Investigating Creativity in the Production of Australian Children’s Literature: Implications for Teaching and Learning

Chloe Killen
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Investigating Creativity in the Production of Australian Children’s Literature: Implications for Teaching and Learning

Chloe Killen, University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Abstract: The term ‘creativity’ is often used as though it’s meaning is obvious. However, we repeatedly mistake “part of the phenomenon…as the whole phenomenon” (Sternberg, 1999: 12) and consider the final product as separate from the process undertaken to produce it. Moving past traditional notions of creativity as the singular product of divine inspiration, genius or madness, we should then be able to move towards a more empirical and rational examination of this phenomenon. With this in mind it is proposed that, drawn from the accumulated research into creativity over the last sixty years, the theory used to consider creativity for this paper is a confluence approach, that is, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (1988, 1996 & 1999). Using this model as a basis for research, instead of ascribing creativity to one singular force, it becomes clear that creative producers operate within a system of circular causality whereby they are influenced and affected by multiple factors including the cultural and social contexts in which they exist. Through a small case study of 5 producers of Australian Children’s Literature it can be seen that individual writers engage with a domain of knowledge and a field or social structure that regulates that knowledge in order to produce ‘novelty’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, Boden 2004, Sternberg & Lubart 1995, Weisberg 2006). With this evidence in place it can be argued that the implications for reconsidering creativity in a rational context are therefore important in influencing the way creativity is taught and learnt.

Keywords: Creativity, Children’s Literature, Csikszentmihalyi, Creative Writing, Systems Model, Teaching

The term ‘creativity’ is often used as though it’s meaning is obvious and uncomplicated. Vague and inadequate descriptions of the process have abounded with little to no regard, on lay peoples part, for how creativity comes into being and what actually happens when it does. In this regard R. Keith Sawyer asserts that throughout most of western history beliefs surrounding creativity have vacillated between two schools of thought: “rationalism and romanticism” (2006: 15). However, Sawyer also contends that “a scientific explanation of creativity requires us to look critically at our own cultural assumptions about how creativity works” and compels us to confront “our most cherished beliefs about creativity” (2006: 33).

The two most prevalent views of creativity in common use can be labeled as the inspirational and the romantic views (Boden, 2004: 14). The inspirational view of creativity is firmly entrenched in the western Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition whereby creativity is considered the product of divine insight. Stemming from the biblical creation story of Genesis, individuals are thought to produce ideas in and out of nothing. According to Plato this inspiration came from a space beyond the individual who was merely considered an empty vessel through which enlightenment was channeled by the Muse or “by power di-
There have been many examples throughout history of cultural artifacts considered to be the product of creators who proudly claim they are vessels through which a divine spark operates (Howe 1999, Negus & Pickering 2004, Sawyer 2006, Csikszentmihalyi 1996). For instance, Plato described poetry as “divine and from the gods, and that poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods, each one possessed by the divinity to whom he is in bondage” (1971: 220).

The romantic view of creativity, on the other hand, transfers the attribution of creativity from the divine to the individual. As a reaction against the Enlightenment’s advocacy of reason and rationality, Romanticism emphasises the individual as the sole site of creative conception. This Kantian notion of genius implies creativity is the product of extraordinary individuals using “a gift that can be squandered but cannot be acquired – or taught” (Boden, 2004: 15). This belief is commonly seen in stereotypes of the reclusive artist struggling for his art who is often portrayed as a mad “quasi-neurotic who channels his near-pathology into a socially permissible path” (Zolberg, 1990: 110). These ideas have remained popular and are now solidified in radical freethinking ideas of self-expression and self-discovery (Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976).

