

SHARPENING THE PENCIL

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In a world of rapid change, speedy trends, information overload, academic and professional rigorousness we have created systems around systems of thought, research, analysis and points of views. Curriculum vitas explain who we are, our professional persona defines us, and we pursue careers that adhere to the requirements of standard CV's; easily readable, chronological in order (without gaps please), digested and consumed by the hiring agents. We try to fulfil requirements set out by our external environment, in which we eagerly participate, and we trust that external reactions to what we do will guide us towards personal fulfilment and secure employment. In the midst of all this, I wonder to what extent we remain original in thought? To what extent we see with our own eyes, not "with the memory of what others have thought"¹? In my paper, I wish to share a personal experience of how creativity has existed, been close to suffocation and death and then finally restored in me. This experience has provided me with new glasses to view the professions I belong to and in general the people and the world around me. Furthermore, this experience and (re)search is the foundation of two types of pilot projects I have designed for the School of Business at the University of Reykjavík, the Icelandic University of Arts and the University of Bifröst in Iceland. Both study programmes are interdisciplinary and based on creative and critical thinking.

¹ Gustave Flaubert: "There is an unexplored side of everything, because instead of looking at things with our eyes we look at them with the memory of what others have thought."

First, there was a story. Then, much later, there was literature as a discipline. Not the other way around. The same applies to all other disciplines, such as architecture, dance and business. First people exchanged goods, and then there was business as a discipline. We have a tendency to forget this difference in point of departure. And this difference is an important context for my thoughts on creative thinking.

In this paper, I will discuss creative thinking in a basic sense and how it is an important aspect to any profession and educational institution. Creative thinking is not only important right now because current state of affairs in most parts of the world is in dire need of it. It is also important because of where it comes from and the transformational effects it has.

Grammar skills versus originality

Our originality, in its clean and intuitive form, is the foundation of our creative ability. I cannot be creative on behalf of someone else and someone else cannot be creative on my behalf. I can enjoy the creativity of others but in order to *be* creative and function on my own terms, I need to begin by applying my own original thoughts, perception, feelings and senses.

Creativity in some people is obvious, in others it is hard to find. There are many and complex reasons for this and perhaps creativity comes more naturally to some than it does to others. Dr. Ken Robinson² is one of the many experts on creative thinking and education who has said all children are born creative. Once they reach school age, they get educated out of creativity. We should expand the word '*education*' in this context, to general conditioning not only within the education system, but also labour market, institutional environment and social structures. In general, there is limited room for creativity to live, breath and grow. Why? It is because we have designed processes and ways of thinking that we think are more or less the right way to go. In the work place, we tend to have little tolerance for ambiguity, trial and error, wonder and reflection,

² His topic of discussion at www.ted.com:
http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

eccentrics and the unknown. Neither do we take things like intuition seriously enough. Let me explain.

As a little girl I was imaginative, adventurous and inventive and my ideas had no limits in shape, form or scope. Ask anyone and some may have to think long and hard but ultimately they'll probably tell you the same thing about themselves. In short, I wanted to become a creative writer and a poet from a very young age but only publicly until I was about 13 years old and after I was around 30 years old. The 17 years in between were years well spent in many ways. I got educated well, I was fortunate with opportunities I was granted and enjoyed what could be called a fast-track international career. It was almost too good to be true. At the age of 29 my CV looked great! I had worked as a foreign news journalist at a distinguished newspaper in Iceland, I wrote articles about international affairs, I had been granted a scholarship to study at a prestigious university in England, had worked for non-governmental organisations in three countries, had been a programme manager for UNIFEM in Kosovo and was working for the UN Economic Commission for Europe, where I was soon to receive a permanent position with the UN Secretariat.

