

f, like the fairy godmothers of Ladybird lore, you could grant a gift at every child's crib, would that gift be creativity?

Such is its current status within society, you'd be the equivalent of the Grinch not to. Just look at the criticisms of education's apparent reluctance to bestow creativity on students. You don't want that coming your way.

Fulbright scholar Erika L Sánchez sums up the mood succinctly when she says, "Rigid curriculums that focus on right and wrong answers teach children to see the world in binaries. These methods don't encourage creativity or innovation. I fear that our deeply flawed education system will produce generations of people who lack critical-thinking skills."

Meanwhile, Sir Ken Robinson, the pharaoh of creative education, is busy making statements such as the following: "Creativity is essential to the success and fulfilment of young people, to the vitality of our communities and to the long-term health of the economy."

Industry, too, routinely dances for creativity rain, with regular calls to "wake up to the creativity deficit". Jon Kamen, chief executive of Radical Media, says: "Creativity has been the long-standing missing ingredient in education. Companies have been desperately seeking it since the last depression. Creative thinking leads to innovation, and innovation leads to success."

Kamen, Sánchez and Robinson are not alone. Robinson's 2006 TED talk "How schools kill creativity" has been viewed online more than 28 million times. This is no marginal view: the need for creativity and education's failure to instil it in pupils has entered the mainstream. Indeed, it is almost impossible to find anyone stupid enough to speak out against the teaching of creativity.

Other concepts – liberty, for example – also enjoy this omnipopularity. Yet Edmund Burke, the 18th-century philosopher, warned against this "trump card" approach to abstract values. "Am I to congratulate," he asked, "a highwayman and murderer, who has broke prison, on the recovery of his natural rights?"

Clearly, liberty must be balanced with other values. So, too, with creativity.

In the path of a juggernaut

The current problems concerning creativity go much deeper than simple overenthusiasm. Our obsession with it – and, more importantly, our insistence that it can be taught – is not only damaging but also has no foundation. I would argue that the creativity project has become a juggernaut empty of meaning and content, and its ubiquitous adoption has actually become harmful for children's education in ways its architects never imagined.

In fact, I have even graver reservations. I'm not sure it can be

taught at all, at least not in the way its advocates propose. Worse, I don't think we even know what it is, which is something of a problem.

To take up the last point first: knowing what we are talking about is surely a fundamental necessity. How can creativity be a target if we don't all agree what it is we are aiming for?

Education is a field that already rests on a hundred concepts that are in endless dispute: what do we mean by "learn"? What do we mean by "educated"? A regular occupant of that hit parade is "creativity". What is the damn thing?

Defining characteristics

The Greeks believed that people didn't create, they merely imitated or uncovered; they had no capacity to produce anything novel which had not first existed in nature or the realm of the ideal form. In a sense, this equates human creation with some enormous, pre-digital form of Photoshop, with existent building blocks being shuffled around.

"Originality," said Voltaire, "is nothing but judicious imitation."

