break is the first edition of this book. *A New Vocabulary*.

Things we do with words

In a paradoxical way for its own area of interest, the field of creativity research and practice often repeats the same kinds of words and concepts decade after decade. To mention just a few: divergent thinking, convergent thinking, cognitive processes, incubation, association, brainstorming and group-think (Thompson & Choi, 2006). In later years, we have

witnessed new words gaining momentum such as crisis, war, climate change, wicked problems, metoo, identity politics, globalisation, economic trends, competition, survival, accelerated changes and complexity. These can be taken as signs of increased societal pressure on all of us to revisit reassumptions and fixed beliefs and ways of living. While creativity was in the first twenty years of the 20th century dominantly related to the need to become more creative to ensure the survival and growth of industries, economies and societies (Bilton, 2007), it is now increasingly related to solving massive problems on a planet striving to survive our constant pressure to subject ourselves to a consumer culture and a growth paradigm. This is today the main reason why there is again a need for a new vocabulary emerging. We need it. There are different angles to pursue in trying to understand these changes and, before introducing our alternative terminology, let's briefly consider two of them – consolidation and creative limitation. Both kinds of phenomena can explain why words and concepts are repeated in particular fields of research and also why this may limit our creative potential. In the end, vocabularies are never innocent ...

Consolidation

Concepts unite to form a field of research. The process of consolidation is behind our tendency to repeat words and concepts and to stay within given frames, within a professional field or sub-culture. In creativity research, consolidation has been a high priority because of the somehow slippery character of the phenomenon of interest. There is no doubt that consolidating a research field requires some kind of consistency in the concepts used, not least in order to enable communication between researchers. This is something already shown by Berger and Luckmann in their popular book *The Social Construction of Reality*, from 1966. In this book, the two authors argue that the institutionalisation of social processes within a professional field grows out of habitualisation and customs, gained through mutual observation with subsequent mutual agreement on the 'way of doing things'. For many years, a cognitive-based terminology dominated the field of creativity research and many say it still does (Glăveanu, 2014); this has resulted in words from cognitive as well as personality psychology being used frequently, leading to the legitimisation of creativity as a cognitive process or personality trait. Equally, the new words entering our creativity vocabulary – such as industry, growth, economy and globalisation – are an indication of the fact that creativity is being studied progressively more outside of psychology, including in the applied fields of management and organisational science (Foss & Saebi, 2015).

Creative limitation

While the repetition of concepts is necessary for the actual institutionalisation and consolidation of a field of research, it may also unintentionally inhibit our creative thinking within that field (Wegener, 2022; Meier & Wegener, 2017). Too much familiarity and habituation, also in the form of repeating words and embracing the same forms of argumentation over and over again, can lead to dangerous forms of group-think. This is usually how the process goes: 'Consideration of a new problem tends to activate frames for similar solutions from long-term memory, so people may tend to retrieve frames related to old solutions and attempt to adapt them to the new set of circumstances – a practice sometimes referred to as *satisficing*' (Santanen, 2006, p. 27). Satisficing and repetition of old patterns of thinking can sometimes be useful but they also endanger our creativity.

From a critical angle, the field of creativity itself can be said to experience a long period of being ‘locked’ in its own terminology because of the success of years, even decades of consolidation.

Can we move beyond consolidation and creative limitation?

Consolidation and creative limitations are related phenomena when a field of research gains momentum and becomes stabilised through processes of institutionalisation. Considering these processes in their interplay and taking them seriously as a possible challenge to our field, this book tries to offer an alternative. What if instead of talking and, as a consequence, thinking about creativity using the same old terms or the new, popular concepts of today, we look for inspiration somewhere else? What if, in fact, it is in the odd or common words, or in words seemingly unrelated to creativity, that we find a more solid ground (conceptually and pragmatically) to theorise creativity? The outcome of this rather ‘creative’ exercise in this book is – we hope – a fresh, new perspective, perhaps a ‘cool’ (Nordic) gaze on creativity.

A few notes on concepts and categories

In research, the concepts we use to understand phenomena reflect processes of categorisation while, at the same time, many of the categories we create in psychology do not exist in the world as such. Categories are the researcher’s constructs, chosen based on his or her preferences and experiences. As noted by Bowker and Star (2000), concepts and categories are always historically situated. They are learned as part of membership in communities of practice. When we give meaning to the world around us, we produce certain forms of organisation that, in turn, produce certain material arrangements, subject positions and forms of knowledge. These are ‘the material and symbolic practices of conceptualization – the making of boundaries and categories to be deployed in research’ (Edwards & Fowler, 2007, p. 110). Thus, although there is no other way of being analytical and systematic, we should always remain critical when it comes to our own processes of naming, labelling and creating categories (Weick, 2006).

Categories are part of the research processes and cannot be escaped; however, we can experiment with them, deconstruct them or even try to dissolve them with the aim of adding new perspectives or reframing our studies. This is our intention with this book in relation to creativity. What does it mean to talk about creativity in terms of thinking or personality traits? Or in terms of societal progress and economic growth? What does it mean to always go back to the classic categories of person, product, process and press (Rhodes, 1961)? What would it mean to talk about it in terms of pathways, body, digital, rhythms or spaces? What would that imply for the way we think about creativity and, importantly, for the way we (en)act it in everyday life?

