

Contracting for Creativity: the use of learning contracts in assessing creativity

Olga Goriunova
Department of Applied Social Sciences
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

Freedom and creativity are closely related. A human being is an embodiment of the capacity for creation; and freedom is a quality of creativity (that is conceived as always free). Unlike freedom, creativity was already discussed in Greek philosophy; and for Plato, human creativity is of an order of semblance to divine creativity. In early Christian philosophy, creativity becomes an experiment in changing ontological status (Augustine of Hippo); for Descartes, creativity is reinvention. Creativity is, thus, a chance to render a human being autonomous.

It is of little surprise therefore, that at least some version of creativity is regarded as core to education in general and Higher Education in particular, as it focuses on the notion of a free individual able to function effectively in a democratic society. Moreover, a recent shift to “immaterial” forms of labour, to open and flexible labour organization, spontaneity, collaboration and cooperation, to the notions of the ‘creative class’ and ‘the creative industries’, promotes a vision of creativity that conceptualizes it as crucial resource and power advancing our economy in a more direct manner than hitherto (Florida 2004, Virno 2004). Nowadays, with the large-scale involvement of creative capacities into innovative practices, creativity becomes central to a wide variety of subjects and practices. It is required to be explained, taught and assessed across subject areas, including those completely novel or traditionally devoid of “creative” approaches.

At the same time, there is no dominant and agreed upon understanding of creativity or how it should be assessed. Existing definitions of creativity suggest that “creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)” (Sternberg and Lubart 1999) and that it is “communication of cultural value” and is related to convention, innovation, tradition and experience (Negus and Pickering 2004). Methods of assessing creativity vary from discipline to discipline and, in the examples of good

practice, range from problem-based, project-based, jury-based, work placement and portfolio-approach methods to an approach I will focus on in this essay, a learning contract.

Learning Contracts and the Assessment of Creativity

Amongst the variety of assessment methods used across disciplines to assess creativity, a few are worthy of individual attention. To that end, this article will briefly discuss problem-based learning and assessment, the portfolio approach, various forms of ‘jury’-style methods where final assessment is based on consensus reached between, for example, tutors, practitioners and students and finally those methods of assessment which are grounded within learning contracts.

According to Elton (2006), a transition from teacher-centred to student-centred assessment has occurred in two ways: first, there was a move towards problem-based assessments (with a focus on enquiry) and then there was a move to the use of portfolios for assessment - from a positivist approach to an interpretive one). Elton further notes that problem-based learning, first introduced as a model of assessment in medicine, quickly spread to other disciplines, but that it needs to be supplemented “from the point of view of creativity and criticality”, with portfolio forms of assessment (ibid.).

PBL (problem-based learning – and assessment) and the portfolio approach, both examples of good practice in assessment, are commonly used, across a wide range of disciplines, as instruments for assessing creativity and they share a common ground. Problem-based learning when used for cooperative learning in groups, often includes elements of self and peer-assessment. Here, the tutor’s role is to guide and facilitate the learning process and there, assessments largely rely on consensus reached through facilitated discussion and self-assessment. Portfolio styles of assessment, where the aim is to represent a student’s learning over time and across a variety of themes, also often use a combination of (reflective) discussion, possibly a viva, and the sharing of opinions among teachers and students in order to produce a final assessment (Johnston 2004).

Such moves towards a culture of consensus and shared responsibility in assessment is in tune, according to Cowdroy and Williams (2006) with the systems model of creativity, a view further supported by the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1988). This model emphasises the need to consider the nature of the creative environment and the creative work undertaken within it, in order to produce an

“assessment of creative performance in terms derived from the consensus views of the membership of the relevant field in reference to the body of work of the relevant domain”. (Cowdroy and Williams op. cit.)

That systems model also appears to accept the formal learning of creativity where, in order to be creative, a person must be conversant with the body of work of the domain and understand the current 'positions' (theoretical, philosophical) of the field" (Csikszentmihalyi, *ibid*; Cowdroy and Williams *ibid*). In a similar way, Biggs (2003) suggests that the consensus formed from the interpretations of an expert panel or a "jury" in terms of a generally accepted understanding of value in a particular field and on the basis of work or portfolio produced (for example) can "simultaneously accommodate multiple and variable criteria associated with various types of knowledge, various thinking processes and application skills".

