The discursive construction of creativity as work in a tertiary art and design environment

Darryl Hocking

Abstract

Central to most research in the field of creativity is the perception that creativity is an external and essentialist phenomenon. Recent studies, particularly in the area of art and design education, are beginning to question this understanding and seek alternative methods for exploring creativity. This paper takes the view that perceptions of creativity are historically and discursively constructed and that cultural shifts in the early twentieth century have more recently constituted the Western understanding of creativity through a discourse of work. As an example, the paper will use a multi-perspectival analytical approach to explore the discursive construction of creativity as work in the situated context of a tertiary art and design studio environment. The paper concludes with a discussion of complications that may arise in the tertiary art and design environment as a result of the potential ambiguity created by the discourse of creativity as work.

Keywords: discourse analysis; multi-perspectival; mixed-methodological; creativity; art education

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1 Introduction

The faculty described by the abstract noun *creativity* pervades almost all aspects of human activity and although it only entered common usage circa the early twentieth century, Pope (2005: 1) aptly observes that creativity has become ‘of immediate interest to just about everyone’. Creativity and innovation are now viewed as crucial for success in the contemporary business environment, and the fields of architecture, art, design, film, music and software design, among others, are now collectively referred to as the creative industries, reinforcing the notion of creativity as an important economic resource. Furthermore, the promotion of creativity as good pedagogical practice has been revived in primary and secondary education, while creative writing is currently one of the largest growth areas in the tertiary context. Not far behind is the emerging field of creative technologies, situated at the interdisciplinary nexus of science, mathematics and new digital media.

Not surprisingly, the last 50 years have evidenced a burgeoning growth in creativity research, with the majority of studies primarily interested in developing definitions of creativity and the attributes that underlie creative behaviour. The research has involved a variety of methods, which notably include the use of controlled experiments (Runco and Sakamoto 1999), the evaluation of successful artists’ and scientists’ lives, personalities and processes (Simonton 1999, 2007; Stokes 2006), and the use of computer modelling (Johnson-Laird 1988; Boden 2004). Common to most of these explorations of creativity is the belief that creativity is a measurable, objective and external reality. The findings are largely consensual in that creativity is defined as the production of ideas or products that are both *novel* and *useful* (e.g. Amabile 1996; Mayer 1999; Sternberg 1999; Stokes 2006), whether creativity is viewed as a personal phenomenon, characterised by an ordinary and regularly occurring act of cognition (Ward et al. 1999), or as a socio-cultural phenomenon where the creative product is validated by the larger community or gatekeepers of the domain (Csikszentmihalyi 1999).

More recently there has been a resurgence of creativity research and practice in art and design education, which since the early 1980s had all but disappeared due to the widespread implementation of standardised outcomes and formalised curricula (Steers 2009; Zimmerman 2010). This renewed attention is largely a consequence of policy initiatives within a number of advanced free market-oriented governments that, in a post-industrial age, have come to foreground the creative industries as pivotal to economic development (Schlesinger 2007; Simmons and Thompson 2008; Freedman 2010). Interestingly, this new wave of creativity studies continues to focus on definitions of creativity and the characteristics of creative behaviour. The research is largely qualitative,
involving interviews with those involved in areas of creativity, or reflective, where researchers draw upon the values and experiences gained through the art and design educative context. While these studies still routinely acknowledge essentialist and external notions of creativity as involving novelty and usefulness, they tend towards a more dynamic and multi-faceted conception, which also recognises the importance of inner psychological criteria. Reid and Solomonides (2007: 30), for example, suggest that students’ individual emotional commitment or ‘sense of being’ is a significant factor for creative engagement in the art and design educative environment. Kleiman (2008) reduces an initial list of over 30 different conceptualisations of creativity, based on interviews with academics, into five key categories. Some reproduce essentialist conceptions of creativity mentioned above, while others conceptualise creativity as a personal fulfilment or a transformation-focused experience. This concurs with the work of Dineen, Samuel and Livesey (2005), who find that while there is some degree of correlation between essentialist descriptions of creativity and what students and teachers identify as creative, in the educative art and design environment creative success is ultimately measured as student individual growth and learner independence. Freedman’s (2010: 10) reconceptualisation of creativity in contemporary educational practice defines it as ‘an open concept’, which ‘must be defined as applied in a cultural context’. Like the studies above, however, he argues that it emerges through internal processes of critical reflection, personal interest, self-motivated learning, and leadership. Nevertheless, Freedman adds to this external criteria such as ‘functional’ or ‘useful’ (Freedman 2010: 12), mirroring earlier definitions. Radclyffe-Thomas (2007) also makes the point that definitions of creativity in arts education are culturally specific (see also Lubart 1999). She states that creativity in Chinese arts education is conceptualised as technical mastery, in contrast with the West’s emphasis on experimentation and exploration, a view that, while recognising cultural differences, could also be described as being culturally essentialist and lacking consideration of the local or situated.

