

Investigating creativity in the production of Australian children's literature: Implications for future research

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Abstract

One of the fundamental questions in the study of communication is what happens during the creation of a message? (McQuail, 1994; Copley, 1996). This paper will investigate a recently developed perspective of creativity in a literary context by determining how texts are produced within the various structures of children's literature. From an analysis of the literature on creativity research over the last 60 years, this paper argues that the best approach to the examination of creativity is through a confluence approach rather than "unidisciplinary approaches" (Sternberg, 1999, p. 12) which have traditionally been privileged in relation to understandings of creativity. Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity (1988, 1996 & 1999) in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) notions of cultural production this paper will investigate how contemporary Australian picture book authors operate. The following case study of five authors of Australian children's literature and their relationship to the notions of domain, field, habitus, agency and structure will show that creative producers operate within a recursive system where social, cultural and individual contexts shape one another.

The development of children's literature and its production has historically been closely connected to the social construction of childhood. It is extremely difficult to separate the concepts of childhood and "literature for children" (Winch et al., 2006, p. 394), as their histories are interdependent. Karen Lesnick-Oberstein maintains that "the two constituent terms—children and literature—within the label children's literature cannot be separated and traced back to original independent meanings" (1994, p. 4). As such discussion of these concepts often intersect and overlap one another.

The general understanding of childhood often refers to the biological period of time before adulthood. However, childhood as "one of our most culturally potent signifiers" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 15) is more a theoretical conception or a social construct than an absolute fact. It is argued that childhood as a concept is created, encouraged, maintained and partially determined by adult authority figures. Representations of childhood are disseminated through society by means of media, photographs, advertisements, products, film and television and, significantly, children's literature. Jacqueline Rose suggests that "children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book . . . in order to secure the child who is outside the book" (1984, p. 2). As such, through the communication of messages through children's literature, children are influenced and encouraged into reproducing and disseminating ideological representations of childhood.

Literature as a general concept originated around the 1800s with the rise in Romanticism as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism. With advances in printing technology and the gradual spread of state education, literature became more widely available, with everyone, including children, taught to read to advance the culture of literacy (Hunt et al., 2004; Darton, 1982). Eventually children were recognised as a distinct marketable audience and children's book as a specific genre.

There has been much debate around the concept of children's literature (Hunt, 1990; 1999; 2004; Chambers, 2001, Rose, 1984) but it is currently thought to refer to books sought out and enjoyed by children or books considered appropriate for children by people in positions of authority, such as parents, teachers, publishers, librarians, award committees and so on (Winch et al., 2006). Many scholars now contend that children's books must cater to two different markets—the children and the adults who are reading to the children (Hunt, 1990; Hollingdale, 1997; Chambers, 1980). It is because of this variance in audience that the genre of children's literature is difficult to define.

Similarly the definition of Australian is problematic as it “moves according to current debates and changing reading, teaching and research patterns” (AustLit online, 2002). A detailed explanation can be found at the Australian Literature Resource (AustLit online, 2002) but, for the purposes of this paper, Australian children's literature is considered to include picture books that have been specifically designed with a child audience in mind (Winch et al., 2006) and that reflect and identify as Australian. Additionally, we will be examining the creative contributions of those who make “the decision[s] about the type of literature that is designed for children” (Winch et al., 2006, p. 393).

Creativity is another term with a complicated history. Commonsense beliefs surrounding creativity consider it as something mysterious and beyond simple explanation (Bailin, 1988). With a general public's aversion toward attempts to rationally define creativity, there has been little (non-academic) consideration as to what creativity is, how it comes into being and what happens when it does.

Two of the most widespread and popular beliefs surrounding creativity are the inspirational and the romantic views (Boden, 2004). The inspirational view considers creativity the product of divine insight and has long been ingrained in the western Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition (Watson, 2005). Individuals are thought to produce ideas in and out of nothing. This belief remains prevalent, with many creators claiming they are a vessel through which enlightenment was channeled, either by their Muse (Wolff, 1993; Bailin, 1988; Plato, 1996) or “by power divine” (Plato cited in Boden, 2004, p. 14). For example, Plato argues that a poet is “never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him” (1996, p. 32).

The romantic view of creativity, on the other hand, considers the individual as the sole site of creative conception, where “talent is innate, and a gift that can be squandered but cannot be acquired—or taught” (Boden, 2004, p. 15). This Kantian view, supposes creativity is the result of genetic or biological traits and “assumes that truly creative acts involve extraordinary individuals carrying out extraordinary thought processes” (Weisberg cited in Sternberg, 1999, p. 148). The romantic view prevails in tales of genius: the obsessed and slightly disturbed starving artist in the garret “who channels his near-pathology into a socially permissible path” (Zolberg, 1990, p. 110). These myths have persisted throughout history simply because they are “believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined” (Boden, 2004, p. 14).

