

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF CREATIVITY

Joyce R. Robinson, M.S.ED.
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS OF CREATIVITY

Abstract

Creativity is considered important for our society to maintain its current economic status. Creativity is the key to achieving a better standard of living; this makes creativity an important element in a student's education. One factor that limits the capability to respond to educational needs is the lack of agreement about what the term creativity means. One source used to determine the correct meaning of a word is the dictionary. A longitudinal review of the definitions of creativity was conducted in dictionaries dating back to the 1950's. Nineteen dictionaries dating from 1953 to 2008 were reviewed. Although terms are updated regularly in dictionaries, data did not show any substantive changes in the definition of creativity over the past 6 decades.

Key words: dictionary, creativity, education, definition, research

Introduction

Creativity has been researched for years, and even though a lot of progress has been made on how creativity affects our lives, there is still much to be learned about how creativity works. The definition of creativity is vague and complex. "The concept of creativity has traditionally proved an elusive one to pin down" (Craft, 2001 p.13). There seems to be some agreement on what creativity requires, but not on how it should be defined. Researchers in the field of creativity define it differently depending on how they view the creative function. There is argument over what should be considered creativity, and if there needs to be a finished product. "Some definitions are formulated in terms of a product, such as an invention or discovery; others, in terms of a process, a kind of person, or a set of conditions" (Torrance, 1971 p. 552). All of these things make it difficult to define creativity. Perhaps at this point the question may come to mind; so is creativity important?

Literature Review

Creativity has an impact on our lives even when we are unaware of it. Great creative thinkers such as Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Ben Franklin have created ideas and technology that have shaped our lives today. Advances in technology are accompanied by the need to develop new skills to help users master the technology. "The information boom is not slowing down, and technological advances are occurring more often" (Runco, 2004, p. 658). The fast pace of technological advances creates demands to adapt to the changes; one way to deal with these demands is through creativity. "Creativity is a useful and effective response to evolutionary changes" (Runco, 2004 p. 658). Creativity is a response to the continual innovation and resourcefulness that have become necessary for economic survival (Craft, 2003). Creativity is considered important for our society to maintain its current economic status. According to Cropley and Cropley (2000), many corporations have rediscovered the value of creativity because the cost of a product is determined by its design; creative designs can lead to cost savings. The world has become a global market (National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE)National, 2007). In order to compete with other countries, it is important for workers to be creative. "The reason – and the only reason – that the rest of the world would be willing to pay us twice as much as equally competent people is if we can add creativity and innovation on a grand scale to sheer competence" (NCEE, 2007, p. 24). Being creative means being able to change with the times, being flexible, innovative, and coming up with better ways to produce and market products and services (NCEE, 2007).

Creativity is the key to achieving a better standard of living; this makes creativity an important element in a student's education. Today's students are tomorrow's workers. Our economic future depends on their ability to come up with new and better ways to produce, market, and create new products. Teaching creativity offers many challenges in the educational setting. The biggest challenge is to understand what it is that the teacher is being asked to teach. According to Parkhurst (1999) one of the factors limiting the capability to respond to educational needs appears to be the lack of agreement about what the term creativity means. It is difficult to teach a subject such as creativity that cannot be defined in one precise description. If each teacher defines creativity differently, they will teach it differently. This leaves gray areas and it becomes difficult to determine if students are getting the knowledge they need to enhance their creative abilities.

There are many tests for determining if a person has creative ability. Each test is designed to measure a different aspect of the creative person or process. "However, the multidimensional

creativity concept they define indicates that assessments should be based on several tests, rather than relying on a single score" (Cropley, 2000, p. 73). Creating an environment for fostering creativity in the classroom is difficult or impossible when the teacher does not clearly understand what they need to be fostering. Because creativity can be defined in different ways, the environment will differ according to the area of interest. The optimal learning environment will vary because students, even in the same topical area, have varied levels of creative ability. Pre-testing and post-testing can be a complex and confusing process, and does not allow for other factors. For example, most creativity tests do not take into account factors such as opportunity, knowledge of field, technical skill, and mental health that may help to determine the creative ability of an individual (Cropley, 2000). Research in the field of creativity has resulted in a greater understanding of what creativity is and how it impacts our lives.

Systematic research on creativity has been conducted since 1869 when Galton studied genius (Craft, 2001). In psychology, a major study of creativity occurred in the 1950's (Craft, 2001). According to Runco (2004), approximately 9000 papers on creativity were published between 1960 and 1991. With so much research available, it might be assumed that creativity has been defined. Indeed, creativity has been defined - by many researchers in many different ways depending on the aspect of creativity that is of interest to them and their field. "As early as 1960, Repucci counted between 50 and 60 definitions extant in the literature on creativity" (Parkhurst, 1999, p. 2). According to Ebert (1994) the term creativity is used as if general agreement exists on the construct's definition; however, definitions are more often specific to particular authors than a matter of consensus. It is not surprising that educators and students are confused about what is expected or needed to increase creative abilities. Currently, there are more definitions of creativity than there were in the 1960's. One source used to determine the correct meaning of a word is the dictionary.

