THE CRISIS OF CREATIVITY: LIMINALITY AND THE CREATIVE GROWN-UP
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CONTEXT

In the context of a culture that applauds innovation, this paper seeks to address the often-problematic relationship that adults may have with creativity. Drawing parallels between the experience of crisis and creativity, the presentation explores the concept of liminal space as a means for understanding the suspicion creativity may provoke, and thus offering possibilities for challenging such resistance.

This paper comes out of a bigger project that seeks to examine the nature of creativity and its potential application in relation to health and well-being. It focuses specifically on creativity in the workplace. The work is informed by the practical challenges we have faced in promoting creativity in the health and care sector and sets out to offer a theoretical perspective on this area of activity. It is intended as a kind of provocation, a jumping-off point for discussion and we look forward to receiving your responses.

DEFINITION OF CREATIVITY

To begin with it is probably worth saying that by creativity we do mean aesthetic expression including theatre, literature, visual art etc, but we are also referring to the more nebulous creative process during which transformations, aesthetic and otherwise, take place.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF CREATIVITY/CREATIVITY AND CHILDHOOD

- Creativity is commonly associated with positive attributes. Often it is related to children and a 'natural' state that it is seen as beneficial to return to – a state free from inhibitions, controls and socially conditioned responses.

- The psychoanalyst Winnicott, for example, describes creativity as "returning to infant experience", in that it offers a space where a person may (re)make their world.

- Creativity certainly appears to be a space of possibilities but it does not always feel as 'golden' to individuals as the psychoanalysts may suggest – particularly when it is a forced condition.

- In the context of UK government directives, people working in the public sector, are being encouraged to be creative. The processes of reinventing and remaking are seen as desirable in a culture that seeks new solutions to old problems.

- Often 'creative' initiatives are viewed with suspicion and even active ridicule that appears to suggest fear on behalf of the potential participants.

- We are interested to uncover what the root of this fear might be.

THE RISK OF CREATIVITY

- Winnicott notes "there is a compulsive element in boredom – a pattern for difficulties". In order to break through such patterns managers may encourage 'creative brainstorming' or creative methodologies to find new solutions to problems. This in itself may raise problems because of the individual's perception of creativity.

- People are not used to being creative in a contemporary capitalist culture, where industrialism and Fordism has favoured task-based working. There have of course always been exceptions to the rule and today creativity in the commercial sector is more prevalent; the public sector has been slow to follow but it is moving in this direction.

- It is important to note that, in the work contexts we are discussing, creativity is not valued in itself but as a strategic tactic. Innovation is seen as valuable in terms of productivity and creativity is seen as a means to move towards that innovation.

- Within capitalist culture, the professionalisation of creativity has also had an impact. Artists and creativity have always played a role in society, but that role has shifted throughout history and from culture to culture. In contemporary, Western culture, where once creativity may have been an integral part of everyday life and something in which all members of the community might participate, creativity has become increasingly removed from the commonplace and elevated into specialised, professional activity. In a consumer society arts have become a commodity.

- People are therefore not necessarily used to being creative in their personal lives or their work and the professionalisation of art has set up expectations and standards of creativity that suggest that to be less than excellent is to fail; in other words, if you can't be the best, don't do it at all. To be creative is to achieve aesthetic enlightenment thus, to enter into creativity is to risk failure.

- Another perception of creativity and arts that may be problematic is the link between creativity and madness and emotional disorders. Observations have been made throughout the centuries about artists and creative people of note and the fine line they have walked, not always successfully, between genius and madness. As Daniel Nettle (specialist in biological psychology) suggests in his book *Strong Imagination*, most of the cannon of western culture was produced by people with a touch of madness.

- So what do we risk in creativity? Failure, intense emotional experience, emotional or mental imbalance or disorder, vulnerability, ridicule, instability, fear of the unknown, uncertainty, chaos, exposure, surprise, conflict? And in the workplace we expect all this to take place in public?