Boden further argues that these myths remain widespread because “they are rarely critically examined” (2004: 14). For instance, they prevail within the arena of creative writing, as “the characteristic effect has been to play down the act of writing itself, as a deliberately learned and practiced craft” (Negus & Pickering, 2004: 3). Instead it is generally promoted that ideas unexpectedly materialize from the ether, fully formed, without the need to edit or revise. If these myths are to be seen as true they suggest that for a writer to be creative they must either sit and wait until their muse inspires them, channel a divine spirit, or recognise their innate talent or genius, as it would be fruitless to try and enhance it. These ideas are problematic on a practical level because as W.I. Thomas asserts “it is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct - if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (cited in Thomas & Thomas, 1928: 571-572).

One of the consequences of this way of thinking was to focus attention solely on the individual as the source of creativity. In line with this individual focus, research on creativity came to be popularised in the academic world in the 1950s following J.P. Guilford’s presidential address to the American Psychological Association (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, Feldman et al 1994, Pope 2005, Runco 2004, Sawyer 2006, Sternberg and Lubart 2003). Guilford outlined a conceptual framework for “isolating various traits of intellect and personality that ‘creative’ individuals might possess in greater quantity than others” (Feldman et al, 1994: 4). This followed similar work by Cesare Lombroso who detailed certain physical traits such as height, pallor, and left-handedness and behaviours such as stammering as indications of genius (Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976). Freud similarly contemplated a link between genius and insanity; that highly creative people are prone to disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar, depression and so on. Edward De Bono’s lateral thinking models followed soon after as they considered the duality of right and left-brain. However, current research tends not to support these individually focused ideas (Hellige 2001, Boden 2004, Pope 2005).

Eventually with the rise of Post-structuralism and the introduction of theories critiquing intentionality from Roland Barthes (1977) and Michel Foucault (1979) perspectives began to change. Reacting against individual focused theories Barthes symbolically called for the death of the author to elevate meaning making to a locus point focused at the relationship between the audience, their social context and the text. Many suggested that too much was
being attributed to individual creators and, as “original thought does not exist in a vacuum” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 315) it became obvious to researchers that individuals were only one component of the machinery of cultural production (Foucault 1979, Barthes 1977, Adorno & Horkheimer 1973, Bourdieu 1977, 1993, 1996 & 1999). These ideas were further explored in a sociological sense to suggest that art is in fact more likely to be a collective activity (Becker, 1982) and a product of the social (Wolff, 1993). However, these theories were not as useful as hoped on a practical level for creative writers as they replaced the limited view of the individual as sole creator with the equally limited view that creativity was a result of the social or cultural (Simonton, 2003).

Recently researchers have concluded that most of these preceding views were inadequate as a rational explanation of creativity as they tended “to view part of the phenomenon…as the whole phenomenon, often resulting in what we believe is a narrow, unsatisfying vision of creativity” (Sternberg, 1999: 12). Instead research appears to be moving towards what have been called confluence approaches to creativity: approaches that acknowledge both the individual and the social in a larger context.

Given this very brief overview of the literature on creativity and looking beyond the widespread myths that creativity is the singular product of divine inspiration, genius or madness, we can move towards a more empirical and rational examination of this phenomenon. The rational confluence approaches to creativity, mentioned above, have been covered extensively in the work of Amabile (1983), Simonton (1994, 2000), Weisberg (1993), Sternberg & Lubart (1999), Dacey & Lennon (1998), Sawyer (2004), Negus & Pickering (2004), Bourdieu (1977, 1993, 1996), and Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1997, 1999).

Focusing on the latter work of Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1997, 1999) 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” (1997: 6). With this confluence approach in mind, teachers of creative writing can move beyond an individual or social approach to creativity in favour of a system of mutual influences that “jointly determine the occurrence of a creative idea, object or action” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 325-339). This will open up discussion of practice and process, instead of concentrating only on the final product.

