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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Thorley, M 2020, 'Failing to learn and learning to fail—exemplars of practice from the creative industries' *International Journal for Academic Development*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 71-82.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1712210>

DOI 10.1080/1360144X.2020.1712210

ISSN 1360-144X

ESSN 1470-1324

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal for Academic Development on 23/01/2020, available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1712210>

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Failing to learn and learning to fail – exemplars of practice from the creative industries

Mark Thorley

Abstract

Universities are facing challenges not seen before. Academic development is expected to address many of these challenges, creating conditions supportive of teaching and learning. However, increasing managerialism, measurement and risk-aversion make this difficult as the emphasis shifts from supporting individuals towards delivering institutional strategy. This can lead to a lack of creativity, a stifling of innovation, and a fear of failure. This paper uses the creative industries as a ‘parallel’ sector of practice. It outlines the challenges, similarities and differences between the sectors, before explaining what lessons higher education can learn from the creative industries.

Key words

Academic development

Creative industries

Creative thinking

Failure

Innovation in higher education

Introduction

Academic development plays an essential role in creating conditions which are supportive of teaching and learning (Leibowitz 2014). Increasingly however, its emphasis has shifted away from supporting individual teachers towards delivering the strategic aims of senior management (Peseta, 2014; Gibbs 2013). This has taken place partly to address the increased risk and greater likelihood of failure attributable to marketisation, government regulation and league tables (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019; Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2010).

To explore ways of harnessing failure, this paper uses the creative industries as a ‘parallel’ sector exemplar. The creative industries encompass a range of economic activities concerned with the generation or exploitation of knowledge and information, and typically include advertising, architecture, art, crafts, design, fashion, film, music, performing arts, publishing, R&D, software, toys, games, TV and Radio, and video games (Howkins, 2013).

Higher education and the creative industries share many functional similarities such as developing talent and targeting the same demographic. There are key differences however, and many revolve around failure and risk. For example, risk and failure have always been central to the creative industries. However, the disruption and instability which globalisation, economic crises and new technology is bringing to higher education is relatively new. This offers opportunity but also, new risks needing to be dealt with (Gidley, 2013; Sternberg et al, 2015).

The potential in acceptance and management of failure therefore needs to be newly realised in order for creativity and innovation to be fostered in higher education. Hope lies in the continued pivotal role of academic development, interpreting and influencing the culture of the organisation, whilst providing ground level structures which facilitate and support.

Present and future challenges for higher education

The last decade has seen considerable growth in Universities and degree programmes in a drive towards widening participation. In many countries however, funding has not matched the increase in student numbers so institutions have to deliver teaching and learning in increasingly

efficient ways. In countries with high tuition fees, the shift of the student to customer presents other challenges. These include a pressure to compete, increase efficiency and maximise student (or customer) satisfaction (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2015). Also, the need to respond to students who, as customers demand more than ever (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Tomlinson 2014, 2016). This brings many risks such as student dissatisfaction or unfulfilling learning experiences.

There has also been an increase in educational accountability (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010), and the apparent freedom of academic practitioners and the autonomy of institutions is being eroded. Typically, such accountability is met with an increase in the 'management' of Universities. This represents the 'managerial culture' position in the domesticity/systems quartile of Land's (2001) model of academic development. In practice, this means a programme must now be managed in line with institutional priorities more than before. This may work well for those concerned but where local needs seem to contradict strategic priorities, problems can result (Schulz, 2013; Abramov, 2012). The increased control of management also highlights the impact of the style of management being practiced. Whilst all of this is happening, technology also continues to disrupt and alter how people acquire knowledge and develop expertise, and on a wider scale, how they live their lives.

Outcome of this situation for academic development

In contrast to the traditional perception of the contemplative academic enjoying freedom at work, the reality for most academics is that their performance and output is inextricably linked to institutional goals and strategy. Furthermore, given the rapidity of politically-motivated policies and initiatives, and competition with other institutions, the management responsible for such strategy is constantly evolving (Fullan & Scott, 2009). The number of middle managers has also increased though many people find such roles difficult to fulfill (Howse, 2017). This is often attributable to the 'plurality' of leadership, where 'collegiate' leadership co-exists with 'top-down' management (McGrath, Roxå & Bolander Laksov, 2019). According to Chilvers, Bortolotto, Alefaio-Tugia, Cooper & Ellison, (2018), taking up a typical middle management position such as Associate Head has a number of negative outcomes including the death of an academic career due to lack of engagement in teaching and learning, but also, a disincentive to

rise to a more senior management position. This could be related to the fact that whatever level of management is examined, few academic administrators have had any management training prior to their appointment (Carroll & Wolverton 2004; Hecht, 2004; Thornton, Walton, Wilson & Jones, 2018; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez & Nies, 2001).

