Creativity – A New Vocabulary

Edited by

Vlad Petre Glăveanu

Lene Tanggaard

Charlotte Wegener

Creativity – A New Vocabulary

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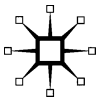

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Foreword: The Importance of Being a Vocabulary

This book has all the potential for being very dull. After all, to create a vocabulary for the various perspectives that try to make sense of creativity cannot be a creative act itself. Vocabularies are there to fix – rather than open – the minds of inquiring human beings. They set up standards – and standards can be the archenemies of anything creative.

Or so it seems. In the ordinary, common-sense ways of looking at vocabularies and dictionaries we look for certainty, seek clear and final definitions and meanings of concepts that are otherwise hard to understand, so that our own personal projects can be fortified by the power of the 'true' meanings. We strive for certainty – rather than creativity – in our searches for socially legitimised meanings. So, how can anybody invent the need for a book such as this one – *Creativity – A New Vocabulary* – as a contribution to our contemporary research and practices of being creative in everyday life by fooling around, playing to be serious in business and politics, and being charmed by the ever-creative journalists who invent new calamity stories and by other decorators of our life environments?

The answer is simple: there are *two* functions of searching for the generalised meanings of widely used concepts. Only one of these is that of giving us certainty – looking up *the* meaning of a word in a vocabulary may give the layperson certainty of the meaningfulness of the life one lives. This is the original, and ordinary, use of vocabularies, dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other authoritative sources of knowledge. In this function, the authorities – who have summoned the making of a vocabulary – exercise their social power on the laypersons who are expected to obey 'the right meanings' of the words. This function is the opposite of any creative act in human lives; it leaves the diligent user of such authoritative sources without any other option than to obey the laws set by the authorities. No innovation is possible, other than by command from the authorities.

Fortunately, human beings are resistant. They are not only 'sloppy users' of ordinary language (to 'correct' that, they might be sent to consult a vocabulary!), but also active resisters of the meanings of ordinary words in extraordinary contexts. How many times do we encounter

the intervention of a waiter into our intimate relations with delicious food in a restaurant who unceremoniously but politely asks 'Are you still *working on* your sushi?'. The deep response to such intervention is implicit resistance in anger – 'I am *enjoying* my meal, not working on it!' The waiter, who is obviously *working* on his or her job, might be sent to consult a vocabulary for the distinction between *work*, *dinner* at a restaurant and *enjoyment* – but his or her learning the meanings would not change the setting at the dinner. Your enjoyment of your dinner might be slightly tainted by the insistence that what you do is actually 'work'. You never thought you left your 'workplace' to go to another job – eating a dinner in a restaurant! And you resist such implications.

Creating a vocabulary of creativity, in this book, is itself an act of resistance. The authors resist the tendency to fix the field and close it for further inquiry. The field of creativity needs to remain open to new (creative) ways of inquiry. By elaborating the different terms used in creativity discourses – in science and beyond – the *second* function of a vocabulary is exemplified. This is – quite in opposition to the first – that of opening the mind to new perspectives in dealing with anything that comes into the general realm of the label 'creativity'. A *creative* vocabulary of creativity includes both new and old terms used in creativity discourses in ways that show how their meanings could be further expanded, how different terms are linked by their implications and how academics' talk of creativity can guide – but not determine – innovation in everyday activities.

So, to summarise, this book has all the potential for not being dull at all! But its actual functions are in the hands of its users. One can – in vain – search for 'the right' definitions in it. That would be a great deal of work, wasted in the wrong place. Or, alternatively, the user can thoroughly enjoy the nuances of meanings that contemporary creativity research in the social sciences has introduced into making sense of the still mysterious (for scientific psychology, at least) capability of human beings to innovate their life environments – and, through these, themselves. This is a book for those who like to fool around with ideas and bring them to new social practices. And that is the most enjoyable practice of them all.

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Why Do We Need a New Vocabulary for Creativity?

Vlad Petre Glăveanu, Lene Tanggaard and Charlotte Wegener

On creativity and coffee breaks

Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) note that organisations eventually may begin to experience long-term underperformance and lack of creativity and innovation owing to intense workload pressures and stress. Constant speed makes you move forward; however, it may be in the wrong direction (towards failures, or even accidents) or it may be a short ride (stress and burnout). Lebbon and Hurley (2013) reported survey research that found 44 per cent of employees feel unmotivated to work and pointed to the fact that, although US employees work longer hours and take less vacation time than employees working in the European Union, productivity remains at similar levels to those in the European Union.

Indeed, the constant separation between work and breaks might be a question of retrospective evaluation: did a certain activity contribute to recreation, foster important relationships or feelings of belonging – which in turn enhanced creativity, collaboration and performance? Is this activity work, then, or is it just a break from work?

