

The cost of creativity: adult learning in austere times

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Introduction

Ironically, at the same time as education is being defined according to neoliberal interests, increasing attention is paid to the notion of creativity. Economic and educational leaders raise concerns about fostering innovation (Hillier & Figgis, 2011). Yet how can creative learning thrive in an educational climate that stifles original curriculum and devalues imaginative approaches to teaching?

This paper explores the cost of creativity in two ways: a) by exploring what is needed to support adult learning to develop creative literacies, and b) by assessing the costs to a society that does not find ways to foster creativity amongst adult learners.

In our larger research project, we are interested in exploring how people can learn to be creative by looking at lifelong learning in connection to fiction writing. Using a term shared with us by a key informant from our previous SSHRC grant on lifelong learning, citizenship and fiction writing, we are interested in how “creative literacies” – an idea that we see as being linked with creativity and multiliteracies, can help develop learners who are interested and capable of innovative and creative approaches related to work, citizenship, family, and community, incorporating diversity, technologies, and multimodalities. Our study involves interviews with authors to ask them about their experiences in learning to write fiction, as we believe that these stories can help educators gain insights into the learning processes connected to fostering creativity.

Neoliberalism

Recent downturns in the global economy have resulted in significant cuts to adult education programs and spiraling costs for higher education. Friedman emphasized that individuals should have freedom of choice (especially in relation to the unregulated, free markets). The word “freedom” invariably has positive connotations in westernized, democratic societies. It suggests that people are first and foremost individuals who have the right to various options. The language that surrounds neoliberalism is persuasive. Yet critical educators point out the silence about how factors such as gender and social class affect an individual’s learning opportunities (Jackson & Burke, 2007).

The ideology of neoliberalism is often traced back to the writings of economist Milton Friedman (1962) and Frederick Hayek (1948 [2005]). In the context of lifelong learning, adult learners must constantly invest in a long string of credentials to continually adapt to the fluid market (Grace, 2007). This investment is seen through a neoliberal lens as the product of an individual’s hard-earned personal and professional efforts. The discourse of neoliberalism has encroached on adult education contexts for several decades now, making it more challenging for adult learners to see how personal identity does not necessarily have to be completely

entwined with economic imperatives, which is the underlying message of neoliberalism, that every aspect of life is defined through its relation to economic prosperity. Kopecký (2011, p. 256) observes that

nowadays, lifelong learning is ascribed more influence than it really has, especially if it is expected to largely replace the function of the welfare state...Lifelong learning is expected to make a positive contribution to economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness or social coherence, but at the level of the individual, these certainties are transformed into (mere) opportunities. An example of this can be seen in the term employability – learning does not provide jobs, but it is meant to increase the chances of finding them.

Within a neoliberal context, the responsibility for attaining educational credentials has become an individualized responsibility, and individuals are charged with the responsibility of choosing wisely to engage in education that will provide payback in terms of better career options.

Similarly, creative literacies only have currency if perceived as producing market-driven versions of innovation. As Shaw and Crowther (2013, p. 398-399) surmise, the new hegemony that there is no policy alternative to austerity reaches deep into cultural life, reinforcing its veracity as it goes. The inclusiveness trope that “we are all in it together”, despite vast differentials in power, wealth and agency, can all too easily become internalized by those who have most to lose – and the persistent demonization of the poor acts to reinforce the myth. So it is that neoliberalism hollows out the collective social and political imagination.

The creativity that fiction writing fosters may reshape the collective social and political imagination in ways that might ‘speak’ to society of the heavy silences encoded into neoliberal discourses.

Critical literacies

Creative literacies incorporate critical as well as creative elements. Fostering creativity requires an investment of time, space, and resources to allow learners the freedom and space to dabble in different approaches to learning and to explore alternative perspectives and possibilities. Su (2009, p. 713) describes the sometimes non-linear approach needed when ‘teaching for creativity [that] requires a shift in focus from knowledge content to the learner’s engagement’. Instead of focusing on innovation to address immediate stop-gap marketplace needs, creative literacies as an educational practice gives adult educators strategies to foster critical and creative learning pathways in their students.

Creative literacies allow for growth and failure as part of the ongoing creative process. As Ashton claims in his best-seller, ‘having ideas is not the same thing as being creative. Creation is execution, not inspiration. Many people have ideas; few take the steps to make the thing they imagine’ (p. 51). For creative writers, ‘the steps’ can involve many rewrites; editorial correspondences; additional research; sometimes even throwing out parts or whole manuscripts to start again.