All this time a little voice inside me kept hinting things at me like: what about your creative writing? What about all the stories inside your head? Drawing and painting? What about the things you enjoy doing? What about nurturing your heart's true desires? – But I wouldn't take it seriously because all around me I was being told how great it all was. And in any case, I had never received such good reactions about my dream of becoming a writer or an artist as I was doing now. Indeed, a long time ago I had learned that I wasn't made up for writing, my grammar skills weren't good enough, that I didn't know all the great literary work out there, and so on.

After I started with the UNECE I learned what bureaucracy and hierarchy does to creative people. At least I know what it did to me. I learned a lot of useful things and made some wonderful friends. But it also tried to constrain me in ways I couldn't handle. My reasons for pursuing this career became more and more hollow and I found it

increasingly difficult to focus at work whereas my thoughts on writing and creative work began to seriously distract me. I started to calculate at what age I could start my pension in order to start writing! That way no one would have to know and I would be able to afford the luxury of pursuing my true desire. My conclusion was that I could pursue my dream of becoming a writer at the age of 55.

To cut a long story short, dramatic things happened in my life during a short period of time and I lost track. I fell apart and had to puzzle the pieces back together again. I was close to puzzling them back to the same shape and form when another shock hit me. And so my journey began to start puzzling from the core of what is Hrund Gunnsteinsdóttir. One of the obvious things I needed to do was to resign from the UN to become a writer. I was scared to death but knew it was something I simply had to do.

I moved back to Iceland with a goal to write a novel which was to be published in one year time. (And by the way, that would be my first attempt at writing more than 3 pages of creative text since I was a little girl...) These seemed to have been my priorities: I had to a) deliver, b) proof to people that what I had decided to do made sense and that c) there would be no serious gaps in my CV!

Needless to say, I didn't succeed.

Later, I realised that I was still dwelling almost solely in what I call 'the rhythm of rational thinking'. Slowly, I began to sense that there was also a 'rhythm of creative thinking' that I wasn't allowing myself into. In order to avoid misunderstanding, I should stress that I had been doing creative things all that time; drawing, painting, writing poems and ideas for projects, mostly for the drawer, etc. This was different. Making creativity a mainstream part of my life and work meant I had to learn the two rhythms and make them work in my advantage. And I am still learning.

I had to redecorate my mind-set in what I perceived to be respectable working hours, approvable product (mostly in a number of pages written per day) and most importantly,

I had to learn to understand what it is to follow your intuition, embark into the unknown and just trust the process.

Paying attention to what it is we pay attention to

We live in a world of rapid changes, speedy trends, information overload and swift changes which we need to keep track of in order to be considered well informed and sought after in the work market. Well informed generally entails being familiar with world affairs, national news and the main developments happening in our environment and of course, in our profession. It is all well, but the danger is that we lose track of our own senses, of how we sense the world around us, what it is that moves us as we go through the day, -or night. What it is that we pay attention to because we are who we are. And in the process, we are in danger of losing connection to our inner selves, our intuition and creative core. Or as a colleague of mine explained it: “We reside solely in the left brain hemisphere, but when we are ‘in our essence’, we begin to use both hemispheres and are reconnected to our intuition.”³

We are required to fulfil academic and professional rigorousness which maintains systems around systems of thought, research, analysis and points of views. The Greek and Roman cultural and philosophical heritage, most obvious in the West, still broadly defines our view of the world, our academic disciplines, our international organs and ways of thinking. We still uphold rational thinking at the cost of creative thinking. We still believe science can be objective and that objectivity and hands-on information is the best way to measure need, success and calculate future steps. We still struggle for credibility in the field of arts and subjective research of the world. And we even still struggle for the recognition that individuals can be creative, not only God or ‘the divine’. Think how confining this all is!

³ The colleague is one of four facilitators in Prisma and this is how he explained the effects he felt after the first week of the programme. All facilitators are required to listen to the lectures and read the reading material in Prisma, since this is new for everyone involved. They also keep diaries according to the instructions I give to students.

