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Practicum

The Creative Mindflow

Achieving and Maintaining Optimal Potential

There is a singular experience within creativity that is as profound as it is difficult to maintain. I experienced this peak creative moment a few months ago while writing fiction. The experience left me feeling centered on the present, wholly engrossed in the words coming forth, driven to engage in the writing, and unified in spirit to the challenge. I experienced the optimal use of my own creativity. I became a conduit for the inner potential available within me. This experience is unique to every person who experiences it but can happen to anyone. I call this optimal creative moment the creative mindflow. It is a perfect flow of creative thoughts without obstruction.

I became aware of the creative mindflow while endeavoring to write creative fiction but I have experienced the creative mindflow on other occasions in my life as well; I just did not see its unique qualities before. I overlooked this experience mainly because I wasn't focused on my creativity, I didn't trust or encourage my creativity, and I didn't take my time with it. But much of that changed this summer. I steadily worked to break down my mental barriers obstructing creative expression. This process of clearing away my internal obstacles opened the door to a great deal of inner inspection and reflection¹. It was through this close examination of myself that I discovered the creative mindflow's existence, essential attributes, and benefits.

There is great difficulty in finding and maintaining creative potential. Any creative person can attest to this fact. Reaching the pure form of inner creativity is not an easy task if using only one's effort and intuition. I have recognized this fact and have tried to employ a higher degree of rationality in order to find useful methods of reaching

¹ Clark, Suzanne. "Building and Sustaining Connectedness to One's Musical Creativity and Spirit." Masters thesis, University of Massachusetts, Boston. 2002, pp.1.

and maintaining a creative mindflow. The results of my research speak to the challenges of writers, photographers, visual artists, or anyone involved in a creative venture. It also has large implications in the study of creativity itself. My audience is broad and varied, showing that this topic has large significance in our world today.

First Step: Discovering a Working Idea of the Nature of Creativity

The creative mindflow is a subset of creativity so, naturally, the first step in examining the creative mindflow is to discover a working idea on the nature of creativity. Unfortunately, there exists no dominant definition of creativity in creativity research today. Creativity is a dynamic concept and is difficult to encapsulate in words alone. Still, one needs to be able to define the details of the subject at hand before elaborating on it. To reach this initial goal I examined not only my own observations, but also that other creatives, creative researchers, and philosophers. Each source had his or her own perspective to offer and it was through the exposure to their vastly different views that I was able to reach a conclusion.

A tension within the creative individual emerged as a dominant theme in much of my sources' observations. Creativity researcher D.W. MacKinnon said, "...there are certain domains of creative endeavor which require that the successful practitioner be both artist and scientist."² Philosophic historian Robert Champigny spoke of philosopher Gaston Bachelard's ideas: "Bachelard is thus led to speak of a 'dual situation: experience, imagination, poetry, on the one hand; experiment, intellect, science, on the other."³ And fiction author Susan Butler said, "Another way of conceiving this duality of the creative mind is as a 'bridge'. A bridge between openness and focus; between words and sensory experience; between the creative and the critical; the conscious and the preconscious."⁴ Creativity is not a phenomena separate from other parts of

² MacKinnon, D.W. *The Personality Correlates of Creativity A Study of American Architects*. Excerpts by D.W. MacKinnon. Proceedings of the Fourteenth Congress on Applied Psychology, vol. 2, Munksgaard, 1962, pp. 11-39.

³ Champigny, Robert. *Translations from the Writings of Contemporary French Philosophers*. The Journal of Philosophy, vol.54, no.11 (May 23, 1957), pp. 337.

⁴ Butler, Susan. *A Teller's Tale: Joining the Circle*. Master's Thesis, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 2002, pp. 24.

consciousness—it is interwoven within consciousness. There seems to be a duality in creativity: one side more imaginative and another more rational.

I define imagination as divergent thought in all forms. It is the opening up to possibility. It extends current ability to see things that do not exist yet...but that *might*. Imagination is the ability to perceive realities beyond the current state and to make something new out of the old⁵. It overcomes obstacles by not recognizing the barriers as barriers at all. It leaps over the walls of limitation.