2 A multi-perspectival discourse analytic approach to creativity

One research tradition absent from these studies, yet one which has the potential to make a significant contribution to creativity research, particularly in the context of art and design education, is discourse analysis. A discourse analytical perspective views the world and the social practices within it as represented by, and constituted through, language and other semiotic systems, rather than simply reflecting already existing inner psychological states or objective realities. At a macro level, ‘discourse’ refers to the ideological posi-
tions, knowledge or values that through social, institutional or professional constraints and affordances regulate the ways we can think or speak about something. A computer scientist, for example, is likely to bring a very different set of values and beliefs to a discussion about creativity in comparison to an arts examination board representative, due to their different professional interests and allegiances. In some instances, certain discourses, which were originally viewed as contentious or the product of a particular social group, become assimilated more widely into everyday practice. Students, identifying creativity with their passion to produce something original that has a lasting impact, rather than something that is purely beautiful (e.g. Reid and Solomonides 2007), may be drawing upon modernist discourses of originality (Krauss 1985) or contemporary discourses of celebrity (Marshall 1997), rather than revealing an internal attribute of personal self confidence as necessary for creativity. At a more micro-level, discourses are produced, reproduced and transformed, either consciously or unconsciously, through local and situated forms of text and talk. It is through the routine cycle of communicative encounters, including telephone calls, corridor discussions and formal meetings, as well as the written genres, which recontextualise these oral interactions, that ‘what may be said or not said, or what may be meant or not meant’ (Candlin and Crichton 2011: 6) for any given context is determined. Discourse analysis has at its disposal a wide variety of analytical tools to explore language use at both the macro and micro levels, which can reveal information about what motivates the beliefs, values, decisions or intentions of individuals and groups in certain contexts and why. Taking a discourse analytical orientation, this study examines the way that creativity and the attributes of creative behaviour are discursively constructed in a situated context of a tertiary art and design programme. Creativity, therefore, is not viewed as an external reality resulting from an essentialist set of criteria or an objective psychological state, but as a historically situated and socially embedded phenomenon which is discursively constituted through text, talk and other semiotic forms.

The study takes an approach to discourse analysis which is both multi-perspectival and mixed-methodological (Candlin 2006; Crichton 2003, 2010; Candlin and Crichton 2011). A multi-perspectival study involves the collection and triangulation of data generated from a variety of primary and secondary discursive practices, including texts and other semiotic artefacts, the interactions and interpretative accounts of participants, recordings and observations from ethnographic sites of engagement, and wider historical resources. Drawing upon Crichton (2003, 2010) and Candlin and Crichton (2011), Figure 1 provides a model that represents such a multi-perspectival analytical approach. The representation of the four central analytical perspectives as symmetrical and overlapping circles highlights their homologous and mutu-
ally informing nature. The large outer circle represents the analyst’s perspective, showing that the analytical focus and different weighting attributed to each perspective reflect the particular motivations, theoretical concerns and research orientations of the analyst (Sarangi and Candlin 2001). Table 1 indicates the range of discursive practices related to the context of the tertiary art and design programme that have been analysed for each of the perspectives.

For Candlin (1997) and Candlin and Crichton (2011), the benefits of their multi-perspectival approach are threefold. Firstly, it recognises the analytical centrality of *interdiscursivity*; not only regarding the way in which prior discourses are seen as shaping the values, discursive resources and structures of existing social practices (Fairclough 1992), but also the way in which the range of discursive practices analysed for each of the different perspectives may be interdiscursively related. Secondly, such interperspectival interdiscursivity facilitates an analytical connection between the macro structures of the larger

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**Figure 1:** Model for a multi-perspectival research agenda. Adapted from Crichton (2003, 2010) and Candlin and Crichton (2011).
social formations and the micro structures of the interaction order (Layder 1993), which Cicourel (2007) argues is necessary for achieving ecological validity; that is, an understanding of how the locally situated activities of participants both constrain and constitute complex organisational structures. Thirdly, a multi-perspectival approach will ultimately result in grounded explanations, rather than simply descriptions or interpretations, of situated discursive practices (Fairclough 1989; Candlin 1997).

