The Logic of the Creative Process

By Jim Shorthose. September 2015

It is probably true to say that we can never really know what creativity 'is'. It is probably true that different people go through different creative processes, and that it happens in different ways each time we do it. Sometimes creativity will be an iterative process which we try over and over again until we are happy with the results. At other times it comes from a flash of inspiration which occurs to us all at once, almost fully formed. Creativity is, it seems, a deeply mysterious process. But this does not mean we cannot discuss it. Restricting our inquiries into creativity as 'deeply mysterious' leaves us at the mercy of apparently random events over which we seem to have little control. We might need our creativity to be a bit more reliable than that. Secondly, if we don't at least try to reflect back upon the nature of the creative process, we run the risk of accepting the cultural myth that only those people touched by some kind of 'genius' are creative. I don't accept this idea of 'genius'. Clearly some people are good at some things, whilst others are good at other things. But this need not collapse into the cultural myth that the 'creative talent' has something innately special about them. The 'creative talent' will want to perpetuate that view, but there is (potentially at least) just as much creativity in the mundane acts of cooking a meal, arranging your interior space, getting dressed in the morning and making your kids laugh. The fact that our culture celebrates certain acts as creative and not others, is not sufficient reason to locate creativity itself only in those celebrated realms of Cultural production. The potential for creativity is much more widely spread and democratic than that.

But how can we go further into this debate about what creativity 'is'? There are many possible pathways. Evolutionary theory, modern neuroscience, the various branches of psychology have had much to say about the creative person. Philosophy, sociology and anthropology has focussed much more upon the social relationships that make up and constantly inform creative relationships. Cultural studies has developed various theories about how certain cultural process impact upon what we collective select and receive as appropriate and valued cultural outcomes of the creative process. Economics and business have made similar statements concerning the market contexts of creativity and the creative industries. There are many, many possible strands to a fully developed explanation of this things we call creativity. But in this small article, I want to 'stand back from the details', to offer some speculations as to the 'logic' of the creative process.

It seems clear that creativity is at heart a very multifaceted process where myriad competing, sometimes contradictory things are happening. The creative process can at times be a moving series of negotiations between,

- a sense of playfulness, and a very serious intent
- a visceral need to express something to the world, and a vague sense of experimentation just to see what happens
- a highly developed sense of motivation and curiosity, and the tussle with feelings of disorientation
- a keen sense of involvement with ones current work, and a response to some accident or error which only vaguely hints at future possibilities
- feelings of current momentum within developing plans, and the need to 'break the rules'
- working within ones current style, and the euphoria at being 'released'
- finding useful daily routines to develop and shape ones creative work, and the benefits of one-off pieces of pure luck
- the value of referring to ones cumulative experience, and the benefits of holding
onto a sense of innocence

- feelings of tension and suffering associated with forming and developing ones creative plans, and the great sense of happiness and purpose they also bring

You can probably think of others? So with all these contradictory facets, feelings and bits of process, how can we think of an underlying 'logic' to creativity? Perhaps the most common is the idea that the creative process often exhibits divergent thinking or ideational fluency. Convergent thinking, the opposite of divergent thinking, tends to be about working along set tram lines to arrive as efficiently as possible at the solution. It is coloured by an arrival agenda. Divergent thinking puts more value in imaginative wanderings and other playful explorations to take thinking beyond logic and rationality, which tends to colour our everyday lives. Divergent thinking starts with 'what if' types of questions, and a 'lets see what happens' outlook. It is more about enjoying the journey than seeking efficient arrival.

Rather than going in a straight line, creativity is usually more circular. It often takes in influences from many strands as it goes along. It often grows out of itself, as feedback loops from mid-points in the creative process send you back to new beginnings, and fresh outlooks. It needs to be gone over again and again. That is, it is recursive. A creative practice (career or business) usually requires practice (doing it again and again until it gets good). That is, it is iterative. Creativity often come from serendipity, aimless wanderings which get you to where you want to be. The concept of obliquity, coming at things from an oblique angle rather than always trying to bash away at things head-on, speaks of how creativity can be achieved by various circuitous routes.

Although creativity requires concentration, it can also come from being aware of background noise, all those sounds 'just off stage' which relate to what you are currently doing, but to which you are only half paying attention to. Good film-makers always record the Wildtrack - the audio from the actors and surrounding noises of the scene. Even though they have no intention of using it, you never know. Sometimes noise needs to be blocked out to allow focus, but at other times noise is the vehicle that can help you find serendipity and do obliquity.

