Loving or Fearing Creativity?
It’s all in the Definition

Marta Davidovich Ockuly* and Ruth Richards†

ABSTRACT

How do we make creativity a bigger part of our lives? This article begins with mentorship at Saybrook, and how at best this can open people’s minds to love of learning, and finding one’s own creative path, rather than fear of how “one is doing” while following someone else’s well-worn trajectory. The article then moves to an original inquiry initiated by the first author as first-year doctoral student, out of concern for developing love of creativity (rather than fear) in her own students. Her professor added some research questions and joined the inquiry. The key question to 114 respondents, contacted online through social media, was “What does creativity mean to you personally?” The answer is not obvious in a culture that often links creativity only with the arts or with famous people, or with creative product—and evaluation of its worth—rather than with the joys of an open-minded creative process conducted in a risk-free atmosphere. The research involved 8 questions via Survey Monkey. Respondents emerged young, tech savvy, highly educated, and often female. Creativity evoked process for 97%, in personal terms for 75% and typically involved everyday (not eminent) creativity. Creative product came up, as did the arts, but not in isolation. Common descriptors included: ideas, imagination, and expression. The authors suggest creativity be presented to learners so as to inspire and engage, using process more than product. Some important implications are discussed.

Key Words: creative process, creativity, defining creativity, evaluation, graduate education, imagination, mentoring, originality, potential, Ruth Richards, self-expression, wellbeing

Ruth Richards: The Mentor
Saybrook is a place, unlike some universities, where students can delve in creatively and take some risks. What follows is a study a first year doctoral student was able to propose and do—with her faculty mentor—and even to present formally the following summer at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, in Orlando, Florida.

Marta Davidovich Ockuly: The Mentee
An ideal graduate education allows students the freedom to explore and research their creative interests. At Saybrook I discovered, first hand, the student’s passion comes first. Even before I was an official doctoral student, Ruth Richards’ mentoring began. Her generous spirit reached out to me with an invitation to participate as an incoming student who already knew her in the 2011 NeuroQuantology Pioneer Tribute Issue. In my first course at Saybrook, with Ruth as my professor, I launched a major research study (with Ruth’s encouragement and partnership), which led to an invitation to present at the American Psychological Association (APA) Annual Meeting in Orlando (August, 2012).
NeuroQuantology | June 2013 | Volume 11 | Issue 2 | Page 256-262
Ockuly and Richards., Loving or fearing creativity

Needless to say, having a faculty mentor who happens to be a pioneering creativity scholar is a huge door opener! It is all the more amazing because Ruth challenged me to turn my frustration with the current state of creativity definitions into a research project. Being ignorant of the process, I jumped at the bait. Ruth gave me plenty of leeway as well as step-by-step mentoring which resulted in a well formulated study using quantitative and qualitative methods. What’s really important to note is — although there were times she strongly challenged my views, Ruth supported me 100% in exploring the questions. In the end, she told me my questions and findings were important and that her own views had expanded because of the study. What a monumental experience for a new graduate student! That we have mentorship that encourages risk-taking at Saybrook, reflects the Saybrook philosophy of creative exploration, while at times challenging the mainstream—with rigor!

The Study: What You Think About Creativity Matters

What does “creativity” mean to you, personally? Take a moment to think about it. We did a new study on this question. Why a study? What if we learn the way we talk about creativity actually turns people off? Or discourages them from trying? What a tragedy for a classroom. What a potential loss for the world.

Process or Product? Every day or Eminent Creativity?

As philosopher Elliot Samuel Paul (2011) says (while reminding us that creativity is for everyone, and about much more than arts):


Yet how do people talk about creativity in a classroom, coffee shop, or boardroom? It varies, but for years, many thought creativity was largely about arts, or famous people. Too often one heard, “I can’t draw, so I’m not creative.” Creators were artists, or maybe scientists or leaders. And just an elite few. In many classrooms, young people studied the creations of other people—namely the bottom line, the creative product. Not how they “did it,” that mysterious alchemy that helps us engage with the forces of creation to bring forth the new. Meanwhile, students learned all too well how to get 100% on someone else’s test—rather than how to ask questions of their own (Richards, 2007; Runco and Pritzker, 2011).

Without their own creative efforts, were they also missing the lessons of risking, of making mistakes, of failing but then trying again (how else do we learn to create?) Too many students were learning to play it safe and get the right answer (and get into college), not how to think, imagine, risk, and personally grow.

