



# Editorial: Our Creative Selves

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## 1. Context

When the editorial team (Anna, Emma, Chrissi and Neil) started work on this themed issue of *PRISM*, more than 12 months ago, we could not have envisaged the world into which this collection of work would emerge. The effects of the COVID19 pandemic have been – and continue to be – felt around the world, and have been transformative with regard to the way in which Higher Education is delivered. As the established, time-worn ‘norms’ of Higher Education have become untenable, there has been a call to educators in all countries to truly engage with their creative selves. Whilst isolated, remote, worried and distracted, we all have to learn to thrive in the new possibilities of digital learning environments, in order to deliver the most meaningful educational experience possible to our students.

As we set out our plans for this *PRISM* themed issue, we were certain of one thing: that it should focus on the notion of individual creativity, by inviting contributors and readers alike to explore what creativity means for them. Now more than ever, we see the importance of harnessing our creative selves – in our work, in our personal creative spaces, and in our responses to the world around us.

The authors that have contributed to this special edition each explore how creativity has facilitated

engagement, connection, personal and professional development, and ultimately the way in which creativity has shaped their worlds. These contributions were produced and submitted in late 2019, and speak to a world before COVID; yet despite the fact that all of the papers in this collection were written before the onset of the pandemic, they all thematically centre on a number of core principles that are perhaps even more relevant as we navigate the uncertain territory of 2020 and beyond. These themes are encapsulated within this word cloud; we invite you to reflect on these and from them create your own meanings, as are relevant to you and your practice:



Within this themed issue we present a treasure trove of creative practice, drawn from a range of practitioner stories and creative applications, across a range of

disciplines and professional areas. All of these accounts showcase a creative idea, practice, intervention or experience, which has enabled the authors to develop their creative confidence through taking risks and being committed to their creative practice. Learners reflected on the impact of creative teaching on their development in the co-produced article from Nerantzi et al (2020). Payton (2020) explores creativity through the lens of mindful play, this study illustrating that embodied activities can lead to depth of learning. Often the authors encountered challenges from students, colleagues or institutional systems (Payton, 2020), yet none of these challenges inhibited the creative spirit and expression of the authors, that has the potential to make a real difference to their students. Paltoglou & Hopper (2020) reflect on the role of expressive freedom and creativity in the teaching of psychology, and Carlin (2020) explore “de-classrooming” - the implementation of an ad-hoc intervention in the role of seminars on sociology, which empowered the sense of creativity and ownership. These themes are echoed further in Gosling, Burke & MacLennan (2020), in which the authors reflectively and critically explore the use of poetry as a means of facilitating collaborative learning between undergraduate students and people with criminal convictions. Many of the contributions are reflective narratives linked to practice, expressing personal learning and development within the wider creative endeavour: Vasko (2020) describes the practice of self reflection through nature walking as “contemplative ecological enquiry”, revealing the creative self at play. Drawing together the themes of personal and pedagogical creative development, Nerantzi and Moravej (2020) revel in the synergies that arise between the academic and academic developer, using a collaborative approach to module design and delivery that very much encapsulates the narratives of growth, change and reflection that lie at the heart of this special issue.

## 2. The Editors

By way of an introduction to Our Creative Selves, the four guest editors wanted to explore what creativity means for each of us. We have chosen to do this by responding to objects that represent creativity for us, as

a reflective prompt to explore our own relationships with our creative selves.

### a. Anna Hunter

Like many people in the Spring of 2020, as the outer world closed down I found myself drawn to what I could bring from the natural world into my own space. Echoing the symbiosis of inner and outer worlds that is explored in Zuzana Vasko’s ‘Inner and Outer Worlds: Creative Practice as contemplative ecological inquiry’, my inner world of home and garden became my entire world for 10 weeks. During this time I found comfort in planting and nurturing – despite being an inexperienced and, often, haphazard plant keeper (let alone gardener). When prompted to consider objects that represent creativity for me, my thoughts are drawn to the plants that I have cared for during the COVID19 crisis – in particular, a pumpkin plant that speaks volumes about what it means to be creative, and to lean into the impossible.

#### *The Pumpkin:*



For about four years, I have had a longing to grow my own pumpkins for Halloween. My family and I moved into our house around that time, and inherited a patch

of garden that seemed destined to be a vegetable bed. That first summer, I succeeded in growing a small pumpkin plant that flowered, but produced nothing more. Disheartened, it has taken until 2020 to try again. Other members of my family were cynical, to say the least. I was told that I was wasting my time, there was no chance that my tiny seeds would produce pumpkins (and even if they did, the squirrels and slugs would eat them long before Halloween). For once, I was undeterred – I now have two enormous pumpkin plants that are rapidly colonizing the bottom of my garden. Will they produce the hallowed fruit? I have no way of knowing. But I know that they have already achieved much more than I had hoped for, and who knows what they will eventually become? Many of us who embrace creativity in our teaching and learning practice will have heard the words ‘it can’t be done’; ‘you can’t do that’. Sometimes creativity exists in the most unlikely of spaces, when all the odds seem to be stacked against it. Often, the naysaying voices come from within, and they can be the loudest critics of all.

