



Creativity As Expressed in the Avocations and Vocation of Communication Scholars.

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Abstract

Many communication scholars are more than researchers, more than teachers, and more than family members and friends. Some are artists. And all of us enjoy expressing our creativity in non-academic ways. This special issue focuses on creativity as primarily expressed through our avocations. Specifically, this article describes the background of the special issue, discusses creativity, and briefly introduces the topics covered in the scholarly articles that accompany the creative pieces.

Keywords: creativity, communication, avocation

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Welcome to this special issue of the *American Communication Journal* focusing on the creativity of communication scholars as expressed through avenues such as music, art, and fiction. I invite you to sit back, have a cup of tea, listen to folk music and rock and roll, read several short stories, explore a folk-art brochure, view drawings, and read poetry. Note the discipline-directed satire emerging through poetry and song. Then step backstage and read accompanying scholarly articles by the contributors.

This article describes the background of the special issue, discusses creativity, and briefly introduces the topics covered in the scholarly articles that accompany the creative pieces. As you view, listen, and read this issue, engage in some play, have fun, think about how *you* do and can break out of the linear constraints of our profession, and delight in glimpsing some of our colleagues' avocations.

Establishing the Foundation

This special issue began in Spring 2001 while I was a visiting faculty member at the University of Kentucky. As I became reacquainted with Robert Bostrom and Nancy Harrington, I relearned these outstanding scholars also are accomplished musicians. Their music making reminded me of two of my University of Arkansas colleagues who also explore creative avenues: Janice Rushing who recently co-wrote a screenplay, *The Seventh Generation*, with Stacey Erickson, and Stephen Smith writing under the pen name John Wilkes who published *The Star Chamber*, a novel filled with political intrigue. I reflected on how we are more than communication scholars, more than teachers, and more than family members and friends. I wanted to celebrate how some of us are artists. And all of us enjoy expressing our creativity in non-academic ways. I also wanted to share something enjoyable with others. Luckily, Stephanie Coopman, editor of the *American Communication Journal*, allowed me to edit this issue focusing on creativity and on how communication scholars express themselves creatively through their avocations.

Creative Products

Sixteen potential contributors submitted a creative product for review. The creative products included poems, allegories, short stories, music, film, performance, and an essay. After three reviewers independently ranked the contributions, I selected the creative material you see in this issue as a sampling of what exists in our colleagues' homes and lives. As Heaton writes in his scholarly article, those chosen were not necessarily more creative than those whose work does not appear here. I simply wanted to illustrate various art forms and to take advantage of the on-line journal capacities to show dimensions of communication scholars previously largely unseen due to the limitations associated with the printed page and what counts as scholarship in our discipline.

What is creativity? The American Heritage Dictionary (1985) defines create as "to cause to exist; bring into being . . . to produce through artistic or imaginative effort" and creative as "having the ability or power to create . . . characterized by originality and expressiveness; imaginative." Several contributors to this issue provide their own definitions of creativity (e.g., Bostrom, Lane, & Harrington; Heaton). For Henry (1991), creativity is "a thinking process associated with imagination, insight, invention, innovation, ingenuity, intuition, inspiration and illumination" (p. 3). Like Bostrom et al., Henry argues that creativity must be appropriate and useful, not just novel.

I do not believe creativity *must be* appropriate and useful. Potentially, the product of creative effort may be useful but that is not a necessary prerequisite. To me, creativity is more about play and serves a nourishing role for those of us who are continually forced to fit into the mold of someone else's definition of appropriate reality. Bohm and Peat (1991), as well as several of the authors in this issue, discuss the role of play in creativity. Science (and our Western culture) generally has little use for play as work although, "Within the act of creative play, fresh perceptions occur which enable a person to propose a new idea that can be put forward for exploration" (Bohm & Peat, 1991, p. 27).

When creativity *is* discussed in most academic and applied contexts it is with an eye for how to work (rather than play) around the edges of the currently accepted definition of reality. Yes, we may merge academic concepts or theories creatively. Yes, we may manage people less traditionally, teach in different ways, or create art using unique metaphors. However, basically only constrained creativity is supported by science. To stray too far from the clearly defined path is to invite criticism. As a result, many of us express ourselves creatively through our avocations.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines avocation as "an activity taken up in addition to one's regular work or profession, usually for enjoyment; hobby" and vocation as "a regular occupation or profession, esp. one for which a person is specially suited or qualified." Several of the authors in this issue discuss the relationship between our vocations and our avocations. Schrag suggests that the healthiest option for the individual and for our discipline is if we can creatively merge our vocations and our avocations. As communication scholars some of us already do so.