Can it be risky even to speak out in certain classrooms? It can! Studies such as Westby and Dawson’s (1995) showed some teachers do not even recognize creative students when they see them. Here, for example, are four qualities from a longer list they gave. Pick two that most describe creative kids. The choices are: sincere, impulsive, reliable, makes up rules as they go along. Teachers in the study often picked: sincere, and reliable. Wrong answer. No problem with these qualities. But the other two are more distinctive for creativity. And are creative kids seen as troublemakers? (Indeed, they can be.)

Consider a current view, with creativity seen as a universal human capacity. Everyday creativity is about “the originality of everyday life.” It is less what we do than how we do it. It is about creative process, valuable in most anything, at work and at leisure. We all have this everyday creativity or we might not even be alive—with our improvisations, guesses, flexible adaptations, intuitions, hunches, and ability to solve problems (Ockuly and Richards, 2012; Richards, 2007; 2010).

Our school children have this potential. As do we. Our human creativity is everywhere. It is in street smarts, how we raise a child, write a report at work, landscape the yard, repair our car, or design a new space shuttle. Our everyday creativity helps keep us alive. Better yet, it may even help us question our lives, and learn what we are living for.

At best, it may move us toward what Maslow (1968) called self-actualizing (vs. special talent) creativity. New levels of spontaneity, wellbeing, openness, presence, and concern with “being” (vs. “deficiency”) values, and broader questions in life beyond
one’s own self-interest. Some see this as a higher phase of human development.

**Why This Study?**

These investigators, coming from different places, have long been concerned with the benefits of creative process in classrooms, in the workplace, in clinics, in daily life, and for our ongoing human development (Ockuly and Richards, 2012; Richards, 2007; Richards et al., 2011). One of the authors (RR), who had long studied *everyday creativity* got taken aside by the other (MDO), who had just arrived at Saybrook University, and who quickly appeared to be one of those amazing new doctoral students, full of creative ideas and concerns about changing the status quo. She had issues with the way creativity is usually defined, even at this progressive and rigorous alternative school.

Way too much about creative product! She had a point. She (MDO) is also a mid-career professional, with a background as prizewinning advertising professional, social media expert, and college instructor with her own creativity course. Her personal goals involve working with creative process in contexts including education, building creative confidence in adults, and facilitating personal and professional growth through expressive arts.

“We need a study” she said. And she was right.

She (MDO) had been discouraged by research definitions of creativity (Hennessey and Amabile, 2010) - typically product-based definitions, tied to objective measurable outcomes. They have their value, but she wondered if a new definition focused on terms used by people in the general population would broaden their personal “buy-in” to the construct. The definition used most often in creativity studies literature cites only two product related criteria – (a) novelty or originality, and (b) usefulness. In their analysis of 90 journal articles using the term *creativity* in the title, Plucker, Beghetto and Dow (2004) found 38% provided an explicit definition, in 41% a definition was only implied, and 21% offered no definition at all (p. 88).

“How,” she (MDO) said, “do we awaken creative potential when people are told their ideas must stand up to outside evaluation? Is it any wonder we are almost afraid to share our embryonic new contributions? Creativity starts with a process of imagining, exploring, and expressing. We can all do it. But it’s a risk; it’s a leap. We can’t thrive unless it’s in a place free of evaluation.”

“Yet, here we are” she went on, “telling our students, and right off the bat, in our very definition of creativity, that we are going to judge them, and it had better be good—and not just new, either, but useful too!” How many would be more willing to flex and build their creative muscles if they understood what mattered most was, first and foremost, engaging in creative process?” She suggested we study how an engaged group from the general population thinks about creativity. Would it differ? The other author (RR) suggested seeing if people more attuned to *everyday (vs. eminent) creativity* and who value their own potential would turn more automatically to talking about process.

The reader may know that much research confirms that early judgment can squash creative ideas. In fact, deferring judgment is critical in any setting where divergent thinking is encouraged. Puccio, Murdock and Mance (2007) affirm: “The Defer Judgment Principle is crucial in divergent thinking because when judgment starts, divergent thinking stops” (p. 63). Rogers (1961) also asserts “providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent” is critical. “When we cease to form judgments of the other individual from our own locus of evaluation, we are fostering creativity (p. 357). (See also Hennessey, 2011). As a result of a lot of early and inappropriate evaluation of creative efforts, many adults face the challenge of rebuilding creative confidence (Kelly and Kelly, 2012). Could erasing fear of being judged from the early process stage of creativity lead to restored creative confidence and increased use of personal creative potential? This question begs further research.

