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# Releasing creativity in teaching and learning: the potential role of organisational legitimacy and increased dialogue

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This paper reflects on the challenges of facilitating creativity in teaching and learning. The authors contend that if enabled, creativity has the potential to deliver substantive change to higher education but that its potential often remains unexploited. Our study suggests that creative practice is alive and well amongst teachers in higher education but that it is greatly restricted by a perceived lack of organisational legitimacy, as result, ideas are being lost. Frequently, creative ideas remain unarticulated by the individual academics to whom they occur. We conclude that higher educational institutions need to make a concerted effort to make creative practice legitimate and foster novel approaches to supporting creativity by establishing an organisational culture that enables dialogue and collaboration between creative individuals, within and beyond the traditional academic boundaries.

**Keywords:** creativity; organisational culture; higher education; teaching and learning; organisational legitimacy; dialogue



## Introduction

Practices in higher education need to become more creative. There are many compelling reasons why this is so: existing knowledge about learning environments, currently available and emerging technologies, the demands and expectations of students, the changing economic and demographic dynamics in higher education, and persistent observations that novelty and diversity of experience can enhance learning. For these reasons, it is vital for pedagogical practice to be creative and for teachers to continue to innovate, both within and beyond the classroom.

However, despite compelling reasons to rethink, to refresh and to change the way we teach, sometimes even the smallest innovations can be difficult to achieve. Universities are typically large, elaborate bureaucracies with high levels of vertical and horizontal job segregation, characterised by established routines and rituals, many of which mitigate against the creative imperative (Hannan & Silver, 2000). Perez (1983) states that incremental innovation can be quite easily accommodated within the organisational context but radical large-scale innovation often involves a level of destruction to enable the emergence of new practices. Therefore, the more established the routines and regulations, the harder it tends to be for creativity to be explored in a meaningful, productive way: The organisational system itself can gravitate against some of the most promising creative teaching ideas.

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This is not to suggest that lecturers, support staff and students from diverse academic disciplines do not engage creatively within their teaching and learning (T&L) domains, but rather in large organisations, creative practice often needs stimulation both within and across disciplinary boundaries – otherwise creativity can be taken for granted or subsumed (Jackson, Oliver, Shaw, & Wisdom, 2007).

This paper describes how a cluster of collaborating higher education institutions worked to create such a stimulus. By establishing an entity entitled 'the Teaching and Learning Incubation Centre', the aim was to encourage the establishment of innovative T&L practices or routines and to provide supports for innovative teaching ideas. By reflecting on the developments of the incubation centre so far, we argue that organisational legitimacy may be a vital lever for creative practice in T&L in many higher education contexts.



## Background

Academic institutions are frequently required to respond to ongoing societal change in ways that are often complex and require the development of creative solutions. Current challenges include an increasingly diverse and expanding student population and changes in graduate skills and knowledge requirements from the workplace (Robley, Whittle, & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005). There are increasing calls for universities to find ways to 'do more with less'. The need to provide effective, high quality and satisfying educational experiences to an increasingly diverse population, with less money and fewer resources is also creating even stronger rationales for innovative practices. In addition, there are increased demands for flexible, open and creative graduates who can adapt to complex responsibilities within the workplace (Barak, 2009). Educators need to understand what it means to be creative in the many domains it embraces (Jackson & Shaw, 2006), and academic institutions need to be agile and innovative. Yet, in many contexts, it is argued that academic practice is becoming increasingly restrictive and controlled as educational institutions strive to integrate the rigid practices required by higher educational authorities (see e.g. Churchman & King, 2009).

This is particularly evident in the realms of T&L where practitioners are urged to organise their teaching by developing structured teaching portfolios, designing lesson plans, identifying learning outcomes and installing many standard features into the curriculum to guide student learning. All of these practices have strong evidence-based imperatives, but there are concerns associated with them too (Jackson, 2008). Whilst focused on improvements to existing practices in T&L, they may constrain or prohibit creativity in the development of new practices. Despite the need for standardisation and routinisation, creativity needs also to be embraced. Nowhere is this more important than in organisations responsible for teaching, learning and research.

By making T&L processes more innovative, we may enable educational institutions to respond more effectively to ongoing challenges in creative ways, to nurture satisfying and meaningful careers for our educators and to enhance students' experiences (Hannan & Silver, 2000).

But creativity is not easy. Educators must grapple with institutional forces such as leadership (Rank, Nelson, Allen, & Xu, 2009), organisational culture and climate (Hannan & Silver, 2000), and other contexts and dynamics that can mitigate against creativity. We argue that a deliberate focus on organisational legitimacy may be one

of the effective means for empowering and enabling pedagogical creativity in higher educational contexts.