With the focus firmly on the individual, popular research on creativity concentrated on biological and psychological attempts to isolate particular traits “that ‘creative’ individuals might possess in greater quantity than others” (Feldman et al., 1994, p. 4). Sigmund Freud contemplated the relationship between conscious and unconscious drives to explore a link between genius and insanity (Sternberg, 1999). Cesare Lombroso considered physical and behavioural traits as indications of genius (Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976). J.P Guilford’s 1950 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Feldman et al., 1994; Pope, 2005; Sawyer, 2006) solidified a psychological approach to investigations of creativity. Edward de Bono (1971; 1992) considered the right brain–left brain duality with his lateral thinking models, and Colin Martindale (cited in Sternberg, 1999, pp. 137-152) provides a summary of the biological base of creativity. However, the scope of these psychologically reductionist (Simonton, 2003) approaches is too narrow and no longer supported by the current research (Hellige, 2001; Boden, 2004; see also Pope, 2005, p. 115).

Perspectives began to change with the rise of Post-structuralism and the suggestion that too much was being attributed to individual creators. Roland Barthes (1977) symbolically called for the death of the author, highlighting the importance of the relationship between the reader and the text. While Michel Foucault (1979) elaborated the role of the author-function and conceded that individuals were only one component of the machinery of cultural production (Foucault, 1979; Barthes, 1977; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1976; Bourdieu, 1977; 1990; 1993; 1996). These sociological theories further considered art as a collective activity (Becker, 1982) and a product of the social (Wolff, 1993). Although these approaches identified the importance of social and cultural context, they are just as flawed as individual approaches, as they view “creativity as an exclusively societal-level event” (Simonton, 2003, p. 304).

Instead current research advocates a confluence approach to creativity that acknowledges the importance of not just the individual, but their social and cultural contexts as well. Csikszentmihalyi explains that to understand creativity:

we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the centre of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information. (Sternberg, 1988, p. 336)

These confluence models provide suitable mechanisms to bridge the “ideological divide between rationality and intuition” (Negus & Pickering, 2004, p. 18) and have been addressed in the work of Amabile (1983), Simonton (2000; 2003), Weisberg (1993), Wallas (1976), Sternberg and Lubart (1991), Dacey & Lennon (1998), Sawyer (2006), Negus and Pickering (2004), Bourdieu (1977; 1993; 1996), and Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1996; 1999).

Based on this accumulated research into creativity over the last 60 years, the confluence approach provides the most comprehensive explanation of creativity. Additionally, the work of Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (1988; 1996; 1999) in conjunction with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production (1993) are the most appropriate theoretical positions from which to examine creativity in the production of contemporary Australian children’s literature. The two models similarly suggest that multiple components interact to “jointly determine the occurrence of a creative idea, object or action” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 325-339). Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model suggests it is possible to investigate moments within the creative process by

examining “the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognise and validate the innovation” (1996, p. 6). Bourdieu’s notion of agency and structure similarly considers the interplay between the concepts of cultural capital, the field, the field of works and an individual’s habitus as crucial to creativity. His investigation considered agency as the individual’s capacity to understand and control their own actions, while structure referred to embedded institutions or cultural norms such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs and so on, that shaped the actions of social agents. According to Bourdieu, it was through the negotiation of this relationship that practice and, therefore, creative production was made possible.

Considering these rational approaches we can come to define creativity as

a productive activity whereby objects, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen to be a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting. (McIntyre, 2008b, p. 1)

To situate this within the arena of contemporary Australian children’s literature, it can be seen that creativity is an activity in which an author writes by drawing upon existing knowledges in order to produce texts that are different from those that have previously been published; the product is then presented to the relevant field for validation; and, if appropriate, is accepted into the established domain of Australian children’s literature.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a case study of five contemporary Australian authors. Robert Yin (1994) suggests that social research is the action of generating facts, opinions and insights to discover patterns and meaning. For this research, a case study is the most appropriate methodology as it “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1989, p. 13). Moreover, “the essence of a case study . . . is that it tries to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Schramm cited in Yin, 1989). As the focus of this research is to illuminate these decisions as made by producers of contemporary Australian children’s literature, a case study with a foundation in constructionism is almost necessary.

