

Creativity East and West: Preconceptions and Misunderstandings

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In this paper I consider how western lay conceptions of creativity and the tendency within educational circles to fail to interact with academic research on creativity may lead to intercultural problems for western-born language educators working in East Asian classrooms. I look at the sources of prejudice about East Asian creativity and try to place prevalent western lay conceptions in their historical context. I argue that these lay conceptions provide an unbalanced and culturally specific picture of creativity as a component of modern western individualism and consider specific pitfalls the EFL educator in East Asia may face.

この論文では、欧米の非専門家的な創造性に関する理解と、創造性に関する学術研究を正しく理解し取り入れることができていない教育界で見られる傾向について考察する。このような事情では、東アジアで言語を教える欧米生まれの教育者達は、文化の違いから起きる問題を抱える事になるかもしれないのである。また、東アジア人の創造性についての偏見の源に焦点をあて、欧米の一般的ないわゆる乏しい創造性の理解がどんな歴史的な背景の中で形作られていったかを提示する。そして、この創造性の未熟な理解が、西洋の現代個人主義に基づくいびつな文化的に限定された考えをもたらすことを論じ、合わせて東アジアで英語を外国語として教えている教育者達が直面するかもしれない落とし穴について考察する。

In this paper I consider common western cultural preconceptions about how and why creativity occurs. Based on this assessment, I look at how the tendency in education (including in language education) to leave creativity undefined even as it is promoted may lead to problems for western-raised educators seeking to promote creativity in foreign language classrooms in East Asia.

Why Creativity Matters to Educators

At the time of writing, the most viewed TED talk of all time, with over 35 million views on the TED website alone, is entitled *Ken Robinson: Do Schools Kill Creativity?* (Robinson, 2006). Robinson argued that traditional systems of public education around the world are designed to produce an industrial workforce and an educational elite. As such, they kill creativity and oppress nonacademic creatively talented people. He argues that this is inappropriate for the postindustrial information age. That is, there is both a *social* and an *economic* imperative to foster creativity in education. He also notes that concern over creativity in education is spreading around the world.

Within the Japanese context, there are similar social and economic concerns. The Yutori education reforms that tried to lessen the regimentation of compulsory education were partly to “enable children to think about their own life, urging them to explore subjects with creativity and subjectivity and solve problems through their own way of thinking and learning.” (MEXT 2002, cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Annual Japanese education white papers have recently emphasised the importance of creativity in lifelong learning (see Figure 1), for the explicit purpose of innovating new social and economic value (Central Council for Education, 2012) along with independence and collaboration. This emphasis is particularly noticeable in education ministry responses to the challenges brought by the shock of the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 (MEXT, 2014).

Along with such concerns about creativity in education in general, there is also an increasing interest in creativity in language education in particular. Here, the focus is on its importance in second language acquisition and in student and teacher development (e.g., Richards, 2013). Several books have recently appeared that examine creativity in second language teaching, learning, and creative writing.

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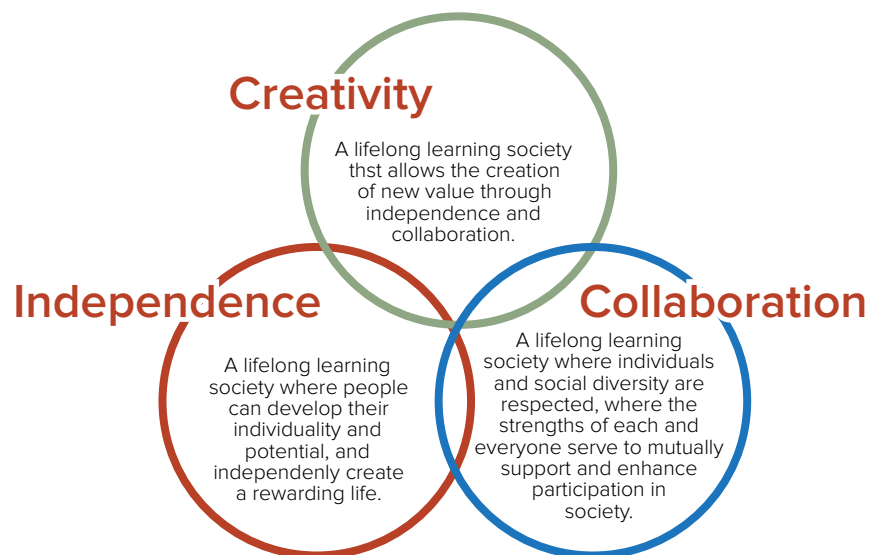


Figure 1. Model for independence, collaboration, and creativity (MEXT, 2012).