### *The emergence of the Incubation Centre*

The Incubation Centre for Teaching and Learning was set up to enable dialogue and to encourage the initiation and sharing of new T&L practices across the Shannon Consortium, in Ireland.[1] The centre was established in September 2009, staffed by a coordinator and a director.

The centre was designed to support the needs of teachers at key stages of the innovation process. Support included assistance with generating or identifying new teaching ideas; scoping and developing these ideas; drafting and submitting creative proposals; providing evaluation and formative feedback; and implementing the new idea.

The centre also secured a small seed fund to provide financial support for fledgling ideas. Teachers in the higher education institutions of the Shannon region were encouraged to apply for the fund on a competitive basis, and their proposals were considered by an external panel of decision-makers drawn from diverse domains and incorporating a number of key expert voices (a student representative, a business entrepreneur, a T&L expert, an artist and an educational policy developer at governmental level). The panel's function was to review applications, select shortlisted projects, award funding to successful applicants and provide formative feedback to all applicants. Together with the panel, we established four criteria for the evaluation of new T&L ideas:

(1) the creative nature of the project;
(2) the potential impact on T&L;
(3) the sustainability of the idea; and
(4) the 'wild card' (factors of emerging importance that had not been identified at the outset).

The centre issued its first call for participants in March of 2009. Sixty-two people (40 academics, 15 support staff and seven students) from the four partner third-level campuses came forward with new ideas for T&L. Applicants were spread across all academic faculties; Arts, Humanities and Social Science, Business, Science and Engineering, and Education and Health Science.

The evidence presented, in this paper was gathered by the Director, during ongoing formal and informal interactions with the community across the four partner institutions. Data included observation of proposer discussions, in-depth, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, e-mail communications and the proposals submitted to the incubation centre.

## Defining creativity in T&L

Beghetto and Kaufman (2009) argue that typically, attempts to define creativity focus on the magnitude of the idea: 'little-c' (everyday creativity) and 'big-c' (revolutionary, ground breaking creativity). They suggest it may be more useful to adopt an alternative notion they call 'mini-c' (intimate, personal creativity), a notion that seems to align more closely with Vygotsky's definition of a creative act.

> any human act that gives rise to something new is referred to as a creative act, regardless of whether what is created is a physical object or some mental or emotional construct that lives within the person who created it and is known only to him. (Vygotsky, 1967/2004, as cited in Beghetto & Kaufman, 2009, p. 7).

Nurturing creativity often requires the recognition of small-scale personal creativity (Amabile, 1997) which when supported, can develop into something with broader implications and applications, 'these min-c insights and interpretations can develop into little-c or big-c contributions' (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2009, p. 309).

Theoretical perspectives that inform our experiences with creativity are as follows: organisational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), catalytic creativity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001) and organisational emergence (Seel, 2002).

Legitimacy is defined as a set of organisational rules or norms, or a generalised perception held by the members of a particular community of what is appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. The notion of legitimacy can help to explain the perceptions held by individuals of the appropriateness of creativity in T&L. Higher educational organisations can play a more deliberate and facilitative role in motivating individuals to engage in creative practice. The notion of catalytic creativity is based on a systems perspective and focuses on the role of the extended environment in shaping creative contributions.

Emergence is described as resulting from interactions between individuals or groups of individuals within complex organisational systems. Organisational emergence is often unplanned and cannot be controlled or coerced. It results in unexpected occurrences and developments, which emerge from within the system. Seel (2002) contends that there are a number of cultural factors which enable organisational emergence: connectivity; diversity of perspectives; the flow of information; interpersonal interactions and unaccounted for time (King & Anderson, 2002).

Seel (2002) suggests that there is a strong link between organisational culture and creativity. An organisational culture that is supportive of creativity encourages and supports a level of organisational emergence. This may be encouraged through tightly connected communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which engage in dialogue, and embrace diversity of perspective.

Innovation is also an essential process to foster, as it is the process through which the creative input is refined and disseminated to the external world or 'the process of bringing any new problem solving idea into use' (Van de Ven & Angle, 1989, p. 12) Whereas, the term creativity is used to define the capacity to create something new or 'the ability to produce work that is both novel and appropriate' (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999, p. 3). Therefore, without creative ideas to feed the innovation pipeline, 'innovation is an engine without any fuel' (Mclean, 2005, p. 227).