**Grass-roots Study: How Do You Define Creativity?**

To access a modern and creatively-aware group, we (Ockuly and Richards, 2012) recruited participants through social media (Facebook, Twitter), targeting people who had shown an interest in creativity. What would they tell us—and how interesting, we thought,
if this turned out different from what many experts say? Would creativity not be viewed in terms of unique end products or a small group of famous people, or stellar work by a few in the arts or sciences? How many respondents would think they themselves were creative—and would that affect how they characterized creativity?

Over a period of ten days, a full 114 people answered 8 questions about creativity, either fill-in questions (sentence completion) or multiple choices, using the online resource of Survey Monkey. These began with “What does the word creativity mean to you?” and also addressed their own creativity. Respondents knew that we wanted their own personal wisdom—and that there was no right or wrong answers. Plus, we asked for first thoughts they had, off the top of their heads.

Results showed this wasn’t your average group, as you might imagine. Respondents were young (2/3 were under 40 years old, range “18 and over” to “over 60”), well-educated (all but 3 of the 114 had some college), and interestingly, 90% were female. Nearly a third had taken a course on creativity. Three quarters (3/4) felt they, themselves, were often or very often creative. Another fifth said they were moderately so. Of course this was also a tech savvy group to have even received our request.

What did creativity mean to them—and were they creatively engaged? Indeed. Creativity was about them, very person-centered indeed (for ¾ of the group). These were personal descriptions more than formal definitions. They used words like expression, ideas, imagination. What came first to mind was what they themselves did. When descriptions were classified, almost everyone said something about creative process, about their creative doing. This was a full 97%. One quarter (25%) did also focus on creative product. Yet only 2% (2 people) spoke only about the outcome or creative product, and its defining features, with one definition of creative product sounding right out of a textbook, “something novel and useful to society or a particular domain.” This person went on to say, “Something that is imitated by others.”

Although almost ¼ (24%) mentioned visual arts or writing, this was typically part of a longer list, and most referred also to what we call the creativity of everyday life—to expressing, finding, imagining, exploring, unleashing, thinking outside the box, and having fun, in diverse ways.

Plus there was energy, action, interest, excitement, and a very positive feeling. No dry characterizations here. And what were they doing outside of visual arts, and a lot of writing? Baking, schoolwork, playing with children, dancing, saying affirmations, solving staffing problems at work, thinking, teaching kids, connecting with friends, cleaning(!), brainstorming with others, buying a birthday present—in other words, doing a vast variety of everyday activities. And these activities, in turn, seemed to be fun, sometimes joyous.

Of interest was a small, rather sad, group of 11 people (10%) who did not consider themselves very creative. Almost half linked creativity with art and actually had taken a creativity course (not necessarily the same people each time, nor do we know what the course was like).

Plus, some seem to have discounted their own everyday creativity and underrated themselves. One woman had impressive activities such as, “Writing a poem, designing doll outfits from outgrown clothes, decorating the house with unusual finds from thrift stores.” Plus she had even taught courses on poetry and healing to medical professionals and college students, in the context of job-related stress, mourning, substance abuse and more. But was she often creative? “Very little,” she said. Could age matter? This was one of three in this group who was over 60 years.

Discussion
How did you characterize creativity, back at the beginning? How did it compare? Our study did draw more for personal descriptions than for formalized definitions that would fit everyone.

This was a population of eager, relatively young, and tech-wise people, seeing creativity as an opening for their own expressions, explorations, and life possibilities. They were engaged, enthusiastic, and very present in the moment, with their recollections of what they had been doing. Thus, with their creatively engaged, they spoke about process more than product, and about everyday creativity much more than the eminent or exceptional creativity of others.
Almost all of this group, was very much “into it,” they considered themselves creative, and saw creativity as part of each day. If about the arts at times, it was about much more too and, indeed, a way of being in the world. There was openness, risking, fun, and presumably the cheerful ability to “let it fly” and make mistakes. These are the types of qualities that also tend to be linked with healthy effects (Lepore and Smyth, 2002; Maslow, 1968; Richards, 2007; Runco and Pritzker, 2011; Rogers, 1961). We need more research in these areas.

Our respondents took us where the creativity was happening. Their characterizations were alive.

Other studies will need to look at other groups under other conditions. Older groups, less tech-savvy groups. People who doubt their own creativity. Will they define it differently? Yet there is already a real question for us, from results to date. Have we found the best way to present creativity to our students, our kids, our friends, our employees—to ourselves.

