

## How Do Artists Learn and What can Educators Learn From Them?

*Tatiana Chemi*

*PhD, is Associate Professor at Aalborg University, Chair of Educational Innovation, where she works in the field of artistic learning and creative processes. She is currently involved in several research projects examining artistic creativity, arts integrated educational designs in schools and the role of emotions in learning.*

*Julie Borup Jensen*

*PhD, is assistant professor at Aalborg University. Her field of research is collaborative creativity and innovation in educational contexts. Her main research interest is arts and artistic processes as contributing to the development of diversity pedagogy and of inclusive and creative learning environments in educational contexts.*

### Abstract

Among scholars and practitioners interested in creative learning, many assumptions and even stereotypes are nurtured about artists' creativity. The myth of the lone genius, for example, is neither close to artistic practices nor beneficial to education. We address the topic of artistic creativity, looking at its relevance to educational settings. Through asking the question: *how do artists create, learn and how can education learn from them*, we have investigated and described professional artists' creative and learning processes. In this article, we present findings from a qualitative research project that explores these questions as an empirical and theoretical contribution to the field of arts and creativity research from a learning perspective. We found that the interviewed artists experience learning and the creative process as interwoven phenomena and that they develop intentional learning strategies that they use in the effort of creating works of art. One of the strategies, based on challenging oneself, is articulated in this article.<sup>2</sup>

*Keywords* creativity, arts, transformative learning, artistic learning

### Domain or not domain?

Whether or not creativity is domain-specific is the subject of much discussion within the field of creativity studies. Both sides have supporters and opponents. The position we take is a mediation of the two extremes, as do Plucker & Beghetto (2004). Creativity unfolds necessarily within domains and contexts, but it is not an exclusive product or process of only one—or a restricted number of—domain(s). In the research that constitutes the background for the present article, we did not understand (and still do not understand) creativity as a phenomenon exclusive to the arts. Still, we wanted to focus on the domain-specific form of creativity in the arts, because artists and artistic communities cultivate and nurture creativity as one of the means and ends of learning, communicating, engaging in relationships and living their lives (Baer 2010). Our previous studies on creativity had showed that there is still a definite need for more focused attention on the specific domain of artistic creativity. Therefore, we designed a research study that aimed at describing the background of artistic creativity, making use of the power of focused observation (Chemi, Jensen & Hersted, in press). Our purpose was to describe the phenomenon of artistic creativity in a learning perspective, by means of artists' recollections, retrospective narratives, conceptualisations, ideas, processes and relationships.

Previous studies have examined artists' creativity, often in correlation, opposition or comparison to scientists' creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, Gardner 1994, Weisberg 1993). Other studies have looked at artistic creativity as domain-specific (Baer 2005, Locher 2010, Weisberg 1993, Weisberg 1999). The problem with both approaches is that they may give rise to assumptions and even stereotypes about artists' creativity: either artistic creativity is likened to ordinary cognitive, procedural or behavioural processes (domain-general) or it is seen as special and as a product of extraordinary genius and talent (domain-specific). The myth of the artist, as an isolated, sometimes even mad genius, seems to be still accepted and taken for granted amongst educational practitioners. However, during the last two decades we have seen a growing tendency in creativity research questioning this myth (Weisberg 1993, Sawyer 2007, Sawyer 2014, Amabile 1998). In this article, we will argue that we can bypass the myth of artistic genius by investigating artistic creativity from a learning perspective. Therefore, we have asked

outstanding, highly creative people within different art fields the overall question: *how do you create, how do you learn (to be creative, to make art, to learn) and how do you organise your work?* In the present article we will focus on the theme of creativity and learning. By studying learning and creative processes among exceptional achievers in the arts and by letting them articulate how they learn and create, we assumed that we could unfold a number of learning traits. This approach demystifies some of the elements of artistic creativity and thereby makes them useful in the field of education. We briefly describe and present the background considerations for our qualitative research project, as well as its design, structure, methodological and conceptual challenges. We conclude by summing up our findings and presenting several implications for education and learning environments.

