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Don't mention the 'c word': the rhetorics of creativity in the Roberts Report

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Creativity in education is almost universally acknowledged to be a positive, desirable thing. But even in the field of art, design and media there is considerable disagreement about what this 'thing' might be. Outside this field it becomes even more complicated; David Gauntlett, for example, acknowledges that the term 'gets...fuzzy, and can start to seem meaningless' before resigning himself to a 'common sense' definition (Gauntlett, 2007, p.25).

Despite this lack of coherence, we find ourselves using the term in accountable contexts - in programme and unit titles, learning outcomes and even assessment criteria. Consequently it is necessary to examine our usage and application of this slippery signifier. This does not mean attempting to come up with a watertight definition (which I'd argue is impossible anyway), but developing a sensitivity to the assumptions which underpin different deployments of it and, perhaps, accepting sometimes that it may not be a useful term with which to operate.

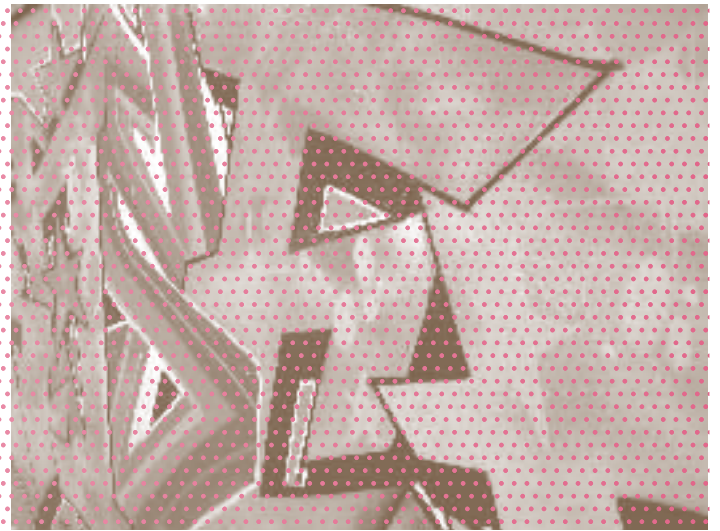
The report for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* (2006) provides useful examples of how some of the tensions and contradictions around creativity are manifested. Although not specifically aimed at Higher Education, it encompasses post-compulsory education and vocational pathways and, arguably, constitutes an 'authorised version' of what creativity in education might be. And although quantitative measures are crude and limited indicators, the fact that the document features the word 'creativity' 356 times and the adjective 'creative' 426 times suggests a degree of confidence in its application.

The report, written in response to James Purnell's (then minister for Creative Industries & Tourism) request to identify strategies for nurturing creative

talent, actually incorporates a number of different versions of creativity, or, to draw on Banaji, Burn and Buckingham's excellent literature review, different 'rhetorics of creativity' (2006). The rhetorics they identify in this review are 'creative genius'; 'democratic and political creativity'; 'ubiquitous creativity'; 'creativity for social good'; 'creativity as economic imperative'; 'play and creativity'; 'creativity and cognition'; 'the creative affordances of technology' and 'the creative classroom'. Despite the fact that some of these rhetorics are not merely different, but contradictory, we can identify many of them in *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* and, in the process, may be able to contextualise and rationalise our own use of the term.

One of the key rhetorics in the report falls into the 'creativity as economic imperative' category - the argument that the 'creative industries' (a term which some would argue already represents a triumphant rhetorical marriage of two incompatibles) constitute an area on which the future of the economy will depend to an increasing degree. Consequently a creatively-skilled workforce is required in order to facilitate its continuing growth and profit, so we find that TV programmes such as *Dragons' Den* and *The X Factor* are valuable reference points for students because 'successful participants go through a process of auditioning, presenting and pitching, honing their skills through criticism and turning themselves into a brand...These programmes are all about self-improvement and risk-taking in a creative and entrepreneurial economy' (DCMS, p.23). But also we find that creativity is equally valuable in a generic employment context: 'The capacity for creativity - to work in teams, to share ideas, to identify problems and critically analyse solutions - is increasingly important in all walks of life. Indeed these are the attributes most often valued by employers in particular when making recruitment decisions. Creativity is not just about self-expression. It requires teamwork and discipline' (DCMS, p.57).

We might wonder how such disparate activities as 'self-branding', collaboration and problem identification can possibly be logically connected or grouped together as a homogeneous 'creative skill set' until we realise that the connection is purely a rhetorical one; as Banaji, Burn and Buckingham



argue 'this rhetoric annexes the concept of creativity in the service of a neo-liberal economic programme and discourse' (2006, p56).