Drawing on specific cases, Cowdroy and Mauffette offer what they refer to as 'Authenticative Assessment' – an approach to assessment in which a major part is played not by teacher-derived criteria but by

"student- derived criteria for assessment of the student's understanding of his or her own concept in terms of the philosophical and theoretical frameworks of the relevant field of creativity" (Crick & Cowdroy, 1998).

This approach, developed from particular aspects of science education represents a certain kind of a culmination of the processes described earlier, which also resemble the kind of evaluative principles used in grant-assessment and for refereed publications.

(Cowdroy and Mauffette *op cit*) describe the process as follows:

"students are assessed individually by a panel of 'experts' (as distinct from merely informed) on the basis of the student's rationale and supporting evidence presented as an argued and defended expose of the conceptual origins, schematic development and actualization of the student's work presented. In the science context the criteria for assessment were evidence of progressive development of the work from an original idea (phenomenon) through development of 'the research question' and development of an empirical method to answer the research question" (Cowdroy and Mauffette 2003).

This integration of problem-based, portfolio and jury-style assessment includes a level of self-directedness, self-assessment and consensus based assessment at a new level of complexity and this, in turn, allows for greater degrees of student self-organised learning. It is this complex autonomy that brings us very close to the main theme of the article –the argument for, in situations requiring the demonstration of 'creativity', learning-contract-based assessment. This form of assessment, it may be claimed, exemplifies the assessment form outlined above, where students themselves devise forms of 'obligation' which they then contract to fulfil.

Learning Contracts

A learning contract is simply a way of structuring teaching, learning and assessment based on a student's formulation of what is required in particular learning situations. Despite the fact that 'contract' itself is a term derived from law, and some institutions prefer to use 'learning agreement' to avoid possible legal implications, learning contracts are widely used today (Anderson et al. 1998).

Learning contracts were introduced across a number of disciplines as varied as medicine, technical sciences, biology, and design. The use of specific equipment, the choice of specialisation field within a broader area of (say) technology, clinical education, or art are examples of where learning contracts have been successfully deployed (Jerrard and Jefsoutine 2006, Litchfield et al. 2007, Solomon 1992, Williams and Williams 1999, Marsden and Luczkowski 2005). Learning contracts are also used in a variety of 'learning spaces', for example, adult education, work-based training, work placements and practice-based fields. However, despite the differences in format, their widespread use in a variety of different contexts for a variety of different purposes and outcomes there is some agreement about the particular characteristics that set the learning contract apart from other forms of learning, teaching and assessment organisation and alignment.

Learning contracts take various forms. Generally, a learning contract is an agreement between a student and an individual tutor, department or institution, which specifies timetable, learning outcomes, strategies and resources which will be required and made available in order to reach those outcomes, activities and assessments (Anderson et al. 1998, Knowles 1975). Examples of what learning contracts typically include are set out in the Appendix.

The fundamental list of benefits learning contracts bring about include "optimal individualization" of learning, real clarity and deep understanding of its purposes (outcomes), radical opening of the boundaries of knowledge and resources, and the encouragement communicated to the learners to take the responsibility for their own learning which is adapted to their individual schedule and rhythm (M.S.Knowles 1987). Such characteristics of learning contract as a method are supported by overwhelming number of researchers.

First, learning contracts are seen to rest upon the motivation of the learner; they are learner-led and open horizons of knowledge (particularly self-knowledge) that cannot be seen in 'normal' settings. In this way, learning contracts offer self-direction in both learning and assessment (Cafarella and Cafarella 1986) and so they carry with them all the advantages of the learner-centred assessment concepts discussed earlier. However, learning contracts go beyond those philosophies since, secondly, their use also:- promotes independence and strengthen problem-solving skills (Tompkins and McGraw 1988), offers flexibility and what Jerrard and Jefsoutine call a 'self-diagnosis of needs' (Jerrard and Jefsoutine 2006, p.57). For those authors the

learning contract also becomes a 'curriculum carrier', where the curriculum content is defined by the student. Such a system, therefore, broadens the "scope of learning" in changing what Jerrard and Jefsoutine call the constitution of the 'geography of learning' (op. cit., p.59).

Learning contracts also offer perspectives on subjects, disciplines, professions etc. that are an invaluable resource for career education offering, as they do, ways of reconciling the relationship between students' internal and external experience. In this usage, the contractual 'form' devised by a student becomes both a plan for work and a "record of achievement" (Jerrard and Jefsoutine 2006). In this form, it closely follows the portfolio approach in its focus on the process and duration of learning rather than the result however, those authors also suggest that unlike the portfolio, by using a learning contract, the individual student acquires greater responsibility "for the negotiation and integration of knowledge" (op. cit.) and making sense of their learning practice. It is at this point that the learning contract connects with 'creativity' because it is this practice of reflexivity, engaging in a "conversation with the material of the situation" (Schön 1983), which fosters creative capacity.