Additionally, Alan Bryman suggests “qualitative research tends to view social life in terms of processes” (2004, p. 281). Since Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (1988; 1996; 1999) and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production (1993) investigate creativity as a creative process existing within a social and cultural setting, the examination of the way authors operate within the field and domain of contemporary Australian children’s literature almost compels a case study approach.

The five authors were selected from the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award list as a representation of the population of Australian children’s picture book authors and “a broader set of recognisable features” (Williams cited in Bryman, 2004, p. 215). The study was limited to those authors who have either won, been honoured or shortlisted on the CBCA award list since 1990. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and analysed in conjunction with and supported by secondary sources of data such as previously published articles about the authors, the material they produced and observation at

literary festivals. No statistical analysis was used in this qualitative study. Rather, a grounded theory approach was undertaken to uncover patterns as “pattern seeing must be a consequence of knowing what you are looking for” (Lull cited in Inglis, 1990, p. 143). This meant data was analysed as it was collected to find relevant information relating to the theoretical perspectives and establish logical chains of evidence. The grounded theory comparison of the empirical pattern was then compared with the predicted one to confirm the original hypothesis and achieve validity under the systematic case study protocol.

As with all research methodologies, there are criticisms of case studies as a social research strategy. Susannah Priest (1996) argues that the very construction of an interview could determine its outcome and, likewise, the act of participant observation could potentially mediate the observed experience. However, it is important to recognise that it is impossible to “study everyone everywhere doing everything” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). This case study was conducted using a convenience sample (Lull, 1990) and as Hsia has argued any sample, regardless of how it is drawn, contains errors, “because it represents the population but is not the population” (1988, p. 115). Hammersley and Atkinson claim, “we are part of the social world we study. This is not a matter of methodological commitment, it is an existential fact” (1983, p. 15).

There are several advantages to the use of a case study as an investigative research methodology. The investigative nature of case studies is “significant because they illuminate in detail larger [external] forces” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 11), in a real life context (Yin, 1989) that are often difficult to quantify through other methodologies. Additionally, although case studies cannot be used to generalise to the overall population they can, through cross-cultural comparison, be successfully used for theoretical generalisations (Bryman, 2004, p. 285). Yin further suggests “the case study contributes uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organisational, social, and political phenomena” (1989, p. 14) and as such it is possible to extrapolate the outcomes for the confirmation of theoretical generalisations rather than generalisation for the entire population.

Results

By applying Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production to the production of contemporary Australian children’s literature, this research explores the idea that a necessary set of elements shape the framework for creativity. Csikszentmihalyi considers creativity to be the result of the relationship between three “dynamic links of circular causality” (1988, p. 329)—the domain, the field and the individual. Similarly, Bourdieu considers each element—cultural capital, the field, the field of works—as equally important and necessary for an individual to produce creativity. Using these two approaches in conjunction with one another, we can understand how individual authors of Australian children’s literature engage in a systematic approach to creativity. Through the acquisition of and engagement with a domain of knowledge, and interaction with a larger social structure or field, individual authors are able to negotiate their agency to produce novelty.

Although the starting point is “purely arbitrary” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 329), the domain, a unique cultural experience, is perhaps the most tangible proof that creativity exists. Knowledge is transmitted through cultural symbols to create domains of knowledge that are “made up of its own symbolic elements, its own rules, and generally

has its own system of notation” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 37). The most important way the domain can aid in the production of creativity is through the domain’s “clarity of structure” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 38). A clear structure reveals the operational construction of a domain, making it more accessible to individuals who can easily assess where or how their work might fit. Bourdieu’s concept of the field of works and cultural capital is similarly important. The field of works can be defined as “all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation” (Harker et al., 1990, p. 1). According to author Shaun Tan, an individual must “understand broader cultural contexts and movements” (personal communication, 2007) and gain the knowledge of their chosen cultural field so that they can operate within it. From this perspective it is only possible to make a “creative contribution” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 47) when one has acquired enough knowledge of the relevant domain.

Domain acquisition is a constantly occurring phenomenon, and in this case is the immersion “in the domain of literature” (Sawyer, 2006, p. 210). It is a product of our “beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 38) and in relation to Australian children’s literature it represents “everything that we as adults think and feel about ourselves, both as individuals and as societies” (Dolin, 2003, p. 7). The process of acquiring knowledge is both conscious and unconscious and often begins before we are aware of it.