The expectation that academic development will provide solutions by default follows the pattern of recent years. As far back as 2003, Harland and Staniforth (2003) placed the profession firmly as an 'academic' rather than an administrative one (most entrants have backgrounds as educators). By 2005 however, Taylor (2005) notes the pivotal role which academic development begins to play in the midst of the institution, its strategy, and the people who form part of it. By occupying such a position, the role becomes more one of leadership, feeding up and answering to management, and being involved in quality assurance. Academic developers therefore become those who 'action' what University managers decide should be actioned.

Given these issues, and when senior management has access to greater amounts of 'performance' data, tensions between academics and management can be rife (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010). Arguably, Universities would be best managed taking a Post-Fordism stance featuring teamwork, flatter hierarchies and shared commitment. However, the crude data at senior management's disposal pushes this back towards Fordism or what Hodkinson (1997) describes as 'Neo-Fordism'. Whereas Post-Fordism focuses on the development of each worker (here, the academic), Neo-Fordism retains elements of Fordism such as 'top-down' management, and administrative systems designed to control. As Hodkinson notes, Neo-Fordism is the worst of both worlds, where its over-reliance upon technical rationalism results in control being more dominant than empowerment (Woodrow, 1992; Hodkinson & Harvard, 1994). The danger for academic development is that by sitting at this awkward and conflicted middle ground, it becomes the administrative system tasked to provide such control with the risk of satisfying no-one.

The need for a different approach to academic development

If a University were to be designed from scratch today, it is unlikely that the function which academic development now fulfills would have that title, or indeed, that approach. That said, academic development is well established, and still pivotal (Stensaker, 2018) though perhaps, a more creative approach is warranted. This is particularly important given that the desire, potential (and struggle) for individual intentionality and agency is still strong in academics (Monk & McKay, 2017; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017). As part of this, the concept of an academic leader (Bolander Laksov & Tomson, 2017) is still fundamental, encompassing the ability to see the big picture, foster communication, build teams and achieve consensus.

A new approach should nurture creativity and innovation, enable learning and development, and also acknowledge the role of failure. Creativity is the development of novel ideas which have usefulness – without such ideas, a University is unlikely to flourish. Furthermore, creativity is the process through which innovation takes place (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003) and is linked to innovation and entrepreneurship (Kao, 1989). Failure plays a significant part of this and has found considerable interest in the literature as a route to success (Harford, 2011; Lim, 1996; Matson, 1991; Matson, 1992; Petroski, 2006; Sitkin, 1992). Failure is also an essential element of learning and development (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Robinson, 2011; Thorley, 2018). More specifically, ‘productive failure’ has been proven to be valuable in learning across disciplines (Kapur & Bielaczyc, 2012; Kapur, 2016). The potential therefore exists for academic developers to harness these concepts in its role of developing the capability of academics and the organisation.

The relevance of the creative industries to academic development

The role which academic development has to play in future is unique and so it is useful to look at other industries to expose methods of thinking, working and collaborating. This paper uses the creative industries as an example not just because of key similarities, but also because it depends completely upon creativity and failure. This approach ties in with Stensaker’s framing of academic development as cultural work, defined ‘as a deliberate attempt to develop and disrupt

the organization on the basis of established and emerging practices and knowledge' (2018, p. 277). Budge and Clark (2012) also explain the work of academic development as a creative act, outlining the various aspects which must be attended to as part of this. Here, common demographics and modes of delivery, expertise and content development, knowledge workers, models of creativity and entry similarities are considered.

Higher education and the creative industries share similar demographics in those who experience their output. For example, the fifteen to twenty-five year old demographic not only spends the most on music, film and computer games, but also acquires a sense of identity and self from such consumption. Higher education shares the same demographic and similarly, develops students' sense of identity and self, whilst also increasingly considering them as consumers.

Related to this, learners in higher education and consumers of the creative industries receive something 'experiential' rather than tangible. For example, films are watched and art is viewed for the way they make people feel – this is in contrast to a more tangible good, such as a piece of furniture. Similarly, learners in higher education are more likely to reflect upon their learning experience rather than 'measuring' their own development. Indeed, many of the metrics which senior management rely on relate to the student 'experience' rather than any measure of their learning.