There are several versions of the dictionary and several different publications. Often the versions are specific to a particular population, for example, Webster's New World Dictionary, Elementary Edition, is designed for young people. According to the editor, Guralnik (1971), the elementary edition was designed for grades four to eight. In deciding what words to include in a dictionary, textbooks and other reading materials were reviewed to find words currently being used in science, social studies, English, and other subjects. Educators and teachers were consulted and an advisory council was formed to help determine content and arrangement. Guralnik explains that entries are listed in alphabetical order, with proper names, abbreviations, suffixes, prefixes, and compounds of two or more words to make use of the dictionary easy for this age group. "Meanings which apply to the use of the word as a noun, for example, are listed separately from those which apply to the use of the word as a verb, adjective, etc." (Webster's New World Dictionary, Elementary Edition, 1971, p. v).

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition (1976), was created for students, researchers, and professional persons. The first version, which appeared in 1953, has continually been updated to remain current. According to Guralnik (1976), the college edition was updated annually and later biennially until the information explosion along with rapid advances in physical science and technology brought about "countless new terms and new applications of established terms" (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition, 1976, p. vii). The lexicographer sifts through masses of data to select items and details to be added to the dictionary that is currently under construction (Guralnik, 1976). "Most often, a period of incubation is required for new words to

prove their vitality and establish their right to entry in the dictionary" (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition, 1976, p vii).

The Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary, second edition (2001) includes a separate section for new words and new meanings of current words that may not be found in the main dictionary section. "The editors must constantly reevaluate the dictionary word list, sometimes taking out terms which are no longer common, current, or useful" (Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary, 2nd edition, 2001, p. vii). Most words entered in dictionaries have passed the tests of time, frequency of occurrence, and range of use (Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary, 2nd edition, 2001).

The dictionary not only gives the meaning of a word but gives information on the pronunciation and its function. Some versions include when the word was first entered into the dictionary. For example, the function of creativity is as a noun. The year creativity was first entered into the dictionary was not long after Galton studied genius in 1869--approximately 1870-1875 (Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary, 2nd edition, 2001). The question then comes to mind, has the definition of creativity changed over the years?

Method

To answer the research question a longitudinal review of the definitions of creativity is needed. Keeping in mind that during the 1950's, creativity was a major topic of research in psychology, it was decided to begin the review of definitions within that same time period. Interest in creativity as a research topic continues to the present time. To reduce confusion, the review of definitions was limited to Webster's dictionary. Webster's dictionary has been in existence for over 125 years and offers several different versions; elementary, collegiate, and unabridged to name a few.

A library search was conducted to find dictionaries dating back to the 1950's with the intent to review definitions of creativity about every five years apart in time. The definition of creativity was recorded. A table of the definitions was then created listing the findings from the oldest to present definitions.

Table 1*Webster's Dictionary Definitions of Creativity from 1953 to 2008*

Resource	Date	Creativity
Webster's New World Dictionary	1953	Listed under creative as a noun
Webster's New World Dictionary and Student Handbook, Elementary Edition	1966	No definition
Webster's New World Dictionary, Elementary Edition	1971	No definition
Webster's New World Dictionary with Student Handbook	1975	Listed under creative as a noun.
Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 2 nd College Edition.	1976	Creative ability; artistic or intellectual inventiveness.
Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary	1980	The quality of being creative; the ability to create.
The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language	1980	No definition
Webster's New World Dictionary	1984	Listed under creative as a noun
Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary	1989	The quality of being creative; the ability to create.
Webster's Basic English Dictionary	1990	No definition
Random House Webster's College Dictionary	1991	The state or quality of being creative; the ability to create meaningful new forms, interpretations, etc.; originality; the process of using creative ability.
Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 10th Edition	1993	The quality of being creative; the ability to create
Merriam-Webster's Desk Dictionary	1995	Listed under create as a noun.
Random House Webster's College Dictionary 2nd Edition	1997	The state or quality of being creative; the ability to create meaningful new forms, etc.; originality; the process of using creative ability.
Webster's New World Dictionary	2000	Listed under create as a noun.
Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary 2nd Edition	2001	The state or quality of being creative; the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; Originality; progressiveness, or imagination; the process by which one utilizes creative ability.
Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 11th Edition	2003	Listed under creative as a noun.
Merriam-Webster's Intermediate Dictionary	2004	Listed under creative as a noun.
Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary	2008	The quality of being creative: the ability to create.