Rationality is convergent thought in all forms. It allows us to analyze information and events so as to better understand them⁶. Rationality is organization and revision that refines what is already present in the world. Such refinement is done by stripping away the unnecessary parts. It overcomes obstacles by tearing down the walls of limitation.

My sources formed a loose agreement that imagination and rationality both play a part in creativity, but the emphasis and definition of these different sides ranged widely. Some creatives favored imaginative forms while others preferred the qualities of a more rational mind. The attributes of imagination were spiritual for some⁷ and entirely cognitive for others⁸; the attributes of rationality were sometimes transcendental and barely useful in other views. Clearly, there appeared contradictions and blurred boundaries between these two modes of thinking. I took this into account, pondered it, looked at it from different angles and finally discovered a working definition of creativity.

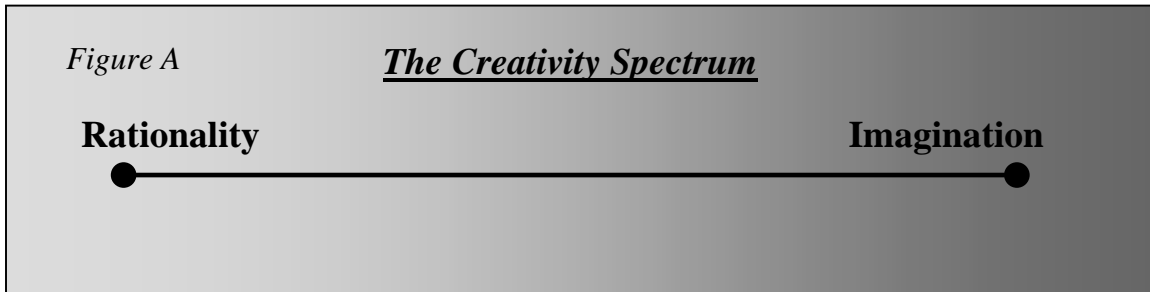
I came to realize that it was the blurring between rationality and imagination that was the most important factor in creative thought. Using this realization I decided that creativity exists in a spectrum with rationality on one side and imagination on the other (see Figure A).

⁵ Christofides, C.G. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 20, No. 3. (Spring, 1962), pp. 265.

⁶ Descartes, Rene. *Meditations: Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Ed. E.S. Haldane & G.R.T. Ross. Dover, 1911, pp. 152-153.

⁷ Els, Susan McBride. *Into the Deep: A Writer's Look at Creativity*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994, pp. 60.

⁸ King, Stephen. *On Writing*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000, pp. 25.



Creativity exists in the blending between these two poles. Creatives find themselves somewhere between the pure form of rationality and imagination in any creative activity. These poles are not *opposite* poles, but *complementary* poles. They are equally important to creativity and help each other accomplish creative success. But it is important to note that these complementary poles only exist in their pure form as a method of comparison. This fact establishes the unavoidable paradox in defining creativity: the poles must exist in theory but a person can never attain a pure state of either one. Both sides feed off the other’s qualities and cannot exist separately.