Are East Asians Less Creative?

Western-origin audiences of my presentations in Japan on this topic are generally self-selected to answer “no.” However, and I suspect this is a general experience, when asked if they know other people who have expressed the idea that Japanese are less creative, they say they do. More widely, the western prejudice that Asians are less capable of original thought has a long pedigree (Mahbubani, 2002).

Indeed, the notion that East Asian cultures suppress creativity has also been expressed by East Asian writers. Some seem less credible, such as Nakagawa (1991) who posited that the harmonious working relationships necessitated by rice farming discourage the challenges to authority necessary for creativity. Others have more surface credibility, such as Kim (2007), who argued that Confucianism devalues play, encourages excessive obedience, promotes mindless rote learning, formalises stifling hierarchies, reduces warmth between parent and child, and encourages conformity.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is considerable empirical research to support this negative assessment of East Asians. For example, Kim (2009) found a negative relationship

between commitment to Confucian values and creativity (particularly adaptive creativity, which operates within paradigms, rather than challenging them) in Korean educators. Yi, Hu, Scheithauer, and Niu (2013) found that German non-Chinese and German raised ethnic Chinese outperformed China-raised ethnic Chinese (both studying abroad and in China) in artistic tasks. Cheng, Kim, and Hull (2010) found that American subjects were more adaptively creative than their Taiwanese counterparts. In study after study, East Asian subjects are assessed as—in one aspect or another—less creative than their western counterparts. This is despite the fact that western and East Asian assessors appear to agree in judging what is a creative result (Niu & Sternberg, 2003).

However, something seems amiss here. In cutting edge consumer technology markets, East Asian companies have long had a strong market share. Japan and Korea produce the most patent applications (both made and approved) per head of population in the world (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2014). They have strong indigenous film and media cultures. In the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international tests of creative problem solving in 2014, the top seven assessed regions were all East Asian in culture: Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Macao, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taiwan (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014). So why are people fretting about East Asian creativity? For that matter, what is creativity?

The Problem of Definition

According to Lucas, Claxton, and Spencer (2012),

It is our contention that schools need to develop creativity in students just as much as they need to produce literate and numerate learners. Yet across the educational world there is no widely used definition of what creativity is, no agreed framework for assessing its development in schools and few assessment tools specifically designed to track learners’ progress. If creativity is to be taken more seriously by educators and educational policy-makers then we need to be clearer about what it is. (p. 2)

Coate and Boulos (2012) similarly stated that “despite this increased insistence that creativity is a ‘good thing,’ creative processes are still poorly understood and elusive” (p. 129).

As these quotations indicate, calls for more creativity in education are commonly unaccompanied by clear definitions of what creativity actually is. This also applies in the case of foreign language teaching. For example, this is from the introduction to a recent book entitled *Creativity in Language Teaching: Perspectives from Research and Practice*:

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When we were inviting contributors for this book, most of them replied to the invitation with the same question: “Yes, but what do you mean by creativity? Is there some definition or theory of creativity that you want me to follow?” Our response was always to hand the question back to them, to ask “What does creativity mean to you? How do you define it?” We did this not just because it seemed to be in keeping with the spirit of creativity that motivated this project in the first place, but also because of our awareness that creativity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and constraining our discussion to just one aspect or theory of creativity seemed counterproductive. (Jones & Richards, 2015, pp. 4-5)

This approach assumes we know what creativity is. Yet Clarke’s (2005) UK survey of foreign language education professionals revealed a bewildering array of definitions (“a dynamic in the process of life that enables us to find ever new ways of living together in and with the world”; “Creativity comes from sensing the limits, but not working to models . . . new ways of being can be improvised and brought about”; and so on). Although there are a few notable exceptions, such as Maley and Peachey (2015), and despite professed concerns for student creativity, there is also commonly little clear separation between creative activities on the part of the teacher and the student, as if creativity were some kind of infectious energy.

As Albert (2013) noted, such definitional hesitancy hampers research on creativity in language education. I would add that it seems to feed into a widespread lack of engagement with the field of creativity research. Moreover, this lack of clarity on what we mean by creativity can result in cultural misunderstandings, stress, and conflict for western-enculturated teachers as they bring their specific cultural and historical preconceptions to the East Asian classroom.