While at times inspirational, many of the authors we have interviewed indicate most often writing is an arduous process. Similarly, in adult learning contexts, creativity is

not just about coming up with good ideas; creative literacies undergird a critical pedagogy that also seeks to establish practices and strategies to help learners develop creative outcomes. As Kopecký points out, 'of course the contemporary obsession with creativity has its own dark side. For instance, it can pressure people to act creatively (Weiner 2000), particularly in domains such as the arts, despite the fact that artists themselves are also expected to develop and stabilise a recognisable style' (p. 5). This 'recognisable style' may be seen as a form of branding, which turns creative forms such as fiction into consumptive objects.

The discourses around creativity have in some ways been coopted by a neoliberal discourse that embraces economic productivity in all aspects of life, including creative projects such as works of fiction. Yet writers, like everyone else, live in a global economic system that shapes many aspects of everyday life and work. Publishing books is a creative process that is also entwined within a larger marketplace that involves concerns around marketing, distribution, and in some instances, funding through arts councils. The analysis of the costs and benefits of supporting creative learning, such as that connected with fiction writing, is a complicated issue to explore.

Research Study

Our SSHRC funded research study involves life history/biographical interviews with over forty successfully published fiction writers. As Halqvist (2014) says, the 'concept of biographical learning is attractive partly because of its holistic character, including both formal and informal learning processes' (p. 499). In addition, we are doing over twenty shorter interviews with 'key informants' from organizations that support fiction writing such as book festivals or arts councils.

Fostering Creativity

We believe that fiction writers, who work in the realm of imagination, can provide us with insights into creative learning processes. As one participant argues, studying English texts is not sufficient to teach you to write because 'you're studying the creation rather than the process.' Fiction writers speak back to the silence that devalues other lifeworlds that a neoliberal discourse would have us ignore or dismiss.

Su (2009, p. 713) discusses a pedagogy of creativity in the following way:

The immersion in associations and creation comes only when teachers let go and give learners time for hazy, pre-conceptual thinking and acting that can unfold in novel forms, liberating them to experience the possibilities in terms of what their engagement might turn out to be. The teacher needs to trust that the learners can and should research their own development of thought and action.

Creative processes here are seen as slow and tacit. There is no linear process, which may mean creativity necessarily requires extended time periods. Su contends that creativity is not the special domain of a few elites, but rather can be explored and fostered in all adult learners.

Canadian literary author Martha Baillie, in contemplating the larger collective pressures writers sometimes experience in their social milieu, argues:

The constraints of social expectation, of the ways in which you fit into a kind of hierarchy that evaluates your abilities can be, I think, very detrimental. However, I also believe that if you really do have a strong creative impulse, at least if it's been nurtured very young, it inevitably will take hold and redirect your life, or at least that was the case for me!

Developing creative literacies, therefore, should be ideally encouraged across the lifespan, with the grounding established during childhood. Neoliberalism at the institutional level (banks, schools, governments) has made a big push for society to actively engage in creativity to jumpstart the economy. Neoliberalism is right on this point, if only it did not limit creativity to the tethers of immediate economic gain. Our institutions *are* often stuck in traditional regimes that respond to any initiatives for change with the response of 'that is the way we have always done it' or 'it's not in the current curriculum' as if that were in and of itself a valid rationale for continuing with a traditional approach. Change is hard. Creativity insists on change. Ironically, neoliberalism has the potential to be successful in some regards at initiating change through creative approaches, but to do this, we need to critically consider how educators themselves engage with creative approaches to learning. Within educational systems, there is often steep resistance to change and innovation, and all too often learners are discouraged by educators from being truly creative.

To exemplify this argument, we turn to Canadian crime fiction writer, Linwood Barclay, whose books have outsold John Grisham's on occasion in the UK. He shares this story about the reaction of his teacher and principal to his interest in fiction writing when he was in elementary school:

I had an elderly English teacher one year, and I wrote a very short Twilight Zone kind of story about a child who digs a hole in a sandbox. He tells his father that the hole goes all the way to the other side of the earth. Later in the story the father can't find the boy, and he ends up looking in the sandbox to see this very deep hole. He wonders if the boy went into the hole so he reaches in, can't feel the bottom, then slips in and is gone. The next scene is the boy coming home and saying to his mom, Hi, I'm home for dinner. Where's Dad? And I showed that story to my father and he loved it. He thought that the hole symbolized the anxiety of fatherhood or something. I handed it into my high school English teacher who responded, "I seriously doubt that a child could dig a hole this deep." So that's a bit of background and my experience with very literal teachers. I remember in maybe grade six, the principal come into my class to have a chat and said, Maybe if you spent less time on writing these stories you'd be better at math.