Importantly, a multi-perspectival analytical approach is also mixed-methodological in that each of the perspectives is associated with a specific set of methodological tools and analytical resources which function to meet the analyst's concerns and orientations.

The range of discourse analytical methods used in this study include the use of corpus analysis to identify the existence of prevailing discourses (Baker 2006), ethnography (Smart 1998) and functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) to further explore these discourses in the interactions, accounts and textual artefacts of participants, and discourse-historical analysis (Reisigl and Wodak

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Table 1: The data collected and analysed in this study for each of the perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
<th>Methodological Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semiotic perspective</strong></td>
<td>A 36,605 word corpus, created using exemplars of art and design student briefs collected from 4 different tertiary institutions in Australasia.</td>
<td>Corpus analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social action perspective</strong></td>
<td>A closer examination of a brief; the focus of the brief writing meeting below.</td>
<td>Systemic Functional Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants' perspective</strong></td>
<td>An audio recording of the meeting where tutors discuss the draft of the student brief.</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach to discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-historical perspective</strong></td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with tutors about their teaching process and the work they do in the studio.</td>
<td>Ethnographic approach to discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analyst's perspective</strong></td>
<td>Theoretical and historical literature regarding creativity and art production.</td>
<td>Discourse historical analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am a tutor/researcher working both in applied linguistics and art and design education. I have research interests in genre and discourse analysis and therefore bring these research agendas to the investigation of creativity. The initial motivation behind this study was an interest in investigating how the largely uncontested and under-theorised genre of the student brief discursively facilitates creativity in the studio. However, a necessary step in this process was understanding how creativity is conceived by participants in this environment, and what it is that is going on when students are being creative.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2009) to critically examine how these discourses are constituted through a dynamic and complex matrix of prior textual and contextual resources. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) a mixed-methodological approach has numerous advantages. Firstly, the convergence and collaboration of findings can result in a more complete and reliable conclusion. Secondly, the weaknesses or biases in one method may be overcome by the strengths of another, and thirdly, the results of one method can inform the purpose and design of the next to be employed. Table 1 also indicates which different methodological orientations were employed to analyse the data collected for each of the perspectives and how they have served to achieve this convergence.

3 The study

Three analytical phases are used in this study. The first phase focuses on a 36,605 word corpus of student briefs drawn from four different tertiary institutions across Australasia. Briefs are central to the creative process in art and design education as they facilitate student creativity by setting out in textual form the conceptual and technical parameters for each creative project. These formal guidelines are generally the result of prior interactions between the students’ tutors, who take into account the values and expectations of the institution (and the art and design world in general). Thus, it would make sense that underlying social or institutional discourses involving creativity might be reproduced in the text of a brief. The second phase examines ethnographic data including participant interactions, semi-structured interviews and specific brief texts from an undergraduate degree programme in art and design in a New Zealand university (equivalent to a foundation year in the United Kingdom). As an introductory year, it prepares the students for, and assesses their ability to cope with, the pedagogical approaches and strategies used in the degree programme of the institution. The final phase of the study looks at a collection of published historical documents in the area of creativity and art and design production.

Phase 1: A corpus analysis of student briefs

This first phase of the study focused on an analysis of keywords and *concordances* from the corpus of brief texts and is located within the semiotic perspective. Keywords are words in one corpus whose frequencies are identified as unusually high when referenced with the frequencies of words occurring in another corpus. Importantly, keywords can provide preliminary insights into the ‘presence of discourses’ (Baker 2006: 121) or aboutness of a collection of texts. In carrying out this procedure, corpus software such as Wordsmith Tools determined a *keyness* value for each word in the corpus or text being analysed.
Concordances are all instances of a selected word listed in the immediate context that it occurs in; usually a few words to the right and a few words to the left, which can provide specific information about the meaning of a word. The left hand side of Table 2 shows the keywords of the student brief corpus when it was referenced with a 113,802 word corpus of 60 creative/design briefs I collected from professional contexts. For triangulation, the right hand side of Table 2 shows the keywords of the student brief corpus when it was referenced with the more general 1,234,111 word Wellington Written corpus. While a number of keywords occur that might merit further investigation, it is particularly interesting that the words work, working and works appeared in 3rd, 16th and 20th places respectively in the left hand keyword list, and work occurred in 3rd place and working in 20th place in the right hand list. It should be pointed out that only those words that appeared in at least one third of all education briefs were included as keywords, thus avoiding the occurrence of keywords resulting from the idiolect of an individual writer.