### **Empirical material**

In order to investigate and describe the different artists' compositional processes and the assumed link to educational creativity, we formulated the following research questions: How are art and learning connected and interrelated? Can specific learning traits be identified of artistic work processes that might enhance creativity? Do artists learn to create their art in specific ways and if so, are there elements or patterns that might be interesting for areas such as education and development? If so, how can these patterns be conceptualised? Can the concepts be transferred into principles applicable to other domains such as teaching and process facilitating and if so, how and why? To work with these questions, we established the premise for the present article that the artists' working processes had the aim of *leading to* creative outcomes. The empirical material for the research project consists of 18 qualitative research interviews with 22 professional artists (some interviewed in groups), desk research and artworks.

The interviewees work within several artistic modalities: literature, poetry and scripts (Siri Hustvedt, Morten Ramsland, Michael Valeur); dance and choreography (Palle Granhøj); acting and directing theatre and performance theatre (Eugenio Barba, Julia Varley, Kirsten Dehlholm); composing and performing music (Anders Koppel, Benjamin Koppel, Marco Nisticó, Mira Kvartetten); film-making (Mary Jordan, Annette K. Olesen); visual arts (Michael Kvium, Julie

Nord); digital arts (Signe Klejs, Niels Rønsholdt); design (Rosan Bosch, Rune Fjord); architecture (Inger Exner, Johannes Exner). We are aware that some of the modalities, like architecture or design, are not considered as traditional fields of art. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study we assume that these fields contain artistic dimensions and the creative processes involved can be viewed from an artistic perspective. The desk research was on information and expressions from the interviewees' web-material such as web-pages, online examples and excerpts of artwork, virtual and physical exhibition rooms and the like and in several cases we carried out a desk study of the interviewees' artistic work. The artwork research was carried out by viewing and experiencing rehearsals and exhibitions, attending their concerts or watching their performances.

We developed the sample of interviewees based on the criterion that they make a living from their artistic work in the sense that being an artist is their profession and that they are acknowledged at the very least in their professional environment and often beyond as well. A second criterion was that they work at an international level and the third criterion, that they are reflective about their own creative working processes, so that the likelihood of getting new information on creative artwork and learning would be high. The following artistic traits were covered in the interviews:

- Big C creativity: Often ground-breaking and renewing existing traditions
- Pro C-creativity: Creativity as an approach to work/learning/action, often involving specific routines or habits of thinking/acting (Kozbelt, Beghetto & Runco 2010; Simonton 2010)

The research question guiding our interviews was to ask the artists how they learn and create and how their creative learning and change processes come about. All the material was collected over a period from September 2012 to December 2013 and the overall research is documented in Chemi, Jensen & Hersted (in press).

### **Methodology and analytical framework**

Our study is based on qualitative research interviews in which we asked the artists how they experience working with artistic processes and how they interpret and create meaning in their activity

and in the results of their creative working processes. Our approach is a consequence of our research question, where the aim is to investigate the concepts of learning and creativity as they appear to the artists. As qualitative researchers, we were open to the phenomena as conceived and expressed by the interviewees when we collected narratives (Brinkmann 2012). We used the semi-structured research interview as described by Brinkmann (2012) as the method for data collection. The interviews were recorded as audio files and afterwards transcribed verbatim, translated into English and analysed. All the interviewed artists were offered the possibility of commenting the excerpts from the interviews and the opportunity to rectify our understanding or to specify concepts.

Our analysis of the collected data corresponds with the qualitative approach by being inspired by Giorgi & Giorgi's descriptive data analysis method (Giorgi & Giorgi 2003). Even though Giorgi's method is developed to conduct research in the field of psychology, we considered the method relevant for exploring the field of learning and creativity, as learning and creativity, like psychology, are ways to understand human activities in a life-world setting. Therefore, we were guided by his method in exploring and revealing the learning and creativity aspects of the research participants' varied expressions. For this article, we emphasise the learning perspective analytically with the intention of exploring its significance for creativity.