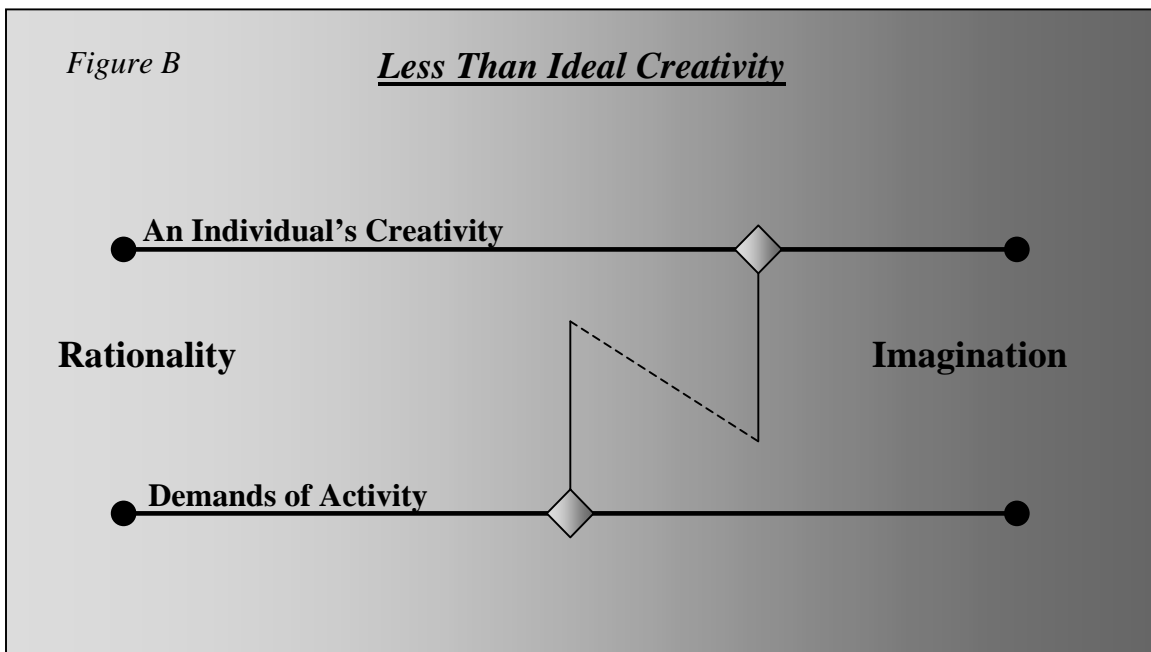
Second Step: Identifying the Occurrence of a Creative Mindflow

The Creativity Spectrum displays creativity one-dimensionally and this is appropriate. Creativity exists only in the individual. It is centered on thought, perception, conceptualization, and form. It isn’t until the cognitive blend of imagination and rationality is acted upon in the external world that creativity becomes three-dimensional, real, tangible, and observable. The Creativity Spectrum elucidates *potential* only—it isn’t until this potential interacts with the outside world that it becomes *accomplishment*. As author Susan Butler says, “Fantasy is the humus that nourishes my roots. And story is the fruit that I bear.”⁹ Creativity cultivates wholeness within but it does not produce practical activity on its own. If accomplishment is to happen on a transcendent level, the creative mindflow must happen.

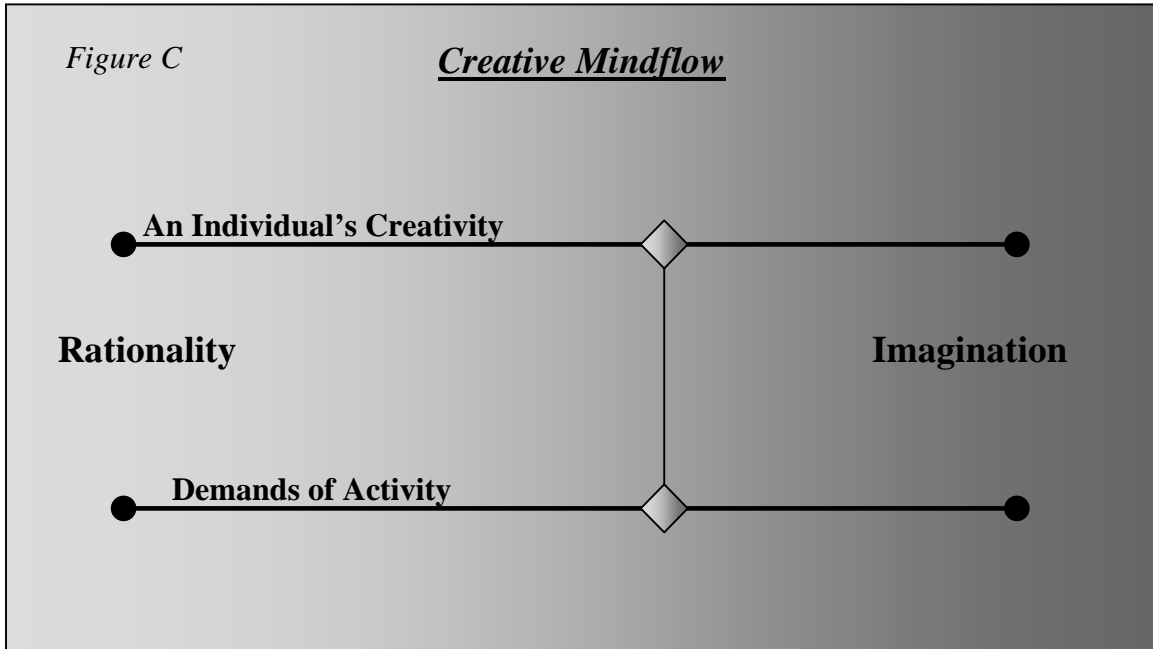
The creative mindflow is the model for optimum creative accomplishment. It occurs when an individual’s creativity becomes an ideal match to the demands of the

