

CREATIVE SKILLS – TO BE DEFINED OR JUST DISCOVERED?

Silja Suntola

The rising role of creativity and innovation in all sectors of our society can hardly be disputed. They have quickly become the backbone for ensuring sustainable competitiveness and wellbeing in most sectors. At the same time, sustainable development, human wellbeing, and ethics are becoming central, value-based competitive factors. We can slowly see a shift in people's values and attitudes, where an increasing proportion of the population pays more conscious attention to environmental, safety, and health aspects. The role of the cultural and creative sectors in this shift has been prominently recognized in both national and international strategies and policy programs. The aim of this article is to provide the reader with a framework to understand the relationship between arts and creativity and some food for thought to think about how anyone can strengthen the creative aspects of their work. Art and creativity are not science – some ambiguity and different opinions and interpretations will always remain.

Background

Organizations and businesses, public sector actors, regions, and nations have developed strategies to incorporate the creative and cultural industries into some aspects of their work. Nevertheless, we have only scratched the surface in our efforts to see the still largely hidden potential of the arts and cultural sector in building wellbeing and sustainable competitiveness. Despite the increasing amount of research and development activities, a deeper and more holistic understanding is still lacking.

Suntola, S. 2024. Creative skills – to be defined or just discovered? Teoksessa Rajahonka, M. & Haapaniemi, H. (toim.) Luovia menetelmiä ja älykkäitä ratkaisuja. Digitaalisen talouden vahvuusalajulkaisu 2023. Mikkeli: Kaakkois-Suomen ammattikorkeakoulu, 136–147. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-344-568-0>

Rapid digitalization strongly spurred the discussion and realization of arts and culture, or creative industries, in the early 1990s, which affected the content production industries (music, AV, games, etc.). The arts and cultural sector were noted to make up a considerable percentage of the GDP of Western countries, exceeding that of many traditional industries. However, measuring the breadth and impact of the sector has proven extremely challenging (Tarjanne 2020).

During the 21st century, the discussion around creative industries shifted from efforts to measure the sector to aiming to measure the impact it could have on spurring competitiveness in other sectors. The term creative economy emerged, referring to the added value of the creative industries as a driver in other sectors (Tarjanne 2020). In Finland, the share of creative industries in the total value added to the economy has decreased since 2016; in 2020, it was less than 3 percent (2.9%). The goal is to grow the share of value added to the economy in line with that of the reference countries, where it can be as much as seven percent (Creative Economy s.a.).

However, the notion of the creative industries as the driver of our economy is complicated and even disputable. It directly limits our perspective on economic gains, often measured in terms of quarterly reports. This article focuses on understanding and supporting the development of creative skills and approaches, their impact on individual, organizational, and societal wellbeing, as well as high performance – without trying to prove the added economic value.

Creative skills and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing sectors have been one of the first to actively research and apply art and artistic practices to different activities and services. Besides compelling research and evidence related to the effectiveness of arts and culture, for example, in reducing and alleviating stress, anxiety, depression, and dealing with mental health issues, it has been shown to improve overall life quality and wholesome living (Laitinen 2017).

An interesting notion within this discussion is the way the role of arts and culture has been described already in the 1947 Constitution of the World Health Organization, which states: *“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”* Further, WHO’s initiative of Arts and Health states

that “anthropology has shown that in early human history, art, religion, and healing evolved in the same social space.” (Arts and health s.a.) This supports the notion and need to study the arts from a more holistic perspective and as an integral part of our human lives.

Arts in business and wider society

Although creativity and innovation have clearly been identified as critical skills for future businesses, discussion around organizational management is still largely approached through economic lenses. Big global companies have enormous power that is reflected in policymaking around the world. As long as the measures of success remain on economic gains for companies’ shareholders, conflicts are bound to emerge. Arts cannot solve this – but it can provide tools and insights to redesign what we are aiming for.

Now that we can do anything, what will we do?
(Adler 2006, 486).

What are creative and art-based skills?

Defining creativity and creative skill is like trying to hold a bar of soap. The moment you think you have a hold of it, it slips away. To support the understanding of the arts in relation to creative skills more generally, we will adopt the framework developed in the Erasmus’ Creative Skills project and look at it through three perspectives: technical, people, and learning skills.

Technical skills refer to the specific skills that are trained within specific forms of art. Many of them can be applied directly or adapted to other sectors. People skills refer to how we work with others. Learning skills lean on the understanding that constant learning and transformation are an integral part of creativity itself.

Technical skills

Technical skills within the arts range from drawing or painting, acting, playing an instrument, designing objects or spaces, or using new technologies to produce something unique. Technical skills alone do not necessarily fulfill the criteria of what is art or what is not.