- In contemporary culture the artist can be seen to act as agos in that they carry and express the fears and phobias of the community, safely outside the community. They also present challenges to the status quo, ask difficult questions and take contrary positions on behalf of society whilst being apart from society. So asking people to be creative, then, can be seen to bring the agos back inside and to potentially disrupt the safety of the workplace.

- Finally, as Winnicott notes, "when we are surprised at ourselves we are creative". The notion of surprise may not be welcome in a place where the status quo provides safety. Adults may be less willing than children to play with possibilities because of the feelings of crisis that may be evoked.

(RE)INVENTION AND THE LIMINAL SPACE

- It is our contention, then, that there is a parallel between states experienced during creativity and crisis and that it is this similarity that may lead to an unwillingness to enter into the creative process.

- We suggest that the notion of a threshold, or liminal, experience may be a useful way of framing and explaining the commonalities between the creative process and the experience of crisis.

- Limen, the root of the word liminality, translates from the Latin as "threshold". The term was first used in socio-cultural analysis by the Belgian folklorist Van Gennep. In examining tribal rites of passage he identified three phases: separation, margin (or limen) and re-aggregation. He identified that ritual subjects are detached from their place in society and then, after a 'threshold' experience, they undergo re-integration which may involve a shift in social status or function (for example the 'Walkabout' in Aboriginal culture, where the initiant leaves the community base as a child and when he returns he is viewed as an adult). The significant, transformational events occur in the liminal realm that acts as a threshold and a container for possibilities.

- In many ways the liminal space can be seen as a metaphor for crisis. Rites of passage are certainly moments of 'crisis' within the life cycle. Crisis is a time of instability and insecurity yet it is also a turning point out of which new possibilities arise. A person will be changed by crisis moments and, as Van Gennep notes, may need to shift social status/function as they re-enter society.

- Liminal space can, at the same time, be seen as a metaphor for the creative process. Richard Schechner, drawing on the work of Van Gennep, notes that the creative process should be carefully framed in terms of a preparation process (where the performer spends time separating themselves from their everyday reality and moving into a different space), performance (or the inhabitation of the liminal, play space), and a 'cool down' (where the performer comes back to their everyday persona).

- Artists are often asked where they get their ideas from and the creative space, where possibilities can be explored, is an important source of inspiration. It does, however, mean leaving behind that which is known and being open to the 'chaos' of the liminal space – which we suggest is a similar chaos to the liminal space experienced in crisis.

- In recognition of the potential danger of the liminal space, Schechner notes that careful framing is required in order to facilitate both movement into and out of it as well as holding an individual whilst they are within it. As rites of passage construct ritual practices that frame crisis moments within the life cycle, creative practices may develop holding structures that ensure the safety of the individual.

- Thus it is important to recognise that creativity is risky as well as rewarding and, in inviting people to enter into the liminal space of creativity, it is important to assure safety through holding structures.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CREATIVITY

- It is worth noting that there is much written about the role of creativity in crisis itself. People often arrive at creativity during crisis and perhaps use creativity as a means of reinvention, for exploration, for regaining direction and for transformation – in order to lead them to reintegration of some kind. Is it possible that people turn to creativity whilst in times of crisis, more easily than at other times, because they have already crossed the threshold?

- But what about adults in the workplace that are not in crisis?

- Victor Turner, an anthropologist, describes liminality as a 'time out of time' where the usual social rules and roles are disbanded. It is interesting that for brainstorming people often take 'away days' to literally be outside the normal environment and allow for different possibilities. Certainly offering the opportunity for 'time out of time' within safe boundaries seems to be important in the facilitation of creativity in the workplace.

- But it is more complex than this.

- Whilst rites of passage and rituals are often used to hold and ease someone through a transformation, this is usually on a very occasional basis and is usually time limited.

- If we accept much of what is written about creativity and creative people, regularity of creativity is very important both in terms of rehearsal time and in working prolifically. Studies about creative people who have really made a lasting impact on the their field suggest that such people did not produce consistently high quality results but that they produced lots of it – the more they produced, the more chance there was of some of it being useful.