Defining Creativity

Although in education policy and practice there is ambivalence and silence, within creativity research there is a settled basic definition of creativity: Something is creative if it is in some way “new” (or “original” or “innovative,” etc.) and in some way “appropriate” (or “useful” or “valuable,” etc.) (Mumford, 2003). This framework applies to a full range of disciplines, as “appropriateness” encompasses the usefulness of a new invention, the value of a great work of art, an insightful book on history, or the impact of a joke. It can capture the full range of creative human experience, as both the newness and appropriateness or value of something can vary between the personal, peer, or world-historical levels, and over time move from the creativity of individual learning experiences and everyday improvised problem solving to the work of Nobel prize winners (Kaufman &

Beghetto, 2009). It allows us to view creativity from different aspects—typically the four “Ps” of place, person, process, and product (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). In short, this simple definition opens the way to a wide, well-structured, and fertile body of research.

There are three key things to note here. First, this definition of creativity does not include theories of *how* creativity occurs or *where* creativity resides or comes from. Lay writers, however, commonly attempt to describe creativity by trying to explain it in terms of the cognitive processes underlying creativity (Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004) and thus inadvertently postulate a theory of how creativity happens, not what it is. The two tasks of description and explanation need to be kept separate.

Second, the basic definition is depersonalised, as shown by the way it is broken down as an object of research into various aspects. Although creativity is the result of actions by people, it is also a product of the circumstances and processes in which the creativity takes place. That is, the definition avoids the presumption that creativity be *essentially* viewed as a property of the individual, as a kind of intelligence or life force. As we can see from above, there is a general tendency amongst educators unfamiliar with the research to define creativity as *unconstrained, disruptive originality*, that *flows naturally* from the individual *as an individual* who needs to be *liberated*. This is a view that comes from specific western historical experience, as I hope to show below.

Third, creativity has two defining characteristics: newness and appropriateness. The lay characterisation I gave above includes only one of them. What is good, or useful, or valuable as judged by others tends to go missing. This has, I will argue later, serious implications both for how we view creativity interculturally and how we approach creativity as teachers in East Asian classrooms.

Making the Familiar Strange: A History of Western Creativity

In order to understand the specificity of the western lay conception of creativity I described in the previous section, I believe it is helpful to “make strange” this conception by examining its historical development. This should allow us to see more clearly what baggage we as creativity-promoting educators may bring into the classroom. Creativity as something humans do and as a subject of public interest is, it turns out, a relatively recent idea (Pope, 2005). Much of what follows is derived from the account in Weiner (2000), along with Niu and Sternberg (2006).

The twin foundations of western culture are the Greco-Roman cultures and the Judeo-Christian tradition (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 20). For Plato, the artist uncovered

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or imitated true form and beauty under the inspiring guide of the muses (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 21; Weiner, 2000, p. 35), but for Aristotle, the poet needed skill and adherence to principles (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 22). That is, a good poet was a skilled one, not an inventive one. In Rome, sculptors and other artists were low status and unrecognised. On the other hand, the Latin word *ars* referred to engineering and public works (*creatio* indicated biological creation), which were for the glory of Rome; inspiration came from the “genius” of the household god or the Roman people (Weiner, 2000, p. 41). In parallel, the Judeo-Christian tradition held that all creativity originates with God and humans merely follow in His steps (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 21). Taken together, creative acts were therefore *not* disruptive and were a process of divine inspiration, discovery, and technique rather than human-generated invention. It is therefore understandable with this legacy that during the medieval period, creative work was seen as a form of copying, an attempt to imitate the eternal. Artists did not sign work with their own name because it was not “their” work (Weiner, 2000, p. 63). Apprentices might sign the name of their master, but this was not a sign of exploitation on the master’s part.

However, with the rediscovery of the classics in the Renaissance, there developed a greater awareness of “the past” and, consequently, also a stronger sense of the “new” (Weiner, 2000, pp. 53-54). At the same time, city states began to require engineers and artists, thus creating a market for their labours and a need for them to develop a “name.” Notably, there is also the development of patent law (first in Venice in 1484)—a system to protect ideas that are new and somehow useful (Weiner, 2000, p. 56). Artists and scientists (such as Da Vinci and Roger Bacon) began to stress the importance of direct observation rather than received wisdom (Weiner, 2000, pp. 57-61). Discoveries of new lands (by Magellan, Columbus, and others) and the move to heliocentrism (by Copernicus and Galileo) added to the sense of the new and the different (Weiner, 2000, pp. 61-62). However, this was all still viewed as observation of the works of God. That is, although the individual began to take centre stage, it was not as an originator, and awareness and fascination with the new was still fascination with discovery.