### *Legitimacy as an 'anchor point' for creativity in T&L*

Organisational legitimacy is defined as 'a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimisation begins with an act, process or idea, which is locally validated, diffused and then accepted as valid by the collective organisation (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006). Legitimacy plays a central role in organisational life

and can result in either adherence to the status quo or the acceptance of new practices or activities. Legitimisation of the status quo often results in the adoption of non-optimal, low-risk actions that are created as a result of adherence to existing practices (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006). Whereas, the acceptance of new practices can result in organisational change with older practices being replaced by more appropriate newer ones. Legitimacy has become a fundamental 'anchor point' for understanding the normative and cognitive forces that constrain or empower actors within an organisation (Johnson et al., 2006; Suchman, 1995).

### *Types of legitimacy*

There are different kinds of organisational legitimacy that can help to provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics that enable and constrain organisational actors. Suchman's typology (see Table 1) focuses on three: pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy. Suchman (1995) argues that each kind requires a different set of behavioural dynamics to be present both at organisational and individual levels.

Pragmatic legitimacy concerns the impact a new ideology, act or practice, ivs perceived to have in solving an existing problem. Pragmatic legitimacy is associated with the benefits or outcomes, which will accrue as a result of adopting or adhering to a new practice. Moral legitimacy is based on whether the activity is ethically the right thing to do; and cognitive legitimacy can be explained as the individual or group's assertion as to whether the activity is deemed comprehensible or aligns with the established rules of engagement or practices of the institution.

### *The shaping of creative contributions – the role of the system*

Individuals rarely develop creative contributions in isolation. Researchers are paying increasing attention to the role played by the wider environment and organisational culture in enabling, shaping and moulding new ideas (Seel, 2002). Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2001) contend that the development of a creative contribution involves intricate interactions between three components: the creative individual; the symbolic domain and the social field.

Creative individuals work and learn within their symbolic domain by absorbing new knowledge; engaging with 'lived experiences' (Jackson et al., 2007); and developing the abilities to reflect on and extract meaning. Over time this engagement transforms individual thinking (Bakhtin, 1981) and would-be creative contributions (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001).

Table 1. Types of legitimacy.

| Pragmatic legitimacy | Moral legitimacy | Cognitive legitimacy |
|---|---|---|
| Individuals are motivated by practical and idealistic considerations | Individuals are motivated by the needs of society | Individuals are motivated by appropriateness and interpretability |
| *Does this solve a problem?* | *Is this the right thing to do?* | *Does this make sense?* |

Note: Adapted from Suchman (1995).

The social field also plays a central role in defining the domain and in deciding what is learned by new comers. The field can have a positive or negative impact on the contribution depending to some degree on the individuals' ability to absorb negative and/or positive feedback.

When applied to the academic environment, these ideas provide greater understanding of the supporting role that academic institutions can play in nurturing creativity. However, if creative contributions are not discussed or released into the domain or field, it is likely that they will rest in individual heads or safe houses particularly if their creators see them as inappropriate disturbance of the status quo. Individual creative contributions need to be shared so as to be formed, then evaluated and validated by experts in the field before they are widely diffused.

We were guided by these notions when reflecting on and analysing the information that was generated by discussions about the new ideas stimulated by the establishment of the incubation centre.



## What the participants told us about creativity

The following are the comments and feedback gathered as a result of intensive interaction between the incubation centre and those academics, students and support staff that came forward to discuss and formulate their creative contributions. The comments were gathered before, during and after the launch of the incubation centre's seed fund.

### *Defining creativity in T&L*

Our findings suggest that academics, support staff and students are constantly engaged in generating creative ideas about T&L. There was evidence of creative practice and innovative ideas across all academic faculties: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; the Business School; the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences; the Faculty of Science and Engineering and the College of Art and Design. Participants talked about the personal nature of creativity, suggesting that ideas often 'lived' in their heads for some time. Many of them had ideas about T&L that they never shared with peers in their own or other academic domains. The majority of those who came forward with new ideas (92%) reported that the first time they had received any feedback about their idea was from the incubation centre. Participants tended to report that their ideas had never been evaluated or validated by experts in their field. In general, creative contributions that were developed tended to be implemented only within the boundaries of the individual's classroom. One respondent said 'I didn't think anyone else would be interested in what I do'. Another was unsure about the innovative nature of the new things that she was trying 'I know now that I have always tried new things, but I guess at the time I was doing them I didn't think they were that terribly new'.