Equally important to the development of creativity research has been the development of creative writing and its production. The term creative writing has historically had a foundation in Romantic ideology where creativity is seen to spring into being fully formed out of nothing. Creative writing is often defined as “writing that expresses the writer’s thoughts and feelings in an imaginative, often unique, and poetic way. Creative writing is guided more by the writer’s need to express feelings and ideas than by restrictive demands of factual and logical progression of expository writing” (sil.org, 1996). Framing creative writing in this way implies that it occurs in a vacuum as a result of an agent’s self-expression free from any constraints. However, as previously seen from the accumulated research into creativity over the last sixty years, this is not the case. According to Sawyer (2006) writing is a conscious and directed activity requiring all the businesslike focus and careful, time-consuming editing of work. Writers “do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations” (Johnson in Bourdieu, 1993: 6). Janet Wolff (1981: 9) furthers suggests that the existence of these structures actually enables creativity in both acts of rebellion and acts of conformity.
Taking these rational approaches into consideration along with Aristotle’s work on ‘being’ (1960: 142) 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, 2008: 1). To interpret this definition in relation to creative writing it can be seen that creative writing is an activity where an author draws upon existing knowledge to produce texts different to what has previously been published; the product is then presented to the relevant field for validation and, if appropriate, is accepted into the established domain of creative writing.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) contends that the domain is perhaps the most tangible proof that creativity exists, as it is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but a unique cultural experience. Made up of the existing knowledge system, the domain consists of the accumulated codes, conventions and cultural work done to this time in a particular area, similar in some senses to Bourdieu’s ‘field of works’ (Toynbee, 2000), and provides a solid foundational structure. The domain of creative writing is “made up of its own symbolic elements, its own rules, and generally has its own system of notation” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 37) and includes such things as genre, rules of language, styles of writing, deadlines, conventions of storytelling and all other cultural artifacts that pre-exist the individual. There are three main ways, according to Csikszentmihalyi, that the domain can aid in the production of creativity: “the clarity of structure, the centrality within the culture, and accessibility” (1997: 38). These factors are crucial as they aid in the understanding of the rules, conventions and symbol systems that individuals must possess in order to enter the domain.

The clarity of the domain’s structure is important as it illuminates the operational formation of the domain, and allows individuals to assess where their work might fit in. If a domain’s structure is not clear it is difficult for cultural producers to know if their product is an improvement on existing works. Unlike the domain of Chemistry or Mathematics for example, the domain of creative writing has typically been loose in clarity due to the “subjective appraisal of content and the reliance on personal taste within the field, as well as formal and informal rule systems such as grammar and genre” (McIntyre & McIntyre, 2007: 17). However this is changing in certain areas. In order to communicate, writers and readers of Australian children’s literature need to understand the rules, conventions and structures of writing. They need to be aware of the structures of grammar, syntax, prose and the elements of a written style in order to construct emotive narratives to engage readers. Additionally they need to be familiar with the story and discourse elements of narrative writing and be able to apply this knowledge to the specialties of writing children’s literature. Traditionally, Australian children’s picture books are 32 pages long, roughly 250 words in length, have a simple linear storyline, use concise, easy to understand language, include colourful pictures and are of a standard physical size. Through the prevalence of this clear set of industry conventions the clarity of the domain of Australian children’s literature is understood and novel variations are readily identified. Therefore, for writers to produce within a particular domain it is crucial that they are taught or understand the specific conventions so they can utilise them to produce novelty appropriate for the domain.

The second way the domain can aid in the production of creativity is through its centrality within the culture. The centrality of a domain will change at times depending on the issues that have taken precedence in the culture. A domain that is central to the culture is more
likely to “attract the more creative minds, thereby making creativity more likely” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 319). Within Australian children’s literature, childhood has become an arena that “society constructs as being culturally important for its time” (Crew, Personal Interview, 2007). With this, the domain of Australian children’s literature appears to be enjoying an increasingly important role in recent studies of literature (Hunt, 2005). While its central position is still evolving, within contemporary culture it is evident that children’s literature is not only engaged with by readers but is now studied at universities, written about in academic journals, and given prestigious awards (Russell, 2007). Additionally the work of several Australian children’s authors, Shaun Tan, Graeme Base, Jeannie Baker, Libby Gleeson to name a few, have received critical acclaim in overseas markets, which further promotes the centrality of the domain within a global culture. Therefore, practitioners of creative writing, by becoming aware of the centrality of the domain can produce work appropriate to their cultural context.