- So what we are expecting when we ask people to be creative in the workplace is that they cross the threshold and enter liminal space, experience those states, time and time again.

- But is it practical to facilitate liminal space on an ongoing basis in the work place? What, in fact, constitutes a liminal space?

- The work environment itself can not constantly be a liminal space because it still has to function within time and within established rules of engagement.

- So we have to find a position whereby the individuals are encouraged and able to create their own liminal space and cross the threshold on a regular basis. Or perhaps more properly what Turner would call liminoid; still a 'time out of time' but in a more free, idiosyncratic and experimental space. So what can we do to help encourage and sustain this?

1. **Awareness**

   Perhaps the starting point has to be awareness – a more deliberate use of liminal space and the crossing of thresholds in the hope that the individual can be empowered in the long term.

   - Useful parallels may come from the work of a colleague and practitioner in arts in health who is well known in the UK for her work around emotional intelligence in schools. She encourages children to be aware of their emotions and to talk honestly about their feelings. She works with the school to run workshops but also to set up a 'feeling room' which is a physical but also liminal space within the school building which pupils can go to when they want to talk about their feelings.

   - But the long term usefulness of this approach for, the children, was questioned, in that whilst the children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings, what happens when they move school, when they aren't in school, when they grow up and the 'feeling room' is not available anymore. How would the children cope and what use would it all be to them then?

   - The answer may firstly be about awareness. Previously the children would not have even been aware of the feelings or the need to articulate them. Once this awareness is increased is there not a much greater chance that the children will identify the gap for themselves when the 'feeling room' is not longer available? Are they not more likely to ask questions and find an alternative for themselves?

- **Equipping**

  Secondly, taking the emotional intelligence example above once more, isn't it about equipping those children with that they need to do this – to question, to challenge, to develop their own coping mechanisms – surely that is what emotional intelligence is all about. And perhaps the same principle applies to the facilitation of liminal space for creativity? We need to think about how we can provide a mix of skills, techniques, ways of working, confidence, esteem, attitudes etc.

- **Big creativity, little creativity**

  Not being able to achieve a goal can be demoralising and very damaging so another useful method might be to develop understanding and demonstrate how individuals can be creative in small ways as well as big ones. In the first instance it might be useful to simply provide experiences of creativity, perhaps through the aesthetic arts, rather than concentrate too early on a series of set problems and targets that require too much too soon.

- **Supporting reintegration**

  Perhaps we also have to think about the experience of reintegration once the individual has been through the transformative space, more specifically, what are the consequences? Positive reintegration might include acceptance and approval of the individual and their ideas from family, peers, friends, colleagues and a sense that the transformation was worthwhile and reaped benefits of some kind? A negative reintegration or even failure to reintegrate at all might stem from rejection or failure of those benefits to materialise?

- So the organisation might have a big role to play in supporting that reintegration in all sorts of ways - reinforcing the positive – supporting the negative – showing how what comes out of that liminal space is beneficial in a range of ways.

- But unpacking this could have all sorts of implications for the organisation as well e.g. can the organisation guarantee the reintegration in any circumstance, can it support shifts in status, attitude, ideas? If it can't, what message does this send?

- There is perhaps a need to avoid the 'carnivelesque' away day where people are encouraged to 'let off steam' but then return to the same working practices where nothing changes.

In conclusion

- In terms of promoting creativity in the workplace there is still a long way to go.

- We have touched upon some of the reasons why adults may have a problematic relationship with creativity – particularly in the work environment.

- But we have also thrown up some difficult questions for the organisations that seek to promote it.

- There are still many more questions about where liminailty ends and the setting of a culture begins.

- Whilst the idea of creativity in the workplace is laudable there are planning and coping implications for both the individual and the organisation.

- Until this is better understood by organisations – until they are just as ready to plan for and cope with the unexpected as the expected, creativity for adults in the workplace will remain problematic.