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Who wants to be creative?

A qualitative study of the imaginaries and expectations of university students regarding creativity and the creative profession.

Topic

This study explores the discourses and stories around the creative profession from the perspective of university students.

In today's global economy there is an overriding demand for creativity. Often referred to as an engine of economic growth, the 'creative person' plays a prominent role in almost all professional fields, while creativity frequently appears as a highly-required skill to succeed in the labour market. This is especially relevant within the framework of creative industries, where creativity is understood as the raw material of professional activity.

While there are many studies that analyse how the dynamics, environments and working conditions in the creative industries have evolved, much less research has been done on the imaginaries, expectations and desires regarding the profession of those who are being trained to work in this field.

Objective

The main aim of this study is to explore the imaginaries of university students around the creative profession. As Pintos (2005)[1] stated, we understand social imaginaries as socially constructed schemes that allow us to perceive, explain and interact with what each social system considers as reality. Thus, from a constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003[2]), we assume that higher education and training, among other multiple actors, processes and social interactions, have a significant role in shaping how creativity and creative professions are socially understood (Pichardo et al, 2007[3]).

Method & context

It is a qualitative exploratory case study, based on an open questionnaire addressed to students of the Bachelor's Degree in Communication or the Bachelor's Degree in Design at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). The selection of these two Degrees basically responds to three criteria: their close connection to the professional field of creativity; the volume of students enrolled (more than 2,000 students in each); and the fact that both Degrees incorporate specific subjects related to the development of creative competence in their study plan.

As the main instrument of data collection we use an online survey based mostly on open questions sent to all students enrolled at one or both Degrees.

The questionnaire addresses three main issues structured in three blocks of questions:

- The beliefs, values and imaginaries of the students about what creativity is.

- The expectations and beliefs around the practice of creativity in creative work.

- What they know, imagine or expect in relation to career opportunities and working conditions in the creative industries.

As a result of the process of data collection, we obtained 273 responses, which corresponds to 7% of the total number of students surveyed. The collected data was analysed using a thematic structure - following a grounded theory approach - based on affinity diagrams created through a process of data categorization and the identification of patterns.

References

J.L. Pintos, "Comunicación, construcción de la realidad e imaginarios sociales". *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 10(29), 37-65, 2005.

V. Burr, *Social Constructionism* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge, 2003.

M.C. Pichardo, A.B. García, J. De la Fuente, F. Justicia, "El estudio de las expectativas en la universidad: análisis de trabajos empíricos y futuras líneas de investigación". *Revista electrónica de investigación educativa*, 9(1), 1-16, 2007.

Emergent results

Five axes of discussion emerged from a first cross-sectional reading of the data collected.

Axis 1
Creativity as an emotional narrative.

"Creativity is a mental orgasm, but also in the stomach." (S090)

Students define creativity using emotional or subjective expressions. Terms such as *intuition, impulsiveness, mood, daring, passion* or *magic* frequently emerge to answer the question, *What is creativity for you?* Indeed, in students' narrative creativity is rarely connected to cognitive, applied or practical dimensions of creative activity, although these aspects slowly start to appear when they talk about the 'profile' or the 'skills' of a creative person.

"Creativity is like playing around, trusting the unusual and letting yourself be carried away by the infinite possibilities of thought. This is how magic arises." (S166)

"Creativity is imagination, intelligence and intuition." (S084)

Axis 2
Creativity as a virtuous narrative.

In*telligent, innovative, pioneering, versatile, dreamer, tolerant, hard-working, courageous* or *generous* are just some of the many adjectives that students use to define a 'creative person'.

"Creative people are observant, cunning, non-judgmental, brilliant, have a great personality, have a vision of the future, and a great capacity for work" (S217)

Also, many responses connect with the mythical idea of the 'genius' as a divergent character (*disorderly, distracted, dispersed, eccentric, visionary, unstable* are stated by students as major characteristics of a creative person).

"A creative person is intuitive, untidy, chaotic, nonconformist, curious" (S257)

In this same vein, the idea of creativity as an individual and personal skill continues to predominate, although the importance of context and the collective dimension of creative work is also mentioned.

"We are individually creative by nature, with the ability to be collectively creative." (S098)

Axis 3
Creativity as a game-changer narrative.

Another strong idea that comes out in the responses is the connection between creativity and concepts such as change, innovation or progress. Many students refer to the idea that creativity serves fundamentally to 'solve problems' and 'improve people's lives' or promote 'change' and 'social improvement'.

"Creativity can solve problems, improve the world and revitalize society." (S217)

This idea of change or progress is also perceived on a personal level. Many point to the possibility of making a place in the professional world 'being their own boss', valuing their own creative talents. In this sense, there seems to be a certain idealization of the idea of self-employment as a space for creative and professional freedom.

"Being freelance is the only option to enter the professional world maintaining a certain freedom." (S029)

"Always as a freelancer. Working for someone today is like digging a deeper and deeper grave." (S228)

Axis 4
Creativity as a narrative of resignation.

"The worst thing about creative work is pressure, which blocks you and doesn't let your ideas flow." (S112)

While a romanticized vision of work contexts and labour practices is clear through words such as *flexibility, fun, experimentation, dynamism, freedom, fluidity, connectedness* or *collaboration*, a less 'idyllic' vision also emerges.

"The worst thing is the low stability of some creative jobs or the fact that working conditions are bad." (S272)

Many talk about rigidity, hierarchy, pressure, high demand or competitiveness when envisioning their future labour environment, mentioning job insecurity and precariousness as a path from which they can hardly escape on their journey to success in the creative industry. Also the vision of delocalized work environments (co-working offices, tele-working, and so on) gains more and more prominence in the expectations of students.

"The tendency will be not to think about 'my table' or 'my computer' ... But open spaces, without individual offices, like co-working spaces." (S261)

Axis 5
Creativity as an aspirational narrative.

According to students' responses, creative professions bring personal and professional satisfaction, which students do not relate to economic benefits but to the emotional satisfaction of creative practice (an *inspiring, motivating, exciting or challenging* job).

"What I like the most is feeling fulfilled with what I do." (S194)

Even when asked about the most negative aspects of creative work, the emotional dimension also dominates, through ideas such as *personal insecurity, frustration, lack of inspiration or lack of creative freedom*, all mentioned by the students as potential sources of dissatisfaction. In this sense, one of the aspects that appears as an important claim by students is the low recognition that creative talent has in the profession and in society in general.

"What I like least about creative work is the frustration, and the little value that is given to our work" (student 049)." (S049)

They use expressions such as *lack of recognition, professional intrusion or devaluation* to refer to how the industry ends up making creative talent invisible under its products and its benefits.

"I don't like the fact that you can never be sure you've found the best solution." (S129)