The next step was to examine concordances of the words work, works and working from the collection of brief texts. While the lexical item work and the plural works are often used to denote the object produced as a result of art or design activity, e.g. work of art, a body of work, practical work, design work

Table 2: Top twenty keywords of student briefs from the educational context, when compared to a corpus of briefs from a professional context and the Wellington Written Corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>Freq Ref.</th>
<th>Keyness</th>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>Freq WCC</th>
<th>Keyness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>859.38</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>1787.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>533.34</td>
<td>studio</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1143.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>471.69</td>
<td>work</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>1025</td>
<td>916.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studio</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>398.2</td>
<td>brief</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>week</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>321.93</td>
<td>design</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>727.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>253.46</td>
<td>drawing</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>565.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drawing</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>246.34</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>3358</td>
<td>543.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>art</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>222.46</td>
<td>research</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>523.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>175.84</td>
<td>etc</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>511.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assessment</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>170.41</td>
<td>start</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>485.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presentation</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>129.19</td>
<td>week</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>400.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideas</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>127.24</td>
<td>materials</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>399.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artists</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>123.88</td>
<td>art</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>390.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possibilities</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>123.72</td>
<td>assessment</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>385.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critique</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>115.91</td>
<td>project</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>353.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>108.57</td>
<td>visual</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>352.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paper</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>102.95</td>
<td>ideas</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>335.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.85</td>
<td>will</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>2093</td>
<td>327.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>directed</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>96.439</td>
<td>presentation</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>320.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>works</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>working</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>270.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*work*, etc., the concordance list in Table 3 also indicates that the verb *work* is regularly used in the education briefs to describe the *material* processes (e.g. carrying out tangible actions) of the students.

Furthermore, in the education brief *work* is also semantically related to quantity, and the belief that the work involves the production of significant output of material goods (Table 2, lines 1-4). Other concordances relating work to temporal issues suggest that the work ethic should be habitual and that periods involving work should be used effectively (lines 5-7).

The conceptualisation of art and design production as habitual, routine-based and occurring in often pre-designated and concentrated time periods can be observed in the representative selection of concordances with *working* (Table 4). Notable in line 5 is the perception that students are not creating, developing or generating art and design at the beach, but are instead *working* and that one of the aims of the brief is to *simply* get students working on something (line 8). What is foregrounded here is the importance that any process actively involving labour is taking place.

Recent literature on creativity supports the further investigation of the possibility of a ‘creativity as work’ discourse. Glück, Ernst and Unger (2002), for example, have established that creative individuals define creativity in different ways depending on the type of creative work they are involved with. Interestingly, in their study constrained artists such as architects assigned little

**Table 3:** Examples of work used as a material process in the corpus of briefs from an educational context

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You are encouraged to work</td>
<td>within personal areas of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>significantly as you work</td>
<td>through the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>In other words to work</td>
<td>with an awareness of what you did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>expected that you will work</td>
<td>on your studies a minimum of 40 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>expect that you will work</td>
<td>in studios.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>or mode you choose to work</td>
<td>in is up to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>as you work</td>
<td>towards creating spatial possibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>To work</td>
<td>in a self initiated framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Enjoy, work</td>
<td>hard and most of all: Have Fun!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4:** Work semantically related to quantity, production and time

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>produce sufficient quantities of work</td>
<td>on your studies a minimum of 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>it is expected that you will work</td>
<td>in studio and make between 5–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is expected that you work</td>
<td>from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>at least 20 developed prints to work</td>
<td>on-site. Use this time well!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>This is your final chance to work</td>
<td>habit by attending consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Develops a good work</td>
<td>quickly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The aim is to work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
importance to novelty or originality, while visual artists repeatedly emphasised the notion of hard work in their descriptions of creativity. The idea that creativity is synonymous with novelty and innovation has also been questioned by Jeanes (2006) who argues that it is the result of a capitalist mantra for rapid change. Referring to the recent ‘Brit Art’ tradition and its advocate the ‘Turner Prize’, she argues that the emphasis on the criteria of innovation results in repetitive artworks, which she views as essentially ‘clichéd’ and ‘passe’ (Jeanes 2006: 131). Instead, for Jeanes, the essence of creativity is ‘a process of personal and perpetual crisis’, where the artist is working on the continually evolving, unfinished and “unfinishable” project (my italics). She is particularly critical of a conscious creativity:

By trying to be creative, in a very conscious way, rather than merely working at some idea or problem, they are by that very act being uncreative. (Jeanes 2006: 131, original italics)

This quotation almost reproduces the earlier concordance line in table 5 stating that the aim of the brief was ‘to simply get everyone working on something’ (my italics). To explore this ‘creativity as work’ discourse further, I will now investigate the other perspectives from the model above, focusing more closely on the situated context of a certificate level university art and design programme.

**Phase 2: Ethnographic data from a situated context**

In order to further examine the significance of the findings identified in the preliminary corpus analysis above, we now turn to ethnographic data collected in the context of the social action perspective, that is, the brief writing meeting where the tutors work together to draft the contents of the brief. Extract 1 provides an example of a commonly occurring interaction between tutors about the number of artefacts that students would need to produce to constitute an acceptable output for the assessment.
Extract 1 (brief meeting)

1 Mike: I'm just using very broad language here.
2 Anna: And I think it had it has to be pretty, pretty broad, because we're covering so many different things, because the specifics will then come in to um, remember when we had that discussion about the numbers, the numbers, game.
3 Mike: How do you mean?
4 Anna: Five on the wall, 21 support works or whatever we decide on that.
5 Mike: You don't have to have that but.
6 Anna: No.
7 Mike: But, and I worked on the programme when they didn't do that but.
8 Anna: Exactly.
9 Mike: As I, you know I used that, you know, and there was very little done.
10 Anna: Hmmmm.
11 Mike: In fact very, very little done, you know students were presenting minimal work.

In extract 1 above, taken from the first brief meeting, Anna is initially sceptical of Mike's emphasis (turn 2), which she acknowledges as having been discussed previously, on identifying quantity requirements in the brief, negatively categorising the process as the 'numbers game'. Mike however refers back to his experience with prior briefs to support his argument (turns 7, 9 and 11), suggesting that when output numbers were omitted the students failed to produce an acceptable quantity of work. Mike's emphasis is on the quantity of production and there is no explicit discussion here about the relationship between quantity and quality, or why quality cannot be achieved in a single work. In extract 2, Anna eventually shows agreement with Mike's position (turn 6), even when he concedes that 2 or 3 works might in fact be appropriate (turn 13). Interestingly, towards the end of this interaction the concept of quality is introduced (turn 10), yet the only indication of what this might mean is the agreement between Anna and Mike that it must involve 'a lot of work' (turn 14).

Extract 2 (brief meeting)

1 Mike: [while writing] Twenty items.
2 Anna: Yep.
3 Mike: [raising voice] I'm sorry, I know I, like a bit of a pain.
4 Anna: To come up with numbers, isn't it, yeah yeah yeah.
5 Mike: Well, you know, it could be, um, it just puts a bit of pressure on them, to fulfil.
Anna: I think it’s good, I agree, you know, because if you put nothing in there, then they just might, you know.

Mike: You’re going to get nothing.

Anna: Yep, yep.

Mike: You know, if you don’t ask for it, they’re not going to do it.

Anna: And we know that if it’s a good quality 12 works or something, that’s also going to be fine, isn’t it.

Mike: Well, that’s right.

Anna: Yep.

Mike: You can then judge on their performance, can’t you, and, and the amount of engagement that was required within what they do present. It might only be 2 or 3 pieces in the end, but if it involves, you know.

Anna: A lot of work.

It is important to note the dialogic nature (Linell 1998) of the discursive practice accountable for constituting what-it-is-students-are-expected-to-do in the art and design studio. This dialogism is explicitly acknowledged by the participants through their comments in extract 1, ‘whatever we decide on that’ (turn 4) and ‘you don’t have to have that’ (turn 5), although Anna, the course coordinator, takes the more consensual stance, evidenced through her regular use of the personal pronoun ‘we’. In contrast Mike, while expressing a stronger point of view overall through repetition, short direct utterances and recourse to prior experience (extract 1, turns 7, 9 and 11), is cognisant of her final authority through his use of the personal pronoun ‘you’ and his later apology and self-deprecation seen in extract 2 (turn 3).