To be sure, there are complex issues in defining any term for rigorous and meaningful scientific research—and particularly for “creative process” which has multiple phases and both conscious and unconscious components. Also, although there are “core” elements of creative process, such as openness to experience, others may vary across fields of endeavor.

Our survey yielded subjective descriptions and personal characterizations of the exciting parts of creating—of exploration and insight. Is this a good way to present creativity to the new practitioner? How do we inspire an 8 year old or a 58 year old, especially if they have low creative self-confidence? Why not tell them about the good part? If it is about external, objective criteria—and a bottom line creative product—might we not shut them down with fears of judgment? Can we instead share the flow and pleasure of what this creator can be doing and feeling and exploring? The affective and motivational dimensions, the subjective as well as objective are part of this. Why can this creating be wonderful? Why should they give it a try?

We can also put it to you again, what does the word creativity mean to you?

Consider the “Four P’s of Creativity”

It is helpful to bring in the so-called “Four Ps of Creativity.” We can add to perspectives of creative product, and process, already discussed above, the added perspectives of creative person, and press of the environment—the environmental press being what either helps turns our creativity on, or turns it off. As we know, worlds of difference can exist between one classroom or workplace and the next (Richards, 2010; Runco and Pritzker, 2011). As for creative person, this is someone who applies her or his innovative capacities—and habitually.

In this research, we ended up dealing with all four Ps. The survey findings suggest we look further at motivation, to see if the common product definition of creativity (original, useful) may, in itself, create the wrong environmental press. An inhibitory press.

The excitement for the creator is elsewhere. This was clear for almost all participants. A process description—what we do during the first, inspired, parts of creating—can carry us beyond our Western bottom line (of asking, What do we get? How good is it?). We move to ways of creatively working and living (What can we creatively do? What can it do for us?).

What can it do for us? Evidence is accumulating that our expressive creative activity, researched best so far with writing, can be, not only physically and psychologically healing, but can even boost our immune function! (Lepore and Smyth, 2002; Richards, 2007; Rogers, 2011). Our resistance to disease. Evolution is telling us something important here. If we become more disease resistant, aren’t we more fit as individuals and a species? More capable of going forth to be creative again? Might creative activity, all else being equal, be valuable for us humans, both individually and together?

For many reasons, shouldn’t we be promoting our human creativity even more?

Hence, the Fourth P, the creative person. What creative modes can become habitual? Become part of us? Why do we seek this? How does it happen? Can our creativity actually change us? And for the better? All else being equal, Maslow (1968) thought this could happen.

www.neuroquantology.com
As a way of life, it seems, creative modes can also be healthy ones. It matters less what the quality of the “product” is. What matters, above all, is process. That we are present, aware, open to possibility, and taking a risk. It matters what we are doing. Is this something to make available in every school, senior center, clinic and hospital? In every home? In every place of business? We need more attention to research in these areas. Not so much on which bottom-line “creative product” we can produce, as what the “creative process” can do for us.

When someone asks us, “What is creativity?” this times perhaps a 27 year old single mom returning to school, what do we say to inspire her? If creativity itself is about opening doors—in our world and in our lives, how can we insure our description of creativity will also open doors for this young person—and not close them?

About the Authors
Marta Davidovich Ockuly

Marta Davidovich Ockuly is an Educator/Coach/Catalyst dedicated to building adult creative confidence. She teaches: “Creative Process: Awakening Creative Potential for Personal and Professional Growth” at Eckerd College. In addition to work as a creativity researcher and doctoral student at Saybrook University, Marta is Chief Inspiration Officer of www.JoyofQuotes.com. Marta imagined and developed this site in 2009. It currently features positive, empowering quotes on 200 subjects and attracts over a million visitors annually from around the world. Her background includes 15 years as an award-winning writer, idea generator, entrepreneur, and advertising, marketing, and public relations professional. She also enjoys providing social media mentoring and strategic marketing support for individuals and organizations committed to social action for sustainable positive change. She is the author/editor of Do Your Dream... NOW- Quote Book & Action Guide, and Dare to Dream: Positively Inspiring Quotes by Women.

Ruth Richards

Ruth Richards, M.D., Ph.D. is an educational psychologist and Board Certified Psychiatrist, with two edited books including the 2007 Everyday Creativity and New Views of Human Nature affiliated with Saybrook University and also McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, 2009 winner of the Rudolf Arnheim Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement in Psychology and the Arts (Div. 10). She was on the Executive Advisory Board for the Encyclopedia of Creativity, 1st Edition, serves on the editorial board of three journals, and the Advisory Board of the interfaith organization AHIMSA (www.ahimsaberkeley.org).
References