'Design', for example, involves creative reasoning, reflective practice and constant negotiation between different relationships, be it clients, users, technicians, engineers, and other. So, when students get first-hand experience of and engagement in the practice of autonomous planning and decision-making in complex situations, particularly through the use of work-based learning contracts, course aims to provide an understanding of and an ability to practice design at various levels (Marsden and Luczkowski 2005) are best served.

Through their emphases on acquiring knowledge through direct experience, reflection on learning in practice and activity as a route to understanding which underpins knowledge, learning contracts provide the means to organize and assess creativity. So, whereas it is, in general, difficult to understand and assess creativity, through the use of learning contracts the task is handed to students from the start with a requirement both to formulate and to achieve a particularly desired, although perhaps unpredictable or 'emergent', outcome. Here, self-directedness, self-assessment and consensus agreement enabled by a supportive framework (the contract) within which to move can become a most effective way of assessing such an elusive quality as creativity.

Experience of using a learning contract to assess creativity

I have used learning contracts in a module I co-taught with a tutor who was an artist by profession. My own teaching focused mainly on theoretical and practical aspects of the subject delivered through lectures and seminars. He, by contrast, worked with the students in a studio-like environment.

Learning contracts were used alongside other methods of teaching and assessment. Here, students were first asked to reflect on the needs - conceptual, organizational,

technical or other - that a project of the kind they were about to undertake might require and they were then required to devise individual learning contracts to cover the duration of the group project. After that they were asked to produce group art work on the set theme.

To me, this was a novel organization of teaching and assessment and I was pleased to see how well it worked. Students took advantage of the high level of personalisation of their learning, aiming to obtain skills, knowledge or even 'high quality' - whatever it was that they considered themselves to be in need of - throughout their work on the project. Learning outcomes included such elements as "becoming better in graphic design", "learning scripting to a higher level" or "developing the capacity to work in public spaces".

Students were assessed on the basis of their learning contracts and completed projects. I generally found that using learning contracts made both learning process and assessment more transparent to students. They felt in control of what they were doing and the activities that they were required to undertake made more sense to them. The creativity and critical thinking they were invited to develop and demonstrate did not need to remain in any confined boundaries and students were invited to develop their understanding of creativity and fulfill the requirements of the latter (critical thinking). At the same time, by working in a group and (re-)negotiating their learning contract with a tutor, students could develop a more grounded and consensus-based understanding of their field of practice and its creative endeavour.

It is my view then, that learning contracts are indispensable organisational resource when it comes to teaching and assessing creativity, and I personally expect that there will be a growth in the use of various forms of learning contracts in the near future.

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Biographical Note

Olga Goriunova is a Senior Lecturer in Media Practice and Course Leader for BA Digital Media at the Department for Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University. Dr.Goriunova has been an active organizer in the field of digital art, and is currently curating a show 'Fun in Software' to be held between Arnolfini, Bristol; MUU and Baltan, Eindhoven and Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund in 2010-2011 and editing a related publication. She is also completing a manuscript 'Art Platforms. Cultural Production on the Internet'.

Examples of learning contract terms:-

Knowles (1987) suggests the following:

1. The specific learning objectives to be accomplished;
2. The resources and strategies to be used in accomplishing them;
3. The evidence that will be collected to indicate the extent to which the objectives have been accomplished;
4. How this evidence will be judged or validated;
5. The target date for completing each objective

Jerrard and Jefsoutine (2006, p.56) similarly suggest, with reference to an earlier study by Jerrard (Jerrard 2002) that the following are key aspects that should be part of a learning contract,):

1. The development of learning objectives – providing a specification of individual elements within the overall aims of the course and contributing to the student’s ‘personal learning agenda’;
2. The specification of strategies and the location of resources – linking and integrating the diversity found at work, or in the studio, and the university;
3. Defining evidence of accomplishment of objectives and their recording – ensuring that the contracts are clear and accessible to the student and staff involved;
4. Validating evidence of accomplishment of objectives – linking remote learning to the existing course regulations and expectations of the university;
5. Accredited prior learning and accredited prior experiential learning