The costs of creativity

Part of the hegemonic buy-in for neoliberalism is that people realize that creativity is needed to improve how our society grapples with twenty-first century challenges. Neoliberalism seems to provide that answer by encouraging the idea of entrepreneurship and innovation. People are deeply troubled with the economic and social challenges that we face, and realize that our current educational strategies are not working. We would agree that we need to start thinking of how supporting creativity will in the long run most likely also support a more robust economy and more engaged citizenry.

UK crime fiction writer, Ann Cleeves, whose character Vera Stanhope, has been made into a successful television series, explains why it is so essential to provide resources such as libraries, where people can access books and engage with fiction:

Where I live, in the North-East of England, we have beautiful beaches and lovely hills, but we also have a lot of deprivation. We have a lot of ex-pit villages where there aren't any pits anymore. But certainly in my memories, since I first moved there, there weren't working pits, and those communities were so tight and so strong. They looked almost rural, and small houses. And that's important too, and that idea of community too I find that quite interesting. We're lucky because a lot of the villages are still going, still intact, and still fighting, even though there isn't any work for people. But for young people growing up in those areas it's very hard because there's no purpose to the place anymore, apart as a place to sleep and then commute away from....we've lost shipbuilding too, and one of the things I'm most proud of I think, is that they make Vera, the production offices of Vera, in the old shipyard offices of Swan Hunter. Swan Hunter build all these Cunard liners. When I first moved there you would see thousands and thousands of men, this is in the mid-80s, coming out at clocking off time, and now there's nobody. They are making things there again. They're not making ships, but they're making film, and it's not just Vera that is made there, it's lots of other projects. But I'm very proud of that...which is why I battle and battle and battle about libraries, because in the U.K. creative industries is only second after financial services in creating income. We generate 8 million pounds an hour in the U.K.

This linkage between public community libraries and the broader, commercial film industry may seem like a surprising connection. Yet for Ann Cleeves, at the root of the film world is the affordance of public spaces that promote everyday types of creative processes. Basics like libraries, books, public learning spaces, and local communities are integral to how she defines creative industries in the U.K., which in turn is an economic powerhouse driving new markets. The point here is that

economic success and creative literacies do not necessarily represent a dichotomy. At its own peril, economic imperatives through neoliberal discourses infuse, and often suffocate, creative processes by trying to cultivate them only in select, elite competitive environments. Within larger societies, a part of what adult educators (and creative writers alike) need to strategically move toward is changing the narrative in the society to see that creativity done right involves investments in the broader public domain. Out of everyday daydreaming in public libraries and other learning contexts come the seeds of real innovation.

There is a tension between creative and economic imperatives, which often gets interpreted as an either/or choice. Arts councils advocate for the role of fiction and publishing as vital to the country's economic and cultural pulse. Yet, understandably some artists do not want their work tainted with commercialism. Neoliberalism has tried to coopt the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation,' and as part of an adult educators' process, we should rightfully question how creativity is being defined. Nevertheless, we argue that creative and economic mandates can intertwine without necessarily compromising the vision of fiction writers.

Creativity and lifelong learning

Ironically, at the same time as mandated standardized tests are gaining ascendance, there is a realization that in order for people to be successful, they need to be creative. Yet how are we going to encourage creativity in an educational climate that stifles freedom, collapses curriculum, and undermines true innovation?

The neoliberal idea of freedom implies learners can select from a virtual buffet of learning choices, but in reality, an all-encompassing focus on the market narrows educational options. Moreover, socialization is an insidious process because cultural values, which feel like individual preferences, are deeply ingrained components of identity. Clark (2010) reminds us that we are surrounded 'by narratives of all kinds—myths and folklore, popular television shows and movies, social scripts and mores, religious histories and parables—all of which embody our cultural values' (p. 88).

Allowing learners the freedom to engage in learning that they perceive to be meaningful and valuable may mean supporting learning that is not always easily measured, controlled, or assessed. Education that is not perceived to have immediate, practical outputs, such as learning connected to the arts, is a difficult 'ask' in an environment of austerity because of pressures for accountability and cost-effectiveness. Although there is a rather bitter irony that austerity exists in part because so many of the what were already limited resources are now fully devoted to the ostensible purpose of such measurability.

The social purpose tradition of adult education is undermined when education pertaining to active citizenship, community engagement, and social justice is devalued. The type of education that is promoted is linked to the market and is expected to be focused on preparing learners to engage more effectively in the workplace. The credentialization of learning is justified in enabling both individuals and nation-states to compete more effectively in the global marketplace.

There are costs associated not only with providing adult learners with creative learning opportunities, but also with failing to do so. Not only will an economy suffer with a lack of innovation and poor levels of literacy in a society, but there will also be detrimental effects on social engagement, democratic participation, and physical and mental well-being (Field, 2009).

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