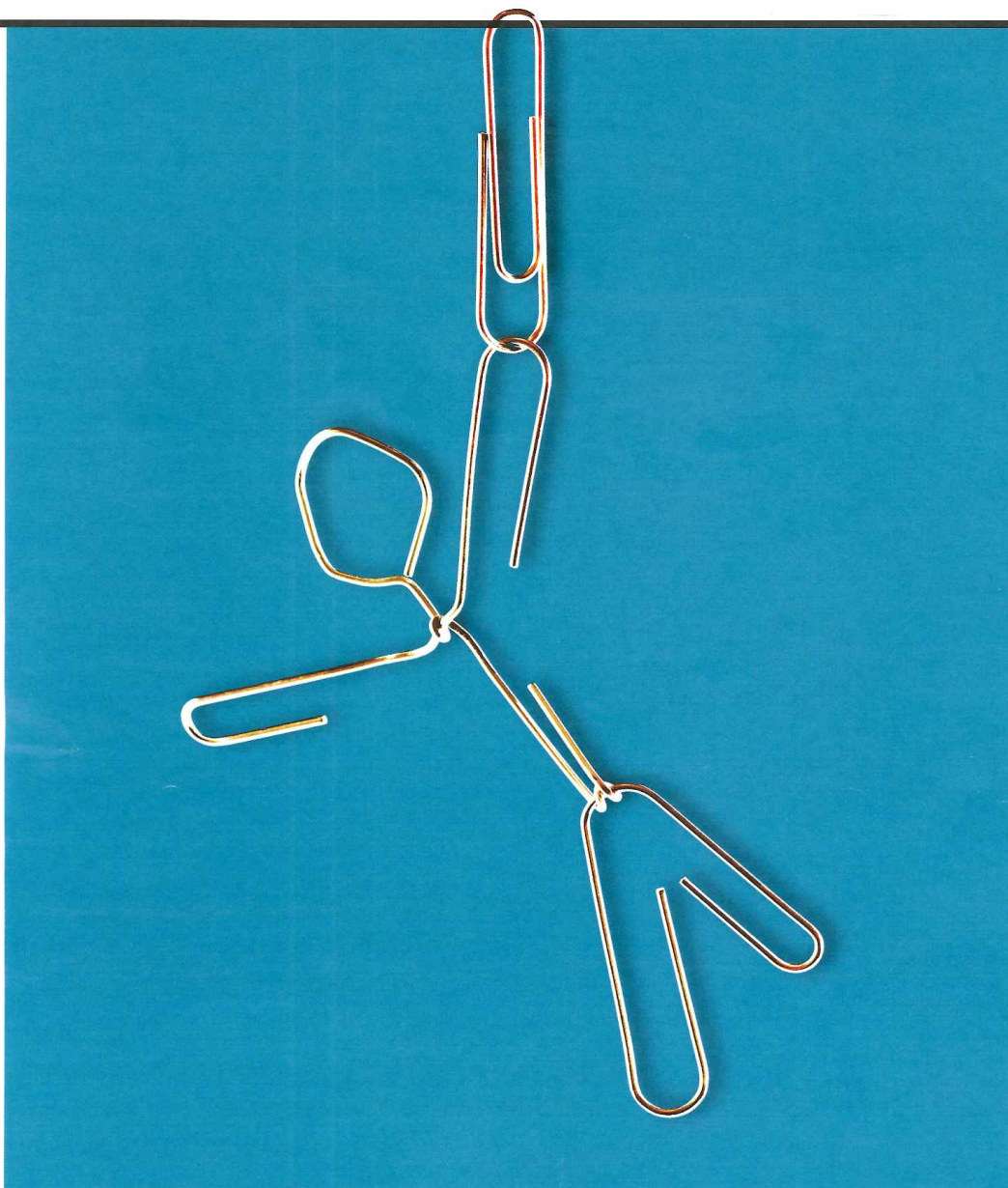
After this came the religious concept of the creative person as a conduit for divine inspiration: the artist channelled God but He retained copyright.

Finally, after the Enlightenment, creativity began to be seen as originating with the artist rather than them acting as a vessel for some external, divine vigour. The artist had become both the candle and the match of creativity. It was then that all our problems began.

Because if creativity is intrinsic to the creator, we can start to wonder how such qualities are to be encouraged, developed or communicated. Hence the study of creativity gathered pace in the early 20th century. Graham Wallas, Max Wertheimer and Alfred North Whitehead are recognised as pioneers in this field, along with JP Guilford who acted as midwife to the psychometric testing of the creative process in the 1950s.

James Kaufman then introduced the world to the "Four-C model of creativity": "mini c" (personal interpretations of experience), "little c" (everyday problem-solving), "Pro c" (professional creativity) and "Big C" (eminence in a creative field). Educational studies often focus on developing little c, with an aim of subsequently achieving the other models.

And has all this work distilled for us a pure definition of creativity? Not even close. Most people broadly agree that it is a quality intrinsic to the process of creating something new or of value. But after that it is an orgy of dispute, with theorists writhing over each other in a muddy blur of fist and flesh. One analyst has estimated that the term has more than 100 definitions in academic usage. Some describe it as an aptitude, some a skill, some a description of a person's ability to generate worthwhile innovations, some a methodology of approach to problem-solving. Creativity can manifest across the whole taxonomy of human endeavour. A mathematician can display as much creativity as a sculptor,



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or an accountant as much as a poet. Some have located it in process (that is, the thought processes of the creator), others in what has been created (the product). Some see it as correlating to psychological qualities in a person while yet others explore the relationship between environment and creativity.