Managers may try to restrict time spent on coffee breaks for efficiency purposes but employees will always move leisure behaviour outside the formal sites of managerial control (Stroebaek, 2013). Likewise, managers may try to exploit the creative potential of coffee breaks and schedule break-like activities, but what is lost is precisely the informality of serendipitous interactions and free talk. In general, however, breaks are often considered to have an individual function; they allow employees to recharge but little consideration is given to the idea that social interaction during breaks also provides employees with a valuable opportunity to discuss difficult issues and exchange knowledge (Waber et al., 2010). From such an integrative perspective, coffee drinking and

coffee breaks are social practices not easily categorised as either work (meetings) or non-work (breaks).

This book was conceived during a coffee break. One of our colleagues had his PhD defence in the afternoon. In the morning, the three of us had met to plan new activities at the department. Some people are comfortable in these formal idea generation meetings, some are not. In fact, Paulus et al. (2006) showed that face-to-face meetings for brainstorming or innovation might be less productive than most of us believe. It is stimulating to be with people who have many ideas and who are good at articulating them; however, some people become more silent than they normally are and possibly relevant contributions may be lost in such circumstances. Their strength is the breaks. And, on that day, the break turned out to be a moment of genuine creativity.

On the way to the coffee room, Charlotte told Vlad and Lene that she had a piece of writing which remained unfinished for almost a year. Its title: 'Upcycling'. Would they read it and make suggestions on how to move forward? Both immediately accepted, finding the topic quite intriguing. Jokingly, we all agreed not only that we creatively upcycle things, but that creativity itself also often involves upcycling objects, ideas, actions, and so on. On our way to the defence, coffees in hand, the three of us talked about the titles of academic papers. Many titles are too long, even boring. We have noticed that the menu at fancy restaurants often uses only one word to evoke a feeling for each main ingredient – maybe we need more simple, but expressive, titles for academic papers? Titles that make us hungry to experience what is actually on the plate? How many words could we use? Very few. In fact, one word might do. Just like in a dictionary! 'A new dictionary . . . ?' 'A new vocabulary . . . ?' 'Creativity . . . ?' 'Creativity – A new vocabulary'! The PhD defence was about to begin and the idea generation had to stop, or at least continue in silence. The result of that coffee break is this book. *A New Vocabulary*.

Things we do with words

In a paradoxical way for its own area of interest, the field of creativity research and practice often repeats the same kinds of words and concepts decade after decade. To mention just a few: divergent thinking, convergent thinking, cognitive processes, incubation, association, brainstorming and group-think (Thompson & Choi, 2006). In later years, we have witnessed new words gaining momentum such as globalisation, economic trends, competition, survival, accelerated changes and

complexity. These can be taken as signs of increased societal pressure on all of us to become more creative, to ensure the survival and growth of industries, economies and societies (Bilton, 2007). Is there a new vocabulary emerging and, if so, do we really need it? There are different angles to pursue in trying to understand these changes and, before introducing our alternative terminology, let's briefly consider two of them – consolidation and creative limitation. Both kinds of phenomena can explain why words and concepts are repeated in particular fields of research and also why this may limit our creative potential. In the end, vocabularies are never innocent . . .

Consolidation

Concepts unite to form a field of research. The process of consolidation is behind our tendency to repeat words and concepts and to stay within given frames, within a professional field or sub-culture. In creativity research, consolidation has been a high priority because of the somehow slippery character of the phenomenon of interest. There is no doubt that consolidating a research field requires some kind of consistency in the concepts used, not least in order to enable communication between researchers. This is something already shown by Berger and Luckmann in their popular book *The Social Construction of Reality*, from 1966. In this book, the two authors argue that the institutionalisation of social processes within a professional field grows out of habitualisation and customs, gained through mutual observation with subsequent mutual agreement on the 'way of doing things'. For many years, a cognitive-based terminology dominated the field of creativity research and many say it still does (Glăveanu, 2014); this has resulted in words from cognitive as well as personality psychology being used frequently, leading to the legitimisation of creativity as a cognitive process or personality trait. Equally, the new words entering our creativity vocabulary – such as industry, growth, economy and globalisation – are an indication of the fact that creativity is being studied progressively more outside of psychology, including in the applied fields of management and organisational science (Foss & Saebi, 2015).

Creative limitation

While the repetition of concepts is necessary for the actual institutionalisation and consolidation of a field of research, it may also unintentionally inhibit our creative thinking within that field. Too much familiarity and habituation, also in the form of repeating words and embracing the

same forms of argumentation over and over again, can lead to dangerous forms of group-think. This is usually how the process goes: 'Consideration of a new problem tends to activate frames for similar solutions from long-term memory, so people may tend to retrieve frames related to old solutions and attempt to adapt them to the new set of circumstances – a practice sometimes referred to as *satisficing*' (Santanen, 2006, p. 27). Satisficing and repetition of old patterns of thinking can sometimes be useful but they also endanger our creativity. From a critical angle, the field of creativity itself can be said to experience a long period of being 'locked' in its own terminology because of the success of years, even decades of consolidation.

Can we move beyond consolidation and creative limitation?