This required that we, as researchers, approached the interview transcriptions with what Giorgi (2012) terms a phenomenological reduction attitude, 'setting into brackets' previous knowledge while examining the interview data. This attempt to work without presumptions towards data was a way for us to raise the probability of understanding ways in which creativity and learning were perceived by the individual interviewed artist. However, our approach to data was, following Giorgi's method, also guided by our research focus on learning and creativity (Giorgi 2012). This double perspective in the approach to data allowed us to analyse the interviews in both open and focussed ways, following five steps as described by Giorgi (2012, pp. 5-6): 1) Reading through the interviews to get a sense of the whole. 2) Constituting meaning units relevant to the theme of learning. 3) Transforming meaning units into expressions corresponding with terms and concepts within a learning perspec-

tive. 4) With the help of our imagination, expressions that were meaningful to the learning perspective were transformed into situated structures, and 5) Clarifying, interpreting and comparing the characteristics of the interviews (Giorgi 2012). This analysis frame was our method for identifying meaning and patterns of learning that were either broadly in common across the interviews, or meaning that was unique and specific for one artist in particular.

While identifying meaning units and transforming them, we worked partly individually and partly together as a research and writing team. We also interpreted selected works of the interviewed artists. In the following section, we will introduce the concept of learning as related to and sometimes even originating from processes of artistic work.

### **Artists as learners**

Findings from the present study have mostly confirmed and defined what other qualitative creativity studies have documented, suggested or formulated about artistic or general creativity. The originality of the study lies in the characteristics of the artists' narratives when interviewed about learning and creative-compositional experiences. The narratives have added to our understanding of specific descriptions from the artist's everyday engagement with creation, problem finding, problem solving and collaborative negotiations with peers, traditions, materials and media, ideas, spaces and environments.

Concerning the relationship between learning, creativity and artistic processes, we found that the interviewed artists perceive creativity as intertwined and interwoven with artistic work processes. Given that not all kinds of learning processes involve creativity and not all kinds of learning promote or foster creativity, creative processes seem, for the interviewed artists, to be related to specific understandings and creative experiences that are explorative, problem-based, accommodative, mediated and sensory-aware. These types of learning have both an individual-personal as well as a collaborative, social and cultural side.

The interviewed artists tend to develop personal strategies for intentional learning, which begin with mastering the craft of a chosen art form and aim at creating opportunities to engage in open, explorative and continual learning processes. These strategies are used in relation to technique acquisition, continual learning and



open engagement with the world. The artists implement the strategies by practicing skills involving sensory awareness and reflection, by challenging their own knowledge, meaning and basic assumptions and through cultivating curiosity and continued exploration. The outcome of these learning and development processes is sensory openness, experimentation and improvisation, reflective processes and transformative learning.

Concerning the collaborative, social and cultural sides of the explorative learning processes, we found that artistic communities of practice provide a range of learning opportunities and possibilities. These learning opportunities seem to be of non-formal or informal and (situated character within the given communities. In this situated understanding of learning, apprenticeship seems to be a fundamental, non-formal educational structure, which passes on knowledge, understanding and possibilities of artistic expression to newcomers and novices, and provides with opportunities for continual learning.

Within the formal educational system, such as primary school, high school and higher education including arts programs, the artists also experience learning opportunities, but often of a negative nature. Our findings show that the learning potentials of these educational environments, although containing explorative and social learning opportunities, often seem to involve an overweight of conforming learning aspects like imitation and adaptation into the cultures of the given educational institution and an experienced excessive emphasis on conformity to educational goals and structures. The interviewed artists generally seem to experience discouragement and demotivation in such learning environments.

### **Perspectives for learning**

The findings of this study have several interesting implications for learning theories and the fields of pedagogy and teaching. In this section, we will present some of the more surprising insights from our study, which may add to existing knowledge on artistic creativity.

