

ARLIS ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY UK & IRELAND CONFERENCE – 16 JULY 2019

Lightning talk

## **'Exploring 'inspiration' and the library's potential role in the creative process'**

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### **Introduction**

This research came out of my master's dissertation, which I completed in 2013 at City University, London.

Although I was an enthusiastic library user while growing up, when I studied illustration at university, I didn't actually take full advantage of what the library had to offer. I suspected that this may be the case for other art and design students, and I wondered why I had never fully connected my creative practice with the library.

When I began reading up on the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature, I realised that up until recently, researchers didn't pay much attention to artists and designers either. Why was there this disconnect?

Librarian Susie Cobbledick wrote in 1996 that, 'a probable explanation lies in the persistent appeal of certain preconceptions concerning artists – that they are intuitive, self-contained individuals that create via inspiration,' (p. 344). So the concept of 'inspiration' seemed to be the key.

Of course, over the intervening years, LIS research into artists and designers has expanded.

In his 2008 literature review, William Hemmig identified 5 purposes for which artists seek information – inspiration, specific visual elements, knowledge of materials and techniques, marketing and career guidance, and knowledge of current trends in the art world (p. 355). So we can see that inspiration is important.

### **What is 'inspiration'?**

However, that led me to ask, what is 'inspiration', and how is it found? The LIS literature doesn't shed much light on these questions. Helen Mason and Lyn Robinson studied the information-related behaviour of emerging artists and designers in 2010, and collected examples of nearly 300 sources of inspiration, including everything from feminist writers, French cinema, and *Vogue*, to 'walking around', 'sleep', 'neuro-diversity', 'drinking coffee' and 'taking a bath' (pp. 167-176). Of course, some of the examples were within the remit of the library to provide, and some were completely outside that remit.

During my dissertation research, I did in-depth interviews with two art and design tutors, two practitioners, and two librarians. I was surprised to find that one of the tutors I interviewed doesn't use the term 'inspiration' at all. His field is graphic design, and he

wanted to distance the creative process from the mystical origins and connotations of the term (Peterson, 2013, p.56).

In my interviews with artists and designers, I saw a portrait of 'inspiration' that I have experienced. It is the exciting, motivating, and unexpected aspects of creation. Interviewees described inspiration as 'sublime', and talked about forgetting to eat or sleep while inspired (Peterson, 2013, p.4). In my recent online survey, one respondent described inspiration as coming now and again like 'little darts', and another described it as 'nebulous', both 'elusive' and 'ever present and invigorating'.

I think all creative people have experienced that feeling, however they choose to define it.

When I went looking for theories of creativity outside of the LIS literature, I found a variety of different terms such as 'illumination', 'insight', and 'flow'. To me, these are all related or peripheral terms for the same experience.

So what is inspiration? To try to answer this question, I had to look to the historical, cultural, and psychological ideas of creativity.

### Historical and cultural

For many centuries, creativity was seen through a 'mystical' lens of religion. In the West, the Enlightenment, Romantic, and modern philosophers started to touch on peripheral concepts like genius and imagination, but did not address creativity directly (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999, pp.4-5).

Researchers often cite a (possibly oversimplified) dichotomy between Western individualism and Eastern collectivism. In the West, the creative product has to be original to be seen as creative. This wasn't always the case in more collectivist Eastern culture, where standing out from the crowd could be a bad thing. This is changing as Western ideas of creativity spread to other cultures (Niu and Sternberg, 2006, pp.18-19).

Interestingly, in the West we often don't consider morality as part of creativity, a creative product could be good or bad. However, in many Eastern cultures, morality is a prerequisite for creativity (Niu and Sternberg, 2006, pp.18-19).

### Psychological

The current study of creativity falls into the domain of psychology, but psychologists have only really been studying creativity in-depth since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Creativity entered the field of psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and has since morphed into its own area of psychological study (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999, p.3-12).

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century creativity researchers focussed on one aspect of creativity, such as the cognitive processes that lead to creativity, or which social or personal attributes can lead to someone being seen as creative. Although both approaches created some excellent theories, many researchers in the 1980s and 90s realised that they were only exploring part of the picture. This led people like Teresa Amabile, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Robert J. Sternberg and Todd I. Lubart to create what they call a 'confluence' approach to creativity

research. Factors such as the individual, the domain, and the field all contribute to what is deemed to be creative (Sternberg and Lubart, 1999, p.4-12).

One theory that I find particularly useful is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of 'flow'. Having grown up in Hungary during World War II, he saw the effect the war had on his relatives and wondered how they had healed from their trauma. He saw that often, being completely immersed in a task can lead to intense satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004).

The nine characteristics of flow are, 'There are clear goals every step of the way; there is immediate feedback to one's actions; there is a balance between challenge and skills; actions and awareness are merged; distractions are excluded from consciousness; there is no worry of failure; self-consciousness disappears; the sense of time becomes distorted; the activity becomes autotelic (something that is an end in itself),' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, pp. 111-113).

I find that the theory of flow connects with my own conceptions of inspiration as well as some of the anecdotes I collected in my interviews in 2013. I have certainly noticed the distortion of time in my own work, and my interviewees spoke of forgetting to eat or sleep when 'inspired'. In many of the characteristics of flow, we can see a link to meditation and mindfulness, which both help with mental wellbeing.