Finally the accessibility of a domain affects the production of creativity through the amount of novelty generated and how quickly novel variations are accepted and distributed. As McIntyre and McIntyre suggest “traditional channels of support from the government alone in the form of libraries, primary and secondary school English curricula and direct funding of the arts and arts programs mean the domain of books and creative writing is accessible not only to current writers but also encourages and fosters interest from children, teenagers and adults of all ages” (2007: 18). The easier it is for a practitioner to access the domain the more attracted they are to producing novelty within it. This is evident recently within Australian children’s literature as, in addition to the growth in traditionally produced books, there has been an increase in self-funded books being produced and disseminated via the Internet. So the more a writer learns about the accessibility of a domain the more readily they can identify its various entry points in order to produce novelty.

Not forgetting that “a person who brings novelty into the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 6) is a crucial part of the system of creativity, an understanding of the domain by creative writers can be achieved through a lifetime engagement with it. In this way knowledge of the domain becomes internalised. The accumulation of this domain knowledge is a product of an interaction with cultural symbols, rules, “beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes” (Webb et al, 2002: 38) and “everything that we as adults think and feel about ourselves, both as individuals and as societies” (Dolin, 2003: 7). Therefore authors of Australian children’s literature have been accumulating a foundation of domain knowledge long before they were even aware of it. For those living in Australia as children, schooling is compulsory from an early age, with many students continuing on to further education. Everything these writers know, even notions of what it means to be Australian, has been either directly taught through mediated schooling or is the result of indirect learning through their personal interaction with the world around them.

By facilitating the teaching and learning of this extensive knowledge base we can empower creative writers in their cultural production. Sawyer (2006) suggests individuals should focus on one specific domain rather than trying to divide their attention over several. Teachers of creative writing can help to guide writers in sharpening their concentration on a specific domain. Teachers can also facilitate the acquisition of certain areas of knowledge they have identified as being useful to writers. For example, they may introduce writing students to new genres, literary styles, techniques and so on to develop their knowledge of a particular domain and sharpen their skill sets. By developing a tacit knowledge base relevant to the
domain they work in these writers can then assess for themselves what is relevant in terms of creative production and whether their contribution will be considered a novel variation in that domain.

The next component of Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model is the field. Comprised of mediators or gatekeepers to the domain, “the easiest way to define a field is to say that it includes all those persons who can affect the structure of the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 330). These people are the gatekeepers of the domain who by recognising and validating novelty, make judgments about selecting appropriate variations to include into the domain while rejecting inappropriate ones. Therefore the field of creative writing would include people such as agents, editors, publishers, booksellers, academics, peer authors and even the general public through their role as audience and consumers. For practitioners of creative writing, possessing knowledge about how to identify and choose the right field is invaluable. According to Csikszentmihalyi, fields can affect the production of creativity in three ways: by being either “reactive or proactive” (1997: 43), choosing a broad or narrow filter to select novelty and if they are “well connected to the rest of the social system and are able to channel support into their own domain” (1997: 44).

Firstly, fields can be proactive by soliciting, stimulating and expecting novel thinking and creative production; by not doing this they would be reactive. By its very nature as a business, the arena of creative writing demands novelty to maintain its commercial interests. “In this way, reactive publishing companies may utilise services such as Bookscan (2006) to act as filters to assess book buying patterns and commission works in a particular genre; proactive publishers, on the other hand, may accept unsolicited works and choose future books from a slush pile of manuscripts” (McIntyre & McIntyre, 2007: 18). By understanding whether a field is proactive or reactive, writers can equip themselves with practical knowledge regarding whether a particular domain is appropriate and how to best target it.

