‘SHARP’ Skills: The Need for Creativity for Tomorrow’s Learners
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Abstract
Now, perhaps more than ever, the world needs creativity and the complete set of attributes that traditionally lie in the creative sector. All sectors are being asked to find fast alternative solutions to both new and age-old problems in ever-changing times. Some would say that humanity is at an evolutionary tipping point that requires empathetic, critical, and agile innovators and communicators. Innovation – but particularly creativity - is vital in the modern world, and will be an essential skillset for tomorrow’s learners. Soft skills are perhaps better known as ‘sharp’ skills, and creativity provides the answer.

Creativity is a skillset, an attitude, and a way of being. Above all else, it is a way of seeing the world with positive growth and the capacity to think beyond known rituals and perceived boundaries. It is often a binary set of circumstances from which something new emerges. It can also be taught.

This paper draws on recent global perspectives on creativity, plus extensive research that sheds light on New Zealand and Unitec’s approaches to creativity. It offers a notion of creativity that makes us unique in New Zealand/Aotearoa. One thing is certain: the creative domain is no longer just for creatives. ‘SHARP’ skills are essential for tomorrow’s learners.

PAPER

Introduction
Tēnā koutou katoa
In speaking to the SINO – New Zealand 2019 conference theme about what tomorrow’s learners will need, I am convinced that creativity is at the centre. Of course, as Head of Creative Industries at Unitec in Auckland, I am probably somewhat biased. However, over the past thirty years as a director, actor, performance teacher, producer, and other creative roles in education and the creative sector, I have witnessed not only the deep transformative power of creativity for individuals and groups, but also the lifelong impact of having a creative mindset and skillset in all professions. Therefore, I am speaking here for all students and teachers who will need to possess a complete set of capabilities embedded in their skillset, both now and in the future.

To advocate the need for creative skillsets in this regard is not new, and many others understand the potency of this approach, too. Daniel Pink, Sir Ken Robinson, and countless others have written extensively on this as the essential ‘human’ skillsets as we enter the Fourth Age. Human creativity is the one thing that the ‘bots can’t do, and we know it will be a central attribute with technological displacement firmly and certainly on the horizon. Current insight into this future landscape agrees that adaptability, agility, and the ability to pivot when opportunities arise is a subset of a larger set of creative capabilities that will ensure lifelong employability. We must be ready for a creative r/evolution. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet says, “The readiness is all”.

Now, perhaps more than ever, the world needs creativity and the complete set of attributes that traditionally lie in the creative arena. All sectors are being asked to find fast, alternative solutions to both new and age-old problems in ever-changing times. Some would say that humanity is at an evolutionary tipping-point that requires empathetic, critical, and agile innovators and communicators. Innovation – but particularly creativity - is vital in the contemporary world, and will be an essential skillset for tomorrow’s learners. The importance of this speaks to an essential set of capabilities; ‘soft’ skills are perhaps better known as ‘sharp’ skills, and I argue that creativity provides the answer.

I want to offer here a perspective on creativity that brings our approach in Aotearoa to the wider world and into multiple domains for non-creatives, too. First, let’s look at how we operate in New Zealand. In our School of Creative Industries at Unitec in Auckland, for example, we teach Performing and Screen Arts and Design and Contemporary Arts in applied practice. We educate aspiring professionals in the art and craft of a whole range of creative practices including acting, dance, screen arts, painting, graphic design, animation, and others. We are interested in pushing boundaries and challenging conventional thinking, and our School has been experiencing great success in the past few years with our programmes. Our students and graduates are winning awards and making an impact both locally and internationally, such as the recent win and highly commended placements in the 2019 Eden Arts Art Schools Award. This burgeoning success reflects our aim in New Zealand to be ahead of the curve; to ‘lead the world from the edge’, to lend from New Zealander and Saatchi & Saatchi advertising guru Kevin Roberts. We are a nation of renowned and great innovators, and this attitude of self-leadership combined with inquisitive muscle is reflected in the way we teach creative practice in Aotearoa.

**Beijing Dance Academy**

One such example of creative success is our School of Creative Industries’ Dance programme partnership with the Beijing Dance Academy. We have a strong collaboration with the Beijing Dance Academy that, if I can be so bold, endorses our place as leaders in creativity. A cohort of students from the Beijing Dance Academy joined us at Unitec in July 2017 for 18 months to learn Creativity in Contemporary Dance. The students have essentially been learning in highly relational ways, underpinned by Mātauranga Māori and broader practice. This is the first time since BDA was
founded that they have entered into a double degree delivery in this unique way. It has been a hugely successful and very rewarding exercise in educational collaboration and delivery, and we have learnt as much from BDA and their students as they have from us.

This led me to think we are onto something quite unique. At first glance, there is a clear distinction between the exacting somatic proficiency of the BDA students and the psycho-somatic skillsets of the Aotearoa students. The experience has followed highly relational pedagogical practice that ensures the students are taking responsibility for their own role as creative makers, so in this sense, our successful partnership with BDA also reflects the best of artistic and creative excellence. Scholarship agrees that any creative endeavour or artwork must fulfil three fundamental requirements in order to be successful. Former Creative New Zealand Arts Council Chair Alastair Carruthers has called this ‘the three limbs of artistic excellence’, (Carruthers, 2008) which may be described as a situation where the following all apply:

1. The idea or concept needs to be strong, original, or innovative;
2. The execution of the form needs to be high quality;
3. The impact on its desired audience or reader needs to be immediate, long-lasting, or both.