Performing arts

Performing arts embody the means to communicate different kinds of information through our different senses in the moment. It allows us to convey meanings and values and arouse understanding and empathy of human experiences and behavior across cultures and historical eras. And more broadly and relevant in any business setting: *“The adoption of arts and design-based initiatives allows the translation of different needs and wants of stakeholders into shared meanings, but also supports emotional and cognitive engagement and creative and divergent viewpoints.”* (Simeonea et al. 2018, 1). In an era where communication across disciplines, different interest groups, societies, nations, or other boundaries is more crucial than ever, performing arts have much to offer.

Performing arts enable the widening and deepening of the scope and means of communication. Although different studies and research might vary slightly, the conclusions are indisputable. Verbal or written information makes up only a small percentage of overall communication. A pioneer in the field of non-verbal communication, Professor Albert Mehrabian, believes that there are three core elements in the effective face-to-face communication of emotions or attitudes: nonverbal behavior (facial expressions, for example), tone of voice, and the literal meaning of the spoken word. Drawing on his findings, he formulated the 7-38-55% communication rule, i.e., 7 percent verbal, 38 percent vocal, and 55 percent visual (Mehrebian 1972).

Visual arts

Visual arts continue to have a profound way to shape our thinking. Not only can visual information convey multiple times more information than written or verbal information simultaneously, but we are also prone to automatically believe visual information over written or verbal communication mediums. Pictures are more than a thousand words.

Visual arts, like arts in general, can portray meanings, values, emotions, or messages that reach different levels of knowing. We can portray different kinds of data and utilize symbols, images, snap-shots, or takes to convey information on different topics, environments, people, and overall impressions.

“The soul... never thinks without a picture” – Aristotle.

Crafts and creative spaces

Design is around us. All physical objects have some shape, color, and texture, consisting of different materials put together in a meaningful way. So why do we differentiate a bowl as a “design” or a house from its mere purpose to something “architecturally” meaningful? According to Ellen Dissanayake, respected US researcher and pioneer of the theory on evolutionary arts, art at its core is “making something special” (Kaaro 2006). While producing pottery (or any other subject or space) to simply fulfill its function might not be art, integrating aesthetic thinking, symbolic meanings, or expressions into it could make it art. In fact, Dissanayake strongly urges to rethink the role and function of art in today’s societies (Kaaro 2006).

Creative technologies and content production

Digital technologies have quickly added to the tools and scopes of different media through which we can distribute creative content. Many of the new tools are easy to learn. They enable content creation and/or production in different forms, shapes, and sounds. Many of them do not require mastering traditional instruments or art disciplines and make up a pool of low-threshold environments for producing creative content. Remote creation, production, and distribution allow worldwide creation, participation, and consumption.

People skills

A term often used in working life is “people skills,” also referred to as “creative soft skills” or just “soft skills.” These are becoming increasingly important in our multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral working environments. But what do “people skills” have to do with the arts?

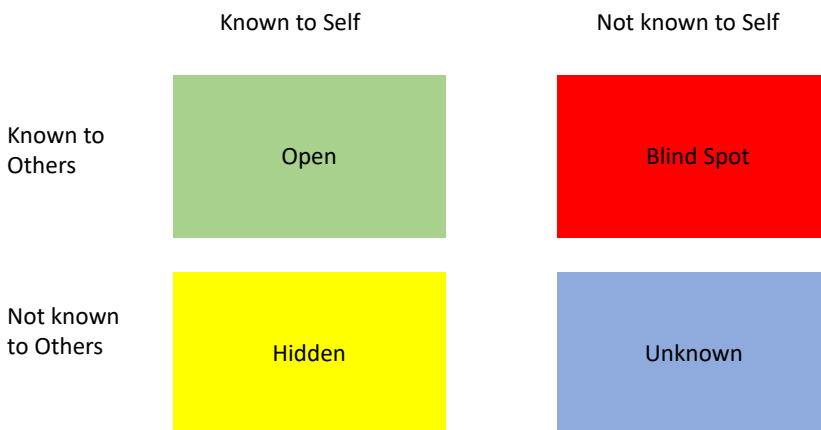
Our physical bodies, with our five senses, function as constant receptors for information flow within ourselves, other people, and the world around us. This can lead our thinking to what some call our 6th sense, intuition. “Intuition is often described as being one of the most important tools of creation among designers, artists, and researchers. It is an integral part of human thinking and, together with reasoning faculties, it forms the basis of thinking” (Raami 2015). By becoming aware of ourselves, we can also learn to attune, deepen, and improve communication and understanding with others.

From knowing oneself to (inner) leadership

Knowing ourselves is the mission of a lifetime and the key to self-development and unleashing one's creativity. Practicing awareness is like moving the invisible boundaries of who you are and who you might be in the world (Creative Skills for Learning and Work 2021).