The interviewed artists seem, first and foremost, to experience several creative processes as interwoven or even intertwined with learning. Therefore, many of them do not distinguish between the two concepts – it seems as if the creative process is experienced as a

knowledge building process, where the artists learn new things at different levels – about their material, art form and its expressions as well as about phenomena in the world, or even about themselves and their potentials and limitations. We see this in expressions like “a mega learning process” (R. Fjord), “verbalising a hunch” (J. Nord), “investigations of the world” (K. Dehlholm), “learning new things all the time and using them” (B. Koppel), “learning by doing” (A. Koppel), “learning by writing” (M. Ramsland), “learning by receiving and expressing” (M. Kvium).

The most striking consequence of this is the way in which the artists use a variety of learning experiences as intentional strategies in their artistic work. They are also quite specific about the qualitative and experienced opportunities for learning provided by the social environment within the field of their art form as well as within other fields, especially educational or collaborative settings.

The interviewed artists seem to instrumentally “use” learning as different strategies within their work at several levels and in different stages of their work:

- As a means of acquiring skills and craftsmanship to be able to perform their art form
- As a means as well as an end to renewing artistic expressions and own knowledge
- As a means and an end to engage with the world.

These findings indicate that learning in itself is perceived as an integral part of their bread-and-butter creative processes and in general of creative activities: a constantly active engagement with the surrounding environment in novel and meaningful ways.

### **Challenging oneself and learning**

When focusing on learning in the artistic work processes in the interviews, we found that one learning strategy stood out in particular, as it was mentioned by all of our informants. We have termed it *the continual learning strategy*, that is, the persistent and deliberate need for and acquisition of learning, sustained through time and experiences. One example is the following quote by Julie Nord, painter:



I am very good at setting myself tasks and then being inspired by them, but I do not work very well if those conditions are too narrow. So I set myself tasks all the time, right, that I can break, so that it will not become too monotonous.

Julie Nord elaborates her way of getting around a key problem that most of the artists mention: how to get beyond routine and renew oneself and how to develop the artwork and the conceptualisation of it. We interpret her statement according to the understanding of learning presented by Peter Jarvis (1999), who claims that an important element of learning is *challenge*. According to Jarvis, there are two ways that challenge occurs in a learning perspective:

- 1 When the person experiences a situation, which differs from what is expected. The person is forced to rethink the situation, identify the problem and compose a strategy for solving the problem. This is much in line with the pragmatic perspective on creative 'problem identification' (Jarvis 1999).
- 2 When the person challenges him- or herself in well-known situation, trying to imagine how things could be different, or trying to see the situation from a different perspective or interpretative angle. Here, there is a link to pragmatic and problem-oriented concepts of hypothesis making and testing and also exploration and experimentation (Jarvis 1999).

The latter form of challenge is, according to Jarvis, the expert's way of getting beyond routine and making intuitive use of knowledge and interpretative competences. It is this expert way of challenging herself that shows how Nord perceives learning as interwoven with the creative process of painting.

The following quote is from author Siri Hustved. When describing her creative process, she tells us that she is deliberately challenging herself by reading writers with opposing attitudes or with whom she disagrees:

I'm driven to read and read and read more. I even read against myself, that is, I read writers, Anglo-American analytical philosophers, for example, with whom I have little

sympathy, writers whose sensibilities are directly opposed to mine, but I like to take in their arguments because they sharpen my own and they have altered my thinking about some questions.

Nobody but herself urges her to get to know the arguments of her “opponents”, but in this way she learns more about her own arguments and she is building up her own expertise. In this process, we see that Siri Hustved has used a helpful tool to be creative, which to a large extent can be related to Jarvis’ concept of challenging oneself. Thereby, she builds new knowledge in her field and is applying this to novel situations – in other words, she is learning. The point for Jarvis is that what constitutes an expert is the capability of setting up challenges for him- or herself, *without* the need of it, without the circumstances or the situation imposing it on the artist. These challenges are experienced by the interviewed artists in the shape of a learning problem that serendipitously but willingly is sought and nurtured. The expert is occasionally and deliberately questioning his or her knowledge, anticipations and perception of situations, also on their own initiative, by setting up and inventing tasks that challenge routine (Jarvis 1999). In light of this, the two interview excerpts above can be interpreted as the painter’s and the writer’s way of establishing a learning setting during the artistic work process by the use of tasks to break routine.