Creativity in a time of trauma and instability may seem superfluous, but nothing could be further from the truth. The papers included in this special edition are joined by shared narratives of connection, freedom, risk, renewal, resistance, playfulness and growth. Much like my own plants, creativity thrives despite the circumstances, and offers us a way in which to truly engage and embrace our creative selves

#### b. Neil Withnell

The effects of the pandemic have certainly brought out creativity in a way that I certainly did not envisage. Creativity means a lot of things to me, namely fun, experimentation and the taking of risks. Colleagues tell me that I am creative but I often don’t think that is true, I just like to try out new things.

Faced with working from home I found myself missing the people contact and the buzz of the University campus. I cannot wait to get back. The special edition of the journal has been a great journey, both in terms of my own learning and of seeing how creative people are, you can see this from the variety of submissions. My own “creative self” over the past few

months has been one of experimentation and risk taking, and yes a lot of fun. I have become more involved in gardening, and although certainly not “green-fingered” the opportunity to understand more about plants and the way they grow (types of soil etc.,) is fascinating. In an attempt to be creative I designed an indoor arrangement that I enjoy seeing develop, very much like my own creative development as every day I notice something new.

#### Growing:



#### c. Emma Gillaspy

This photo shows my collection of Play-Doh, a ‘tool’ I use a lot in my teaching and also representing multiple facets of who I am as a creative educator. I love the endless possibilities and potential that comes with using such malleable materials and I guess that’s how I view the world... the opportunity to reshape my views and experiences is ever-present and I believe in the transformational potential of people. There’s something nostalgic about the material too. Whenever I use it, people begin to share stories of their childhood or playing with their children. This speaks to my own drive for creative congruence, reconnecting with my core values and beliefs and leveraging them to shape my teaching practice. I’m passionate about developing confident congruence in others through appreciative inquiry-based coaching, working with the whole person’s experiences to unlock their true potential. Play-Doh can be social and collaborative too, working together to create something new - although that has certainly been more challenging to facilitate during the



global coronavirus pandemic! My most creative moments always happen when I'm working with others - online or face-to-face. There's nothing quite like the positive energy I feel when bouncing around new ideas, so I'm always seeking creative 'tribes' who foster that non-judgemental space. Finally, Play-Doh needs action, it's daring you to do/make something with it and I feel this need for action within me too. Education needs to change, we need rebels who can stand up against the traditions, break down the barriers and foster different ways of thinking and doing. I find myself driven to question the system, I'm never satisfied with the status quo and I'm constantly looking for ways to move forward both as an individual and a sector. I dare you to take the actions you believe are needed in education too.

#### *Possibilities and Potential:*



#### **d. Chrissi Nerantzi**



I think the object actually picked me. My creative self is a ball of wool, a colourful one. The wool takes me places, is a connector and I can make stuff using it. When you are with me, you will never know what happened next, not even I often know, or what I will make. It will be a surprise. I guess it is the child in me that never moved out. My appetite to wander and wonder has been growing year after year... The connecting aspect is important to me. Connecting with ideas and people. To develop trust and caring relationships and experiment, to play. There is a lot of value keeping our curiosity and inner flame alive and being an explorer, an adventurer and even a rebel. What would the world be without them? I can see (at least some of) the opportunities. Overcoming challenges is part of it. Now during the Covid-19 pandemic and always. Being resourceful and inventive. With limited resources. No budget. Breaking free from

rules and conventions and making novel connections to create more exciting realities, to problem-find and problem-solve, to make our world a better place. To go a path nobody else has been before, to be that path. Not everybody can see this. Not everybody recognises the value of creative ideas. At least not immediately. But that is ok. They may not be ready for them yet. Often it can take years... Pushing the boundaries means living at the edge, being at times rejected, even ridiculed. The other rebels out there give me hope. My ball of wool brings us together and we stay together for a little while or longer, depending on the commitment we have to each other. This is how ideas grow and evolve, how they can be sustained. I am not alone.

#### *Not Alone:*



### **3. Looking Ahead**

Our individual stories, like the narratives of practice contained within this special edition, demonstrate clearly that creativity is essential to who we are, as individuals, as educators and as learners. Telling the story of who we are allows us to understand ourselves and our practices better, so that we can continue to grow and innovate. Stories are important, the stories contained here even more so, because they also provide evidence of the effectiveness of the creative approaches.

But we aren't ready to stop here: more evidence is needed to continue to demonstrate the incredible impact of creativity within Higher Education teaching and learning. This special edition has, to some extent, been a celebration of the creative self, often triumphant in the face of adversity. Future research

may focus on the frustrations encountered by the creative practitioner, on the creative projects that didn't come to fruition, the interventions that didn't work as planned. This collection has been delivered into the midst of a pandemic, but was conceived long before the real impact of COVID 19 was seen - a future collection will explore the creative ways in which educators have risen to meet the challenges of a permanent shift in the educational landscape. There are many different exciting and unknown directions that this research will take in the future; we hope you will come with us on the journey.

We would like to thank all our contributors, their commitment to creative practice but also to sharing their work with a wider audience so generously and openly.

The Guest Editorial team.

#### 4. Disclosure statement

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