

Creativity in a Cultural Context

Rita L. Irwin

Lakehead University

J. Karen Reynolds

University of British Columbia

This paper describes a study of 20 Ojibwe Native Canadians' conceptions of creativity. The findings suggest that creative thought processes of individuals, although liberating, are tied to and defined by social, cultural, ethical, and historical contexts or systems within the culture. The Ojibwe respondents elaborated on conditions that are necessary for fostering creativity. Time, material, an atmosphere of cooperation, psychological safety, and psychological freedom are conditions under which all persons may be creative and under which creativity is an all-pervasive aspect of life.

Introduction

One area of controversy in the field of creativity research is the extent to which creativity is affected by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it occurs (Tardiff & Sternberg, 1989). Some authors believe that these contexts define creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1989; Gardner, 1989; Johnson-Laird, 1989). Conversely, others believe that creativity is independent of any context, except perhaps the specific context in which a creative product is produced (Schank, 1989; Weisberg, 1989). In this article, we illustrate that creativity is affected by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it occurs. We also argue that through the use of a naturalistic research methodology, researchers may come to understand the interplay of these contexts within a foreign culture.

The Research Study

Over the past year, we had the opportunity to interview 20 Ojibwe Native Canadians from northwestern Ontario regarding their views of creativity. Fifteen of these people were from an isolated bush community (Reynolds, 1991) while the remaining five were urbanized. One of the former and three of the latter considered themselves practicing artists. Several participants from the bush community were teachers.

Through the use of open-ended and taped interviews, the insider's perspective is elevated and examined. These informal interviews represent conversations that invite the participant to share conceptions and feelings of phenomena based on personal experiences. Although prompts listed through an interview guide serve as reminders of important questions, emergent dialogue is critical (Irwin, 1988) and therefore a dialogical reflexive manner must be maintained (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Woods, 1986; van Manen, 1990). In this way, data are collected and subsequently analyzed inductively. Theory emerges through triangulation of themes among sources, people, and time.

Field notes were kept throughout the research to record substantive and methodological information. The substantive data reflected the contextual nature of our focus. The methodological notes provided a means of monitoring the efficacy of

our approach. The data from the field notes and the interview transcripts were analyzed by both authors in generating the themes discussed in this article.

A significant characteristic of naturalistic research methodology is that meaning is of primary importance. Researchers are engaged in discovering the ways that people create meaning within life experience. In this way, beliefs, values, and cultural assumptions are highlighted.

Employing naturalistic research techniques throughout this study allowed for a discovery of meaning. In other words, by ignoring our conceptions of creativity and discovering Native beliefs and ideas regarding this concept, we came to understand the dynamic and contextual nature of creativity. The following examination seeks to describe the contextual nature of creativity of the Ojibwe people who were interviewed.

Native Conceptions of Creativity

Emphasizing the importance of concrete products as visible proofs of originality as a determination of creativity may reduce the significance that creativity may have for the psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human expression. Furthermore, when the external manifestation of a creative experience becomes a priority, the significance of the internal nature of the experience may be overlooked.

Although a premium may be placed on the external benefits of "creative production" (Renzulli, 1986) to a culture's economy and security, the nature of the creative experience that takes place inside the individual may be qualitatively different from the ways in which it is viewed by the society. "Inside the creative experience is ... inquiry, the expansion of emotional depth and range, the tuning of the spirit, and the quest for meaning" (London, 1989, p. 18). Many of the Native people interviewed spoke of the special feelings they had when they were involved in a creative endeavor. This feeling was characterized by a sense of satisfaction and pride in accomplishing something that was different from others. These expressions often reflected an aesthetic nature: woodcarving, painting, storytelling, beading, sewing, and creative music.

Anything you make with your hands or anything that you do, you have to have love for it and that's when everything here [heart] comes out, comes out good ... when I was growing up ... I started seeing Indian or Native art and I thought that was really something, made me feel good ... so I went out and I learned, I didn't stay home ... I started travelling a lot and looked at different artists work ... Gee, this is a part of me, why can't I do that? So I applied myself and found a love for it. (Native artist)

To the Native artists interviewed, creativity became an all pervasive outlook on life. It meant taking risks, appreciating and overcoming criticism, and a dynamic view of problem solving.