By choosing broad or narrow filters the field can control the amount of novelty accepted to be absorbed back into the domain. When stimulating creativity within a domain, the field’s filter is generally wide to encourage involvement, but as creativity becomes more established the field’s filters are narrowed to only accept the best. To this end some fields are more conservative than others and filters often adjust over time to ensure no field is too relaxed or too stagnant (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Teachers, by illustrating this trend for writing students, can help their students concentrate on a field with filters wide enough to accept novelty but narrow enough to be selective. Students can use this knowledge to produce appropriate work to be considered for inclusion into the relevant domain.

Finally, “fields can encourage novelty if they are well connected to the rest of the social system and are able to channel support into their own domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 44). In a manner similar to Bourdieu (1993), Csikszentmihalyi argues that access to resources within a field can affect the production of creativity. Even a seemingly solitary act such as creative writing depends on many factors to ensure production. In order to publish, writers need access to: economic resources, through patronage or self-funding; agents, as most manuscripts will not be accepted unsolicited; publishers with access to physical and financial resources including press, paper and distribution outlets; and audiences (professionals such as critics along with amateurs) who will purchase the final product (Russell, 2007). These various components of the field all channel support back into the domain. For example in Australia, although online sales have affected book retailing, bookshops still play a major part in the field of writing (Moorhouse, 2007: 122-123). Likewise reviewers remain critical
to the process of connecting an audience to a book. There are considerable resources devoted to writer’s festivals, government grants to fund writer’s centres and a proliferation of manuscript assessment services, mentoring schemes, fellowships and literary prizes (Moorhouse, 2006). Each of these activities has a set of individuals involved in them who make decisions that affect the daily practice of particular writers. Teachers may need to identify the resources within the field for students in order to help them expand their awareness of their relationship with the rest of the social system. By appreciating this, a writer can work this arena of social contestation (McIntyre 2006, 2007, 2008) to their advantage.

With an understanding of the structures of the field of creative writing we can see that authors “do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations” (Johnson in Bourdieu, 1993: 6). Fields are also arenas of social contestation in which power struggles for what is acceptable to include in the domain occur. In this way various fields “are continuously being transformed by…agents and their practices” (Webb et al, 2002: 50). When considering the field of creative writers there are several key players a writer must be aware of. The first is the field of authors. For a beginning writer, it can be difficult to understand the “institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities” (Webb et al, 2002: 21-22). Australian children’s author Jackie French illustrates the difficulties she faces as an emerging writer: “I found it extraordinarily difficult in the first, probably within the first ten years, really knowing what was expected of me” (Personal Interview, 2007). Csikszentmihalyi says it takes approximately ten years of constant work to internalise these conventions, however once this is done there is a sense of unity among members of the field. Nette Hilton agrees, saying it’s beneficial to be among other writers as “you can talk about the processes of writing…It’s nice to be with people who understand that the product is very much a work intensive process” (Personal Interview, 2007). While many of these conventions can be gathered through experience, the more writers are taught about the expectations of the field, the easier it will be for them to behave accordingly.

The arena of publishing is the next area where most of the immediate decisions regarding the value of innovation are made. This section of the field includes several major players who inhabit the publishing houses and their ancillary operatives. This group consists of all the people who make value judgments as to the worth of novel variation, they include: agents, commissioning agents, copy editors, proof readers, members of publicity and marketing departments, designers, and most importantly for authors, editors. These people are the ones who hold the power, especially editors and publishers, and so it is crucial to a writer’s success in the field to get to know who they are and how they operate. For example it is well known by authors that certain publishers have a specific agenda or particular identity they wish to promote and books are chosen in accordance with those guidelines (Crew 2007, Tan 2007). By being made aware of these relationships writers can market themselves more appropriately and foster successful relationships with the people who make the decisions regarding publishing.