One of the biggest challenges in today's complex operating environment is the enormous and constantly growing amount of data we face daily – whether it be through social media channels, new projects, new research, or just following the news. Self-awareness is not taught in schools, but the reflective mind is the basis of creativity. It can mean walking in nature, sipping a hot cup of tea at the busiest times of the day, turning all digital channels off, and listening to one's favorite song. Awareness and reflection are core elements of art that, when practiced regularly, are one way to stay tuned between holistic thinking and working with details.

Practicing awareness relates not just to the outside world but also to our inner world. The Johari window provides a useful framework for this (Creative Skills for Learning and Work 2021). It was created in the 1950s by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (Luft & Ingham 1955). It is a tool to help us understand how we perceive and, hence, interpret reality in relation to how others perceive it. We could argue that one role of art is to evoke and remind us of the “Not known to Self” part within us and in relation to the outside world.



Graphics: Suntola, 2023

Figure 1. The Johari window is a useful tool to recognize the limits of our perceived reality. (Figure: Silja Suntola; adapted from Luft and Ingham 1955)

Identity

A key challenge for anyone is to address the question of “Who are you really?”

In our Western world, our work or profession often plays a large role in how we define our identity, at least for the outside world. Different sectors or fields define what being “professional” means differently. In the business world, it is common to think that personal aspects of life are just inappropriate for the office.

It is different with artists. An artist’s personality is often a key ingredient of their work and performance. Personality rather than technical expertise makes up who and how good you are for a given job or gig. An actress cannot just “leave her persona at home,” as that is part of her. A guitarist cannot just write how to interpret the next solo on their CV (Creative Skills for Learning and Work 2021).

Social skills

The performing arts deal, in essence, with bodily and sensory communication. This forms the basis of most of our communication (Mehrebian 1972). There are numerous methods and skills derived from performing arts that are used to practice and learn about group dynamics, bodily communication in multicultural settings, and leadership. Setting the role of arts on a bigger scale aside for a moment, it has, for instance, become increasingly popular in management literature to use art metaphors to understand how to lead creative processes and people. A classic example is studying an orchestra conductor for bodily leadership (Zel & Onay 2012) or a jazz band as a metaphor for shared leadership (Sorensen 2013). Multiple instruments or voices perform in harmony with each other, shifting leadership through bodily communications. It is crucial to realize that what we say and how we behave, verbally and non-verbally, does matter.

Learning skills

Art drives learning through experience through practice. Only through repetition, trial-and-error, can we arrive at mastery. This iterative, learning-by-doing approach serves creative processes in any environment, where changing variables and human factors play a key role (Hägg 2011). It is also the basis for software development, where coders work itera-

tively, layer by layer, coming up with version 1.0, updating from there to 2.0, etc. (Austin & Devin 2003).

Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (Gardner 1983; 2011) proposes that individuals possess a range of different types of intelligence (linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic). Though our Western world is much focused on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences, it is clear that other intelligences, including the ones central to the arts, are becoming increasingly important.

Curiosity

The word “play” is a steady part of art vocabulary, referring to a theatre “play” or “playing” an instrument. The word “playfulness” refers to trying something out without taking it too seriously. This trait or way of being “playful is a key ingredient to the creative, iterative process of learning. Playing out different scenarios and picturing possible outcomes can be a process for thinking, unveiling meaningful things, and working in different environments – going for endeavors where we are not always able to describe the result beforehand precisely. The process is a way of getting to the real root of the problem and, hence, finding working solutions.

“Playing around” can be a problem in our knowledge-driven working life, where we are supposed to have a clear plan and knowledge of the result before starting the work or task. Combining “an end result that is difficult to clearly determine” with an operating environment overflowing with information and data, is an easy way to get thrown off course.

“Almost all creativity involves purposeful play.”

– Abraham Maslow.

Creative skills for school and work – learning-by-doing

What are the creative skills most businesses and other organizations are so desperately looking for? According to the World Economic Forum, the top skills wanted have shifted in the last several years so that even though analytical thinking still tops the list, businesses surveyed for the report believe demand for creative thinking will grow faster in the next five years – by 73% – than demand for analytical thinking. Following

creative thinking are self-efficacy skills – resilience, flexibility, and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning, which are empathy and leadership skills. (Future of Jobs 2023.) The top ten skills are listed as the most in demand for employers by 2023:

1. Analytical thinking
2. Creative thinking
3. Resilience, flexibility and agility
4. Motivation and self-awareness
5. Curiosity and lifelong learning
6. Technological literacy
7. Dependability and attention to detail
8. Empathy and active listening
9. Leadership and social influence
10. Quality control.

Does education meet these requirements? It is time to re-think our current focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) subjects in curricula, just like we did in the STEAM Process project. The need for creative skills in working organizations cannot be brushed aside or fixed by merely inserting more traditional art subjects into the curriculum. More holistic thinking of our human capacity, the wider aspects of cultural knowing, and its capabilities are needed.