Root-Bernstein (2001) provides historical and contemporary examples of scientists who express themselves through music (avocation) and whose music inspires their science (vocation). He argues people use a common set of thinking tools in music and science. Creative people are usually polymaths (multi-talented) who think in trans-disciplinary ways "because they have a predisposition--learned or innate or a combination of the two . . . to view their intellectual world globally and holistically" (p. 66). He reports on research showing that the success of 40 male scientists was statistically correlated with their active adult participation in music, arts and literature. He also talks about the importance of merging our vocations and our avocations.

From whence does creativity flow? At least five major schools of thought exist as to the origin of creativity: grace, accident, association, cognition, and personality (Henry, 1991). The very popular associationist theory contends that creativity can occur when someone applies procedures from one area to another to give rise to novel associations. This is consistent with Kubey and Barrows' discussion in this issue regarding the use of "flow theory" and emerges in Root-Bernstein's (2001) discussion of the relationship between music, creativity and scientific thinking. The cognitive school argues creativity draws on normal cognitive processes like recognition, reasoning and understanding and is the result of deep

thinking in an area and sustained effort across time. Finally, personality theory sees creativity as a natural human trait distributed across the populace in varying "strengths." Heaton's essay in this issue appears to support this school of thought.

Researchers seek to identify the characteristics of creative people and Henry (1991) reviews some of these characteristics. Like, Rich and Rasmussen in this issue, Henry and McAleer (1991) argue that intuition plays a major role in creativity. In his discussion of six psychological traits creative people may possess McAleer (1991) describes "a strong commitment to a personal aesthetic, 'the drive to wrest order, simplicity, meaning, richness, or powerful expression from what is seemingly chaos' . . . a high tolerance for complexity, disorganization, and asymmetry" (p. 13). In this issue, Heaton addresses the need to map particularly messy problems as part of the creative process. Naglieri (2001) identified five creativity-relevant skills noting there appears to be a particular connection between planning ability and creativity. Other skills include suspending judgment, keeping response options open as long as possible, metacognition which is the ability to think about your own cognitive processes, and exploring new pathways. In terms of exploring new pathways, both Bostrom et al. and Schwartzman discuss the role of metaphor in the creative process as do Bohm and Peat (1991). Another psychological trait is inner motivation whereby creators engage in an enterprise for its own sake. This theme is reinforced by Mullen's statement in this issue that "We teach and write to some extent because we have to for professional and economic reasons. We also play because we have to, but we are driven, like all artists, by passion and creativity." Other traits identified by McAleer are the ability to excel in finding problems as well as a willingness to take risks, fail and learn from these failures.

What blocks our creativity? Emotional barriers to creative thinking include: fear of failing, need for security and low tolerance for ambiguity, a preference for judging ideas, an inability to relax, lack of challenge or effort, excessive zeal, lack of access to imagination, lack of imaginative control, and inability to distinguish fantasy from reality (Henry, 1991). Bohn and Peat (1991) discuss the common problem of believing only a person of considerable genius can be creative. Although intelligence and creativity are associated, the relationship weakens with IQ's of over 120 and it's hard to differentiate the two at high levels of talent and ability (Naglieri, 2001). Bohn and Peat write that we must "cease to take for granted that we are incapable of creativity" (p. 29). I do not consider myself especially creative. However, after reading what blocks creativity I doubt I will ever state again that "I am not creative." We all are. It is interesting to note that the blocks identified here focus on individual-level shortcomings and overlook the infertility of the soil we find ourselves in. This soil can be in our household, our department, or our profession. Henry does discuss how the environment can shape or constrain our creativity. In this issue, Schrag and Schwartzman both discuss how creativity can rejuvenate our discipline if it is *allowed* to.