In delivering such an experience, both sectors use the same communication media to deliver the experience from the oldest to the latest technology. Academia has moved from its traditional reliance on the printed word in books and journals to online delivery, streaming and apps. The creative industries have also changed in response to the same technological shifts – music is streamed, games titles are made into films and so on. Firstly, this means that 'content' must be designed considering the same digital delivery channels. Secondly however, it means that both sectors need to respond creatively to the challenge of their traditional business model being disrupted by new modes of delivery. For example, just as the music and film industries have reacted to the proliferation of 'free' content now available online, so has higher education been challenged by the increase of free online courses (Ong & Grigoryan, 2015). Academic development is often pivotal to the response to such challenges, harnessing emerging technology and alternative pedagogical approaches in collaboration with teaching staff.

In many parts of the creative industries, the performer plays a crucial role in delivering the experience to consumers - this includes actors in films and musicians in performances. Despite the large and diverse teams who contribute to the final experience, it is the performance that 'fronts' the experience which is most likely to be recalled. The same can be said for the work of Universities - seminars, lectures and modules are intrinsically represented by the academic who delivers them and despite a whole raft of work which takes place in preparation, learners inevitably associate it with the person standing before them. Like the creative industries, through the eyes of a learner, a 'good' or 'bad' learning experience is associated with the person delivering it, despite much of it being initiated or controlled by others.

Both sectors focus on the development of talent (or expertise) in order to develop and deliver the experience of a product or service. Despite the shift in focus for academic development, it is still individual academics who produce the 'content' on which Universities depend just as creative practitioners do for the creative industries. If that talent is neglected, mismanaged or underutilised, the quality of output in the service or product suffers. The quality of such a product or service also depends upon creativity and innovation throughout the organisation. Where the creative industries need to constantly respond to the tastes and fashions of consumers, so higher education must constantly evolve to meet the needs of learners, and the requirements of graduates from global employers.

The important elements of creativity and innovation tie in with the concept of the 'knowledge worker'. First coined by Drucker (1959), knowledge workers are typically engaged in non-routine work, involving high degrees of creative thinking (divergent and convergent). It is therefore distinct from, for example, mass production (from where the Fordism School of management emerged) and involves significant challenge rooted in the workers' own drive and expertise. Just as academics create new work as a matter of course, so do workers in the creative industries to constantly satisfy the needs of consumers. Florida takes the concept of knowledge workers further in his explanation of the 'creative class' as 'people in design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content' (2002, p. 8). For Florida, the creative class is made up of two groups. The 'super creative core' includes science, engineering, education and arts, with design and media workers as a subset. Workers such as these are seen to be innovative and creative, and not

just ‘problem-solving’, but also ‘problem-finding’ (ibid, p. 69). The second group is ‘creative professionals’ (business, legal sector etc.) who ‘draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems’ using higher degrees of education to do so (ibid, p, 69). Both sectors then are staffed by such knowledge workers.

In terms of how the necessary ideas and innovations emerge, Simonton’s change configuration theory (1988) is relevant. The theory contradicts the common perception of a gifted individual generating a ‘genius’ idea ‘out of the blue’. Instead, it shows how ideas are created partly by chance, filtered, some are developed, some not, and eventually, the ‘genius’ idea emerges. This process needs facilitation so that creative people are empowered, and their ideas nurtured. It takes place in the creative industries, and many ‘creative’ people do this themselves. Similarly, higher education needs to have systems which not only favour results, but also the process of change configuration.

Csikszentmihayli’s (1997) systems model of creativity applies to both sectors. The model describes the interplay of domains, fields and gatekeepers. Essentially, gatekeepers (in the form of cultural intermediaries and creative practitioners acting as peers) decide what has sufficient merit to be admitted to the domain. In creative practice, this means that a practitioner needs to keep working (and probably failing) until their work is ‘creative’ enough to be part of the domain. If the success of academic practice depends upon creativity (and failure as part of that), academic developers can be likened to gatekeepers. They influence the academic practice of academics and hold a pivotal place in deciding what will be allowed into the domain (by being ‘supported’ by the institution). In making such decisions, they are managing creativity, and working to align it with the needs of the institution. As Clegg (2003) notes, most of the work of individual academic scholarship is developmental (depending upon creativity). Now that Universities have become more managerial, as Fyffe (2018) notes, if this does not pay sufficient attention to the reform intentions and quality agenda in Universities (which academic development often has to represent), there is potential for conflict.