The immediate and long-term ripples of this bilateral BDA project will hopefully positively affect generations of practitioners both now and in many years to come. So, I wonder; what do we have brewing in educating creative disciplines so that BDA might look to us at Unitec in Auckland to teach, and can this be transferred to other realms?

This identity word cloud represents the myriad of ways the staff in our School view our approach to creative practice. As you can see, we have different understandings of it; even amongst creatives, it’s very subjective. But there are some common denominators in here that speak to structure and freedom, thinking and feeling, to name a few:

![Figure 1: Creative Industries staff word cloud, Unitec, Auckland, 2017](image)

**21st Century Skillsets**

Creativity can be applied to great effect in other domains, too. To thrive in the future workforce, we know that students must be adept at collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, which are some of the skills identified in a 2015 World Economic Forum report (New Vision for Education: Unlocking the Potential of Technology, 2015). This report defined a set of sixteen crucial proficiencies for education in the 21st century. These skills include six ‘foundational literacies’ such as literacy,
numeracy, and scientific literacy, and ten skills that are labelled as either ‘competencies’ or ‘character qualities’. It can be argued that creativity actually underpins all of these sixteen educational proficiencies, since it encompasses this entire essential range of abilities. Creativity is a panacea skillset.

Creativity

What do I mean by ‘creativity’? Creativity is a skillset, an attitude, and a way of being. It is the ability to form an idea into substance; to think beyond ritual into the unknown, and to draw into being that which may not yet exist. Etymology speaks to this; the word ‘create’ comes from late fourteenth-century Latin ‘creatus’, past participle of ‘creare’, ‘to make, bring forth, produce, beget,’ which is itself related to ‘crescere’; ‘arise, grow’. So, creativity is fundamentally concerned with the specific unearthing of newness, innovation from the inside out, and also growth, adaptation, and development. It is also capable of being both universal and culturally specific.

Creativity relies on oppositional and reciprocal points of view; in fact, dichotomy is central to creative practice. Creative brilliance so often stems from the marriage or clash of seeming opposites that combine to teach and unlock creative processes: thinking and feeling; planning and application; structure and freedom; habit and disruption; logic and imagination; and tradition and the search for originality, to name a few. It implies an oppositional dance between divergent and convergent thinking.
Above all else, creativity is a way of seeing the world with positive growth and the capacity to think beyond known rituals and perceived boundaries. It is often a binary set of circumstances from which something new emerges. It can also be taught, even when we accept that individual neuro-diversity and flexibility dictate we are all different, and learn in diverse ways. Embedding creativity in all our discipline areas of learning is critical to this.

Moreover, despite what prevailing orthodoxy has perhaps socialized us to believe, my view is that we are all creative. Creative ability is not a set left or right brain attribute that you are born with, and it can be taught and applied in all professions. However, we have to have the courage to be disruptive, to sit with the unknown, and to challenge conventional and accepted knowledge in order to allow this to flourish in all domains.

**SOFT ‘SHARP’ SKILLS**

This leads me to ask the questions: How can creative approaches be applied in other spaces to elicit more divergent and convergent – or imaginative, and selective - thinking? How do we embed creative skills in all learning areas?

I want to be a bit disruptive here and suggest that we banish the term ‘soft’ skills, which can be seen as a pejorative term. I prefer to call them ‘SHARP’ skills. Sharp skills aren’t passive, but are essential skills that cut through and give individuals the edge in all professions. I’d like to offer a matrix here based on dichotomous concepts contained in this acronym of SHARP, and I propose that these attributes can be applied to any programme or subject area in both educational design, practice, and workplace to encourage more creativity in all walks of life. In my view, these are essential attributes for embedding creativity in multiple domains.

![Figure 3: “SHARP” Skills](image-url)
S - Skills and Structure
Here, I am referring to the learnt skills of the craft or discipline at hand; the learnt tradition. This is fundamental, but often overlooked when we refer to condensed models of learning. It is vital that students have the ability to learn their craft well in a time-based and appropriate way germane to their discipline. To break the mould, it is essential to know what the existing form is.

The twin concept of skills is structure, which is arguably aligned to any creative process. The process of being deliberate and having methodology appropriate to the discipline gives flight to the imagination. The saying that, “Structure gives freedom” resonates well here.

Both skills and structure are underpinned by an appreciation of the value of process itself. Creativity can happen in a flash, but it usually develops when you move through layers of experimenting, discarding, and selective keeping; of trying and failing. It is often a messy, iterative process, where the only known is a deadline such as opening night. "Have the courage to fail" is a familiar refrain, and our job as educators is to create the conditions where failure can happen.