Returning to the semiotic perspective, the discursive construction of the creative act as involving work is reinforced in the three assessment criteria that comprise the final component of the brief. For reasons of space, only the first and third criteria are reproduced here.

**Extract 3 (assessment criteria)**

1. Employs a **systematic process of making work**, accompanied by processes of visual experimentation and analysis. Uses a variety of media and technical processes appropriate to the work produced. Uses media to explore, develop and communicate ideas/issues being addressed. **Produces work that meets the requirement of the brief**

3. Develops a **good work habit** by attending consistently, organizing resources (i.e. equipment and materials), and **producing work** that effectively meets the requirements of the brief. **Works cooperatively**, with respect for others and observes all Art and Design School protocols.

[italics added for emphasis]
The process of making is fronted in the main clause of the first criterion with the closest concept to traditional perceptions of creativity as novelty inferred in the noun ‘experimentation’ which is only included in the dependent clause. The theme of the sentence employ is used here as a synonym of use; however, employ has a strong semantic association with the concept of paid work. The first criterion again ends with a focus on the production of work, and its ability to meet the requirements of the brief. The section of the brief referred to as requirements focuses on the number of works that are required for a successful completion of the assessment event. An example of these can be seen in extract 4.

**Extract 4 (requirements from the brief)**

On Friday August 15 by 10am. You will present the following:

**Five items of work you consider are the most successful** (Presentation method will be by negotiation).

**At least twenty exploratory supporting items of work** (Placed on the floor beside or beneath the presentation work).

The focus on systematicity is also relevant, referring to the fact that the processes used must follow a work-like, regular, orderly and methodical approach. Criterion 3 once again foregrounds the view that creative success is based on habitual action and reiterates the reference to the requirements of the brief.

Using data collected from the participants’ perspective, the link between work and creativity can be seen in the following extract from an interview with a member of the lecturing staff. Here she discusses the centrality of the requirements section and the reason for the insistence on high production outputs.

**Extract 5 (interview with Claire)**

1 Interviewer: How negotiable are those requirements?

2 Claire: Umm. They, aw, they’re not especially negotiable, because we’re asking for particular numbers, like a certain number, so when we ask for five items, and also with, yeah, we want to see five items. The twenty exploratory works that’s minimum, hopefully, but what I find is if you ask for a certain number that’s exactly what you get, exactly what you get, if you ask for one work, you’ll only get one work. (...) Why is that? Why do you think that students only work to prescribed requirements?
Claire: I think it might be a hangover from school. They might be very literal perhaps, but also they’re just not that motivated creatively. I find that they don’t, very few of them have that absolute desire to be creating, you know.

The perceived relationship between creative motivation or creative desire and level of work is made explicit in this extract, as Claire implies that creativity resides in large production outputs; that is, students who are not actively producing relatively large quantities of work are not motivated creatively, or being creative enough.

When questioned about the absence of any mention of the concept of ‘creativity’ in their educative context or about their own conceptualisations of creativity with respect to the art and design educative environment, the tutors’ responses were multifarious, perhaps showing evidence of conflicting and contested discourses. Anna, for example, suggested that creativity was very important in the educative environment and initially aligned creativity with innovation, which she described as coming from the few students who had something ‘new to offer’. Here, Anna is reproducing the widely accepted discourse of creativity as the production of ideas or products that are novel. She went on to admit, however, that creativity was a ‘hard thing to define’ and then struggled to construct a definition of creativity that was exclusive from the notion of making work:

Extract 6 (interview with Anna)

Anna: (...) some people can be really hard workers and be really good designers, you know, and not necessarily... oh, well, yeah, I suppose you’ve still got to be sort of quite creative, um, sometimes maybe through the hard work the creativity comes out.

Competing discourses are also evident in an interview with Mike. When asked about the importance of creativity in the studio, Mike suggested that creativity is a ‘hoary word’ and ‘inappropriate’ for the art and design educative context. Here, Mike is possibly drawing on a discourse prevalent since the late 1970s which aligned creativity with a set of standards and outcomes that could be taught, a reaction against earlier discourses of creativity as an individual and innate ability (Steers 2009; Zimmerman 2010). When questioned on this point he responded that:
Extract 7 (interview with Mike)

Mike: Well, it’s tangled and fraught, and, and the mere mention of it, we use words like coming from left field or lateral, or thinking outside the square, as being better descriptors for what traditionally we may have called creativity.