### **How is 'inspiration' found?**

As for how inspiration is found, there are various theories of information behaviours that may be more successful within the creative process. For a long time, the library and information science literature has mainly been interested in purposive, problem-drive, active searching. However, there is a growing interest in passive, non-directed information behaviour as well. The four information behaviours that I focussed on were browsing, Information Encountering, satisficing, and serendipity.

#### **Browsing**

Marcia J. Bates has done in-depth research into browsing and found that it, 'can be seen to contain four elements, iterated indefinitely, until the overall episode ends: 1. glimpsing a field of vision; 2. selecting or sampling a physical or representational object from the field; 3. examining the object; and 4. physically or conceptually acquiring the examined object, or abandoning it,' (2007). She theorised that there was a connection between this information behaviour and theories in the fields of evolutionary biology and anthropology. Bates and her doctoral advisee Jenna Hartel both believed that this behaviour evolved from mating and foraging behaviours, and Hartel wrote that dating, nibbling, and shopping serve these same purposes in modern society (2002).

#### **Information Encountering (IE)**

Sandra Erdelez proposed the theory of Information Encountering (IE) in 1997. Her model identified multiple steps such as noticing, stopping, examining, capturing, and returning. There was a switch between a 'foreground problem' and a 'background interest/problems/tasks' (Erdelez, 2005, p.181). Erdelez's framework for IE contains three key elements: the characteristics of the information user, the characteristics of the

information environment, and the characteristics of the encountered information. She theorised that there are categories of information users such as non-encounterers, occasional encounterers, encounterers, and super-encounterers (Erdelez, 2005, p.179).

### Satisficing

Both Bates and Erdelez see links between browsing and Information Encountering and 'satisficing'. This is also known as Zipf's Principle of Least Effort (1949). This states that, 'people invest little in seeking information, preferring easy-to-use, accessible sources to sources of known high quality that are less easy to use and/or less accessible,' (Bates, 2005, p.4).

Satisficing was also a key to William Hemmig's understanding of artists' information behaviour. Hemmig writes, 'the artists themselves, their social networks, and the limitless range of information sources that contributes to the creation and sale of work – comprises the artists' COP [community of practice]. We can now comprehend browsing as actually the most efficient means of seeking meaning in this highly ambiguous universe,' (2008, p.357). Hemmig's 2009 study of artists found that they didn't report having trouble finding information because they don't need what they can't find (p.695).

### Serendipity

In writing my dissertation, I found that the nature of serendipity was a lot like the nature of inspiration – many people have had these experiences, but they have both resisted easy definition. Stephann Makri and Ann Blandford developed a definition of serendipity, 'as a process of making a mental connection that has the potential to lead to a valuable outcome, projecting the value of the outcome and taking actions to exploit the connection, leading to a valuable outcome,' (2012b, p.706). For them, serendipity was a label given to an experience after it had occurred (Makri and Blandford, 2012a, p.692).

### Practical ideas

I don't claim to be an expert on how one can practically help the creative process, although that's something I hope to explore further in later research. I have selected a few examples of things we do at UAL to share with you today.

### Sessions

I have started incorporating theories of creative thinking into my sessions for BA students starting their dissertation research. I've included Graham Wallas' 1926 four-stage model of creative thinking as a way of getting students to consider their own creative process over a sustained research project (p.37-38).

There are colleagues in the Library Services and Academic Support teams who run sessions for students and staff on creativity. This includes the workshop being run tomorrow by Viv Eades called 'Creative Library Research' where participants are asked to swap their books with someone else and explore possible connections to the new item (ARLIS, 2019, p.16).

## Resources

Art and design libraries generally have a very wide scope, and they try to cater for their users' broad range of interests. At Chelsea, we encourage suggestions from students and staff, and generally buy everything that is requested, if the budget permits.

Special Collections and Archives are another area of the collections that are ripe for inspiration. All students at Chelsea receive a Special Collections induction at the beginning of their course. I run a session for second year BA Textile Design students on Josef Albers' 1963 *Interaction of Color*. This feeds into a unit where they explore colour in their printed and woven textiles.

## Systems

UAL's catalogue, Library Search, features a new books section on the main page. This is curated and frequently updated by a librarian in the Central Bibliographic Services team to show a scope of different topics from across the University's six libraries. This allows for serendipitous discoveries in the virtual environment.

One respondent to my online survey thought that the library could become more inspiring by using the online catalogue as a way of breaking down the subject area divisions within the physical library space. They suggested the catalogue could have a 'surprise me' button, or an 'inspire me' function that allows for an ever-changing random selection of library items.

## Spaces

One respondent to my survey thought that having more books out on display could help inspiration. They found the new books display that we have in Chelsea Library particularly good for serendipitous discovery.

Chelsea Library has an exhibition space that is available for students and staff to curate. Exhibitions have included the special collections and archives, and student and staff work.

Flexible working spaces were also important to the respondents. One respondent said that they like the quiet and escapism, but also the collective endeavour to learn. Another respondent said that social interaction was just as important as research for them.

## Next steps with this research

So far, my research has been mainly theoretical, so I would now like to explore creativity and inspiration in practice. I am currently adapting my MA dissertation into a journal article, and I am thinking of conducting more in-depth interviews to update my research. In the following academic year, I will be creating my own inspiration and creativity focussed workshop for UAL students.

Thank you for listening! My email address is [c.peterson@arts.ac.uk](mailto:c.peterson@arts.ac.uk), and my Twitter handle is [@CaitLibrarian](https://twitter.com/CaitLibrarian), please feel free to get in touch with me.

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