Art is a way of life. How you look at things has to do with the way you look out on life. How you deal with it, present it ... even with a painting, when you come to a problem how are you going to deal with it? How are you going to copy? ... when you're doing art or anything that you make, there's always going to be negativity. People criticize you. It's healthy because it makes you strong in here [heart]. You're inspired to do more and also learn to accept things the way they are. You can't change things, but in your art you can overcome a lot of hardships. Art is a way of life ... To me it's just basic common sense. (Native artist)

Creative expression in traditional lifestyle was often functional and utilitarian in nature. Creative expression grew out of basic skills associated with the maintenance of shelter, food, and warmth. Once these basic skills were learned from a parent, elder, or mentor, the individual could decide to refine an original process. For instance, reference was made to an elder who created a paddle handle that fit more comfortably than others into the palm of the user's hand. Over several years this elder made numerous modifications to the original design. He developed and refined his ideas through practical use. Several other examples of creative expression in traditional lifestyle were the construction of various types of traps, nets, fishing poles, snowshoes, and sleds, and the use of plants and berries for dyes.

As the artists described how they came to be involved in their art, stories of being mentored by older people whose expertise they respected come to the forefront.

I used to watch him all day carve. Just watch to see what he's doing ... I had to try because I saw that thing in my eyes and I got a feeling for it, so I tried ... They didn't teach me how to do it. I just had it in my mind a long time ago when I watched them carve. (Native artist)

They taught me in a way that I was able to learn and at the same time to listen. They taught me to be patient with myself and also with the brush or whatever you use ... It's basic tool for creativity: to listen, to watch, to absorb all you need. (Native artist)

Creative expression may serve extrinsic and intrinsic purposes. Intrinsically, the creative process allows the individual to seek and establish meaning within and through himself or herself in relation to the context of lived experience (London, 1989). Extrinsically, creative expression can offer a manifestation of an individual's internal search in a product. In this way the creative process is contextual and therefore needs to be understood in the cultural context where it takes place (Sternberg, 1988). The creative process may reflect an individual's "social vision" (Lippard, 1990, p. 7) in relation to the culture's institutions, economy, political systems, values, and traditions. For example, carvings of birds, animals, and people engaged in traditional cultural pursuits reflect a regard for nature and traditional lifestyle.

The determination of creativity becomes a value-laden process when placed into a cultural context. Several participants in this study made references to traditional abilities and skills as being creative processes today. This reflects their appreciation of the traditional culture, which has been diminished through acculturation. Neotraditionalists represent a group who support a renaissance of traditional Native culture.

All of the participants expressed the belief that everyone can be creative and that creativity can be taught if the appropriate learning environment is provided. First, opportunities for creative expression require that certain materials are accessible to the individual. Second, there must be sufficient time available to be involved in the process of understanding and creating.

Third, many of the participants suggested that school programs should offer optimal conditions for the expression of creativity instead of the measurement of creative abilities (Irwin, 1990). A Native teacher pointed out that Native people prefer to work in a cooperative manner. For this reason, Native students would intuitively understand and appreciate a creative process that is characterized by a form of "noncompetitive knowing" (London, 1989, p. 45). This means that a student would not feel required to evaluate his or her efforts against those of another.

Evaluation becomes a personal assessment as opposed to an external judgment of ability according to some standardized criteria. Self-evaluation is familiar to the Native youngster. In a traditional Native family, children were expected to evaluate their own learning (More, 1987). They were not formally assessed by their parents and elders.

The fourth and fifth conditions that are integral to the positive expression and development of creativity for students are “psychological safety” and “psychological freedom” (Rogers, 1961). Psychological safety is created in a nonthreatening environment where the student feels self-worth and acceptance.

If I'm painting, I'm just totally in there ... I'm aware of my body. I can go without supper or anything like that because it doesn't bother me. I'm so involved in what I'm doing ... Now when I'm writing I'm absolutely aware of everything around me. I'm right into that person. I can feel the presence of that person. (Native artist and author)

Psychological freedom represents the freedom for a student to express himself or herself symbolically while assuming responsibility for the process and product throughout the creative experience.