How can we grow our creativity? At least three of the contributors to this issue offer resources we can consult as we seek to unlock our creativity. In addition, McCaskey (1991) discusses the use of mapping and Trimingham (2002), a graphic artist, identifies four things that sap our creativity, seven habits we should form in order to be more creative, four ways to set creative moods, and ten things we can do to be more creative immediately. He identifies distracters including negative thinking, negative environments, negative postures and poor ergonomics, and excessive multi-tasking. Good habits include keeping a daily journal, drawing every day, exercising, carrying a notebook and using it, practicing suspending judgment, appreciating other artists' work, and refueling our creative tank. He tells readers to set creative moods via listening to music, worrying effectively, finding our playful side, and being assertive. Finally, he suggests ten ways to become more creative immediately: define the challenge, research solutions, use repetitive tasking, talk with others, tackle another problem, look to nature, make a game of it, humor yourself, clean up, and focus on one thing in the project.

The next section previews the essays and identifies what I found most interesting in each. As you read the individual essays you will find additional elements that resonate for you.

Previewing the Essays

Folk music, creativity, and the brain. Bostrom, Lane, and Harrington play folk music. Many of us in the Southern States Communication Association (<http://ssca.net>) have heard them play at conventions in Lexington, Kentucky. In their scholarly article, they write that their creativity stems from their "wish to break out of the straight jacket of examining communicative interactions in linear ways," a desire echoed by

many of the contributors to this issue. Bostrom et al. use folk music and satire to impact how communication scholars view and perhaps even enact their profession. But knowing these folks personally and having sat in on their practice sessions, I know they also play folk music and engage in satire in order to have a tremendous amount of fun. Their scholarly essay addresses creativity and coloring outside the lines, using the full range of stimuli when creating, how brain structure influences interpretation, metaphor as creativity, and creativity as persuasion. I finished reading their essay with an increased appreciation for the persuasive nature of folk music. Listening to and reading their songs, I enjoyed the satire embedded in their lyrics and repeatedly laughed loudly.

Baseball, covenants, journeys, and transformative experiences. Marc Rich contributed a delightfully entertaining story regarding neighborhood baseball. In a companion scholarly piece, Rich and Rasmussen illuminate the link among four short stories: Rich's "*Home (run) Home*," Clarissa Pinkola Estes's "*Guadalupe; The Path of the Broken Heart*," Tim O'Brien's "*On The Rainy River*," and Leslie Marmon Silko's "*Ceremony*." Rich and Rasmussen create a case study showing how these stories function communicatively using an inductive methodology "born of intuition and embodiment." After a close reading all four texts, they generate "the thesis that in these works of fiction *narrator and reader enter into a covenant to co-create a transformative experience centered in the merger of the mystical and the mundane in liminal space*." All four stories involve a *covenant*, a *journey* merging the mystical and the mundane, generally in liminal space(s), and a *transformative* experience. All four stories include marginal voices and borderland communities. In their scholarly article, they provide an analysis seeking to potentially deconstruct dominant narratives about liminality, transformation, and the relationship between self and other. I enjoyed Rich's short story and easily could image such events occurring. In their scholarly article, I found their discussion of liminal space, marginal voices, and borderland communities especially interesting since I teach intercultural communication.

Art, fiction, and healing the deconstructed professorate. Schrag is a man of many artistic talents as you will see when you explore some of his drawings and visit his website where you can read two of the books he wrote for children. According to Schrag, *knowing*, which is discipline specific, and *understanding*, which is the awareness of why knowledge is meaningful, are differentiated and disconnected in today's academy. As a result, faculties are deconstructed. Yet he believes "we can heal a deconstructed professorate and revitalize the academy by establishing mechanisms that allow us to share the person beyond our *vita* with our colleagues, students and friends." His philosophy regarding healing and revitalizing rests to a great extent on two books: [Man's Search for Meaning](#) by Viktor Frankl, and [Second Foundation](#) by Isaac Asimov. He suggests we recombine our vocations and our avocations. "I also choose to believe that my colleagues hold fascinations beyond the obvious attractions of their resumes; that the inquisitive mind mandated by our way of life bubbles out in ways not revealed in the office, classroom or laboratory. I choose to believe that we are all Masters in someone's eyes, and that our tracks are deserving of note. The potential worth of such tracks is intriguing. Frankl's model implies they may heal us. Asimov's gives us cause to hope they may benefit the academy as a whole. I have chosen the Internet as the medium in which to explore ways of recording my own tracks. I have created a web site that shamelessly co-mingles my vocation and my avocations."