Hacking is the modern name for getting something done with tools that were not intended for that task. Its creativity comes from putting means and ends in a different order, from 'bending the rules' to achieve something despite what the 'handbook' of normal procedure says. For Max Weber, instrumental rationality starts with the formal means (organizational charts, written procedures, departmental responsibilities, specific tools etc.) and tries to apply these same means to all end. In contrast, substantive rationality start with the ends (the final objective or desired outcome) and only then decides upon the means for that specific job. Hacking is underpinned by a substantive rationality, and is often part of the underlying 'logic' of the creative process.

The musical idea of counterpoint refers to the way sounds can form pleasing contrasts, create mutually informative relationships or otherwise become 'harmonious' when placed next to each other, even though they are rhythmically independent. It forms a dynamic context for each component to have its own place whilst simultaneously encouraging the emergence of novel combinations within the creative space as a whole. Counterpoint as used in music is analogous to more general ideas about creativity. Independent 'bits' of creativity often find their location, meaning and (dis)harmony when they get play against other independent 'bits'. Creative think often comes from the colliding mergers of independence and inter-dependence within a broader whole. Counterpoint speaks of interesting contrasts even though each creative act has its own rhythm or logic. Sometimes counterpoint can be a very broad thing played out across different types of background creative trajectory. Sometimes a more specific thing used to form a particular creative outcome – think of how imagery and music play across each other in a film.
So we can see a developing set of ideas about how creativity can have an underlying 'logic' made up of less than directly connected parts. But perhaps the best way to sum all this up and really arrive at a picture of the 'logic' of the creative process is to delve into the weird world of dialectical logic. This starts to get us into deep philosophy, and many people find dialectical logic difficult to grasp. But it need not be that way.

The point is, creativity does not come from 'things' – ideas, propensities, universal mind-sets, single attitudes, linear plans, one-way logics – but from the various interplays, differences and contradictions between such 'things' as they mutually inform each other. For dialectical logic, opposites mutually inform each other, often define each other. Try a thought experiment. If the world only had one colour, then that colour would not exist. It is only by being not-blue, not-red and not-yellow, that green can be perceived as green, and thereby have its green-ness. Similar with creativity. Because it is made up from so many mutually interacting contradictions and ever changing thought processes, we can say that the underlying 'logic' of creativity is dialectical. The ever moving and dynamic process between these contradictory facets fuels the process of creative flux and change, which is the essence of creativity. And this gets played out in lots of interactions, between,

Your Brain and You - the way your brain functions to take in information whilst simultaneously reflecting back upon its own brain-ness. This culminates in your mind, the process which selects certain ideas and information in terms of what is important to this thing you call ‘You’, which has has the feeling of being a more unified entity. Being aware of this mind selection process, which is simultaneously ‘You’ and something you ‘do’ is a good way of getting better at doing it. Being good at creativity entails being good at self-awareness.

You and Others – the way this thing called ‘You’ - your personality, experiences, motivations and skills are shaped by the relationships you have with everything that is ‘Not-You’, that is everyone else. And then the way this ‘Not-You’ of everyone else you meet is shaped in turn by their experiences of you. ‘You’ are ‘Not-You’, and ‘Not-You’ is ‘You’. Being good at creativity often entails being good at relationships.

Now and the Past – the way that what you are working on 'Now' is the culmination of a long series of ‘Not-Now’ events from your past, that have formed your current perceptions of ‘Now’. The present is a culmination of the past, and your sense of creativity for the future is made from the idea you have of the present. Being good at creativity entails being good at the history of you and your creativity.

What You Do and What You Don’t Do – the way you define what your creativity 'does' against ideas of what you ‘don’t do’. The 'presence' of your creativity is made up partly from what you have decided should be 'absent'. Connecting the interplays between these 'presences' to 'absences' is what sometimes makes new bits of creativity move. Being good at creativity sometimes entails knowing about what you 'don't do', so that you can then 'do it'.

Your Imagination and the Real World – the way your inner, subjective experiences are shaped by the objective social, political and economic realities of the World, which you then in turn shape to imagine other possible Worlds, and so seek to change things. The 'outer' shapes the 'inner', so that the 'inner' then seeks to shape to the 'outer'. Being good at creativity often entails being good at thinking about 'what is' so as to think about 'what ought to be'.

Working and Not-Working – the way creativity involves researching, thinking and
planning something so that you can forget about it, go for a walk, do something else, get drunk, so that you can arrive at a solution without appearing to have thought about it. Many creative people report that the flash of inspiration comes when they are relaxed, comfortable, taking time away from work. Being good at creative work often entails taking a bath.

**Person and Culture** – the way the creative individual generates new ideas which impact upon the broader culture, just as the broader culture shapes what 'counts' as creativity, selects which bits are to be celebrated and decides how the creative individual is doing in terms of cultural 'success'. Being good at creativity often entails finding happy compromises between what *you* want and what *they* want.