Here, Mike is still assigning value to notions of transformation and divergence, but is perhaps trying to avoid associating these with the traditional discourses described above: what Mike refers to as the ability ‘disposed upon a few that excel’. He also goes on to suggest that concepts such as ‘lateral’ were more appropriate because the boundaries of meaning associated with the ‘problematic’ words creative or creativity were in a constant state of flux, depending on the ‘fashions’ of the time. Mike, in a sense, is revealing his consciousness of creativity as a discursively constituted object.

Phase 3: The socio-historical context

The absence of an interest in creativity in arts education from the later half of the twentieth century, referred to above, is often attributed to the standardised outcomes and formalised curricula implemented in the late 1970s. I would add, however, that it may also be the result of a pedagogical and philosophical rejection of the perception of creativity as the innate ability of a few talented individuals. This romantic view of the individual creative genius is referred to as a ‘traditionalist’ rhetoric by Banaji and Burn (2007) in their analysis of perceptions of creativity in British education. They suggest the traditionalist rhetoric is a critique of modernism and popular culture, and define it as ‘a discourse about aesthetic judgment and value, manners, civilisation and the attempt to establish literary artistic and musical cannons’ (Banaji and Burn 2007: 62). Kant’s Critique of Judgment is seen as a significant influence of this discourse of creativity, which has its origins in Enlightenment humanism. According to Banaji and Burn, the opening of a more democratic discourse of creativity can in part be attributed to the twentieth-century cultural theorist and sociologist Bourdieu, who provided an influential critique of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy as elite and representing the tastes of an educated and privileged social class (Bourdieu 1984).

Similarly, the literary theorist Pope (2005) argues that Marxist and post-structural discourses have been convincing in their suppression of the eighteenth-century romantic notion of creativity, which has been substituted with the concept of production. As an example, he points to the Marxist literary critic Macherey, who is seen as an influential figure in the development of post-structuralism. Macherey (1966) argues that the conceptualisation of the writer or artist as creator belonged to a humanist ideology, and as a result it
overlooked the centrality of work or the process of making. Interestingly, the cover of the 2006 edition of Macherey’s seminal text on literary theory contains numerous images of iconic tools of labour, including a hammer, a hacksaw and a screwdriver.

The increasing shift in the late twentieth century towards a discourse of creativity as production can further be seen in the following quotation from Rosenberg (1983) which refers to a dialogue that influential artist Marcel Duchamp had with Pierre Cabanne in 1971:

People like to think that art is the mystery of creation, but, Duchamp pointed out, the artist, as a person active in society, is a ‘man like any other. It’s his job to do certain things’ – in the case of the painter, ‘things on a canvas, with a frame. Duchamp said that he had always been drawn to the notion of the artist as a craftsman – a term more venerable than ‘artist’. This was a revision to the traditional idea of making, and it provided him with a stand against the romanticism of his friends the Surrealists. (Rosenberg 1983: 3-4)

Here, Duchamp dismisses the romantic and individualist discourse of creativity, simultaneously repositioning the subject of the painter as a trade signified only by its tools, the canvas and the frame, thus constituting creativity as a more egalitarian discourse of production or making work.

Further insights regarding the increasing pervasiveness of the creativity as work discourse in the twentieth century are provided by Molesworth (2003) in her essay included with the catalogue for an exhibition titled Work Ethic. According to Molesworth, as artists in the twentieth century moved away from both the traditional skills and materials associated with the ‘visual pleasure and seduction of mimetic representation’ (Molesworth 2003: 17), they turned towards other criteria that would be valued by their audiences. This largely involved constituting themselves as workers, and ‘replacing the skills of art with the activities of work’ (Molesworth 2003: 25) – an appropriate response to the rise of twentieth-century capitalism and the resulting professionalisation of the artist. Molesworth makes the point that artists’ conscious portrayal of themselves as workers, particularly during the 1960s, can be evidenced in the many photographs or documentaries where they appear hard at work in their studio, dressed in the work shirt and blue jeans attire normally associated at the time with the working classes. One revealing example of the discourse of creativity as work colonising visual arts during the mid-twentieth century is a quotation by the abstractionist Frank Stella who states that ‘it sounds a little dramatic, being an “art worker”. I just wanted to do it and get it over with so I could go home and watch TV’ (Stella, cited by Molesworth 2003: 35). For Steinberg (1972), a significant consequence of the reconceptualisation of creativity as work, particularly in the United States, is that artistic culture
has shifted from its traditional associations as a pleasurable leisure activity of aristocracy to that of the practical and economic. As a result, the act of being creative could be justified by the notion that work was being done. In some cases, the discourse of creativity as work became the central focus of many artists. One example, pointed out in Molesworth (2003), is Tehching Hsieh's performance piece, One Year Performance, where he punched a time clock in his New York City studio every hour on the hour from April 11th 1980 until April 11th 1981.