This point is a pattern found throughout the interviews. It is underlined by theatre director Eugenio Barba, who explicitly mentions challenges as part of creative and learning activities:

You teach people to be creative in the sense that challenge is the daily bread. You challenge yourself, you challenge yourself that you must not say it is not possible. The impossible is the possible, which takes more time.

Here the concept of challenge is seen from the point of view of the master or educator and in this case also the artistic leader. He deliberately works with the aim of making the actors overcome inherent limitations and routine-based solutions to problems. This fine balance between challenge-finding and challenge-breaking is mentioned by several artists under the key word of “rules”. Some

specific rules seem to stimulate artistic challenges rather than stifle them. For instance architect Johannes Exner talks about his teaching experience at the School of Architecture and how he framed the limitation issue to his students:

I have found that problems [are positive]: “congratulations on that, I hope they are really big!” Why? Yes, because if you can solve them, then you’re brilliant, you may well be if no one else can solve them. Yes, all problems. I think it’s great to be able to turn those things and say, yes, it is a choice, you know it’s pretty hard, it’s a very big problem that is there and then you say, it’s a challenge. So you could say that your mood can be up and down, but if you turn it in this way, it becomes fun.

In this case, rules and limitations are tools to engage in artistic dialogues with other members of the field and optimal learning opportunities.

### **Summing up: What can educators learn?**

In the light of Jarvis’ learning perspective, the concept of the learner challenging him/herself seems to be one of the tools that artists use for implementing the strategy of continual learning. However, as pointed out by Mezirow, a challenge or, as he terms it, a disorienting dilemma, will often put the person under pressure, being understood as a learning activity that challenges the individual’s existing meaning perspectives and existential values. The individual can respond to this dilemma either by learning and initiating a transformation (of identity, of understanding, of knowledge and so on) or by rejecting learning and change (Mezirow, 2010). There is reason to believe that the rejecting response might impede a given creative process, also possibly impeding learning. Therefore, challenge may not *per se* promote explorative learning related to creativity, but must have specific qualities in order to work as a tool in strategies for continual learning and creativity.

What seems to unite these types of diverse challenges, in respect of supporting explorative, continual learning, is first and foremost voluntariness. Secondly, there seems to be a cultural understanding within artistic communities that challenging oneself serves a pur-

pose of developing artistic ideas and expressions. This means that it seems to be culturally accepted as a shared strategy for exploration and continual learning and is conveyed in teaching, collaboration and other relations, which points to the concept of scaffolding within a community of practice (Morcom 2014). In this case, challenging oneself seems to be one of the ways in which artistic communities (Lave & Wenger 1991) scaffold and create opportunities for learning. There is also reason to assume that artists experience these strategies as necessary. If we connect this to the theme of on-going learning, the deeper purpose of this learning approach seems to be that artists use specific learning strategies to develop and renew artistic expression. Many individual character traits and collaborative dynamics might potentially support the unfolding of artistic creativity. These include curiosity and a readiness for exploration, a mindset of persistence and resilience, together with more relational or context-based experiences such as enjoyment of creation and learning, playfully acting-reacting (to peers, to artistic or cultural traditions, to situations and so on).

All together, the study indicates that similar principles apply in artistic creativity as in education in general: the development of learners' creative approaches and skills depends on optimal learning environments, where challenges are experienced as positive and as being part of the development of artistic creation. The learning environment's ability to provide aesthetic, explorative and reflective learning opportunities and support is fundamental to artists as learners and in learning terms can be understood as scaffolding. One effective tool for achieving creative learning environments is a pedagogical focus on individuals' possibilities of finding their own uniqueness and realising their unique potential. This seems to be achieved by relating to and interacting with a community collaboratively, but also by questioning it.

