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Creativity or Conformity? Building Cultures of Creativity in Higher Education

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Spreading the Creativity Bug

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the authors' experience of attempting to apply creative thinking techniques in the workplace following attendance at a creative thinking course. It explores the process which involved, initially, the application of the techniques to a specific project, growing awareness of the relevance to other aspects of working life, and finally the realisation of the importance of the creative thinking approach to professional development in general.

Keywords: creativity, librarianship, higher education.

Spreading the Creativity Bug

Do you remember the predictions about Y2K? They said that when the clocks ticked over from 1999 to 2000 nothing was ever going to be the same again. Well, for the authors of this paper, nothing *was* ever quite the same after the year 2000. This was the year we attended a two-part in-house Creative Thinking and Problem Solving course presented by Nik Mahon, a member of staff from our own Faculty of Media Arts and Society. In this course we learned about a number of different creative thinking techniques, including random words and Tony Buzan's mindmaps and six thinking hats. More importantly, though, we caught a creativity bug that had far more impact than any specific technique. Since then we have slowly changed the way we work day-to-day in many small but important ways, not to mention the creative things that we have done outside of work. And we are librarians: a profession with more of a reputation for tradition than for innovation, not especially known for an ability to think outside the books.

What we found is that the practice of thinking creatively is something that grows in the way that a mindmap grows, by associations of ideas, one thing sparking off another, and another. New ideas emerge and feed back into the ongoing process of developing our role as learning facilitators. Serendipity and consilience come into it as well. Ideas that may not have any relevance to the project in hand, if not too quickly discarded, can turn out to contribute to something else entirely. Creative thinking makes the most of the way in which seemingly disparate things can be connected in unexpected ways.

Where this started, for us, was shortly after the Creative Thinking and Problem Solving course that we attended, when we were involved in an attempt to devise a new interface for the library homepage. We applied the techniques we had learned to try and come up with something radically different to the existing design. What we came up with was an interface based on a metaphor of physical space and the actual library building, with the addition of several entirely imaginary Easter egg like features (including a roof garden, with doughnut machine) which were intended to encourage exploration, both by their unusual nature and by being not entirely serious. This was so different to the existing approach that certain proposed aspects of its development (for example, poetry in the virtual toilets) were vetoed by middle management, although we were allowed to develop The Alternative Library and link to it from the main library home page.

Once this had been created we wanted to record the work that had been done, which made us think about our writing and presentation skills. We tried setting up blogs to reflect on the process and using mindmaps as presentation tools. What we were doing with mindmaps led us to rethink our student training sessions, in particular how we went about explaining the concept of using keywords in formulating search strategies for literature searching. Creative techniques also changed the way we approached our internal meetings: we went out and bought six different coloured 'thinking hats', which are brought out of the cupboard from time to time to remind us to think effectively and not to forget to take time to think creatively. We keep random word boxes on our desks for those times when our creative thinking needs a little kick-start. Around about this

time we also started up our own creative writing group, which meets during lunch hours.

Before long we found that creative thinking had spread from one specific project to influence almost every aspect our work, and even life out of working hours: creative thinking has a way of not respecting work/life boundaries. We had discovered for ourselves that creativity is not just a set of techniques, but a change in mind-set.

We had found this such a positive experience that we wanted to pass the creativity bug on to other people, especially to our students, who face a world that increasingly demands an ability to come up with innovative responses.

It was the creation of The Alternative Library, and the subsequent publication of a paper about it (Collinson and Williams, 2004) that made us first realise that what we were doing had the potential to be more than just a different, more enjoyable, approach to our day-to-day work. The things we had learned at the creativity course, and had sometimes felt guilty about experimenting with in a work environment, because they were too much like fun and did occasionally meet with disapproval, could in fact contribute to our jobs in a more high profile academic context as well.

A presentation on The Alternative Library was put together and accepted for an in-house Learning and Teaching Conference. There was, on our part, some fear that colleagues would find it a bit odd, and our confidence was further put to the test when we realized that some very senior staff had signed up for the session, including the Deputy Vice Chancellor, and the Head of Information Technology. However, it helped that the *Aslib Proceedings* publication had occurred just that week. Publication in a peer-reviewed journal helped us to overcome some of our fears about presenting a paper that some had felt was 'unacademic'.

Comments and questions after the presentation resulted in suggestions for developing the concept in a more radical way than we had previously envisaged. Rather than having to defend the more off-the-wall aspects of our work we found that we were being challenged to take it further. Borges' work was mentioned, in particular his labyrinth (Borges, 1964). This led us on to thinking about how libraries can be seen by users - particularly higher education students moving up from smaller school or college libraries - as somewhat labyrinthine. Out of this grew the idea of developing a game-based learning maze with a rather gothic final assessment involving an axeman. We were surprised at how willing and able the various members of senior management present were to engage in a lively creative thinking session that generated some potentially interesting ways forward. Out of this presentation, we developed a paper on the place of the Alternative Library within our e-induction programme, which we presented at an external conference (eLit, 2006) and which was subsequently accepted for publication (Collinson and Williams, forthcoming).

Creative thinking can, at times, seem a rather subversive activity, one that does not appear entirely serious. The fact that it is often highly enjoyable, even fun, somehow makes it seem not to be work. We had enjoyed the way that it contributed in a very positive way to our day-to-day activities with students, but had not expected it to also

lead to professional development of the kind that is recognised by the powers that be within the University. It took some time for us to accept the fact that it could contribute to entirely serious professional activities and developments.

We were lucky enough to work in an organisation where we had the opportunity to attend an in-house creative thinking course, and where we had the active encouragement of senior management for creative initiatives. An organisation, in fact, that used the words 'spark your imagination' in their advertising! However there were still times when we felt that what we were doing was in some kind of conflict with the serious professional persona that we all tend to adopt in a work situation. We have had to fight against our own personal resistance to change and creative development as well as some middle management reservations about what we were doing. To develop creative thinking and creative initiatives in an organisational culture that is *not* open to new approaches, and where there is also external resistance to overcome would be a very much harder task to undertake.

We hope that this conference will encourage more people to find ways to overcome the various barriers to creative thinking and working, and help to spread the creativity bug throughout UK higher education. Perhaps, after this conference, nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Postscript

One of the strengths of a creative mind-set is how it enables you to deal in a positive way with change. As we were developing our ideas for this paper, one of the authors changed jobs and moved to another university. While this complicated matters in some ways, we found that it could be turned into a learning opportunity. We explored tools that were new to us such as Writely (now Google Docs & Spreadsheets) for shared document editing and Gliffy for shared diagram/mindmap creation. Investigating these new ways of working have stretched our creative muscles yet further and may yet contribute to our work in support of developments in online collaborative learning via Virtual Learning Environments.

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