4 Discussion

In this paper I have suggested that the emerging social and economic structures of the twentieth century are responsible for the discursive reconstitution of creative activity as work. This seems to have occurred initially in the field of visual arts production, where the dominant discourse of the individual creative genius, coupled with the emphasis on traditional artistic skill, was largely relinquished and replaced with a discourse of work – a discourse which, as observed in the institutional setting of this study, continues to articulate the practice of art and design and the attributes of what is perceived as creative behaviour. The art and design brief plays a major role in formalizing this creativity as work discourse (among others) into the regulatory language of the institution, thus structuring the creative processes and activities of the students and tutors.

However, certain complications can arise with the discourse of creativity as work in the tertiary art and design environment. Firstly, it often competes with discourses of a more traditionalist nature that students may have previously encountered and internalised. In the ethnographic accounts of my study, I regularly noticed that students were anxious about their drawing abilities, believing that their tutors were looking for displays of a particular artistic quality, rather than evidence of a systematic process of development or exploration that occurs as the result of regular studio attendance and adherence to a habitual work ethic. Many students enter the tertiary art and design environment expecting to be taught traditional fine art skills in more formal tutor-oriented setting, but in the contemporary tertiary environment students are more likely to be provided with a studio space, a brief, and are expected to begin working.

Like other workers in the contemporary labour market, students are given designated work hours and their attendance during these hours is regularly monitored. Any indication that the required work ethic is lacking will negatively affect a student’s final results. Furthermore, the studio hours (9am to 3pm in the context studied) are longer than most students’ previous experiences of
short focused periods (approximately one hour) of art and design instruction at a secondary institution, where the final product is potentially more important than the process of working.

Secondly, I believe it is difficult to clearly constitute a work ethic as underpinning creative activity in the minds of students. The abstract nature of creativity as work makes it difficult for tutors to specify exactly what working entails in a way that is meaningful to the students. Therefore, to facilitate creative action as work, tutors resort to ‘the numbers game’, as evidenced in the data collected for this study. Tutors encourage students to work hard by requiring them to produce a certain number of preliminary drawings and final works, but ironically as a consequence students then begin to focus on the product rather than the process. The section of the brief that students gave the highest priority to was the section indicating the number of creative outputs required. Interestingly, the ambiguity evidenced here in the lack of clarity involving the discourse of creativity as work could also be viewed as a discursive strategy of power. By framing creativity through the abstract notion of work, the tutors are able to bring a level of personal connoisseurship to their validation of the students’ creative output, while simultaneously enforcing students’ commitment to the creative production line.

To conclude, the view of creativity as a discursively constituted and legitimised phenomena is largely absent from the scholarly literature; however, as seen in the context of this study, this view has much to offer the investigation of creativity and creative practice in both institutional and professional settings. Importantly, it can reveal the complex semiotic, interactional, institutional and socio-historical practices that interact to constitute and legitimise what-it-is-that-is-going-on when we describe ourselves, or are described by others, as being ‘creative’. In doing so, it may invite the use of a more diverse range of investigative procedures, generating richer, more useful definitions of creativity than those currently available. These multi-strategies would be framed by the context of the local, co-engaging the everyday (inter) actions of participants with the broader social and historical structures in an attempt to achieve Cicourel’s (2007) notion of ecological validity. As a final note, a discourse analytical orientation also has something to offer in exploration of contexts involving practices of power and control, such as the one represented here, where the professional or institutional validation of creativity is necessary for the success of a particular group or individual. The critical dimension of many discourse analytical procedures, including CDA, can provide an analysis of social action to reveal insights into what are often occluded practices of domination, an area of creativity research which is regularly overlooked.
About the author

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