One respondent, when talking about how she came up with ideas, talked about how she tended to keep them to herself particularly at the early stages of the idea's existence: 'I don't tell anyone else until I have tried it out and am pretty sure that it works. Even then sometimes I don't find time to tell others about what I'm doing'.

Another suggested that 'sometimes [a new teaching idea] just stays in my head, I think about it a lot but I don't actually do it. I suppose fear holds me back, not

knowing if it will work'. Many participants reported that 'the first time I had a chance to discuss my idea or receive feedback was with the incubation centre'.

We carried out detailed semi-structured interviews with the seven successful seed fund applicants to evaluate the role of the educational system. Participants stated that occasionally they discussed ideas with close peers that they trusted and had good working and personal relationships with.

We asked the seven award winners if their departments or third-level institutions had been supportive of their efforts to innovate in the realm of T&L. Those emanating from newer faculties were quick to respond and stated clearly that 'they felt supported' in their creative endeavour and that the department 'actively encouraged' them to be creative: 'in my department teaching innovation is very strongly supported', and 'I suppose we kind of have a policy in our department that we try not to repeat the same projects over a four year cycle'.

Two participants who continuously engaged in creative endeavour reported creativity as an integral part of their job or 'a way of life'. They felt both supported and rewarded by their departments and as a result were constantly dabbling in creativity 'it's the way we do things around here, its great to surprise your peers and come up with new concepts for teaching. We draw tremendous energy from it' 'sometimes we just get lost in new space and come up with the most amazing connections between things that didn't even seem connected at the beginning'.

Not all respondents had such positive things to say about the way T&L was supported. One of the award winners who was based in a more established department reported 'teaching isn't perceived as terribly important…my head of department wouldn't even know I had been awarded funding under the incubation centre, and certainly I won't be telling him/her, it wouldn't mean anything to him/her'. There was little evidence that the participants engage in creativity for career progression or promotion indeed senior management had little or no interaction with participants. Whilst newer departments appeared to be more supportive of creative practice in T&L this was by no means the experience of everyone we interviewed: 'if it doesn't fit with the established formula then it is hard to get things accepted, that's why we just do it ourselves in our own departments or classrooms'.

Those individuals, who reported that they didn't feel supported by their departments or indeed organisations, suggested that they felt isolated, and that there was little of no recognition or support for creative practice.

> I try to hide what I do in the classroom, if it doesn't fit with the existing or established practice, it's better to say nothing at all. I do it for my students and to keep myself awake and alive when I teach, otherwise I would be bored silly and so would my students.

The incubation centre participants identified 'improving the student experience' and the 'personal satisfaction' as the key motivating factors for engaging in creativity. Comments such as 'I feel satisfied if the experience has been good' 'if I know the students are learning that's satisfaction' 'how I have ended up with this project is a constant desire to engage students'. Other themes also emerged such as creative practice enables 'questioning the existing way', 'problem solving', 'it's cheaper than buying an off the shelf solutions', 'it's a way of drawing on the wealth of your life experience and using it in the classroom'.

## Discussion

This was an exploratory and qualitative study, which focused on the experiences and insights of a small number of innovators in T&L within one regional zone of higher education. To draw robust or generalisable conclusions from the analysis of their responses would be a mistake. However, some of the comments of the participants reveal dynamics associated with creativity in higher education that might suggest important caveats when it comes to supporting pedagogical and indeed other forms of innovation in large organisations.

Comments from several respondents suggest something very interesting, which certainly requires further investigation and analysis in higher education settings: it seems that new ideas can linger in the consciousness of potential innovators, without benefiting from the dynamism of discussion, exploration and analysis amongst



Table 2. The role of academic environment in shaping creative contributions.

| The individual | Symbolic domain | Social field |
|---|---|---|
| *The innovating individual who provides the creative contribution* | *Where the individual works, absorbs and contributes* | *Gatekeepers and practitioners who respond to, judge and reward contributions* |
| The academic | *where:* peers, department, discipline, faculty, university, higher education<br>*absorbs:* body of knowledge, skills and practices<br>*contributes:* knowledge, stimulates learning, new practices and skills | *components:* the fields' *elite*: established academics, peers and practitioners, senior management, students<br>*methods*: scholarly peer review, management review, student teaching evaluations |
| The student | *where:* peers, teachers, tutors, discipline, faculty, university<br>*absorbs*: body of knowledge, skills and practices<br>*contributes:* knowledge | *components:* lecturers<br>*methods:* assessment, grading, feedback |
| The support staff | *where:* peers, department, faculty university, higher education<br>*absorbs:* skills and practices<br>*contributes:* system performance, skills and practices | *components:* senior administrators, management, academic staff, students, higher educational authority<br>*methods*: quality/performance review, informal feedback |
| *Individual internalises a particular version of the domain and the field which informs the work they do.* | *Provides fertile ground to nurture, transform and mould the contribution* | *Establishes criteria for evaluation, judges and decides on outcome of contribution* |