In this case study, all of the authors were born in Australia and attended compulsory schooling from an early age. They were all taught to speak, read, understand and deconstruct language, and even consider the Australian identity through both formal education and indirect learning through their world experiences. More than half of the participants in this research pursued further education and had been involved in the domain of children’s literature prior to their writing careers—as teachers, students, parents, or employees in the field of publishing. Toby Riddle explained that he spent a lot of time “soaking up all the information [he] could about books and publishing” (personal communication, 2007). Through years of knowledge accumulation, authors of contemporary Australian children’s literature develop a form of useful tacit knowledge (Schon, 1983).

In addition to the development of tacit knowledge, all the participants agreed that they sometimes actively pursued domain acquisition through research. Jackie French claimed that “there is probably no dividing line between my life and the research . . . I’m what you would call a mental omnivore. I spend most of my life in unconscious preparation for what I am going to write” (personal communication, 2007). Gary Crew also noted the intricate relationship he has with research: “I’m an Associate Professor now so it’s part of my life . . . I just like research so my ideas usually come from a source” (personal communication, 2007). By knowing and understanding the domain of children’s literature, an author can identify a specific area to focus on, they can sharpen their knowledge and skills in this particular area, and use their knowledge to assess the relevance of their product before submitting it to the field.

The next component of the process is the field. Csikszentmihalyi says, “the easiest way to define a field is to say that it includes all those persons who can affect the structure of the domain” (1988, p. 330). Consisting of relevant experts or “gatekeepers” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28), the field mediates the domain by recognising and validating innovative cultural products. Bourdieu (1993) also emphasises this

relationship, explaining that the field constitutes the people who work within the discursive frameworks of the domain.

In examining the field of contemporary Australian children's literature, it can be seen that there are three important arenas (Dolin, 2003) in which the "gatekeepers" of knowledge "pass judgment on all novelty created to decide whether it will eventually become accepted as part of the culture" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 41). According to Dolin, the players we are most concerned with in relation to the field of contemporary Australian children's literature are:

(1) The institutional players—publishing houses and their corporate structures, schools, the family, booksellers, and universities and academics; (2) Production technologies—printing (the influence of cheap high-quality colour printing on children's literature is well-known), cross-technology marketing devices (television and movie tie-ins), powerful distribution networks (the rise of books packaged to be simultaneously released internationally in many languages); (3) authors—especially the changing status of children's book authors, how authors are paid, how authors promote books, authors who write for adults and children, how children's books are reviewed in the press, and so on. (2003, p. 12-13)

When considering the field in the production of children's literature, there are several key players to be examined. The first is the field of authors. For an emerging author, it can be difficult to understand the structure of the field in which they have chosen to operate. Csikszentmihalyi claims it takes approximately 10 years of constant work within a field before an individual has internalised the structure enough to produce creative innovation effectively. Jackie French illustrates this idea when discussing her experience as an emerging writer:

I had absolutely no idea what books people were writing, what books were being published . . . I found it extraordinarily difficult in the first, probably within the first ten years, really knowing what was expected of me. (personal communication, 2007)

The next crucial element in the field of children's literature is the arena of publishing. This is where most of the decisions regarding the value of innovation are made and includes major players such as editors, agents, commissioning agents, copy editors, proofreaders, members of publicity and marketing departments, designers. Authors must trust that, as "gatekeepers", their editor has internalised the values of the domain and is capable of correctly judging value in relation to the field. The book must also be approved and accepted by the publisher. It is well known by authors that certain publishers have a specific agenda, particular identity or "construction of childhood" (Crew, personal communication, 2007) they wish to promote and books are chosen in accordance with those guidelines. By understanding the operations of the field, authors are better equipped to behave appropriately and develop successful relationships with key players.

People who are involved in the manipulation of production technology are also important in the field of contemporary Australian children's literature. These people involved in the mechanical production of books are not often seen, but they play a significant part in the field as they facilitate the production and authorisation of discourses, activities and novelty for the decision-makers to validate. They are sometimes crucial to success for, as Becker suggests, if books require "innovative printing techniques publishers are not equipped for" (1982, p. 27), it is unlikely that the book will be published.

The audience is a critical element in the field of contemporary Australian children's literature as they are the final "gatekeepers" who ultimately determine the commercial success or failure of a creative product. As R. Keith Sawyer contends, the "ultimate test for a creative work is whether or not it is accepted by a broad audience" (2006, p. 127). Csikszentmihalyi goes one step further by arguing that

what we call creativity is a phenomenon that is constructed through an interaction between *producer and audience* [italics in original]. Creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individuals' products. (1999, p. 314).

As a result, it is important for authors to foster collegial relationships with their audience. It is evident that the field is a necessary element in both Bourdieu's ideas on cultural production and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of systemic creativity as these influential players make decisions about and stimulate production of children's literature.