Leonard Shlain, writer and brain surgeon, writes about how when our left brain governs our thoughts (as it has since we developed the alphabet thousands of years ago) we lose trust in our intuition, see e.g. *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*, p. 428-9.

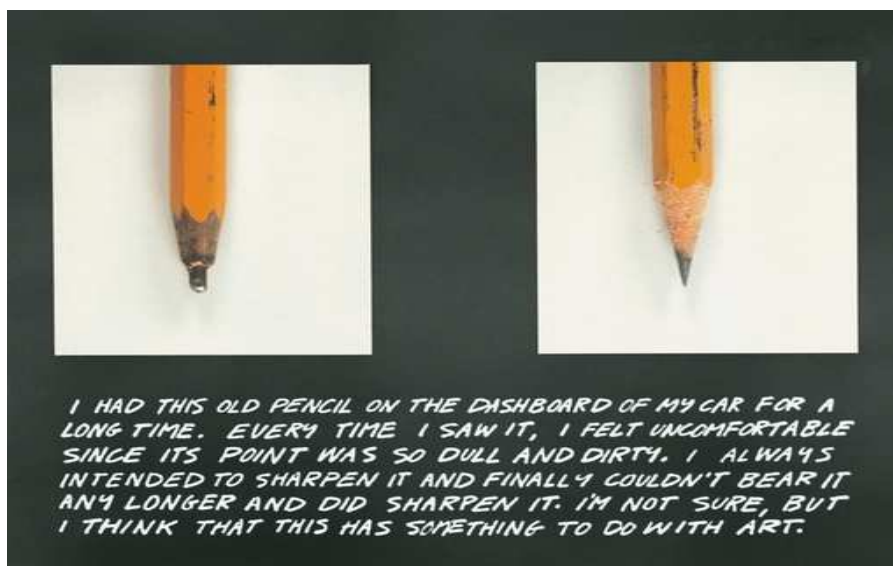
The constant need to systematize, theorize and categorize trends, approaches, messages, ideas in a given time and space, limits the flow of intuition and feeling. It at least limits our ability to understand what our intuition and feeling is telling us. In the big picture, we have limited knowledge about the world we live in, about our own body and mind and how we function in the cosmos. We don't even know how we were created in the first place. We continue to want to organise things and feel that we are in charge, on top of things. We strive to explain the unexplained, suppress the uncomfortable and dismiss the unknown. The knowledge the human race has accumulated is immense and admirable. I feel deeply humbled at the amazing research, theories, reflections and images that have been created over the centuries and I am in awe at the discoveries made thus far. Little that I know... But at the same time, it is necessary to remember that existing concepts and theories are good if they help us to think. But they are of no use to our creative minds if they take over our own thinking. And when that happens, original thought becomes a rarity. And I do wonder, to what extent do we remain original in thought? To what extent do we perceive with our own true senses, not with the memory of what others have thought before us?⁴

Professionally and personally, curriculum vitas explain who we are, our professional persona defines who we are and many of us pursue careers that adhere to the requirements of standard CV's; easily readable, chronological in order (without gaps please), digested and consumed by the hiring agents. At a young age, most of us try to picture ourselves in a job that is 'already out there', we try to fulfil requirements set out by our external environment, in which we eagerly participate, and we trust that external reactions to what we do will guide us towards personal fulfilment and secure employment. – Perhaps similar to what Plato set out in his *Allegory of the Cave*. And in the process, we divert the traffic that we are to our external environment, instead of looking inside at what is both wisdom, material and originality; trusting and acting on it.

⁴ Gustave Flaubert.

Sharpening to better reach the essence

When you go off track in life you stop listening to your intuition. You may experience this as a numb existence, monotonous or just relatively mechanical. It can also mean sleepless nights, racing mind, anxiety. It is as if your pencil isn't sharp enough and what comes out of it becomes blurry and unclear. If you manage to get back on track on your own terms, based on your essence, you will know what intuition is. These are the extreme poles and I mention them because I've experienced both. But what I think is this: generating our creative abilities has to do with sharpening our pencil, our essence.