The field of creative writing also includes players involved in the manipulation of production technology and the mechanics of producing books. These people play a significant part in the field as they facilitate the production of texts and if books require “innovative printing techniques publishers are not equipped for” (Becker, 1982: 27) it is unlikely that that book would be published. Australian author Gary Crew explains “there might be an editor, there
might be a line editor, there might be a director, there might be a publicist, but the real people who make books are those in the bowels of the earth. We need to remember the people who make paper, the people who do the binding, the people who drive the forklift, who put the books on a palette, who package cartons of them to send off. Without those people I would not have a literary life” (Personal Interview, 2007). By acknowledging the often forgotten production staff, Crew emphasises the importance of the role that they play in shaping the books that are made. Similar to Becker’s (1982) discussion of Art Worlds, Crew suggests that even though the decision to publish has been previously made elsewhere, without the support of the production team the manufacture of books would result in vastly different products.

The audience is the final element in the field of creative writing. They are the final gatekeepers of knowledge who “pass judgment on all novelty created to decide whether it will eventually become accepted as part of the culture” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: 41). As Sawyer (2006) contends, acceptance by a broad audience is the ultimate mark of creativity. Csikszentmihalyi similarly contends, “creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individuals’ products” (1999: 314). By being taught about the specifics of certain audiences, writers are more likely to produce work appropriate for the field.

Therefore creativity in the field of creative writing occurs through any innovation produced that is deemed worthy by the field and is welcomed into the domain. Creativity can only be recognised in “existing domains and fields” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: 29) so it is crucial for a writer to engage with and understand their particular field if they want to produce novelty. Csikszentmihalyi says, “a person who wants to make a creative contribution not only must work within a creative system but must also reproduce that system within his or her mind” (1996: 47). It is therefore important that a writer is taught the structures and selection processes of the field to help them navigate the difficult terrain within the arena of social contestation.

The final component of Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity is the individual. The individual’s contribution to creativity has often been mistaken as the “whole phenomenon” (Sternberg, 1999: 12) with notions of individual genius incorrectly applied to the creative producer (Weisberg 1993, Howe 1999). While still acknowledging the importance of individual producers, Csikszentmihalyi contends that creative producers can no longer be seen as the central figure but are equally as important as the broader social and cultural contexts in which they operate (1988). It can be seen that individual writers draw upon their personal background, which consists of their genetics, personal experiences, habitus and cultural capital, to “produce a novel variation in the content of the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 315).

As a single example among many recent attempts to understand creativity through individual factors that contribute to the lives of creative writers, Jane Pirrto (1998, 2002) found that childhood trauma was a common element in 60% of the participants in her study. However, this study by itself is not conclusive evidence of causality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 73) as it could be argued that most people experience trauma of varying degrees in their lives, and perhaps creative individuals are more likely to be encouraged to redirect “potentially destructive experience into creative behaviour” (McIntyre & McIntyre, 2007: 17). Another explanation for this connection may be that romantic notions of creativity, notions that emphasise the tenets of creative agony and deviancy, are so deeply embedded in
popular culture that creative individuals are encouraged to reproduce popular beliefs in order to fit the prevailing stereotypes (Sawyer 2006: 16-17). As Thomas (1928) suggests, and was argued above, this belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the information that constructs the creative idea “existed long before the creative person arrived on the scene” (1988: 329-330) in the domain. So what can an individual writer do to produce novelty? Graham Wallas, in his essay ‘Stages in the Creative Process’ (1979), believes that the creative process can be seen as evolving from preparation to incubation to illumination and finally to verification. Csikszentmihalyi extended Wallas’ final stage to include two distinct elements: evaluation and elaboration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 79-80). It is essential to remember that these five stages “typically overlap and recur several times before the process is completed” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 83). With these caveats in mind it is clear that there are certain times in the creative process where particular activities typically take place.

The first stage in Wallas’s process is preparation, the time where individuals immerse themselves in the area they wish to investigate. Shaun Tan says that his process always starts with a “systematic assemblage of material” (Personal Interview 2007). In this stage authors of Australian children’s literature take into consideration “the values, beliefs, customs and symbols of the society into which they are born” (Dolin, 2003: 7), along with additional information on the topic they want to write about to correctly identify and analyse every single parameter of the problem (Sawyer, 2006: 58). Jackie French further illustrates this by saying, “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 Interview, 2007).