The final component of Csikszentmihalyi and Bourdieu's confluence approaches is that of the individual. It is this role that is most commonly mistaken as the "whole phenomenon often resulting in what we believe is a narrow, unsatisfying vision of creativity" (Sternberg, 1999, p. 12). Both of these approaches consider creativity to come "from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 1). For Bourdieu, the individual is at the same time both constrained and enabled by the symbolic systems they work within, as "practice is always informed by a sense of agency (the ability to understand and control our own actions)" (Schirato & Yell, 1993, p. 5). It is by working within the structures presented to them that the individual is able to produce innovation. From these theoretical perspectives, it is the individual's task to draw upon their foundation of knowledge, the domain or field of works, in order to begin the process of creativity as "original thought does not exist in a vacuum" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 315).

In this research, the participating authors of contemporary Australian children's literature were asked to examine their own beliefs regarding the romantic and inspirational conceptions of creativity. When questioned directly, they too dismissed them as "myths" (Boden, 2004, p. 14):

I've never liked terms like genius because they just set up a real distance between you and the person that's saying it. It's a really meaningless term. (Tan, personal communication, 2007)

These individual authors acknowledged that, indeed, there were times of sudden inspiration (Wallas, 1979), but these tended to consist of "several insights interspersed with periods of incubation, evaluation and elaboration" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 80) over an extended period of time (Weisberg, 1993). When directly questioned, the authors in this case study all preferred to consider their creativity as the result of hard work. Nette Hilton said:

We seriously treat it like work. If there is a group of writers together we will talk about it like it is work. You treat your hours like it's work and it causes you grief like it's work and it has all of the prerequisites of work. (personal communication, 2007)

Jackie French similarly agreed:

It would be lovely to think that it really just depends on inspiration shooting through the universe that does it but it's not. In the end it is basically the more work you give it, the

harder you work, the better you are able to concentrate, the better the piece of work is going to be and that is invariable. (personal communication, 2007)

Finally, it became apparent that the authors had at one time or other experienced a negotiation between their personal agency and external pressures, or structures. In relation to this struggle, Nette Hilton's says: "I think that you are creative in response to a problem . . . if you are really challenged" (personal communication, 2007). This is in line with Bourdieu's discussions of cultural production, which, according to David Swartz, can be seen as investigating "one of the oldest problems in the Western intellectual tradition, namely, the relationship between the individual and society" (1996, p. 96). It is the individual's task then to work within the structure of the field and domain. These structures can be both enabling and constraining (Giddens, 1984; Haralambos & Holbern, 1995). Janet Wolff asserts:

Everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by, social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables activity on our part. (1981, p. 9)

Additionally, the participants all mentioned constraints such as deadlines, marketing pressures, relationships with editors and publishers, along with the physical limitations of the texts: 32 pages, minimal text (600 words or less), age appropriate language, engaging plotlines, appropriate themes and so on. While these elements were regarded as limiting to a certain extent, it was the general consensus that, when confronted with these problems, the authors all worked "extremely hard" (French, personal communication, 2007) and often believed they produced their best work when working within these limitations. Nette Hilton, elaborating on her experience, concluded that "in the beginning it was limiting [but] . . . the fact that I was limited in what I had to do really did push me very hard to come up with the goods" (personal communication, July, 2007).

In conclusion, the reason for studying creativity as a rational process is because "a scientific explanation of creativity requires us to look critically at our own cultural assumptions about how creativity works" (Sawyer, 2006, p. 33) and requires us to investigate and confront "our most cherished beliefs about creativity" (Sawyer, 2006, p. 33). Through the examination of five prominent authors of contemporary Australian children's literature, it is clear that the production of "literature reflects cultural ideologies" (Winch et al., 2006, p. 408). By reconceptualising creativity myths and applying Csikszentmihalyi's systems model and Bourdieu's notions of cultural production to creativity in contemporary Australian children's literature, it can be seen that creative products are produced through the author's individual interaction with a domain of knowledge and a field.

Additionally, applying a rational approach to the study of creativity has implications for further research within and outside Australian children's literature. By reconceptualising the wider conceptual understanding of creativity, research of this nature has the possibility to affect the production of creative products. Using a confluence approach in other fields of research to investigate the relationships between individuals and their society, we can "enrich the culture and . . . learn from this knowledge how to make our own lives directly more interesting and productive" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 10). In a practical sense, research into creativity can change

the way we operate. By understanding the creative process we can be proactive cultural producers and increase our productivity, both as individuals and as a society.

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