



THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY, ALONG WITH ALMOST ALL CURRENT KNOWLEDGE-WORKER INDUSTRIES, IS CONFRONTED BY THE NEED TO RE-INVENT ITSELF. CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS JOURNAL (STEIDL, 2005; SMITH, 2005) HAVE MADE THE CASE CONVINCINGLY THAT THE FORCES OF GLOBALISATION AND COMMODITISATION, AND CHALLENGES FROM COMPETING BUSINESS CONSULTANCIES HAVE LEFT THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY VULNERABLE, BUT ALSO WITH GREAT OPPORTUNITIES.

It has become a commonplace observation that creativity and knowledge skills are now capital 'goods' in themselves, prime sources of competitive advantage and value. But what does this mean? And what does it imply for the human beings who are central to these creative processes? These questions will be the focus of this paper. They lead to deep waters and I expect we will be merely sounding them for later explorations.

But first we need to know something about the psychology of creativity.

#### Convention-Making and Convention-Breaking

For children almost everything is new. They have not yet laid down anything like the constellations of experiences, meanings and response patterns that define the adult mind. For them, life is mostly novel and in flux. They live in a world of creative change and wonderment. As any parent knows, for the child this state of being also has its attendant terrors, fears and frustrations. Children thus also have an urgent desire to know and understand in order to predict and thereby gain some control over their lives. Not understanding what's going on usually causes us anxiety.

From the beginning then, there is a tension between:

1. The desire to see things as 'the same'; to successfully (viably) project what we know onto the field of perception (and thereby to feel confident and comfortable).
2. An openness to be changed and 'informed' by the newness of what is 'out there'; to be willing to change our mental structures to better fit in with reality (and thereby feel excited)

The great developmental psychologist, sociologist and philosopher Jean Piaget (1952) captured this tension in his twin concepts of Assimilation and Accommodation. In the former, we fit the world into our pre-conceptions. In the latter we change our structures in response to invalidation of our pre-conceptions. Under this (creative) stress - where the world frustrates us with anomalies, paradoxes and contradictions - we (hopefully) 'creatively accommodate' ourselves to the world. When we do, we experience creative insight. We feel as if we have glimpsed something deeper about the nature of reality and we feel larger and more 'connected' with our world.

In similar fashion the German philosopher Heidegger (1959) distinguished between 'Calculative thinking', a 'predictive' style of thought, and 'Meditative thinking', which he described as a mood of receptive 'anticipation'. He referred to the latter as 'real thinking' where we wait humbly upon what might show up without knowing what that might be. He saw that a major problem of the modern world was its valorisation of calculative, functional thought to the detriment of more creative meditative thought.

#### The Pressure to Not Create

The relationships between stress, emotions and creativity are key to an understanding of the psychology of creativity. As emotional creatures we are as much homo 'patiens', from the Latin 'to suffer', as we are homo 'sapiens', from the Latin for 'wisdom'. This is not the place for details but I'll make a few key points:

- The brain's emotional processing is faster and more 'primary' than purely analytical mental processes
- All mental life has an emotional 'feel' or 'tone' to it
- All decision-making relies heavily on emotional 'preferences' and is disabled without them
- Intuition and creativity are intimately related to these emotional preferences
- Emotional robustness, particularly tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty is a key predictor of creative output
- Some emotional stress is good for creativity as it stimulates attention and brain activity (via the release of brain chemicals such as norepinephrine and dopamine)
- High levels of stress are destructive of creativity and tend to lead to stereotypical or convergent thinking
- Self-Identity lies at the core of our mental and emotional systems and invalidation of it is experienced as threatening and usually degrades creativity

Once we have a mental construct that 'works' there is an automatic brain tendency to use that structure over and over. The more we use particular neural pathways, the more deeply entrenched they become and, crucially, the more difficult it becomes to activate alternative pathways. This problem is even more acute for experts (no matter the field):

*Experts, in particular, appear to have extreme difficulty in questioning the foundations for their belief. This I argue is because we can only view our world through mental paradigms. Such paradigms, our mindsets, have evolved so that we can respond automatically to things of importance but, by having mindsets, we are intrinsically prejudiced.*

(Snyder, 1996)

In summary, our creative successes themselves can inhibit future creativity! Blinded by our mental paradigms, and experiencing discomfort when they are contradicted, we tend to 'overlook' or deny anomalies.