⁹ Butler, Susan. *A Teller’s Tale: Joining the Circle*. Master’s Thesis, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 2002, pp. 29.

creative challenge at hand. Creative accomplishment is possible without experiencing creative mindflow, but full potential is unlikely to be realized. Any method contrary to creative mindflow will be comparatively long and treacherous. A less-than-ideal form of creativity forces one to use a rickety bridge made of conscious effort and vague intuition (See Figure B). This bridge is satisfactory to accomplish some creative tasks, but transcendence of current creative boundaries is complicated, frustrated, dragged out, and (in most cases) ultimately thwarted. Working outside of a creative mindflow makes creative activity difficult, tiring, and no fun.



Creative mindflow occurs when a perfect balance is struck between one's creativity and the needs of the creative activity. In this experience there is no longer a need for conscious effort or vague intuition. Conscious effort is superseded by a natural and confident focus; intuition is superseded by deep understanding. There is a perfect symmetry between creativity, motivation, and the demands of the activity (see Figure C).



The essential focus inherent within the creative mindflow causes an interesting phenomena. When a creative uses their higher thinking, or metacognition, to realize that creative mindflow is occurring they are expelled out of it. This occurs because metacognition takes the creative person's focus away from the activity at hand, breaking the perfect unity of subject and creative task. Metacognition can be used to position one's self for future creative mindflows but never to cause it to happen. The creative mindflow can only be attained by *letting* one's self fall into the embrace of the activity in the moment. *Letting* requires the more flowing form of effort called *focus*¹⁰.

To explain how focus can possibly supplant conscious effort think of the Star Wars movie The Empire Strikes Back. In the story, the guru Yoda is trying to teach young Luke Skywalker how to lift an entire spaceship out of the swamp using the Force. Luke tries and tries but only manages to rattle it a bit. He isn't able to lift the ship out of the water until he finally decenters his mental effort from the obstacles of size, weight, and strength and onto simply *doing*. In a similar way, a person in a creative mindflow must stop thinking about the obstacles trying to be overcome, and just focus on *doing* the task at hand. Conscious effort keeps thought centered on obstacles; focus keeps thought centered on actually doing the task at hand.

¹⁰ Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. New York: Random House, 1997.

Altogether there are four conditions that need to be met in order for a creative mindflow to occur. The first condition relates to the focus that I mentioned above. A creative person must be able to reside entirely in the present moment. Metacognitive thoughts are one obstruction from staying entirely in the present because it forces a comparison of past events to current thinking. A person's attention becomes diverted from the present to the past. But thinking about future implications of the creative activity also removes one from the creative mindflow. Thoughts on the future or the past are thoughts away from the present. For creative mindflow to occur, all thought must be centered on the present activity. Habits of mind that prevent immersion in the present moment are detrimental to this experience and must be controlled.