Building on both the constructionist and pragmatism traditions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; James, 1907), we consider language and vocabularies highly consequential for how we define, discover, assess, validate and practice creativity. For example, let’s take the very common reference to the *creative person*. Studies of what makes people creative and what distinguishes creative people from others (less creative) have marked the very beginning of what we call nowadays the ‘psychology of creativity’ (Barron & Harrington, 1981). To this day, we find a vigorous literature, at least in psychology, dedicated to the creative person, his or her personality, cognitive styles and, more recently, his or her brain

processes. We are, in other words, very often concerned with *who is* (or can be) a creative person. Yet, very few ask *what is* the creative person? Is it even appropriate to talk about creativity as a property or quality of people? What exactly ‘in’ or ‘about’ a person is actually creative? In everyday conversations, we might hear such and such being called highly creative (often in contrast to the speaker or simply the rest of us), but when we ask for details we will most probably learn about what the person does (‘see, just the other day ...’). Wouldn’t it make more sense to talk about creative action rather than creativity as a personal attribute (Glăveanu, 2014)? How about if we dropped ‘creativity’ altogether, as a noun, and kept only ‘creating’, as a verb (Wagoner, 2015)?

This radical suggestion might belong to the realm of Borges’s fantastic prose (see ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ in his collection *Fictions*, 1962), but in practice we cannot do without nouns, without words, without categories. And they often, for better or worse, stabilise reality for us, performing a kind of magic by which the thing I say (creativity) becomes something real, something I refer to in the world (such as the creative person). So, what is there to do?

We can become more aware of what words and categories actually ‘do’; we can inquire more about *the power of vocabularies* and, if we get really annoyed, we can create our own! *Creativity: A New Vocabulary*. Aren’t we, though, just replacing one set of terms with another? ...Yes, but different vocabularies have different pragmatic value. The first editor engaged in a similar exercise a couple of years ago, ‘against’ the traditional 4P model. What resulted was the 5As (if you are curious to know more, see Glăveanu, 2013). By the time the three editors finished their coffee break, a whole new alternative vocabulary had emerged. And when they talked to other colleagues from their university, more and more words kept being added. In the second edition, we revised and included almost all the initial chapters and added five brand new ones: Body, Digital, No, Silence, World-making. And many are, surely, still to come! For the moment, though, we all ‘settled’ for a small collection of essays. The instruction given to authors was rather straightforward:

Please think about a concept from your own area that is not usually associated with creativity but could help us develop a new way of understanding creativity as a dynamic, relational, developmental phenomenon.

Fear. Rhythm. Translation. Mess. Can they teach us anything about creativity? What about the seemingly ‘opposites’ of creating: memory, silence, rules? And then issues we don’t often think about in relation to creativity: power, space, things ...Is this just another vocabulary? Through the free, deconstructive and playful approach we all took in writing each chapter, the outcome might just as well be considered an ‘*anti-vocabulary*’ of creativity. But perhaps this takes the critical attitude a step too far. We are not claiming here the birth of a revolutionary new language of creativity (in fact, as you will see in this book, as a group of authors, we are quite suspicious of revolutions as the prime markers of creativity). Quite the contrary, with only a few exceptions, you are probably very familiar with the concepts discussed in the following pages. By symbolically replacing some concepts with others we don’t aim to establish a new orthodoxy or expect you, dear reader, to unlearn words and adopt ours in a rather Orwellian move. What we hope is that you will enjoy thinking about creativity in new ways, that you will find at least some of the terms we propose useful in practice and, above all, that you will learn to take all vocabularies – new and old – with a grain of salt. Why not start your own?

Reading this book

And while we are on the topic of de(re)construction, let's unpack the notion of a book a little. The implicit assumption shared by authors and readers alike is that a book begins with the first chapter and ends with the last one. Reading a book, you often gain momentum and, if you are lucky, you get the feeling that you won't be able to put it down until the very last page. Linear reading; often matched by linear ways of understanding what has been written.

Our hope is that you won't read this book in the same way. If we are to imagine now a 'how to' set of instructions, we would first invite you to pick up the book and observe its weight, its colours and images, the smell of printed letters on new pages (yes, you probably know the scent as well). Then, find the table of contents and have a look. Amused? Intrigued? A bit of both? Start from the concept you find most interesting or, if you are so inclined, the least interesting, then move to the one you think might be related to it, then the next one and so on. Make and follow your own pathway through this collection of essays (and, if you are wondering, 'Pathways' does happen to be a chapter!).

Some hypothetical itineraries:

- *The process journey*: 'Business as Usual', 'Lostness', 'Mess', 'Rhythm', 'Stumbling', 'Translation', 'World-making'
- *The materiality journey*: 'Affordance', 'Body', 'Craft', 'Pathways', 'Space', 'Things', 'Upcycling'
- *The social journey*: 'No', 'Perspective', 'Power', 'Reflexivity', 'Rules', 'Silence'
- *The conditions of creativity journey*: 'Difference', 'Digital', 'Fear', 'Language', 'Memory'
- *The haphazard way*: Any chapter, in any order (we suggest from end to beginning)

No matter what path you take through the book, you will probably end up in a similar place. But the nature of the journey will be different. As you might notice, we deliberately didn't include a final chapter that brings all of these words together. We don't want to create a 'model' of creativity simply because we believe there is no single model for it, nor should we aim to have one (see also Baer, 2011). What we do have are different conceptions and terms for creativity, some better than others (or, rather, more useful), when tested against the ultimate proof of practice. We can only hope our proposed vocabulary will pass this test.

Maybe you will tell us if this was the case when we meet on a future coffee break. It's on us!

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