

Two rhythms and a sharpened pencil

The Icelandic University of Arts and the University of Bifröst in collaboration with the Academia of Reykjavík started Prisma 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.

Prisma¹ gives students 16 units (ECTS) and the bulk disciplines taught are philosophy and the arts. Many other disciplines are taught alongside these which I will elaborate later. The basic requirement for entrance is matriculation exam or equivalent, and students also have BA, BSc and Master's degrees in many different disciplines. Our students are from the age of 19 to 67.

But as a part of a larger ideology, Prisma is really about allowing the space, time and interaction of two different rhythms dancing in a room and a genuine understanding of the value and importance of sharpening pencils. Let me explain...

The beginning...

In order to do justice to Prisma, I want to move away from the structure of the programme for a while, and take you back to square one, expand our discussion and look back thousands of years.

So - first, there was a story, an anecdote, somebody had something to share. 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 and critical thinking.

Modern society

Key words: speed, attention span, core of creativity, the western legacy of rational thinking.

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, I need to apply my own original thoughts, perception, feelings and senses.

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. Whether we agree with Robinson on this point or not, I want us to expand the word 'education' in this context, to a general conditioning not only within the education system, but also labour market, institutional environment and social structures. In general, I would argue that there is limited room for creativity to live, breath and grow. Why?

¹ I am the designer and director of Prisma.

² His topic of discussion at [www.ted.com: http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html). See also *The Element* by Ken Robinson with Lou Aronica (2009) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's discussion about „mimes“ in *Creativity – Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention* (1996).

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, eccentrics and the unknown. Neither do we take things like intuition or gut feeling seriously enough.

We live in a world of rapid changes, speedy trends and information overload 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 intuition and creative core. Research shows that the biological effects of stress and the "bombardment of distracting stimuli" reduce the ability to think creatively³. Furthermore, some people argue that structured, hierarchical and rigid organisations kill all creativity. I tend to agree with that. Gordon Torr puts it bluntly: "Two guys in a garage will continue to outperform major corporations in a desperate race for originality⁴".

We are required to fulfil academic and professional rigorousness which maintains systems around 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!

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 limits our ability to be humane as opposed to mechanical, procedural, detached from reality of people and nature. Instead of diverting the traffic that we are inwards towards our originality, we reflect ourselves mostly in the speed of the requirements of modern society. And reflection can be nothing more than a mirror image; with no imagination.

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. While the truth is, we have no idea what the future holds, really. And as we prepare for it, we are preparing for what we already know.

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

³ See e.g. *Managing Creative People*, by Gordon Torr (2008), chapter 5 on cortical arousal and research by Teresa M. Amabile in particular.

⁴ Torr (2008).

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"?⁵

Two rhythms

The methodology in Prisma is very much based on my own personal experience of having had to learn to work in two different rhythms. It is not that I dance all day, it is just that I lack better words to explain my point. I've called these the rhythms of "creative thinking and rational thinking".

The creative thinking rhythm is a mode in which you allow fantasies, day dreams, primitive thoughts go wild. It is where you venture into the "unknown", allow yourself to think of things that you don't have terms for, often this is a feeling or intuition you experience that you want to get some more of and then later it will materialise into something new; an artwork, computer programme, script or a new political theory. It is the mode in which your censor has taken a break and you've completely forgotten there ever was one!

When something interesting occurs to you at the stage of creative thinking, you need to be able to slip out of it and return to the world of logic and everyday reality. This is where rational thinking is useful. It's the ability to plan, work under pressure, and test the feasibility of your idea in the cold light of day⁶.

However, rational thinking can be extremely judgmental, rude and destructive if it enters the mode of creative thinking. It's the voice that keeps stopping you saying; no you can't do that! This is ridiculous! Boring! This doesn't make sense, and so on.

Training the skill to manage the two rhythms is extremely valuable and can entail a radical change in people's lives. Depending on the background of the students in Prisma, one of the two rhythms usually emerges more strongly than the other during the course of the programme. This is typically the rhythm that was formerly less visible or known to them.