The Enlightenment moved beyond direct observation to seek to understand the principles upon which the world operated. For example, Rousseau sought the principles of good government, Descartes the first principles of knowledge, Smith the principles of economics, and Bach the principles of perfect music (Weiner, 2000, pp. 70-71). Thus creativity as we would now call it was still a matter of discovery of the laws bequeathed by the creator. The rising bourgeoisie encouraged an outlook of perpetual increases in wealth and self-improvement. The first museums—markers of the past—opened, indicating the clear sense in which time was now seen as linear.

However, economic progress and the desire for perfection brought two traumatic events to Europe: industrialisation and the French revolution. The previous harmony and geometry of the enlightenment had led to degradation of the lived environment, violence and regimented compulsion, and declining faith in ruling authorities. The backlash produced dialectic modes of thinking: reason versus emotion, mind versus body, sacred versus profane, the imaginative versus the economically useful (Albert & Runco, 1999, p. 23; Weiner, 2000, p. 78). The poet became a struggler, a Promethean rebel, and the countryside, not industrial progress, became idealised (the beginning of the parting of the ways of science and the arts). Thus creativity became framed as the outpouring of passion from within, and the natural property of, an individual. Benjamin Franklin argued that creativity could be unlocked in anyone. John Stuart Mill proposed that creative individuals were vital to a civilised society. Marx wrote against the appropriation of the fruits of the worker’s labour. Shelley saw creativity as personal liberation (Weiner, 2000, pp. 78-82).

The fascination with the new developed further into the 20th century. Self-styled *avant-garde* movements arose across the arts. The question moved from “Is it art?” to “Is it new?” Revolutionary ferment produced futurism and then the myth of the great genius capable of transforming society through creative destruction: fascism (Weiner, 2000, p. 92). Although creativity was now a property of the individual, creative individuals could still be corralled to the benefit of the state or nation. The artist’s relationship to the state was a fundamental political question.

The trauma of the war and the totalitarian experience led to a postwar adjustment in the ideals of creativity. It was no longer only about the new, but also about being different, about asserting independence and resisting regimentation, about maintaining one’s unique identity, and about democratisation. Indeed, the sponsorship of western-style abstract art in Europe as a means to encourage resistance to communism was a key strategy of US foreign policy (Saunders, 1999). Of course, the experience of nationalist-driven industrialised war was not limited to westerners. The Gutai abstract art movement in Japan that began in the 1950s, itself a reaction to totalitarian control of art, was openly inspired by western-style abstract expressionism (notably Jackson Pollock), opposing the Marxist-inspired socialist realism of the postwar Tokyo art scene (Munroe, 1994). However, it is telling that it took much time for Gutai to be recognised as genuinely Japanese rather than an American import.

Thus, we arrive at our current western view of creativity: something like a spirit that can come from within an individual that produces newness and difference, that is disruptive, that is self-liberating, and that is natural. This is a view that has come out of *spe-*

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cific Western historical developments over several hundred years. It represents a now firmly rooted salience in western culture not apparent in East Asian texts at least going into the 20th century (Niu & Sternberg, 2006) and is in contrast to East Asian traditions of creativity as ethically good and more adaptive than revolutionary (Tan, 2016) and resulting from mimicry of ideal forms (Albert & Runco, 1999, p. 18).

Challenges for the Westerner in the East Asian Classroom

In this final section, I highlight four challenges that may face western educators seeking to focus on creative activities in the East Asian classroom. The argument here is not that creativity itself is a different phenomenon east and west. Evidence suggests that educational practices informed by western creativity research can successfully operate across cultures (Dineen & Niu, 2008). Instead the argument is that working to the western lay conception of creativity may lead to failure in trying to encourage creative behaviour, particularly (but not exclusively) in East Asian settings. As noted in the section above, one should of course be wary of absolute distinctions between the historical experiences and modern perspectives of East Asia and the west, and the following comments should be understood as generalisations and tendencies

The Importance of Appropriateness

The modern western lay conception of creativity focuses on newness and difference—at the expense of appropriateness—and the notion of creativity as having a product. This in itself is a mistake. Clear goal setting is important in creativity management (Amabile, 1998). As Maley and Peachey (2015) put it in the context of language education, “Creativity is widely believed to be about letting the imagination loose in an orgy of totally free self-expression. It is, of course, no such thing. Creativity is born of discipline and thrives in a context of constraints” (p. 6). Importantly, Niu and Sternberg (2006) argued that the Confucian tradition emphasises the goodness of creativity and its necessary contribution to society, a characteristic supported by modern day research into creativity in East Asia (Morris & Leung, 2010). That is, an approach that eschews appropriateness or worth as a condition of creativity runs against expectations about what creativity is.