The second stage, incubation, is perhaps the most contentious. Considered to be the time where ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 79), it is difficult to find evidence beside self-reportage from creative individuals (Weisberg, 1993). Toby Riddle notes that the stage of incubation has a close relationship with the next stage, insight: “There are definitely times when it’s just not happening and it’s probably a better idea to just take the day off or take more time off and just regenerate or allow for a fallow period that is necessary. I learnt to trust that at the end of those periods you often have a great burst of creativity” (Personal Interview, 2007). This experience of having an idea is the insight or illumination stage. It is this moment that is too often mistaken for the whole process and in Romantic terms is often mistakenly considered to be the result of either divine inspiration or extraordinary personal genius.

Finally, the last stage is verification and has since been broken into two parts by Csikszentmihalyi: evaluation and elaboration. Evaluation is a period in which the individual must decide whether the insight they had was “valuable and worth pursuing” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 80). While elaboration is where the individual is involved in the hard work of creation. For producers of contemporary Australian children’s literature this stage would include the solidification of plot, character development, self-editing and so on. It is after all five of these stages are completed that the individual can claim to have produced an innovation which can be directed to the field, which the writer is also member of, to be verified and tested.

In addition to this rational staged process Bourdieu suggests individuals possess an intangible “feel for the game” (1998: 80) unique to the individual (Webb et al, 2002) and momentary in nature. This habitus is “the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early
childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second nature” (Johnson in Bourdieu, 1993: 5). Nette Hilton says this process “will reveal your knowledge of the world or the stories that you know” (Personal Interview, 2007). It is the product of a lifetime of knowledge gathering and cultural awareness, which is internalised to become an instinctive, or near automatic response to decision making. Gary Crew considers his habitus an internal systemic process: “shifting from the conscious to the process, shifting from thought to process, from thought to doing, from thought to action” (Personal Interview, 2007). Habitus can also be associated with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow where “time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost” (Csikszentmihalyi cited in Geirland, 1996). By developing a conscious understanding of the process of creativity and habitus specific to creative writing an author can examine their own process to identify where they might improve.

In conclusion, it is clear that implications for reconsidering creativity in a rational context are significant in influencing the way creativity is taught and learnt. The systems model of creativity provides teachers and students of creative writing with a rational approach to the teaching of creativity that moves beyond romantic inspired approaches. It has been argued that creative producers operate within a system of circular causality whereby they are influenced and affected by multiple factors including the cultural and social contexts in which they exist. Some of these factors may be beyond the individual’s influence, such as the operational structure of the field. However, by developing an understanding of creativity as a systemic process, individual agents can “enrich the culture and... learn from this knowledge how to make [their] own lives directly more interesting and productive” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: 10). In a practical sense the more knowledge a writer can gain about the domain and field of creative writing, the more they will be able to produce appropriate material and the more likely it is for creativity to be recognised.

The ability to understand the field and the domain can be learned and it is possible for a teacher to facilitate that learning to guide the student towards a rational understanding of creativity. Instead of waiting for inspiration to strike, writers can be proactive in developing their creative practice. This means writers can be taught to cultivate disciplined work habits such as dedicating specific blocks of time to actively engage in writing practices such as researching, drafting, revising and editing. By realising creativity comes about through a process of active work, writers can enhance their creative production. Jackie French summarises, “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” (French Personal Interview, 2007).

References


About the Author

Chloe Killen

Chloe Killen is a PhD candidate investigating creativity in the production of Australian children’s literature. Her research examines the creative process of contemporary Australian picture book authors, illustrators, agents and publishers in an attempt to demystify creativity myths. In addition to teaching into the discipline of Communication and Media at the University of Newcastle, Chloe has worked as a copy writer, editor and production assistant for television and radio, as a project co-ordinator for a writers centre, a marketing assistant for an independent record label, and a research assistant for several academics.