Lately I have learned of other terms for these two modes, such as "divergent thinking" as opposed to "convergent thinking", put forward by Tim Brown at IDEO. "Primary process thought" vs. "secondary process thought" found in psychological literature (e.g. Kris 1952⁷). Ken Robinson and the brain surgeon Leonard Shlain, among many others, have maintained that we humans reside in the left brain hemisphere at the cost of the right brain hemisphere. All these different terms are an attempt to explain the same process.

Interdisciplinary approach

Key words: new context, divergent thinking, a dense perspective?

Why an interdisciplinary approach? What does it do for creative and critical thinking?

As I mentioned earlier, the main disciplines taught are philosophy and the arts. The other disciplines are e.g. anthropology, creative and communication studies, creative and critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creative writing, drawing as a way to

⁵ A quote from Gustave Flaubert.

⁶ This is not an attempt to maintain that everyone is equally creative or creative in the same way. Indeed, there are many opposing and different views on this matter. In his book, *Managing Creative People*, (2008) Gordon Torr maintains not all people are creative or can be creative. You can't teach creativity, he argues. Personally, I am still searching for the answer.

⁷ Torr, 2008.

sense, marketing, cultural studies, architecture, design, sociology, 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 lecture at Prisma and four facilitators each manage a group of 15-20 students throughout the programme.

As I said before, our (humans) constant need to systematize, theorize and categorize trends, approaches, messages, ideas in a given time and space, limits the flow of intuition and feeling. In Prisma, we approach these disciplines as "tools to think with". Our mission is not to repeat what others have said, give summaries and analyse theories and texts for the sole purpose of knowing the texts better. But rather, students need to know the crux of the theories and texts well enough to be able to use them "on their own terms", to forward their own original thoughts. Apply them in new areas, match them with a totally different discipline and so on. The different lectures and reading material are therefore like keys into new dimensions, views and thoughts that the student continuously reflects on from a perspective of his or her own that he or she develops during the programme.

The interdisciplinary approach widens the horizon. It allows different perspectives all at once on a given topic. It breaks down barriers that we may have in our minds, between disciplines, traditions and lines of thought. It also trains students in taking on tasks and subjects previously unknown to them which translates into more varied opportunities, flexibility in the labour market as well as in life. And at the end of the day, it provides students with the permission and space to realise the value of their own thoughts, perspectives and intuition.

The interdisciplinary approach is the raw material to work with. And while the interdisciplinary teaching has educational value in itself, it is not a material to maintain unchanged. It should move our spirit forward, to new dimensions and help us realise the value of a humble courage that dares to trust that a creative process, even if the answers aren't visible from the start. I think it is safe to say that it is in vain to try to *make* people think more creatively⁸. Teresa M. Amabile has done extensive research on creative work processes, brains of creative and uncreative people and has found out, among other things, that people produce their best creative work when they do it for its own sake. It is intrinsic motivation that generates creativity, not financial benefits, titles or deadlines⁹. A flow of creativity comes not from conditioning, although frameworks can be extremely useful.

An idea or product that deserves the label "creative" arises from synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person. Research also shows that people are more likely to think and work creatively by changing conditions in the environment¹⁰.

The four steps

The following steps are an important part of the design of Prisma.

1. To see more

Here, we emphasise the senses, that we process information with all our senses, not only the eyes and ears. That language, as a way of communicating and receiving information is more than information through the mouth or text. That "*all interpretation is*

⁸ See e.g. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, (1996) *Creativity. Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*.

⁹ Torr, 2008

¹⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, 1996.

*the imposition of concepts*¹¹ and we encourage the students 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.

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 or sketch book as a tool in creative and critical thinking. The students are completely free to decide the shape and form of the first assignment, but one of the guidelines is that they write or sketch down what they pay attention to, whether or not they like what they notice! And that they do this for a few days without thinking of how the final outcome will look like. And this is perhaps the most challenging part of the assignment! 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. On the fifth day, they select a number of points they've put down in their diary or sketch book and "see what these points tell them". The result is often a great surprise to the students. Some of the paint, write short stories, do a cartoon, or conceive the first piece of jewellery they later start to produce! They are required to submit a report which explains the work process, how they processed the points from the diary that led to the assignment, how the project developed as it did and what the result tells them. The most challenging part of this assignment is trusting that your attention, as unimportant as it may seem, is actually something to work with!