Models and metrics

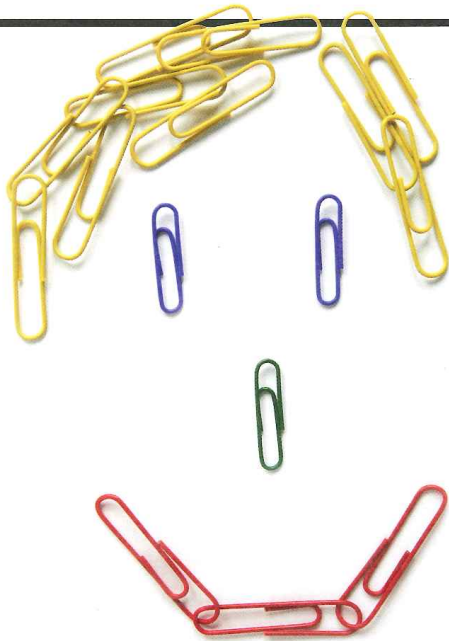
Of course, if we don't know what creativity is, it is very difficult to measure whether individuals are any good at it, or possess it, or can improve in their wielding of it. Which is not to say that people haven't tried to explore all these.

E Paul Torrance was a leading light in the field of assessing creativity. He was renowned for the Torrance Tests of Creative

Thinking (TTCT), which are widely used in business and education. They measure divergent thinking (in other words, multiple, ingenious answers) based on four sub-scales: fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. Yet even Torrance admitted that the TTCT did not test all aspects of creativity, and that a person who scored highly on the TTCT might not exhibit high levels of creativity – they would also need motivation, skill and ability for it to manifest.

Torrance further acknowledged that providing evidence that creativity could be taught was difficult, if not impossible. At the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association in 1972, he said: "Though my evidence satisfies me, I know of no evidence that anyone could present to this symposium that would be widely acceptable. Much that goes





into my knowing that children can be taught to think creatively cannot be documented."

Of course, much of psychology is based on models that cannot be physically verified. But we do demand, at least, some evidence of efficacy, some tangible benefit to thinking this way or that on the matter. There must be some form of tactile or experiential reward to the project, and the model must, at the very least, not conflict with the data we do have.

The sad fact is that no model of creativity offers this level of assurance. Just as research has failed to produce anything like a successful creativity quotient model (in the manner of the IQ test), it is yet to produce any clear correlation between assessed creativity at a young age and experiential creativity in the adult lives of those evaluated. This may be because other factors play a huge part in the journey from creative child to creatively employed adult. Or it may be because there is no correlation at all. See? Either model works as well.

The paper clip test

The claim that schools are squeezing creativity out of children's minds like a bureaucratic juicer is just as flimsy as the definition and assessment of creativity. The advocates

of this view, such as Robinson, point to Torrance-like tests of divergent thinking, which show that young children demonstrate "genius levels" of such thinking in their infancy which then decay to a miserable moronism by their teens. This is usually exemplified by the famous cabaret act of asking a child how they might use a paper clip. The kindergarten child comes up with many ideas, the weary adult only a few.

Is this evidence of brilliance crushed by the wheels of the machine? No. As the psychologist Daniel Willingham points out, "There is an alternative explanation. Thinking of alternative uses is easier if you are unfamiliar with the typical use for the object. If you know what a paper clip is, every time you say to yourself, 'Hmm, what might one do with this?' the idea 'fasten papers!' intrudes."

In other words, convergent thinking is a very useful part of navigating the world. If, every time the phone rang, you spent five minutes wondering if you should answer it or use it to boil an egg, you would miss a lot of calls.

A final nail in the coffin of the claim that children are having the creativity beaten out of them by schools is one that I find so obvious I wonder if I haven't taken crazy pills. The last time I looked, children were not only given a multitude of different problems that required creative thinking in maths, science and so on, but I would estimate that a good fifth of a child's secondary education in the UK, and more at primary level, is given over to subjects that are immediately, obviously and intrinsically creative: art, music, drama and large sections of English. If anyone can show me these mythical schools where children are chained to desks and forced to recite the Yellow Pages, I would be interested to visit them. Creativity in schools is not stifled, it is force-fed into the curriculum like corn into an unhappy goose.

So the current anxiety about children's creativity is unfounded. That is not the same as saying that creativity is unimportant, or that as teachers we shouldn't be interested in encouraging it. Of course we should foster environments where children feel they can take risks and where unusual solutions are encouraged and analysed, and then applauded if their novelty leads to something valuable. Likewise, we should encourage personal growth. But we have to remember that our understanding of creativity is very subjective, very loose and almost immeasurable.

We need to recognise, too, that children are naturally creative, we don't have to gift them the ability. What we do need to provide is education. Before my children think outside the box, I would first prefer if they thought inside it. I would like them to value the box. Boxes are useful. If we don't know what's inside it, how will we know what it's for? ●

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