This is because the brain is designed to minimise anxiety by minimising ambiguity. It is a sense-making system and we experience anxiety when we are confused and can't make sense of things. Under high stress we are designed to automatically 'do what we know that works' to reduce ambiguity, and this means doing the same thing over and over. Thus, under stress we tend to come to solutions to problems more quickly, but more conventionally, or worse, inappropriately (Amabile, 1990; Claxton, 1997).

#### Creative Mastery in an Age of Accelerated Change

This raises the central question of this paper: In a time of unprecedented change and time pressures, where creativity is considered the coin of the realm, how do we overcome our natural tendency to conservatism and conventionality when under constant creative pressures? How do we reduce the deleterious effects of stress and negative emotion? The answer is simple: ontological acceleration (Kelly, 1969). But 'simple' doesn't necessarily mean 'easy'.

What do I mean by 'ontological acceleration'? Ontology refers to the nature of being or existence. I think what is required for us to utilise the accelerating onrush of events is to change our modes of being, to alter **who we are** not just **what we know**. George Kelly (1969) referred to 'man [sic] as a form of motion', not a thing, and I think we need to step into sync with this way of experiencing and understanding ourselves. We are all works in progress. Developing as creative beings is not principally about new creative techniques and strategies.

These are valuable adjuncts to a deeper process of transformation, of a growing capacity to tolerate, even invite, mental and emotional disruption. This is what the Romantic poet John Keats called a 'negative capability':

*... that is, when a man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*

[Letter to G. and T. Keats, 21 Dec. 1817]. (Page, 1965, p. 53)

We need to develop our ability to change our frameworks. From a 'metacognitive' level (where we think about our thinking) we need to learn to hold our beliefs lightly, knowing they are results of fallible mindsets that are incurably partial and subject to revision. Mindsets are 'useful fictions'. One way of becoming more flexible is to have wide, eclectic passions and expertise:

*It is necessary to take on more mindsets. Develop more mental paradigms by working in completely different fields... Because, by nature, we can only look at the world through our mindsets, we need more of them to see more of the world.*

(Snyder 1996)

More than that, our ongoing task is to stay open, optimistic and emotionally robust and mentally flexible. Multiple perspectives help, but only if the person (and the organisation) has developed certain psychological capacities. How, as a practical matter, do we stay open?

#### Three Potential Areas of Personal & Business Development

I'll now discuss three features of the creative outlook: reflexivity, objectivity and social empathy. There is not space here to go into great detail about how to develop these capacities, but suffice it to say here that these are practical matters that can be learned by a combination of awareness and practice.

##### 1. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the ability to apply one's theories to oneself. One's theory of creativity should account for itself. When our 'creative' practices become conventional procedures, clearly we are not being reflexive.

Reflexivity in the context of changes to the advertising industry is the ability to apply the tools of creativity to one's own functioning, one's identity, and to one's work practices and business structures. The future holds the certainty of accelerating change and the demand for ongoing creativity. This means, I think, continued self re-creation. It is one thing to be creative about some 'thing' (a brief, artwork, problem), it is quite another to change the instruments of creativity (us and our organisations).

There's already a recognised need for creative agencies to apply creativity to the nature of the agencies themselves (Christensen 1997; Dru, 2002; Drucker, 2002; Steidl, 2005). Unless business organisations themselves respond creatively to changed circumstances, it becomes very hard for creative workers to maintain spontaneity, open-ness and creative courage.

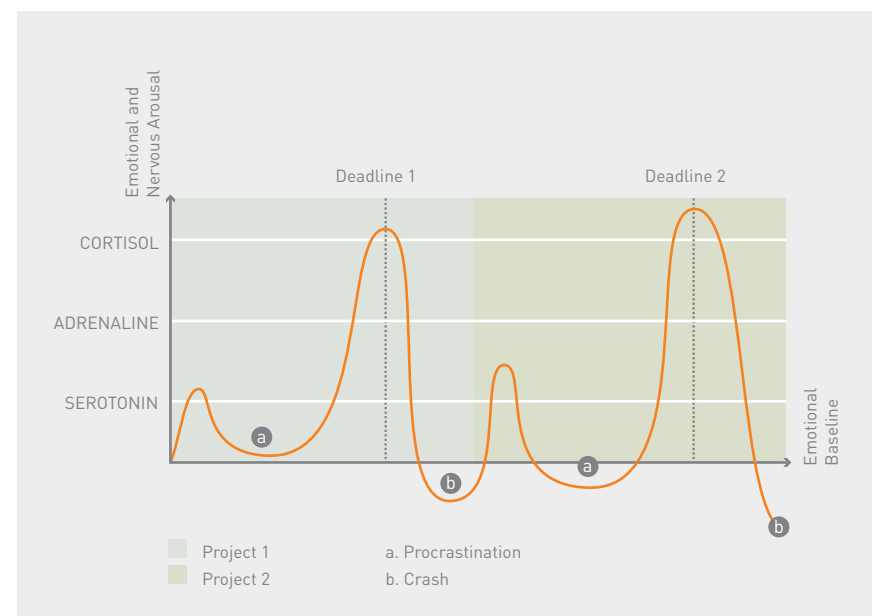
Peter Drucker (2002) has argued that organisations of the future will need to be fluid structures where roles 'cut across job descriptions'. Otherwise, in trying to conserve or duplicate past successes, self-concern, competitiveness and conventionality begin to take over as the psychology of defensiveness and conformity predominate.