Our research furthermore shows that application of the artistic mindset, approaches, values and more practically methodologies is central to approaching learning as self-discovering, collaborative and explorative. We believe that addressing the questions of how to create momentum in learning, enthusiasm and curiosity would help build an appropriately challenging learning environment inspired by artistic creativity. In this enterprise, the arts can be a tool

for engaging exploration by means of open-ended questions that open up to more questions and create a chain of curiosity.

This said, we should note that our research also points to the fact that the field of artistic creativity in learning perspectives deserves serious further investigation, as well as practical development of pedagogy. Central questions, such as the following, should be addressed: How can learning environments scaffold and facilitate encounter and dialogue with an artistic community (of practice)? How can the artists' approaches to learning and creating inspire schools? How can artists pass on methods and tools of creation? What can be really learned in, by and through the arts?

Our hope with this present contribution is to have specified a several central themes and issues through qualitative methods and to have begun a process of articulating significant questions for future research.

## References

- Amabile, T. 1998. How to Kill Creativity. *Harvard Business Review*. Sept. pp. 77-87.
- Baer, J. 2010. Is Creativity Domain Specific? In J.C. Kaufman & R.J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 321-342.
- Brinkmann, S. 2012. *Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Life*. London: Sage publications ltd.
- Chemi, T., Jensen, J. B. & Hersted, L. (in press). *Behind the Scenes of Artistic Creativity: Processes of Learning, Creating and Organising*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1997. *Creativity: Flow and Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Dewey, J. 1980. *Art as Experience*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Group.
- Dewey, J. 1981. In Boydston J. A., Baysinger P., Levine B., Walsh B. A., Simon H. F., Poulos K. E. and Sharpe A. (Eds.). *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Gardner, H. 1993. *Multiple Intelligences. New Horizons*. New York, USA: Basic Books.
- Giorgi, A. 2012. The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method. In *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, no. 43, pp. 3-12.

- Giorgi, A. & Giorgi, B. 2003. The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes and L. Yardley (Eds.). *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (243–273). Washington D.C. American Psychological Association
- Heyworth, J. 2011. Jumping through ‘loops’: A reflective study on preparing generalist pre-service teachers to teach music. *Issues in Educational Research*, 21(1), 42-64.
- Jarvis, P. 1999. *The practitioner-researcher: Developing theory from practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kozbelt, A., Beghetto, R.,A. & Runco, M.A. 2010. Theories of Creativity. In J.C. Kaufman & R.J. Sternberg (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of creativity*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 20-48.
- Locher, P.J. 2010. How Does a Visual Artist Create an Artwork. In J.C. Kaufman & R.J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 131-145.
- Mason, J. 2002. *Qualitative researching*. London: SAGE.
- Plucker, Jonathan A. & Beghetto, Ronald A. (2004). Why Creativity Is Domain General, Why It Looks Domain Specific and Why the Distinction Does Not Matter. In Sternberg, Robert J., Grigorenko, Elena L. & Singer, Jerome L. (Eds.), 2004. *Creativity: From potential to realization* (pp. 153-167). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.
- Morcom, V. 2014. Scaffolding Social and Emotional Learning in an Elementary Classroom Community: A Sociocultural Perspective. *International Journal of Educational Research*, no. 67, pp. 18-29.
- Sawyer, R. K. 2007. *Group Genius: the Creative Power of Collaboration*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sawyer, R. K. 2014. *Group creativity: Music, theater, collaboration*. Psychology Press.
- Simonton, D.K. 2010. Creativity in Highly Eminent Individuals. In J.C. Kaufman & R.J. Sternberg (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of creativity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 174-189.
- Weisberg, R.W. 1993. *Creativity: Beyond the Myth of Genius*. New York: Freeman.



Weisberg, R., W. 1999. Creativity and Knowledge: A Challenge to Theories. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 226-250.

### Notes

- 1 Both authors have contributed equally and collaboratively to this article.
- 2 The present article is based on a research project conducted by the authors together with Lone Hersted, colleague at the *Department for Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University*, to whom goes our due acknowledgement.

NOTE TO THE READER: All quotes that are not referenced are part of the qualitative interviews with the artists.