different people and viewpoints. The trigger for innovation may be that crucial but fragile moment when someone brings an idea out into the open. Broaching the subject with someone else, sharing the idea with a colleague or presenting an idea to a forum that is likely to take it seriously or support are all routes to achieving a sense of legitimacy. In order for a 'trigger point' to be successful (i.e. to increase the idea's chances of being tested and or implemented), it needs to be accompanied by a supportive organisational culture in which to enable the potential innovator to articulate and put shape on the ideas that they are considering in ways that are institutionally implementable and aligned.

Whilst several of the innovators felt supported within their own departments, it was less clear that such a supportive environment was always strong enough to provide the legitimacy and momentum that is needed for a creative idea to be implemented in some way.

The wider organisational culture has a supportive role to play; internally this may involve academic peers, course teams, departments, faculty and senior management. Equally importantly are the connections to the external environment to other academics and peers nationally and internationally. New ideas needs to be nurtured from inception to birth requiring the development of a supportive 'climate and culture' by creating norms, habits and systems that routinely look for new ideas, stimulate creativity and provide the dialogic and practical space in which such ideas can be piloted, evaluated and implemented (Table 2).



## Conclusions and recommendations

Whilst our results clearly demonstrate that there is a strong and easily uncovered orientation towards small-scale creativity in T&L, our findings strongly suggest that there is scope for higher education organisations to take a more proactive role: firstly by legitimising creativity as appropriate behaviour, and secondly by embedding this legitimacy in organisational culture which requires a supportive organisational strategy, visionary senior management and clearly defined organisational mission and values. In addition, and equally important, there is a continued need to create and sustain arenas that enable creative and innovative dialogue about T&L (Jackson et al., 2007).

### *Legitimising reactivity in T&L*

Higher education organisations should send out clear signals that creativity in T&L is both appropriate and recognised. Creating an entity such as an incubation centre comes some way towards legitimising creativity in T&L. But in addition to and alongside an incubation centre as a stimulator of innovation, it is almost inevitably necessary to deepen an organisation's strategic commitment to creativity and innovation, to engage senior management and to create departmental and faculty champions if creativity is to be viewed and experienced as a sustainable legitimate endeavour.

### *Facilitating increased interaction*

In order to grow the scale, magnitude and potential of T&L innovation, organisations need to facilitate increased interaction at a number of levels: between peers

within the same academic domains and across the boundaries of different academic domains. In addition, dialogue with experts in the field is also required as their opinions and feedback is crucial.

Finally, if innovation is to flourish and deliver to its true potential in T&L, strong commitment needs to be made by educational institutions to signal that both creativity and innovation are indeed required and valued within higher education. This will encourage and inspire creative individuals to contribute and share their ideas with the broader community, thereby sending new and dynamic ripples throughout education and finally bring to the surface ideas that otherwise risk being unexploited.

## Note

1. The Shannon Consortium is a partnership between four academic institutions on the West Coast of Ireland. It was set up in 2007 and its members are The University of Limerick, The Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Institute of Technology and The Institute of Technology Tralee.



## Notes on contributors

Andrea Deverell is the director of the Incubation Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick. Her research interests include: innovation and creativity in Teaching and Learning, service and experiential learning, and organisational diversity and personal awareness. She is responsible for the facilitating and encouraging academics and support-staff to approach their teaching in creative and imaginative ways. Currently, the centre is involved in the roll out of a service learning provision for the student population. She has extensive experience in teaching part-time distance-learning postgraduate students.

Sarah Moore is a professor and the Associate Vice President Academic at the University of Limerick. Her research interests include: learning orientations and environments in work and education, gender in education, cognitive style, student retention in third-level environments, professional development in academia, teaching innovation, and diversity awareness and management. She is responsible for the continued development of Teaching and Learning strategies at the University of Limerick and is strand leader of the Shannon consortium's Teaching and Learning strategy. She regularly publishes books and journal articles in the areas of academic practice, student development and learning dynamics. She has recently joined the UK's SEDA papers committee, acts as external advisor to the teaching grants committee at University College Dublin, is a member of the Irish Institute of Training and Development, and an appointed member of the Higher Education Authority.

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