In a conceptual age it is also helpful to remember that the means of production is knowledge (not IT). As such it is 'owned' by knowledge workers and is highly portable. The advertising industry needs to reward knowledge workers, particularly those working directly with creativity, not principally with money, but by helping them satisfy their values, especially those related to social recognition and power. In simple terms, those in creative roles should be represented at executive levels of advertising organisations. Equally, executive roles should be primarily 'creative' in the terms I have been discussing.

I think the process begins within each of us. Why do we compartmentalise creativity to some people or special jobs, for example musicians, artists or ad agency 'creatives'? We 'rule out' areas of life and work as 'not creative' or not open to creativity and define ourselves in fairly tight ways. The first thing to say is that creativity can and should be applied more widely. Everyone in modern workplaces should be creative and we should be creative across our lives.

Why aren't most of us like this? Frequently the creative process is approached in a very stressful, unsustainable way. My psychologist colleague Dave Burroughs and I have developed a model of creative work called the 'Creative Roller Coaster' (see Figure 1) that describes the way people in deadline-driven creative industries work. It is an adrenaline-driven work practice characterised by alternating periods of procrastination and stress.

Our view is that people become addicted to this way of being and often believe this is the only way they can create. Little wonder then that there is a strong tendency to turn yesterday's creative breakthrough into tomorrow's convention. There is nothing wrong with elaboration and incremental innovation, but it is no substitute for disruptive, breakthrough thinking. In order to sustainably work in this high-end creative fashion we need to develop psychologically. Don't forget: we are 'wired' for conservatism. We have to transcend our 'nature' to some extent in order to 'flatten' the creative roller coaster and develop tolerance, even eagerness for, ambiguity and uncertainty. Fortunately we can develop this capacity. A key element in this personal capacity is a kind of thoroughgoing, reality-inspired objectivity.



|| Figure 1. The Creative Roller Coaster

## 2. Objectivity

By objectivity I mean the capacity for open-ness, where I *allow the world to be other than I want or know it to be*. Underlying this is a passion for understanding. The etymology of the word 'understand' is literally to 'stand under' the object of understanding. This is a position of humility with respect to reality where we are 'in-formed' by it rather than projecting conventions onto it.

This is highly relevant to attitudes to change and the ability to see anomalies as opportunities. If we are not 'objective' we relate to events in terms of what 'should be', rather than 'what is', and thus we develop emotional resistance and rigidity in thought. We keep assimilating despite change, despite negative feedback. In terms of competitive advantage we are shifting deck chairs on the Titanic. Our conventions will eventually drag us under, while our competitors who respond to the changing world will thrive.

## 3. Advanced Empathy

A third feature of the creative outlook is what I call 'advanced empathy'. Empathy is a special form of objectivity: interpersonal objectivity. In order to feel and experience what it is to be the other person we have to forget ourselves. We have to be 'empty', disinterested and lacking in self-consciousness. We also have to be committed to, and clear about, the value of empathy and then we can try to resonate emotionally with others.

While it may be the case that some people are more naturally empathic, it is nonetheless a universal human characteristic that becomes most apparent in the strangeness we feel when it is lacking (as in the case of sociopaths or in autistics). Usually we fail to be empathic because we are self-focussed. We can see this most commonly in everyday conversations where we might be busy thinking about yesterday, tomorrow, how the conversation is going and so on, but not being fully present to the other person.