H - Habit and Heuristic knowledge
This leads us to habit. Habit ensures that practice is recurrent and also gives a framework to push against. New York-based choreographer Twyla Tharp calls creativity itself a “habit”; she commits to a highly predictable structure every day in order to find freedom within the work. As Tharp states in her book The Creative Habit, her premise is that “[i]n order to be creative you have to know how to prepare to be creative.” (Tharp, 2006). She suggests that habit is the way to make a ritual of your creativity, to work through creative blocks, and to escape, and most of all, to avoid, ruts.

I like this bi-lateral and quite structured way of thinking about creativity, which proposes that it’s a learnt habit or craft underpinned by structure, or an inherent duality. To be on the edge of freedom but tethered by the known or familiar is very powerful. Once again, this implies that oppositional and reciprocal points of view are central to creative practice.

Of course, habit needs to be balanced with heuristic process and knowledge, or enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves through curiosity and a bank of assumed knowledge. Heuristics employs a practical method not guaranteed to be perfect, but sufficient for the immediate goals, and it offers a reflexive approach that mimics a kind creative process; that of check, reflect, and adapt.

In a wider context, heuristics also refers to lifelong learning and enabling people to invest in education as an ongoing journey. It is vital that graduates now see themselves as lifelong adaptors, problem-solvers, and learners who have ultimate agency.

A - Awareness and Agility
This brings us to awareness; being self-aware, concerned with and well-informed about others, and conscious of contemporary issues. Awareness and collaboration come from a relational way of being in the world. Cultural competency is critical here. Māori and Pākehā in New Zealand are constantly working towards greater understandings of biculturalism in a dynamic postcolonial environment. This is a creative act that is highly relational and dynamic. Agility is vital here, to, since being able to move quickly when needed and respond to provocations enables an adaptive and agile mindset and skillset.

Both these principles need to be in place to have a good team that is capable of being reciprocal and dynamic. In the rehearsal room or many other ‘non-creative’ disciplines, it is important to be
challenged and be in the company of others who believe in your potential, but who can do this in an aware, agile, and relational way.

**R - Risk and Responsibility**
Risk is the next part of this matrix, since risk is courage. Courage is of course derived from ‘couer’ (French for ‘from the heart’), so this speaks to a definition of the concept as ‘heart-bringing’. We have many names for it including entrepreneurship, backing your talent, tenacity, resilience, and being fearless. Creativity is not possible without risk, since true creativity takes courage. To create something new as if for the first time can mean sitting with the unknown until a path forward becomes clear; to remain fearless, and to have the capacity to sit within chaos to find harmony.

Responsibility is the counterpoint here. Response-ability, is ‘the ability to respond’. To proactively be able to position your own viewpoint in response to, or in front of, or in relation to, the actual conditions around you. This includes notions of self-authorship and self-determination, creative or technical empowerment, and conscious action rather than unconscious re-action. It also refers to financial literacy and planning.

**P - Position and Perspective**
Finally, position is critical; knowing whether your point of view resides inside (emic) or outside (etic) the culture or point of ‘knowingness’ on an issue is vital. Positionality also means having critical thinking abilities that contextualise the work in relation to others. We live in an age of information overload, but this only concentrates the need to have a position in relation to this. Creating something new relies on a conscious positioning of the self.

Cultural proficiency is of course again important here. A key point is understanding and knowing the complete set of identifiers such as who make up the relational connections, why or the purpose of the work, how or methodology, and what? (knowledge), so that learners can situate themselves in relation to the craft.

This leads to perspective, which of course relates on a micro level to wellness and mindfulness, being empathetic, or expressing notions of truth that others may not see. On a macro level, it can mean building networks, starting a movement, and being determined to continue or challenge assumed notions of truth. Knowledge – and perhaps by extension, real wisdom - comes from a renewed sense of self in relation to the world. Creativity provides the door into deep knowledge of accumulated wisdoms that survive social structures, political systems, and even the attempted decimation of cultural knowledge. A ransacking force will often destruct the library or temple first, then the people who hold that knowledge. Why? To obliterate evidence of memory and creative practice. Such is the power of creativity, knowledge, and notions of truth in every culture’s identity.

**KNOW THYSELF**

In closing, I want to mention the third statement of the Ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi, which supposedly read, “Know thyself”. This is still perhaps the real and only true guidepost needed to live and practice a creative life, and for us as educators to remember when we are seeking to apply creativity in all domains. To pursue self-knowledge really is the essence of true creativity, and that true creativity is only possible with a deep and abiding commitment to the knowledge of the unique and individual self. With this bilateral view, it’s clear that our greatest challenge and opportunity lies in educating the whole person, whatever the discipline. This is arguably the real crux of education.

So to bring us back to the beginning, we understand this at Unitec. We try to instil in all our students the ability to be innovative, practical, collaborative, and connected to the community. This aligns
with the necessary opposites in ‘SHARP’ skills that combine to unlock creativity. Embedding creativity in all educational practice is critical to this.

If we do this, I believe that the future is full of more transformation, increased creativity in all fields, and as a result, more unseen and exciting possibilities to think beyond ritual into the unknown and draw into being that which may not yet exist in all our different domains. That vision is an exciting future I want to be part of.

Tēnākoutou katoa.

References