I didn't want the teacher messing up my art and telling me I can't do something I enjoy doing. If I wanted to create something, I'll do it myself and the same thing with all my painting. You know it's mine. I'm not following someone else's format. (Native artist)

The ideal situation for my kids would be to have them in a school where art is the central focus, where creativity becomes the central focus in any subject, not just in drawing or painting, but in math and reading as well. (Native parent)

I think of it as freedom. There's nothing between you and anyone else that says you have to do this or that. You have the whole freedom, the whole language. Creativity is a language itself. (Native parent)

Although psychological safety and freedom are critical conditions for the development of creativity, a cultural tension exists with yet a sixth condition: the ethical values of the culture need to be respected. Tardiff and Sternberg (1989) suggest that there are three different ways in which tension can be observed in creative processes:

First, one may be faced with conflict between staying with tradition and breaking new ground at each step in the process. Second, tension may lie in the ideas themselves, such that different paths to a solution or different products are suggested. Finally, it may exist in the constant battle between unorganized chaos and the drive to higher levels of organization and efficiency within the individual, or the society at large. (p. 431)

For the participants in this study, the former two ways seem most appropriate. One Native artist linked ethics with aesthetics reminding us that:

Native art was never Native art. Never was. You know Native art was done for medicinal purposes ... my mother would freak out if I had a Morrisseau. It would be like a Catholic wearing a rosary for a necklace ... you can use a Morrisseau if you're teaching painting but you always come to a level where you don't go any deeper than that. You know, because you're dealing with the inner or whatever it is that keeps the culture together ... it's such a private ... spiritual experience ... it has too deep a meaning to the Native people. This was not meant for public arts. So there is a level for you. If you overstep the boundaries then you'll just sabotage something. You'll demoralize something. (Native artist and author)

For these Native people, images are a means of celebrating mystery rather than explaining it. London (1989, p. 11) suggests that for Native people, "an image, a dance step, a song may function from time to time as entertainment, but the root and full practice of the arts lies in the recognition that art is power, an instrument of communion between the self and all that is important, all that is sacred." The individual's experience of imagery and ideas is deeply personal and spiritual (Highwater, 1982). From an ethical standpoint, a creative person in a cultural context must foresee the consequences of a creative orientation and modify possible extremes in order to respect the cultural values of the community.

Conclusion

For the Ojibwe in this study, creativity was not something that was elevated. It was all pervasive. No one person was singled out as being particularly creative; rather, special abilities were appreciated in each individual.

Although this study found some agreement with authors who describe creative thought processes of individuals within a particular point in time, this study was able to empirically illuminate a newer view: creativity exists in and is defined by a larger system of social, cultural, ethical, and historical networks. The individual in this system is only one of many necessary parts.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Society for Education Through Art and Ontario Society for Education Through Art Conference, Toronto, Ontario, November 12-15, 1991.

References

- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Toronto: Allyn and Bacon.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1989). Society, culture, and person: A systems view of creativity. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 325-339). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisner, E.W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Toronto: Collier Macmillan.
- Gardner, H. (1989). Creative lives and creative works: A synthetic scientific approach. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 298-321). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Highwater, J. (1982). *The primal mind: Vision and reality in Indian America*. New York: New American Library.
- Irwin, R.L. (1988). *The practical knowledge of a fine arts supervisor in educational change: A case study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia.
- Irwin, R.L. (1990, November 2-4). *Weaving the threads of creative expression*. Keynote address for the Early Childhood Education Council Conference of the Alberta Teachers' Association, Lethbridge.
- Johnson-Laird, P.N. (1989). Freedom and constraint in creativity. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 202-219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lippard, L. (1990). *Mixed blessings: New art in multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- London, P. (1989). *No more secondhand art: Awakening the artist within*. Boston: Shambhala.
- More, A. (1987, October). Native Indian learning styles: A review for researchers and teachers. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 17-29.

- Renzulli, J.S. (1986). The three-ring conception of giftedness: A developmental model for creative productivity. In R.J. Sternberg & J.E. Davidson (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness* (pp. 53-92). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, J.K. (1991). *Native conceptions of "giftedness."* Unpublished master's thesis, Lakehead University.
- Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Miiflin.
- Schank, R.C. (1989). Creativity as a mechanical process. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 220-238). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sternberg, R.J. (1988). A triarchic view of intelligence. In S.H. Irvine & J.W. Berry (Eds.), *Human abilities in cultural context* (pp. 60-85). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tardiff, T.Z., & Sternberg, R.J. (1989). What do we know about creativity? In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 429-440). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London: Althouse Press.
- Weisberg, R.W. (1989). Problem solving and creativity. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *The nature of creativity: Contemporary psychological perspectives* (pp. 148-176). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woods, P. (1986). *Inside schools: Ethnography in educational research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.