Lastly, entry to and working in the creative industries has relevance for academic development. The route into academic development may be unplanned, and academic developers may end up there more by accident than design. For these reasons, many learn by doing (and failing), and given the rapid changes in the sector, are expected to continue to facilitate development in

increasingly uncertain conditions. This is similar to the creative industries where there is often no obvious entry point, and no ‘accepted’ qualifications. The creative industries have also always been highly competitive with more aspirants than positions available – rejection is therefore common. Looking at academia more broadly, as more people complete PhDs, there is a similar oversupply of aspirants who commit large amounts of time and effort to try to secure an academic position. The manner in which they are treated by the sector can be less than satisfactory – interestingly, Afonso (2014) has likened the practice to that of a drug gang.

Differences between the approach of higher education and the creative industries

A creative idea is defined as one which is new and has some usefulness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Robinson & Aronica 2009; Robinson, 2011; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Both sectors need creative ideas, and are similar in the ways already described, though there are differences.

Firstly, the two sectors have different cultures largely due to their history. The creative industries are dynamic, ever-changing and emphasise the ‘new’ rather than the ‘tried and tested’. Although higher education now needs to be just as dynamic in a rapidly-changing world, it nevertheless tends to portray an image of tradition, reliability and being a pillar of economic and social wellbeing. For both sectors, the cultural characteristics underpin their attraction to aspirants and how existing staff feel about their position within them.

The reputation of individual academics is based upon indicators which are increasingly metric-based and visible to others in the institution and the outside world. For example, research performance can be measured from research publications and funding applications. In recent years, the ‘quality’ of teaching has also contributed to the reputation of an academic, and evaluation scores based on the perception of learners feature heavily. Whether such indicators offer an accurate picture of an academic’s performance and reputation is at best, open to question. Either way, such measurements can make academics ‘risk-averse’, only investing their time and attention to activities which will contribute to these measures. Whilst there is much advice in younger industries to ‘fail often, fail fast’, the issue with academia is the long lead-time on many activities. For example, a journal article or new course development could take two years of work but then fail to be published or run. Rather than undertake such an activity and just

see if it works, the academic must instead juggle lots of ‘probables’, deciding to allocate time and effort to the ones most likely to succeed. This is problematic as many creative ideas are not explored sufficiently to see if they are worth developing. Also, co-operation between academics is discouraged and more established academics are less likely to become involved in risky projects. This is why Stensaker (2018) argues that academic development must now be thought of as cultural work. In comparison, in the creative industries, failure (or rejection) happens at many points from the inception and production through to marketing and consumption of a product, and so is the lifeblood of creative territory.

The creative industries are dynamic and value individualism, and so whilst some functions may be structured, the ‘production’ of creativity and innovation is less process-driven. This is because creativity depends upon driven individuals and teams having the motivation, capability and support to produce novel work. In contrast, the tensions between senior management in higher education (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010), role conflict, role ambiguity and organizational climate (Schulz, 2013) can seem to stifle individuality from which creativity and innovation could emerge.

Lastly, although the similarity between academic developers and cultural intermediaries has been pointed out, the pivotal role of academic development does not get the same acknowledgement. Cultural intermediaries ‘drive’ content for creative industry organisations - success results in credit and with the rise in reputation, the opportunity to shape and sponsor further projects. Although academic development could do this, the history of the role means that the potential to do this is not always acknowledged or exploited.

What academic development can learn from the creative industries

As academic development faces a crucial point in its trajectory, the question then arises as to what it can learn from the creative industries.

The first is to acknowledge that like the creative industries, the delivery of creative and innovative ‘content’ is the lifeblood of higher education. Whether in the form of research, teaching or innovative new pedagogical approaches, without such content, higher education

cannot remain current or effective. There is considerable danger in focusing too much on systems and process at the cost of content. Not only do academics spend too much time on the systems, but also those systems stifle creativity and innovation. Alternatively, the creative potential of ‘maverick educators’ is not harnessed or exploited (Mind & Tappenden, 2014). Also, less experienced academics fail to initiate new ideas, and instead, wait for the system to prompt them.