The Over-Valuation of Divergent Thinking

The need to recognise appropriateness also has implications for cross-cultural assessments of creativity. It is common to divide creative thinking into two main kinds, divergent (the production of a wide variety of original ideas and elaborate on them) and

convergent (the selection of best ideas and solutions to problems). Most direct tests of creative ability mainly assess divergent creativity, and these tests have only limited predictive validity. We may therefore expect a relative cultural bias against Asian test takers when compared with western subjects more at home with such demonstrations of individuality, and that is indeed what we see. There is evidence that explicit instructions to East Asian subjects to act in a creative manner in assessments can help improve performance significantly (Niu & Sternberg, 2003).

The Absence of “Disruptive” Creativity and Misidentified Introversion

Identity in Confucian Heritage Cultures is derived much more from the group. Not that there is no individualism, but that individuals are greatly defined by their relationships with others. As a result,

What is missing from the Eastern notion of creativity is the idea of defying the crowd as an essential element. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, in a collectivist society, defying the crowd may be seen as less valuable than making contributions to the society and sometimes defying the crowd may even be seen as strange rather than as creative in the East. (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 33)

Thus, students in all-class brainstorming sessions are less likely to publicly produce ideas that challenge group values and also more hesitant in what they say insofar as they will in part be speaking “for the group.” As Adams and Owens (2015) remarked in their case study of a Japanese university drama project, there is a “form of social closeness in which those who ‘creatively disrupt’ are resisted rather than encouraged” (p. 82). This inhibition in itself creates a constraint on creative behaviour, and teachers would be far better brainstorming in private pairs or as individuals (something wise in western settings also, Park-Gates, 2001). However, a further source of prejudice exists: Because the western vision of creativity is informed by the notion of creativity as an inner wellspring producing independence and individuality, there is a widespread tendency to view extraverts as inevitably more creative (Grant, 2013), and thus to find enculturated student reticence disheartening and an indication of a lack of creative potential. However, not only is this to mistake group dynamics for introversion, the relationship between extraversion and creativity is, in any case, more complex, with extraverts doing well on divergent thinking tests, but introverts often performing better in real-life creative tasks (Batey & Furnham, 2006), with some evidence that the extraversion-creativity link may actually be a disinhibition-creativity link (Martindale, 2007). The strongest personality link with creativity is in fact openness to experience.

Ignoring the Importance of Domain Specific Competence

As John Baer has written at length, the belief that creativity was some kind of general innate ability across all subject domains (such that someone creative in visual arts would also be creative in poetry or science) persisted even in research circles until a couple of decades ago. However, research has shown that creativity is domain specific: Creative ability in one domain (after controlling for intelligence) does not predict it in another. Of course, polymaths exist, but they are also as rare as domain-specific creativity predicts (Baer, 2015).

This means that attempts to foster creativity as a general individual attribute will likely be unsuccessful, as the evidence collated by Baer shows. Furthermore, relying on students to use their creativity to overcome a problem about which they lack knowledge or expertise will not work. Instead, teachers need to be aware of specific student intellectual resources when setting creative tasks and to address knowledge deficiencies with content teaching. This includes directly creative tasks such as story writing in which students need to be aware of the genre as well as critical discussions of real-world issues. In terms of East Asia, the importance of domain competence means that we should perhaps reassess negative views of a secondary education system that stresses rote learning and the acquisition of knowledge: These may support creativity more than the stereotype would suggest (Park, 2013).

Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have shown the importance in education of defining creativity and of engaging with the creativity literature. In the modern west, creativity is tied up with fundamental conceptions of individual identity and personality. Western-born educators working in East Asia need awareness of that specificity and of how it is both unbalanced and in parts contrary to research findings, if they want to promote creativity successfully.

Bio Data

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