Poetry and expanding the boundaries of our scholarship. Schwartzman, a published poet, shares several of his poems with us. Having visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington within the past year, I found his poem regarding the shoes seen there especially moving. In his scholarly piece, he argues that poetry can help enlarge our discipline. Schwartzman contends that traditional scholarly research privileges replication of past findings rather than creative problem solving. Indeed, the scholarly tendency to squelch creativity can make scholarship and creativity practically become antonyms. He presents an agenda of poeticizing scholarship which questions this "troublesome bifurcation between scholarly and creative endeavors". Although our discipline makes a start toward writing in creative forms such as autoethnographies, Schwartzman contends that more poetic modes of expression may lead us to experiment more and to broach subjects unsuitable for addressing in more traditional forms of scholarship. Schwartzman's comment, "My desire to extend the bounds of what counts as scholarship arises from the blood-curdling muteness of conventional scholarship" resonated with me. Although I don't necessarily believe conventional scholarship is mute, writing in that form became increasingly less interesting as I began to master the techniques.

Messy texts, folk-art brochures, and Graceland. Heaton writes that to create is to "bring into or cause to come into existence; make; originate" (Williams, 1979, 211). For Heaton, creativity is a messy process that leads to the creation of "messy texts" (Marcus, 1994). Heaton seeks ways to write nonlinear arguments

about nonlinear experiences into the linear form of an article. "I tried to represent and experience the difference between linear ways of making academic arguments and nonlinear ways of experiencing the world." In his creative product, he combines the nonlinear aspects of a "mystory" with an "autoethnography" to examine "the performances of fans (people who interact with each other because of their love for Elvis) and fans (people who do not like Elvis, but still choose to focus on Elvis as the source of their interactions) that take place in the shopping area across the street from Graceland during International Elvis Tribute Week." His creative product takes the form of a folk-art brochure. Using processes suggested by Sheehy and by Baer, Heaton challenges readers to creatively express themselves. I appreciated the artistic ability shown in Heaton's brochure. Also, I liked the idea that our work can really be viewed as play.

Rock and roll, flow, improvisation, students, and small group theory. Radford, Cooper, Kubey, McCurry, Millen, and Barrows describe a blues, rock, and sometime heavy metal band called The Professors consisting of communication professors from a number of New Jersey schools who perform at clubs and professional conferences. Like in Bostrom et al.'s songs, satire of our profession occurs in some of their lyrics including "Peer Review".

Their scholarly piece reflects upon the place of musical creativity within their lives as working academics and in their own personal histories. The piece is broken into subsections where different members discuss different topics such as intellectual/artistic freedom, getting "in the flow", and how they play music for the personal and interactional joys of the experience. Radford describes how band members transpose the principle of academic freedom from the classroom to the jam session and, ultimately, to the performance noting the group's mindset of academic/musical freedom allows them to be creative and original. Kubey and Barrows both discuss the idea of "flow" which "is the state of enormous engagement that each of us experiences when intensely involved in an activity where challenges and skills are equally matched and where positive feedback comes regularly and quickly." Barrows describes flow theory as a process which guides breakthroughs in creative thought. McCurry discusses improvisation, and proposes that "in a society and time that screams for the individual to be heard, we as professors often must orchestrate listening space in our groups of students. Who is the soloist? What is the rhythm in the group's pattern of communication? What is the melody that they all have in their heads? What are 'they' saying?" Mullen shows how playing music helps him form a discourse of connection with his students. Finally, Cooper describes a rock band as an intriguing example of small group communication. As someone trying to learn how to play the guitar, I was inspired by the discussion of what music means in the contributors' private and professional lives. I enjoyed reading about Csikszentmihalyi's ideas of flow. Many times I find myself lost in writing an article, analyzing data, gardening, or practicing the guitar. The material they placed on the web is interesting both musically and as a description of dynamics of a musical group.

Conclusion

Working on this project was interesting and fun. I hope you find it equally so. I am sure you have avocations and struggle to be creative. I hope you find the creative products and scholarly products appearing in this special issue enjoyable, interesting and insightful. Perhaps you will be inspired to CREATE as Heaton urges. Perhaps creativity can help heal a deconstructed professorate. Perhaps our combined creative efforts will infuse vitality into our discipline. Perhaps something you read here might help transform how you currently view a specific concept.

ENJOY

PLAY

CREATE

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