I believe that intuition and being alert to it, connects you to your core, your essence. It enables you to be in a flow and you begin to trust that things will turn out well. This awareness will make you realise that creativity, in essence,

has as much to do with the process as it has to do with the outcome.

In the study programmes I have designed the main focus is to get students to realise their essence; the core of their originality. And like John Baldessari's pencil (see picture), the goal is to enable the students to *sharpen themselves* as creative and critical actors.

The programmes

Creative and critical thinking in an international context

This is a course I designed and am now teaching at the University of Reykjavík, School of Business. It gives 6 units (ECTS), is taught once a week for 12 weeks. The students are a mixture of day-time students who are usually in their thirties and have recently graduated with a matriculation exam. The other half is students that study Business while maintaining their day-time jobs. These are professionals working in banks, schools, accounting and firms. Twelve students have selected this course which is optional for 3rd year students.

The students are required to submit 3 individual assignments and one group assignment. All but one assignment emphasise the following:

- a. Reading material set for classes is used as a tool to think with, explore and debate when students put forth their own ideas and views.
- b. Students explore concepts and material on their own and venture onto new fields, areas which were not necessarily of general interest or known to them, collect information and material in places they are not used to visiting. The material also comes from very different directions, such as knitting, texture, business, international aid, arts, psychology etc.
- c. Students are asked not to summarize or give an analysis of the texts they read or material they use. They are asked to develop the thoughts that spring forward during the process or reading or exploring, and put forth their own ideas on their own terms.

The students always hand in a separate report about the work process, the thought processes and development of ideas, list of reading and materials used, what the work tells them, etc.

Prisma⁵, a new diploma study programme based on critical and creative thinking

The Icelandic University of Arts and the University of Bifröst in collaboration with the Academia of Reykjavík offers this programme as a reaction to the economic recession and rapidly rising unemployment rate in Iceland. Prisma is therefore partly an attempt to meet the needs of unemployed individuals from all levels of society who want to explore new opportunities and expand on their education and qualifications. The basic requirement for entrance is matriculation exam and students also have BA, BSc and Master's degrees in areas such as architecture, arts, business, management, performance arts, administration, advertising, film industry, the media and so on.

Prisma⁶ gives students 16 units (ECTS) and the bulk disciplines taught are philosophy and the arts. Many other disciplines are taught alongside these, such as anthropology, creative and communication studies, entrepreneurship, creative writing, drawing as a way to sense, marketing, cultural studies, architecture, design, the history of images, modern history and nationalism, music and music as a way to convey, structure and manage, international affairs, etc. Once a week, a guest speaker comes to Prisma to discuss new developments in his or her field of expertise.

Over forty speakers/teachers lecture at Prisma and four facilitators each manage a group of 15-20 students.

The Prisma students (69 in total) do a diary assignment, as do the students in the University of Reykjavík, and that is their first assignment⁷. Prisma is divided into 3 sections and in each section the students work in four groups on an assignment based on the results of the "fisherman's game". The fisherman's game is used in both programmes, and is ideal for a work in groups. A member of a group draws 4-5 tickets out of a ball. On the tickets are written a concept, a feeling, a recent headline from the

⁵ <http://www.bifrost.is/islenska/namsleidir/prisma-nytt-diplomanam/>

⁶ I was contracted to design the programme and submit to the schools. I was then hired to implement the idea and am now the director of Prisma.

⁷ See more about the diary assignment under "To see more".

media, a design (e.g. a building, furniture, or other design) a theory and a historical event. The group is supposed to explore the content in the tickets as part of their homework and diary writing, allow the lectures to feed into that process and finally submit an assignment at the end of the section. They can submit the product or assignment in any form they choose; an essay, video art, animation, transcript for a movie, advertisement etc, etc. As with the programme in University of Reykjavík (see section above), they are required to submit a report on the work process, development of thoughts and ideas related to the assignment, list main material used in the research behind it, and so on. This report behind the product is always the most important thing for the teacher or facilitator to assess the students' work. One facilitator is responsible for each group, and groups rotate at the beginning of each section. So throughout Prisma you change group and facilitator twice.