**Focussed Action and Relaxed Semi-Action** – the way in which creative focus often comes from a period of relaxed semi-action, just as the relaxed semi-action stimulates the creative person into focussed action. Being good at creativity often entails knowing when it is 'not working' and when to do something else. It is important that this is actually 'something' else, to keep your mind active but not too focussed. Doing nothing at all doesn't seem to work so well.

**Worldliness and Naivety** – the way a smart creative interaction with the world often stems from asking fairly naïve and childlike questions, just as that very naivety spurs the creative person to develop more insightful questions. Being good at creativity often entails choosing the right question at the right time within the lifetime of the project as it emerges out of itself.

**Complexity and Simplicity** – the way creativity requires drawing together multiple, often competing, sometimes contradictory ideas so they can be corralled into more simple statements, just as blindingly simple statements, images and designs can then sometimes convey a whole world of complexity and nuance. Being good at creativity often entails being good at navigation between 'levels' of meaning.

**Deliberate and Non-Deliberate** – the way that deliberately ‘paying attention’ is often supplemented by more unconscious or playful spheres of non-attention, just as these attentions can then become re-forgotten and ‘embodied’ parts of creative flow. Being good at creativity often entails skilful navigation between non-deliberate remembering and deliberate forgetting.

**Continuous and Discontinuous** – the way that creative processes carried out in a continuous ways are often refreshed by a break, just as the break carries within it the new creative insights developed through our daily concerted efforts. Being good at creativity often entails mixing a holiday from work with a working holiday.

**Goal-defined and Non-goal-defined** – the way that the attention paid to specific things, for specific reasons to achieve a specific goal is sometimes informed by those more open-ended activities we engage for no specific thing, reason or goal, just as the non-goal oriented thoughts are given a creative ‘home’ by goal-specific needs. Being good at creativity often entails not trying too hard, so that we can try hard.

**Discipline and Playfulness** – the way creative processes require the shelving of play if it is come to full fruition, just as that very playfulness is the wellspring of the fruitful thing to be disciplined about. Being good at creativity often entails being a grown-up child, or a childlike adult.
Extroversion and Introversion – the way many creative people exhibit a extrovert eagerness to engage with the world by overcoming a nervous shyness about their work, just as that shy introversion gives them time and space to develop better articulations of their creative self to the outside world. Being good at creativity often entails choosing the right identity for the right occasion.

Pride and Humility – the way creative people exhibit a proud declaration about their achievements, which itself emanates from a humble recognition that they are building upon the work of others and can never really fulfil their dreams for their ambitions. Being good at creativity often entails knowing when to shout and when to be quiet.

Tradition and Rebellion – the way that creative traditions can give location to work and educate us into themes and techniques, just as we challenge and push these 'location' to shine light of new directions and possibilities. Being good at creativity often entails finding a good balance between learning one's craft from previous masters and challenging their authority.

Objectivity and Passion – the way that one's creativity requires an objective sense of what will and will not work, just as that very work flows from an innate passion for something that you put your heart and soul into, and will defend to the end come what may. Being good at creativity often entails working to create your 'baby' so as to let it die away, to be reborn at another time.

Difficult Tensions and Great Pleasures – the way that grappling with the tensions, sufferings and difficulties of creativity give us great pleasure, just as those pleasure remind us of the great tensions to come. Being good at creativity often entails accepting the pain because we know of the joy to come.

If we were constantly aware of all this dialectical stuff, it would no doubt culminate in a whole series of infinite regressions and navel gazing. We would probably get very little done, and it might even drive us a little crazy. We usually experience our creative processes in a more unified way. Many creative people report the experience of being 'in the zone' when things are going really well. Czikszentmihalyi calls this experience **creative flow**.

It is experienced when,
- There are clear goals every step of the way
- There is immediate feedback to one's actions
- There is a good balance between challenges and skills
- Action and awareness merge
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes autotelic

Which means,
- Auto = self
- Telos = ultimate aim or objective

Creativity becomes **autotelic** when it is propelled forward only by its own inner
meaning and dynamics alone. When it is experienced as its own pleasure. Particularly when things are going well, creativity becomes its own 'logic', its own reason and its own reward. Process and outcome become wrapped up together. 'Being in' the creative process becomes more immediate and meaningful than 'having it' for the pursuit of an external need or demand. With autotelic creativity, everything is already 'there' within it.

However, despite the unified sense of experiencing being 'in the zone', of autotelic creativity, it still might be useful to speculate on the underlying dialectical nature of your creative self, your creative processes, your creative working practices, your creative past and future if you are to more fully grasp its inner dynamic. And grasping that might be a good way to approach a more self-aware understanding of what your creativity is and how it works.