Consolidation and creative limitations are related phenomena when a field of research gains momentum and becomes stabilised through processes of institutionalisation. Considering these processes in their interplay and taking them seriously as a possible challenge to our field, this book tries to offer an alternative. What if instead of talking and, as a consequence, thinking about creativity using the same old terms or the new, popular concepts of today, we look for inspiration somewhere else? What if, in fact, it is in the odd or common words, or in words seemingly unrelated to creativity, that we find a more solid ground (conceptually and pragmatically) to theorise creativity? The outcome of this rather 'creative' exercise in this book is – we hope – a fresh, new perspective, perhaps a 'cool' (Nordic) gaze on creativity.

A few notes on concepts and categories

In research, the concepts we use to understand phenomena reflect processes of categorisation while, at the same time, many of the categories we create in psychology do not exist in the world as such. Categories are the researcher's constructs, chosen based on his or her preferences and experiences. As noted by Bowker and Star (2000), concepts and categories are always historically situated. They are learned as part of membership in communities of practice. When we give meaning to the world around us, we produce certain forms of organisation that, in turn, produce certain material arrangements, subject positions and forms of knowledge. These are 'the material and symbolic practices of conceptualization – the making of boundaries and categories to be deployed in research' (Edwards & Fowler, 2007, p. 110). Thus, although there is no

other way of being analytical and systematic, we should always remain critical when it comes to our own processes of naming, labelling and creating categories (Weick, 2006).

Categories are part of the research processes and cannot be escaped; however, we can experiment with them, deconstruct them or even try to dissolve them with the aim of adding new perspectives or reframing our studies. This is our intention with this book in relation to creativity. What does it mean to talk about creativity in terms of thinking or personality traits? Or in terms of societal progress and economic growth? What does it mean to always go back to the classic categories of person, product, process and press (Rhodes, 1961)? What would it mean to talk about it in terms of pathways, rhythms or spaces? What would that imply for the way we think about creativity and, importantly, for the way we (en)act it in everyday life?

Building on both the constructionist and pragmatism traditions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; James, 1907), we consider language and vocabularies highly consequential for how we define, discover, assess, validate and practice creativity. For example, let's take the very common reference to the *creative person*. Studies of what makes people creative and what distinguishes creative people from others (less creative) have marked the very beginning of what we call nowadays the 'psychology of creativity' (Barron & Harrington, 1981). To this day, we find a vigorous literature, at least in psychology, dedicated to the creative person, his or her personality, cognitive styles and, more recently, his or her brain processes. We are, in other words, very often concerned with *who is* (or can be) a creative person. Yet, very few ask *what is* the creative person? Is it even appropriate to talk about creativity as a property or quality of people? What exactly 'in' or 'about' a person is actually creative? In everyday conversations, we might hear such and such being called highly creative (often in contrast to the speaker or simply the rest of us), but when we ask for details we will most probably learn about what the person does ('see, just the other day . . . '). Wouldn't it make more sense to talk about creative action rather than creativity as a personal attribute (Glăveanu, 2014)? How about if we dropped 'creativity' altogether, as a noun, and kept only 'creating', as a verb (Wagoner, 2015)?

This radical suggestion might belong to the realm of Borges's fantastic prose (see 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' in his collection *Fictions*, 1962), but in practice we cannot do without nouns, without words, without categories. And they often, for better or worse, stabilise reality for us,

performing a kind of magic by which the thing I say (creativity) becomes something real, something I refer to in the world (such as the creative person). So, what is there to do?

We can become more aware of what words and categories actually 'do'; we can inquire more about *the power of vocabularies* and, if we get really annoyed, we can create our own! *Creativity: A New Vocabulary*. Aren't we, though, just replacing one set of terms with another? . . . Yes, but different vocabularies have different pragmatic value. The first editor engaged in a similar exercise a couple of years ago, 'against' the traditional 4P model. What resulted was the 5As (if you are curious to know more, see Glăveanu, 2013). By the time the three editors finished their coffee break, a whole new alternative vocabulary had emerged. And when they talked to other colleagues from their university, more and more words kept being added. And many are still to come! For the moment, though, we all 'settled' for a small collection of essays. The instruction given to authors was rather straightforward:

> Please think about a concept from your own area that is not usually associated with creativity but could help us develop a new way of understanding creativity as a dynamic, relational, developmental phenomenon.

Fear. Rhythm. Translation. Mess. Can they teach us anything about creativity? What about the seemingly 'opposites' of creating: memory, mirroring, rules? And then issues we don't often think about in relation to creativity: power, space, things . . . Is this just another vocabulary? Through the free, deconstructive and playful approach we all took in writing each chapter, the outcome might just as well be considered an '*anti-vocabulary*' of creativity. But perhaps this takes the critical attitude a step too far. We are not claiming here the birth of a revolutionary new language of creativity (in fact, as you will see in this book, as a group of authors, we are quite suspicious of revolutions as the prime markers of creativity). Quite the contrary, with only a few exceptions, you are probably very familiar with the concepts discussed in the following pages. By symbolically replacing some concepts with others we don't aim to establish a new orthodoxy or expect you, dear reader, to un-learn words and adopt ours in a rather Orwellian move. What we hope is that you will enjoy thinking about creativity in new ways, that you will find at least some of the terms we propose useful in practice and, above all, that you will learn to take all vocabularies – new and old – with a grain of salt. Why not start your own?