To develop objectivity it is most important to be able to enter 'Flow' (Csikszentmihaly, 1990; 1996). Flow is a state of non-distracted absorption in what we are doing. In this state our skills and knowledge are matched to the demands of the task and we derive pleasure directly from our work. This is known as 'intrinsic motivation' where one is motivated by the work rather than the outcome. If we are too 'hyped up' Flow is not possible and we'll tend to be 'hyper-vigilant', checking compulsively on 'how we are going', that is, being anxiously fixated on results and extrinsic rewards.

There are strong correlations between being intrinsically motivated and being creative. This capacity to stay in the present moment and open to input allows our brain to be 'sculpted' by the world. I can think of no better definition of being objective! We now know that the brain remains much more plastic, or open to structural change, throughout life than was once believed. But this plasticity has to be exercised or we will become more close-minded as we age. Creativity, or 'discoverativity' as Douglas Hofstadter, author of Gödel, Escher, Bach put it, is primarily about discovery. Having the 'portals' open is of course a pre-condition for such discovery.

A conversation that is empathic, on the other hand, is one where participants have three experiences. The first is the experience of being heard, the second of being understood and the third of being accepted as they are. Both people thereby engage in non self-conscious conversational flow. The experience of time is altered and both people feel enriched. Again, the capacity to generate these experiences can be developed, first by developing psychological awareness and then by practice.

Advanced empathy is an extension of this immediate empathy to a broader social group. How can we 'feel' what is important and meaningful to our audience? We begin simply by extension of our more immediate, one-on-one empathy. We become curious and genuinely interested in the life experience of others. In day-to-day life we develop the 'common touch'. We listen more than we speak and we come to know others in ways they may not know themselves, yet.

The best advertising communicates something to people they didn't know, but which nonetheless resonates with their values and their sense of self. Great advertising creates markets based on an empathic understanding of what is important to people.

Advanced empathy, like one-to-one empathy, also changes the outlook of the recipient. When someone feels understood and accepted as they are, they become free to change and they feel enhanced as a person. As the world is becoming increasingly commoditised, and thereby more concerned with services and solutions, this capacity to understand and respond to people's values and needs becomes increasingly commercially valuable. In changing the maps in people's minds (Steidl, 2005) you in fact make the consumer a co-creator. They embark on something creative for them: a new way of participating, experiencing, thinking and feeling.

### Everyday Creativity

I think we are moving into a time where 'old-fashioned' human capacities will become 'modern' once again. In an increasingly commoditised and alienating material world, genuine and authentic experience will become more important to people and literally more valuable. Brands and brand loyalty will live and die within this broader social evolution and need for authenticity. The creativity needed to connect with this need will be itself a more sophisticated and authentic one.

The challenge to those in the advertising industry is part of a broader challenge to the creative class. That is to develop themselves as fulltime creators. It is no longer possible to rest on the laurels of earlier creative breakthroughs. Nor will it be enough to confine creativity to certain people or certain narrowly defined job descriptions. The challenge is to develop a sustainable, everyday creativity across the organisation and across roles. It means to live a creative life that applies reflexively to everything we do, relationships, work, recreation and so on.

In my view, there is enormous personal satisfaction and meaning in living in this way. It is simple, but by no means easy. But when we understand the nature of our fleeting and tenuous reality do we have a choice? Are we not always 'skating away on the thin ice of a new day'?<sup>1</sup>

1. Jethro Tull, (1974). 'Skating away on the thin ice of a new day', War Child.

### DR CHRIS STEVENS

Chris is Principal Psychologist with Creative Mastery International - a psychological consultancy specialising in maximising creative performance. He leads a team of psychologists focussed on maximising individual and workplace potential and is a recognised expert in the area of creativity and insight. He is a sought-after international speaker with published articles on personal adjustment, creativity, insight and constructive outlooks. He has presented in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, UK, Europe and to standing room only crowds in New York. Dr Stevens' media clients have included ITV London, The History & Biography Channels London, Channel 7 Australia, Channel 10 Australia, Television New Zealand Limited and the Advertising Federation of Australia.

He has a strong commitment to working within creative industries to help organisations maximise their creative capabilities, increase their competitive advantage and facilitate workplace cultures of sustainable creative achievement.

Dr Stevens' Doctoral research in psychology, explored the nature and genesis of insight and creativity. Through Creative Mastery International, Dr Stevens offers specially designed creative professional development programs and master classes based on sound principles of adult learning and a higher order approach to creativity that extends well beyond creative tips and techniques.

[drchris@communicorp.com.au](mailto:drchris@communicorp.com.au)

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