Findings

There were 19 dictionaries reviewed from 1953 to 2008. Of the 19, four did not define creativity, two listed creativity under create. Create was listed in all nineteen versions as a verb. Five dictionaries listed creativity under creative. Creative was listed in 17 of the 19 dictionaries and under create in the other two dictionaries. Creative was labeled as an adjective. Eight dictionaries listed creativity separately as a noun with definitions. The eight dictionaries that defined creativity gave a total of eleven definitions. Four dictionaries (1980, 1989, 1993, and 2008) defined creativity as the quality of being creative, and the ability to create; three of these four dictionaries were collegiate versions. Three dictionaries (1991, 1997, 2001) gave the

definition of creativity as the state or quality of being creative, and defined creativity as originality, all three were Random House Webster's, with two being a college version. Two dictionaries (1991, 1997) defined creativity as the process of using creative ability and the ability to create meaningful new forms, interpretations, etc.; both dictionaries were Random House college versions. One dictionary (1976) gave the definition of creative ability as artistic or intellectual inventiveness-- this dictionary was a Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. The Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary (2001) gave additional definitions of creativity as the process by which one utilizes creative ability; progressiveness or imagination; and the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc. The unabridged dictionary has not been reduced in size by omission of terms or definitions.

Of the 19 dictionaries reviewed, creativity was addressed in all versions dating after 1990; if creativity was not given a separate entry, it was listed under create or creative. In the time period of 1991 to 2001, the definitions of creativity were more detailed and provided more information than earlier definitions.

Summary

Dictionaries are updated depending on new words coined, phrases currently in use, current usage of existing words, and advances in technology. The definition of creativity changed little from one publication date to the next within the same versions. Each version or level defined creativity slightly different, in accordance to the intended audience. Lack of changes in the definition of creativity can be attributed to the disagreements about how creativity is viewed. Researchers, teachers, educators, and even students interpret what creativity is to them. What one person may view as an expression of creativity, another may view as not expressing creativity, depending upon the context of the creative behavior or product. What may be creativity for one person may not be for another, depending upon individual creativity.

Contributing to the problem of an agreed upon definition for creativity is its flexible nature. The ability to change was an important characteristic of creativity; a characteristic that makes creativity valuable. The flexibility associated with creativity allows adaptation to evolutionary changes across many different disciplines. The flexibility and changing nature of creativity leads to a broad and general definition so that the definition may be applied to a wide spectrum of disciplines, ability levels, and behaviors.

"Some definitions are formulated in terms of a product, such as an invention or discovery; others, in terms of a process, a kind of person, or a set of conditions" (Torrance, 1971, p. 552). Though the definition of creativity may be broad the dictionaries reviewed agreed creativity was a noun. "Nouns are often thought of as referring to persons, places, things, states, or qualities" (Random House Webster's unabridged dictionary, 2nd edition, 2001 p. 1327) and can function as the main or only element of subjects or objects in the sentence. Can a process be considered a noun? This question deserves further review as the process may need to be explored to determine if it can stand as a noun.

More information needs to be gathered on how the definition of creativity was determined and how it has evolved with the influences of research and society. Current data do not show any clear changes in the definition over the past 6 decades, although terms are updated regularly in dictionaries. More data need to be collected from other dictionary sources and as far back as when the term was first entered into a dictionary. Collecting data will prove challenging

as publications were fewer in past years; current dictionaries are published and updated more frequently.

The final outcome of this review shows that the definition of creativity is elusive and there is more than one way to interpret and apply definitions. Some researchers have suggested a definition they feel will cover different views. For example, Parkhurst (1999) proposes the following definition of creativity: “The ability or quality displayed when solving hitherto unsolved problems, when developing novel solutions to problems others have solved differently, or when developing original and novel (at least to the originator) products” (p. 18). This is still a very general and broad definition. Perhaps there does not need to be one precise definition, but several that are specific to each area. The educator would need to tailor a definition to current topics to integrate creativity into the curriculum.

References

- Craft, A. (2003). The limits to creativity in education: Dilemmas for the educator. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(2), 113-127.
- Craft, A. (2001). An analysis of research and literature on creativity in education. *Qualifications and Curriculum Authority*, March 14, 2008, [http://www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity/creativity report.pdf](http://www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity/creativity%20report.pdf).
- Cropley, A. J. (2000). Defining and measuring creativity: Are creativity tests worth using? *Roepers Review*, 23(2), 72-80.
- Cropley, D. H. & Cropley, A. J. (2000) Fostering creativity in engineering undergraduates. *High Ability Studies*, 11(2), 207-219.
- Ebert, E. S., III (1994). The cognitive spiral: Creative thinking and cognitive processing. *Journal of creative behavior*, 28, 275-290.
- National Center on Education and the Economy. (2007). *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Parkhurst, H. B. (1999). Confusion, lack of consensus, and the definition of creativity as a construct. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 33(1), 1-21.
- Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2nd ed.). (2001). New York, N.Y.: Random House, Inc.
- Runco, M. A. (2004). Creativity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 657-687.
- Torrence, P. E. (1971). The creative person. *The Encyclopedia of Education*, 552-557.
- Webster's New World Dictionary* (elementary ed.). (1971). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (2nd ed.). (1976). New York, NY: Grand – Central Publishing Co.