The question of “what we can learn from arts for creative skills in any sector” prevails. Including the questions of what we are looking for in the end – a better economy, fewer wars and poverty, and meaningful life on our planet. Keeping these questions alive is important as we consider how we can support companies with the same values as the individuals who comprise them? What does modern, forward-thinking leadership look like?

In our information-overloaded society, being efficient is less about the amount of work per hour and more about the ability to identify and focus on what is meaningful. The skill to see the wood for the trees and identify the pertinent questions worth answering is valued; we should accept the unfinished, unknown, and unfathomable as part of our lives.

Conclusions

Looking at the three elements of creative skills described in this article, the question of what next remains. To reach the full potential of art in our economy and beyond, we need to redefine or remind ourselves of its original meanings (Kaaro 2006). Can we embrace and see art as imminent parts of our lives, that we all practice each day?

It does not need to be complicated. It can simply be becoming aware of ourselves as creators and observers of life, as catalysts of stimuli from within and around us. Additionally, it complements our rational thinking with different ways of knowing and embracing not-knowing and making use of anything from ancient methods and tools to those that the newest technology and digitality have to offer. Navigating and exploring the unknown.

Arts and culture are integral parts of human life. They exist whether we are aware of them or not. Now, it is up to us to use them wisely, complementing our technological advantage for the good of humankind. We need to use our creative skills to think not only of the next quarter but also of the next 100, 1000 years, and beyond. That's where the power of art starts.

What we can't comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe. – Abraham Joshua Heschel

Read more about the projects:

- Creative Soft Skills (2020-2021). Erasmus+ project, co-funded by the European Union. [Creative Soft Skills – Recognize Artists Soft Skills](#)
- STEAM Process. (2020-2022). Erasmus+ project, co-funded by the European Union. [STEAMProcess – Innovating the transition process from STEM to STEAM approach in science, teaching and training - Xamk](#)

REFERENCES

Adler, N. J. 2006. The Arts & Leadership: Now That We Can Do Anything, What Will We Do? *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 5(4): 486–499.

Arts and health. s.a. World Health Organization. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/arts-and-health> [Accessed 03.10.2023]

Austin, R. & Devin, L. 2003. *Artful Making – What Managers Need to Know About How Artists Work.* Pearson Education, Inc.

Constitution. 1946. World Health Organization. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution> [Accessed 03.10.2023]

Creative economy. s.a. Ministry of Education and Culture. Web page. Available at: <https://okm.fi/en/creative-economy> [Accessed 03.10.2023]

Creative Skills for Learning and Work. 2021. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.creativesoftskills.eu/creative-skills-learning-work-creative-skills-supporting-all-sectors/> [Accessed 07.10.2023]

Hägg, O. 2011. *Yrittäjyysvalmennus ja yrittäjäidentiteetti.* Doctoral dissertation. Tampere University Press 2011. Available at: <https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/66758> [Accessed 07.10.2023]

Future of Jobs 2023: These are the most in-demand skills now – and beyond. World Economic Forum. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/future-of-jobs-2023-skills/> [Accessed 03.10.2023]

Gardner, H. 1983. *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences.* New York, Basic Books.

Kaaro, J. 2006. Alun alkaen taide oli kaikkien juttu. *Tiede-lehti.*

Laitinen, L. 2017. Näkökulmia taiteen ja kulttuurin terveysvaikutuksista. Webpage. Available at: <https://www.sitra.fi/artikkelit/nakokulmia-taiteen-ja-kulttuurin-terveysvaikutuksiin/> [Accessed 03.10.2023]

Luft, J. & Ingham, H. 1955. The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development. Los Angeles: UCLA

Mehrabian, A. 1972. Nonverbal communication. Piscataway, NJ, Aldine Transaction.

Raami, A. 2015. Intuition unleashed: on the application and development of intuition in the creative process. Doctoral dissertation. Aalto University publication series Doctoral Dissertations 29/2015. Available at: <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/15347> [Accessed 07.10.2023]

Simeone, L, Secundo, G. & Schiuma, G. 2018. Arts and design as translational mechanisms for academic entrepreneurship: The metaLAB at Harvard case study, *Journal of Business Research* 85, 434–443.

Sorensen, N. 2013. The Metaphor of ‘The Jazz Band’: Ethical Issues for Leadership. *Critical Studies in Improvisation. Ethics and the Improvising Business.* 9(1).

Tarjanne, P. 2020. Luovan talouden tiekartta. Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön julkaisuja 2020:48. Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö. Available at: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162474/TEM_2020_48.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [Accessed 07.10.2023]

Zel, U. & Onay, M. 2012. Conductors as a Metaphor of “Leadership”. *International Journal of Contemporary Economics and Administrative Sciences* 2(3).