To facilitate this, academic developers (despite their history and entry into the field) could think of themselves as cultural intermediaries (drawing upon the work of Bourdieu [1984] and Csikszentmihalyi [1997]). They are ideally positioned to do so because of their intimate knowledge of the organisation, their unique insider/outsider view, and their experience of handling the tension between control and improvement (Stensaker, 2018). Cultural intermediaries in the creative industries ‘shape’ the content produced by creative practitioners, and also, the expertise and development of such creative practitioners. They do so by deciding what will succeed or fail at each stage, with the creative practitioner having to rework before coming back (thus facilitating Simonton’s [1988] ‘chance configuration theory’). This expertise interprets the needs of the market (critical or economic) and feeds it into the work of creative practitioners. Their interpretation of the ‘market’ is not just that of senior management, but instead based on the collective knowledge in their networks, an understanding of their competitors and so on, thus mitigating against the danger of uncritical ‘practice importing’ which Stensaker (2018) warns against. As the ‘cultural intermediaries’ of higher education, academic developers’ work is to foster, lead and cajole creative talent in a way which senior management is unable to.

Related to this, academic developers may benefit by recognising that their own work is ‘creative’. Budge and Clark (2012) explore this concept, interrogating the activities which form part of the creative process. They note that observing, attending to relationships, engaging and persisting, exploring and risk-taking, problem solving, intuiting, and reflecting and envisaging are the key ‘creative’ activities which are pivotal to academic development. Here, attending to relationships, exploring and risk-taking, and problem solving are particularly pertinent. Attending to relationships outlines how their work is one of a collaborative nature, partnering with academics and others. Exploring and risk-taking shows an attitude to try new things and to

not be fearful of the consequences. Problem-solving involves a proactive engagement in solving issues and challenges.

Academic developers could also benefit from seeing their role as that of facilitating the work of knowledge workers. As noted, the proliferation of student evaluations, league tables and other measures of effectiveness and productivity can lead to an unsatisfactory ‘Neo-Fordism’ management style (Hodkinson, 1997) to which academics may not respond well. Instead, as knowledge workers, academics value autonomy and the opportunity to develop their own expertise and solutions.

In managing relationships and working collaboratively, academic developers are effectively the custodians of the environment of creativity. Senior management seem more concerned with the achievement of strategic goals, though individual academics provide the resource to produce the creativity to achieve such goals. Academic development therefore plays a pivotal function in being able to manage the environment for creativity and innovation, and inspiring others to do the same (from learning technologists to enlightened Faculty Deans). This ‘environment’ is a crucial part of creativity (Fisher, 2014; Sternberg, 2006; Suwala, 2012). Rather than existing in isolation (as in the ‘traditional’ view of the artist or brilliant inventor working alone), creativity depends upon interaction within the environment. This includes the culture, connections, shared methods and beliefs – thereby forming a place in which talent, creativity and ideas can be nurtured.

Academic developers, in a similar way to cultural intermediaries can actively embrace failure and encourage techniques which make it an acceptable part of the process. As has been noted, in academia, failure tends to come late, after considerable time and effort, and with significant pain. The right intervention can mean that failure comes earlier and can therefore be dealt with. For example, an academic can be supported with time and resources for an innovative approach, whether or not it will ultimately work. In this way, the process is more akin to that of the creative industries, with potential failure at more points, thus tying in with Simonton’s (1988) chance configuration theory. This depends upon the expertise of the academic developer as a gatekeeper or cultural intermediary. Crucially, the academic developer need not fear failure themselves, and instead see its occurrence as evidence of creativity and innovation, despite the challenges of making this acceptable to senior management.

As ‘creatives’ themselves, and facilitators of others’ creativity, the work of academic development is made easier by understanding the ‘traits’ of creativity, and how these relate to failure. Writers such as Amabile (1989) and Furnham and Bachtiar (2008) explain the typical traits of creativity – divergent thinking, openness and preference for challenge. These traits apply fundamentally to how failure is dealt with as part of the process. For example, divergent thinking does not follow logical incremental steps but instead, involves formulating as many solutions as possible. This depends upon thinking openly without being preoccupied with what has worked (or failed) in the past. Challenge also forms a significant part of this – taking on challenges brings more risk and a greater likelihood of failure.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how, given the challenges higher education faces, academic development can learn from other sectors particularly those such as the creative industries which share target demographic, knowledge working and the need for creativity. By exposing the parallels and key differences, it has highlighted the potential in a different approach which draws upon practice in the creative industries. Specifically, it highlights the potential to refocus on creative and innovative content through re-thinking the role as one of cultural intermediary. As part of this, the role of academic development itself can be acknowledged as creative, facilitating the practice of knowledge workers, managing the creative environment and managing inevitable failure in itself and others.

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