

Students' Conferences as a Means of Fostering Creativity

Academic education based on the professional competency formation as a promising basis for success in a career joins a number of psychological and developmental processes, development of creativity among them.

Creativity is a special kind of thinking that involves originality and fluency, that breaks away from existing patterns and introduces something new. Creativity may be applied to problem solving, in which case it facilitates the generation of a range of possible solutions, in particular the problems which have no single right answer. Alternatively, and most productively, it may be applied to the process of creating - this means, realising of a held vision, empowered by a tension-resolution system which is put in place by the existing reality being differentiated from a desired vision. So, creativity is obviously something that belongs to everyday life, rather than something confined to the so-called creative spheres, such as, say, the world of arts (poets, painters and musicians).

Creativity development is one of the priorities in the education and nurture process these days when the future of mankind depends so much on generation of non-standard ideas that may be of value to the survival and progress of our civilization. Less globally, creativity is vital for research, being an indispensable component of cognition and an important aspect of moulding of professional competency of students. Creative individuals are generally recognized to have a high capacity for challenges in their jobs, as much as willingness to take risks and high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder.

Research on creativity, done by Sternberg and Lubart (USA) suggests that it depends on divergent thinking rather than the convergent thinking that is typically assessed in measures of intelligence.¹

Creative individuals share some common core characteristics across cultures, though there are a number of factors to be considered concerning the ways in which thought processes can be engaged in different cultural milieus and the obstacles that these milieus may present.

There are different ways in which creativity can be fostered in different cultures. In terms of Hofstede's dimensions of individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, it has been found out that countries high on uncertainty avoidance prefer creative individuals to work through organizational norms, rules, and procedures. Countries higher on power distance preferred creative individuals to gain support from those in authority before action is taken, or to build a broad base of support from those in authority before action is taken, or to build a broad base of support among members for new ideas. Collectivistic countries prefer creative people to seek cross-functional support for their efforts.

Being an inborn human pattern, creativity cannot be deleted from or stopped in the human mental activity, still it can be retarded or intensified.

Paradoxically as it may appear, the aggressive environment may even enhance the level of creativity (probably, due to the striving for survival) and give rise to sparks of genius, while comfort and relaxation do not always predispose to look for new ideas and new solutions.

As Matsumoto and Juang put it, "creativity requires people to "get outside of their own box" or framework; another area of cultural difference would be the degree to which this ability is fostered"².

¹ R.J.Sternberg, T.I.Lubart (1999). The concept of creativity: Prospects and paradigms. In R.J.Sternberg (Ed.), *Handbook of creativity* (pp. 3-15). New York: Cambridge University Press

² D.Matsumoto, L.Juang (2004). *Culture and Psychology*. 3d edition. Belmont, USA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning

Creative development is the process of evolution and creative activities of an individual engaged in a creative endeavor extending over a period of time.

The creative process appears typically to follow four stages:

Preparation - considering the situation is a telic and paratelic process, playing around with ideas and deliberating on their feasibility;

then, identifying the problem, issue, theme or vision, finding out what one really wants to achieve, causes a reversal to paratelic excitement (or sometimes telic anxiety, particularly if this is an other-determined should or must).

Incubation - the matter sinks into the unconscious; if access to the unconscious is blocked (such as by anxiety) this resource (the processing power of whole brain) may be limited or slow to emerge. Also, within consciousness, current reality is further compared to the envisioned outcome, to energise the incubation and provide more data.

Illumination - imaginative ideas emerge spontaneously into consciousness and in the paratelic state the individual gets to work making them a reality.

In the academic environment it is important to support the process of creative development not only within the curriculum, but also in extra-curricula activities. There are various patterns of creative interests development in the study process.

One of such possibilities comes with the organization of Graduate and Post-Graduate Student Research Conferences. This is the kind of extra-curricula activities annually practiced at the Polytechnical University in St Petersburg. The basis is constituted by individual projects done by groups of researchers consisting of students and their supervisors. Subjects for investigation in numerous fields of knowledge and practice are chosen by students, their supervisors being co-authors and exercising cross-functional support for the students' effort. The research is based on, centers on, and grows out of students' creative interests. The conceptional structures they build up in the domains of their interests which guide them in their development, are generative of their creativity, and are the basis for their creative projects, thus a fundamental source and basis of their creative contributions to society.

The proceedings conducted by the Faculty of Foreign Languages are specific for their bilateral nature: the students' competency in their major or minor subject they have chosen, on one hand, and the general communication competency component, on the other.

The first component is based on multiple interests as the basis for creativity, patterns of projects rooted in interests, processes of creative development, all of which focus on peak creative moments of insight, idea generation, and discovery. An individual's creativity and the originality of his contributions is rooted in the distinctiveness of his interests and the path he follows pursuing their development.

The second component includes the linguistic aspect and is responsible for the traffic of concepts and ideas and the delivery of the information to the audience. Language is one of the channels through which individuals are influenced in their creative development by the culture the language belongs to, as well as the world around them. Acknowledging the importance of the mother tongue which plays the leading part in the concept formation and formulation, we have found that the achievement of the positive effect is profoundly contributed by the second language application that whets and elaborates the ideas through their analysis and interpretation. Besides, this way the achievements become accessible to the international audience, thus generating discussion on a higher level and appearance of new ideas, which is part of cultural transmission.

The most distinctive channel of cultural transmission is that which occurs through individuals' formation of their creative interests, as Jonathan Feinstein puts it³. Creative interests originate in

³ J.S. Feinstein (2006). *The Nature of Creative Development*. Stanford University Press.

individuals' engagement with the world, sparked by specific experiences and elements they encounter. Cultural elements and experiences are the basis for many creative interests, making this a main pathway of cultural transmission and influence. Channels of cultural transmission and influence arise during exploration and development of interests. Elements and experiences spark creative responses, and individuals build up rich conceptual structures in the domains of their interests out of elements they encounter, that in turn are generative of their ideas and insights.

Developing of creative interests in professional fields is often characteristic of the very early stages of academic education, far before the main contributions individuals are supposed to make. We find it a target of our professional activities to support and foster the relevant practices of our students and appeal to our colleagues to get involved in this process by combining the relevant expertise and effort on the international level.

Cultural development – the progress of civilization – has its primary source, ultimately, in creative contributions made by people in all walks of life. The projects and presentations offered by students for discussion at Student Research Conferences as creative contributions, promise to become a means of providing the enhanced level of professionalism and productivity of a new generation of specialists. Besides it is an area of cross-cultural communication, given students from other countries share the creative interests.