Four main steps

The following steps are at the core of the design of the study programmes.

1. To see more

The main aim is to introduce what creative thinking is about and the difference between what I call rational and creative thinking. This is done in lectures, discussion groups and individual assignments. I emphasise the senses, that we process information with all our senses, not only the eyes and ears. That *“all interpretation is the imposition of concepts”*⁸ and encourage them to look beyond analysis and interpretation to experience their own perception of things.

We discuss things that obscure our senses; feelings, relationships, overload of information, mainstream information, demands we make on ourselves, and so on. Originality, or our essence, has to do with our inner self and our perception of things. In order to get to the essence we need to learn to clear the way to it.

⁸ From C. Fred Alford, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy*.

The first step is to pay attention to what one pays attention to, record it and process the results in the first assignment. This is to introduce the diary as a tool in creative and critical thinking. The students are completely free to decide the shape and form of the first assignment, but are encouraged to allow things to evolve over a few days period without forcing things to happen or deciding too early what the assignment will look like. They are required to submit a report which explains how the assignment evolved, how they processed points from the diary that led to the assignment, how the project developed as it did and what the result tells them.

All students are required to use diaries throughout the programme, in which they write down their thoughts and ideas in order to identify their creative core, the things that catch their attention and ideas that are forming inside them but they perhaps haven't been paying attention to them.

2. To put on the reverse

This part deals with broadening the horizon, introducing different view points to the same thing, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange and taking nothing for granted. We discuss how mainstream views and theories have changed throughout the centuries, decades and years, how innovation and progress has taken place with this in mind, and so on.

3. To put into context

Students get an interdisciplinary education which enables them to put different disciplines, professions, ideologies and other things into context. This also enables them to be more flexible in the work market with regards to tasks and the ability to collect the necessary information needed in areas previously unknown to them.

The interdisciplinary approach is based on introducing what different disciplines have to offer to students through lectures, chapters, articles and books. What students are drawn to, what arouses their thinking and challenges their previously held beliefs is what they are encouraged to work with. Disciplines are introduced as tools to work with in an

endeavour to sharpen the students' creative and critical abilities. Many of the lectures are but a window into a whole discipline and it is up to the students to see the tool involved in each one of them (if there is one to their minds) and to explore further into this field of expertise if the students are interested in that.

4. To create on your own.

If you dwell only in the rhythm of creative thinking you may find it hard to realise or implement your ideas. Similarly, if you dwell only in rational thinking, you may find it hard to realise your creative abilities. Knowing how to work with these two rhythms is an important asset when it comes to creating on your own.

The students are trained how to do this through assignments in groups and individually, through the lectures and workshops.

In Prisma, the students are trained in using the methodology of design and painting during the processing of information and ideas in one of the assignments. In their third and last assignment, they are trained to use the methodology of devised theatre when working in a group, developing an idea and implementing it.

Final words

The study programmes are an innovation in universities in Iceland. Their structure, methodology and design are rooted in my personal experience and how I have learned to understand the different rhythms of creative and rational thinking. How I have learned to value and trust intuition and how I have become highly critical of highly calculative, sequential, and abstract approach to life on earth. And to be honest, I realised how much I would have wanted to study something that would have drawn out my creative side, made me feel comfortable about my eccentric strokes and strengthened my own inner compass. In this paper I have discussed creative and critical thinking at its basic level and how I have applied this in two educational programmes at a university level in Iceland. I argue that the methodology and vision can be applied to many more places

than universities programmes, such as aid agencies and organisations, companies and institutions working in the private or public sphere.