Interestingly the report juxtaposes this rhetoric with one which is virtually its antithesis: 'While this economic and regeneration driver is compelling it is matched by an equal and moral imperative - the intrinsic importance of giving children and young people creative experience - both to develop personal identity and confidence and to understand and prepare for a 21st century society' (DCMS, p.12). This is a very different conception of creativity; not a set of transferable skills, but a range of enriching experiences which are, in themselves, worthwhile and important to the individual. But the equation of the importance of each - one is 'matched' by the other - and the suggestion that 'creative experience' leads to personal growth (and, implicitly, employability) blurs the distinction between them.

Generally the 'pro social' rhetoric serves to provide bridges between more contradictory areas or to create the illusion of homogeneity. Banaji, Burn and Buckingham argue that 'this rhetoric emerges largely from contemporary social democratic discourses of inclusion and multiculturalism' (2006, p.56) and this is apparent in the Early Years section of the report; '...it is crucial that we see our youngest children's creativity at the heart of these new formations. Creativity here is a necessity not a luxury. Evidence from early years practice suggests that creativity is essential to all five of the ECM (Every Child Matters) outcomes' (DCMS, 2006, p.27). The key example in this section describes a nursery school in which a pedagogical strategy involving the use of play, outdoor space and exercise has been implemented and had a range of benefits, including increased parental engagement. The point here is not to question whether or not this is good, innovative work (as indeed it seems to be), but to query the co-opting of the term creativity and highlight the way in which it is validated through the 'play' rhetoric as well as the 'pro social' rhetoric. Despite the involvement of 'arts and artists' there is no suggestion that the children's creativity is defined through what they produce, but rather through the exploratory process. And the emphasis on health, happiness and engagement effects a connection between 'community project' and 'creative work' which can be seen in other contexts.

In art, design and media we have a tendency to construct creativity around 'great works' and 'great practitioners' - what Banaji, Burn and Buckingham call the 'creative genius' rhetoric - the idea that creativity is a special quality possessed by elite individuals. And another tension in *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* is between this elite conception and a more inclusive, democratic notion of creativity. The democratising impulse is clearly demonstrated in the reference to 'children who are highly creative but not academic and do not like school. The generation brought up with 'rip-mix-burn' as their motto will feed Britain's creative and cultural industries' (DCMS, p.21). Here then it is vital to recognise and celebrate diverse manifestations of creativity in order to provide encouragement to the disenfranchised. There is no qualitative distinction being made here between different products or processes (which, incidentally, is another unresolved tension) and there is even the suggestion that, through blogging, MySpace and Garage Band, all young people are equally creative. However, in relation to Creative Portfolios, the notion of creative excellence emerges: 'EMI should host a site for children with highly musical Creative Portfolios' and 'At a higher level one could imagine an award scheme, for people who have gone through a number of

creative projects...perhaps this could be called the *Dizzee Rascal Award* or the *Simon Cowell Award* or the *Damien Hirst Award*' (p.24). The nomination of a figurehead for each award here is an indication of an investment in an elitist conception of creativity, regardless of whether or not one considers that Simon Cowell is a 'creative genius'.

Despite the confident assertions in the Government Response to *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* that 'creativity involves thinking or behaving imaginatively; this imaginative activity is purposeful...these processes must generate something original; the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective' (DCMS, p.4) there are many tensions and contradictions around the term, even in the report to which this responds. In the appendices, for example, there is a range of replies to five key questions posed by Paul Roberts, the report's author. In response to the question 'what generates creativity?' one contribution states 'Creativity can be taught in a structured and disciplined fashion' and is followed by one stating 'Creativity is generated by children's own natural curiosity and imagination and cannot be 'taught' in a traditional way' (DCMS, p.68).

We might recognise in this, admittedly selective and partial, analysis some of our own assumptions and prejudices about creativity and acknowledge that we have our own intellectual and emotional stake in it. At the very least there seems to be a case for adopting a more sceptical position in relation to it, which is not to deny the value of exciting work and good teaching, but to be more explicit about our agenda and aware of the rhetoric when we invoke 'the c word': •

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Biography

After many years encouraging FE students to be creative, Mark Readman now teaches on the MA in Creative and Media Education at Bournemouth University. His PhD research attempts to make sense of creativity by engaging with how it functions as a cultural construct.

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