All students are required to use diaries throughout the programme, as a way to clear the mind and train the students in using their consciousness as well as sub-consciousness in enhancing creativity. It is also a way of being able to use the reading material and lectures as tools to think with.

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. In one of the lectures, the director of the University of Arts, Hjalmar Ragnarsson, reminded us that the heliocentric theory had been put forth during the 3rd century before Christ by Aristarchus but at that time, geocentric theory prevailed. It wasn't until 1.800 years later that Copernicus presented the heliocentric theory again – based on Aristarchus's work – that our view of the world radically changed. Mind you, for 1.800 years an important truth was lying around without being noticed. What is it today, that we aren't noticing?

3. To put into context

This has mostly to do with the interdisciplinary approach of Prisma, which I have already discussed.

¹¹ From C. Fred Alford, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy*.

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.

Fisherman

During the work process in the assignment, students are encouraged to revisit these four steps. The largest group assignment is called "the fisherman's game". A member of each working group draws 4-5 tickets out of a ball. On each tickets is written a concept, a feeling, a recent headline from the media, some sort of design work (e.g. a building, furniture, infrastructure) a theory and e.g. a historical event. At the start, the information on the tickets makes no sense as a whole and seem to have nothing in common. The group is supposed to explore the content on the tickets as part of their homework, allow the lectures to feed into that process and finally submit an assignment at the end of a two weeks period. They can submit the product or assignment in any form they choose; an essay, video art, animation, transcript for a movie, advertisement, art performance, installation, business project etc. The students 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 base their assessment on. One facilitator is responsible for each group, and groups rotate at the beginning of each of the three sections.

Students are also required to submit a sketch book, which can also be a box, at the end of the programme that explains their journey throughout Prisma.

The facilitators

Key word: varied experience, open-minded and generous individuals.

The four facilitators in Prisma come from different disciplines themselves and the common denominator for them all is varied experience, open-mindedness and generosity in interaction and teaching. One is a historian, expert on Icelandic food culture and has an MA in Cultural Management. Another one is an architect, an artist and a lecturer at the University of Arts. Third one has a degree in Psychology, has been a monk in Thailand and a stock exchange broker in Hong Kong. The fourth one is a theatre director and has an extensive experience in cultural management.

One of the most important lessons from Prisma for the universities is the value of close knitted and continuous interaction between students and facilitators. School is from 9am – 4 pm all days of the week, with a mixture of lectures and workshops and the facilitators are actively present all the time. Their generosity in interaction, friendliness and bright spirit does magic.

Sharpening the pencil

I've talked about intuition, the importance of knowing your creative core, realising where your originality lies and appreciate it. Knowing your own compass enables you to stand firmly, show flexibility and be unafraid of new things. Paying attention to what it is you pay attention to is a short cut to your intuitive sense of the world. When you do enjoy this balance your pencil is sharp. But when it isn't, it draws a blurry and unclear picture.

In Prisma, the students are the main topic. The main focus is to get students to realise their essence; the core of their originality and realise where their energy is best served. And like John Baldessari's pencil (see picture), the goal is to enable the students to *sharpen themselves* as creative and critical actors.

Innovation

Innovation and creative thinking is about everything. You can be an artist and not be creative or innovative. And you can be a physicist or a teacher and be very innovative and creative. I could go on and on, on this topic ... as you may have noticed today!

I hope I haven't left you with a feeling that Prisma disregards the conventional university study programmes and specialisation in different disciplines. That is not at all the feeling I mean to convey. I am rather searching for a balance, which I think our planet is in dire need of. Sometimes poems speak a truth that presentations can't. So I want to finish by sharing with you a poem by Bill Holm, which I think is a fine final tone. Thank you.

Advice

*Someone dancing inside us
has learned only a few steps:
the "Do-Your-Work" in 4/4 time,
the "What-Do-You-Expect" Waltz.
He hasn't noticed yet the woman
standing away from the lamp,
the one with black eyes
who knows the rumba,
and strange steps in jumpy rhythms
from the mountains of Bulgaria.
If they dance together,
something unexpected will happen;
if they don't, the next world
will be a lot like this one.*

Bill Holm 1943 – 2009