The second condition necessary for creative mindflow to occur is that the subject must have enough desire and interest in the creative activity. If a subject doesn't care about the creative activity then there will be no immersion. There will be no investment of mental capital and no focus. An uninterested mind is a wandering mind—and a wandering mind is the quickest route out of the creative mindflow. The eradication of such a mental habit can only be accomplished with interest and desire.

The third condition for creative mindflow states that a challenge must test the boundaries of the subject's current abilities¹¹. There must be an element of risk involved in the activity. This risk could be a physical, psychological, or emotional risks. There must be something at stake or else there will be no need for creative mindflow to occur. If the creative task offers no challenge, then it doesn't make sense for a person to devote all of their attention to it. Optimal creativity is accomplished only when boundaries are transcended. If those boundaries are already absent then the creative mindflow need not—and will not—occur.

The fourth and final condition for creative mindflow is that the person's creativity must match the needs of the creative activity. This condition is arguably the most important of the four conditions since it forms a crucial part of the aforementioned definition of creative mindflow. A person's potential, their ability to relate to the task at hand, and the appropriateness of the creativity all make a big difference on the dynamics

¹¹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1990.

of the experience. This condition elevates the experience from barely noticeable to highly charged. It introduces the *flow* into creative mindflow. It forms the relationship between the I and the external world¹².

Final Step: Admitting Open Questions

It may not be easy to move along the Creativity Spectrum at first, but every person has the inherent abilities to bridge the gap between rationality and imagination. Shifting from one side to the other requires changing habits of mind and habits of action. Changing these habits comes only through practice. It requires daily challenges designed to flush out any obstructions from the goal of a higher realization of thinking and acting. There are many documented methods of doing such a thing, but I have not yet delved into the topic deeply enough to speak of them with a satisfactory amount of detail. Answering the question of how exactly one can move themselves on the Creativity Spectrum will be one that I will explore in future research.

Future research will be focused on other questions as well. The loss of metacognition blinds us to much of this experience. So how does a creative determine where they are in the spectrum? Is this best accomplished through trial-and-error, like a *recently* blinded man; or is this best accomplished using our other sensory and mental capabilities, like a *long*-blind man? How does one develop good mental habits that flex mental muscles in both directions? Why does it tend to be more difficult to move from the rational to the imaginative? Why is creative mindflow sometimes described as an emotionally charged event?

There is still much to be discovered and learned about this peak experience. In order to determine the answers (or deeper questions) to the above questions I intend to do three things: (1) do more creative activities of my own, (2) read more observations on the topic, and (3) freewrite more about the ramifications and attributes of the creative mindflow. These activities will spiral me back to my initial approach of compiling numerous individual perspectives in order to discover the bigger picture.

¹² Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.

Doing more creative activities should allow me to document more about this elusive but important experience. Activities could include more creative writing, learning a new skill, or simply taking small risks daily. Preceding and following these creative activities, I plan to use metacognition to record the details about the experience.

Metacognition can still be useful despite its exclusion from the creative mindflow experience. It can peer into the fresh past in which a mindflow may have occurred. It can determine how best to maneuver the Creativity Spectrum and how to match this mindset to the external challenge. There is much that higher thinking can offer in the study of creative mindflow even if it can't be directly associated with it.

Reading more about the topic should lend more details on the relationship between rationality and imagination within the Creativity Spectrum. It could prove to be highly enlightening to discover new ways of differentiating between the opposing poles of the spectrum.

But I am guessing that doing more freewriting in order to work out the details of the creative mindflow experience will prove to be most valuable. Freewriting is an effective method of opening up to new possibilities. It taps deeply into imagination and allows future revision. It has proven very efficient in the past and I expect this trend to continually improve. I have a great deal of thinking ahead of me in order to determine the most effective method of applying the theory of creative mindflow to everyday creative life.

At any rate, I am very excited to continue the study of this fascinating topic. It has such breadth that I am at times overwhelmed. But when I return to the use of the creative mindflow I am reminded of the simplicity in its use. The more one seeks the creative mindflow, the easier it comes to you.
