



Creative Inquiry: Confronting the challenges of scholarship in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT

It is becoming increasingly apparent that creativity and imagination are key to envisioning alternatives to the problems of postnormal times. At the same time, educational institutions all over the globe are still mired in assumptions from the machine/industrial age, preparing students for reproduction and conformity rather than creativity. This article outlines the philosophical foundations of an educational approach in which creativity is central to scholarship, where learners move from being consumers to creators and from bystanders to participants in the postnormal dance of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

We are coming to know a world that is neither a clock work mechanism wound up *ab initio* to work out a predeterminate programme; nor a blind meaningless chaos that, by sheer chance, happens to have thrown up complex physico-chemical structures with capacity for thought and feeling. It is a world that is through and through dramatic, and therefore through and through interesting. There can have been few moments on this earth more dramatic and interesting than the offering of Pandora's gift of Creativity [1].

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world is in the throes of a remarkable transformation [2–5]. This may not be the end of history, but perhaps the end of one age and the intimations of a new one. For the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, “solid modernity” has become “liquid modernity”: everything is fluid, changing, with no predictability, no certainty, no stability. Human beings have to learn to become flexible, adaptable, capable of living and working under conditions of great uncertainty [6–8]. Sardar argues that we are in postnormal times, “an in between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense” [5, p. 435]. The complexity, pluralism, and uncertainty of life certainly appear overwhelming at times. We are arguably in the middle of the *Future Shock* discussed by Alvin Toffler [9]. Whatever it is we are going through, shocking, postnormal, fluid, or all of the above, the world is changing. And it is clear that our educational systems do not prepare us for the emerging pluralistic, interconnected, complex world. They certainly do not prepare us for seemingly perpetual change, instability, and above all, uncertainty [10–13].

From the state of the global economy to the environment, to the nature of leadership, immigration, the shift to a multipolar world, the persistence of global poverty, climate change, and international terrorism, it seems there is no end to the list of global and local problems. The solutions of modernity, its very engines of progress, seem in many cases to have become the problems of postnormal times. Creativity and imagination will be essential to envisioning and developing alternatives to the systems, structures, and processes that are presently failing us [5,14,15]. But if the urgency and importance of creativity are clear, in education creativity is mostly conspicuous by its absence [16,17].

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Mainstream education across the globe, which I refer to as Reproductive Education, is still mired in the machine assumptions of the industrial age [10,13,18,19]. Reproductive Education stresses conformity and homogeneity and suppresses creativity at a time when it is apparent that creativity needs to be mobilized to get beyond the decaying industrial views of modernity and envision new futures, new possibilities, new economic, environmental, social, and cultural and ethical systems [5,13,20]. Reproductive Education may have been appropriate for the industrial assembly line and its orderly bureaucracy, but it is simply unable to confront the fluid, unexpected challenges of postnormal times [17].

Reproductive Education viewed learners as consumers of knowledge. In Reproductive Education learners are spectators to knowledge generated by external forces and figures, experts whose work must be “consumed”. Given the underlying Reproductive foundation of most education, it should come as no surprise that in the U.S. doctoral students have been prepared to be good course-takers, not independent scholars capable of doing their own original research [21]. While they may be able to reproduce information that is already known in order to pass a course, they are often unable to make an original contribution to the field. They are certainly not being prepared to be creative, which is perhaps unsurprisingly what the research shows is central to doing original research. Disparaging popular use of terms like “academic” and “scholarly” to refer to something synonymous with “irrelevant in practice” is perhaps indicative of a more serious concern about the relevance of education. This is particularly true at the graduate level, where doctoral degrees have been subjected to enormous criticism [22]. In fact, the Ph.D. is hardly ever framed in a way that reflects its most basic definition (an *original* contribution to a field), which is to say *by definition* a creative process leading to a creative product. Students are being prepared to be consumers, not creators of knowledge. They remain spectators, not participants, in the adventure of knowledge in postnormal times.

I draw on my experience of almost 25 years in alternative and mainstream post-secondary institutions, and specifically the design of a transdisciplinary doctoral degree [23] and a masters degree [24] that have now been in existence for over 6 years at a private, non-profit U.S. university, to provide an outline of one approach that makes creativity central in the curriculum. It should be noted that neither of the degrees is exclusively *about* or *in* creativity. Creative Inquiry is an approach to education that places creativity at the heart of scholarship. It stresses the self-creation of the learner in his or her context, the creation of the process of inquiry, and the creative nature of the product. It is a broad frame for a kind of education that attempts to reflect the complexity of our planetary situation in and through the need for creativity and by recognizing and embracing complexity [23]. Creative Inquiry frames learners as creators, and explicitly works with the premise that all human beings can be creative [25–27]. Learners become participants who are actively engaged with ideas in a way that is embodied and embedded. During their course of study they are encouraged to actively participate in the larger discourse and uncover also how they already embody knowledge in their own lives. Knowledge is not out there in an abstract realm, but understood to be embodied in our very ability to understand and act in the world [28].

In this essay I explore the need for a change in education in postnormal times, focusing particularly on a shift in the understanding and practice of *scholarship*, understood as the attitudes and skills one brings to academic inquiry. Space does not allow for specific pedagogical examples of the applications of Creative Inquiry, which can be found elsewhere [23–26,29].

2. From consumers to creators

Despite the extensive body of creativity research, and the increasing awareness that creativity is an essential competence for the 21st century in industry in order to survive in a rapidly changing world [13,20,30–37], education has not been able to develop a new form of scholarship that actively incorporates creativity and makes it central to education [38]. There are several reasons for this: the importance placed on education as a means of social control; the fact that increasing creativity in the classroom means less control and more unpredictability for faculty and administration; and persistent misunderstandings about the nature of creativity [38–41].

The problems of present educational systems can ultimately be traced to the underlying foundations of Reproductive Education, the machine view of the industrial age [16,42]. The Newtonian/Cartesian worldview, central to the industrial age and at the heart of modernity, saw the Universe, society, and human beings, as machines and mechanical processes [19,43,44]. Reproductive Education reflects educators’ borrowing of concepts from the Newtonian/Cartesian machine metaphor applied to the Industrial organization of society, coupled with traditional authoritarianism. This was education designed to reproduce the existing social order and educate for conformity, hierarchy, division of labor, hyper-specialization, and the quest for certainty [19,45–47]. The principles of reduction and disjunction could be found in the organization of knowledge at the level of educational institutions, through disciplinary fragmentation and the separation of academic disciplines and departments into air-tight compartments [48], while analysis, logical and critical thought became the standard of “good thinking”.

In Reproductive Education, learners are educated to be cogs in an industrial machine. In the machine metaphor, the creator is by necessity *outside* the machine, and indeed the Divine Watchmaker was a key image in one theological argument for the existence of God [49,50]. Reproductive Education does not account for creativity. In fact it is actively designed to avoid its expression in students, whether in or out of the classroom. Nothing new is expected, required, or wanted from learners themselves. They are “trivial machines”: the student’s output can be predicted if one knows the input [51]. Being a good student means producing an output that is already known to the instructor, not being creative.

Creative Inquiry reflects a larger shift in worldview from a Newtonian/Cartesian machine metaphor to a metaphor of a creative universe [13,52–55]. It reflects scientific developments outlining the fundamental creativity of the Universe, Nature,

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