

## **New Creative Careers: The Problems of Progression and Uncertainty**

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This chapter presents findings from research<sup>1</sup> which we conducted with participants who were current and former art college students, practitioners in different areas of creative arts and design, and therefore workers in a relatively newly named part of the economy, the 'creative industries'. These industries have been defined as including, but not limited to, 'advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio.' (DCMS, 2001). Originally identified by New Labour as a significantly successful new sector, they have subsequently received considerable attention from policy-makers and academic commentators in the UK and elsewhere.

The list of creative industries we have quoted also corresponds closely to the subject areas and activities of many art college courses, and this indicates how these institutions function as a vocational training ground and entry point for the creative industries. This connection is not, of course, coincidental. For policymakers and commentators, the creative industries are interesting and novel precisely because of the association between the arts and economics (O'Connor, 2009). These have traditionally been seen as incompatible: the fate of the artist was to starve in the garret rather than drive economic growth and urban regeneration, and indeed some commentators suggest that the reality for many contemporary creative workers is not really so very different (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Whether or not the economic circumstances have changed, the 'creative' of creative working still retains the aura of the arts, a link to the classic image or 'romantic myth' of the artist as inspired maker, and the assumption that 'the making of art requires special talents, gifts, or abilities, which few have' (Becker, 1982).

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<sup>1</sup>A full account of the research on which this chapter is based can be found at:  
<http://www.naln.ac.uk/en/projects--research/progression-to-postgraduate-study-and-careers.cfm>

Becker considered art and creative practices in sociological terms, and part of his project was to challenge the image of the solitary maker by exploring the 'art worlds' which sustain and enable artistic or creative work, such as providing materials and markets and an audience to recognise and value it. Our aim in this research has been to consider contemporary creative careers as a social phenomenon, but using a different approach to Becker's, taken from social and discursive psychology.

Our approach is introduced in the first section below, in which we also provide more detail of the study. Subsequent sections discuss special issues which the research raised in relation to creative working. As part of this we consider the trajectories of creative careers, including the notion that these do not involved the 'age-stage' progression of a 'normal' career pathway. We also examine the linking of personal and professional development which characterises creative work. We then consider the implications of the research findings, for vocational learners themselves and for course providers, teachers and institutions. We discuss sources of advantage and disadvantage for learners, as indicated by our research, and some further implications for those aiming to assist and expand lifelong learning opportunities.

### **The Research Study**

The research discussed in this chapter was an interview-based study conducted in 2007. The special focus of this research, which was funded by the National Arts Learning Network, was to investigate the importance of university-level study in Creative Arts and Design, including postgraduate study, as part of a creative career. An additional interest was in people who had not followed a traditional educational pathway, perhaps as a consequence of a decision to return to study or training as preparation for a new creative career, or because of difficulties at some point in their educational careers. For some of our participants, therefore, a postgraduate course had been the ultimate challenge and achievement, especially for those who had struggled with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. For

others, postgraduate study was the point at which they focused down their interest onto what they *really* wanted to do. For yet others, it had been the point of change, the opportunity to begin working in an entirely new area. And for participants who had not (yet) studied at postgraduate level, it was an option to be rejected or taken up in the future.

The obvious way to research all this might seem to be to collect statistics, perhaps through a survey to find out, for example, the ages and previous study experience of postgraduate students, and the ‘facts’ of their subsequent careers in terms of the work they did, their earnings and so on. This kind of research has been undertaken by others (Pollard et al., 2008), including in the alumni surveys conducted by many art colleges. Its strength is that it can provide a useful overview of the complex picture of a large number of lives. Its limitations, and every kind of research has limitations, are that it necessarily simplifies in order to produce generalisations, with the result that interesting details must be omitted and important differences may be obscured. People’s answers to questions about what they *will* do in the future or in certain situations (‘if’) are a notoriously unreliable predictor of behaviour, and a statistical analysis does not provide much information about the ways participants view the world or their reasons for doing what they do.

The approach we adopt in our research, in contrast, involves the collection and analysis of data from a limited number of participants. The theoretical traditions which inform our research are social and discursive, from psychology and the social sciences. Readers who are interested in more detail and sources may want to look at some of our academic publications<sup>2</sup>. The overview we seek is of the ideas which participants share about study and work as part of creative careers. We assume that these shared ideas come from society in general (a 21<sup>st</sup> century UK world view, if you like, with all the larger historical and global influences which that implies) and also from our participants’ common experiences, of school, art college and certain kinds of work. We were therefore interested in what they told us about their lives,

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume3/QSR\\_2\\_1\\_Taylor\\_Littleton](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume3/QSR_2_1_Taylor_Littleton), also Taylor, 2001; Taylor 2007

and more specifically in how they characterised and valued what they talked about.

We recruited our participants through art colleges and their alumni lists, inviting volunteers who had followed a 'different' career path into Art and Design, for example by entering university study without 'A' levels, or postgraduate study without a first degree in Art and Design, or changing their field of work. The final sample of 46 participants included current students as well as people engaged in different kinds of creative work for themselves or others. They ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s. It is important to note that age was not an indicator of career maturity since the sample included people who had changed careers and others who had returned to study after a break. The participants' common experience was that they had all studied, or were currently studying, Creative Arts and Design.

Each participant was interviewed for about an hour about her or his study and work experience, plans and hopes for the future. The interviews were designed and conducted to encourage conversation. For example, the interviewer asked open-ended questions and although she followed a guide list of topics, she followed up points which arose and invited additional comments, so that each interview was different. (This contrasts with survey interviews in which every participant would be asked exactly the same questions, with a limited choice of possible answers.)

These interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed, are our research data. The transcripts were analysed together, as a single body of data, to find patterns across them in what was said and how it was said. We examined the talk as self-presentation, sense-making and performance, shaped by the interview interaction and also the discourses of the wider society which these patterns indicate, for example, through what is taken to be 'normal'. We treated participants' accounts as broadly truthful about the details of their study and work, and our aim was not to understand the participants as if they were clients in a therapy situation, or to read their talk as evidence of 'inner' mental states, like a window on a psychic arena. Our interest was and is in the

possibly unrecognised implications of taken-for-granted ideas and social practices.

As one example of our data analysis, we noted that many participants were formally or informally categorised during their schooling as either 'academic' or 'artistic'. These are our category labels, summarising a pattern which emerged in different words and details as we compared many interviews. Our participants' accounts indicated that the 'academic' pupils were likely to have been directed away from 'artistic' subjects, by their teachers and also their families. A similar exclusion happened with pupils who were good at science who were discouraged from taking more creative courses which interested them. These early categorisations therefore had long-term consequences, and sometimes a participant who had graduated and pursued a different career for some years subsequently decided to return to an original interest in creative work which she or he had been discouraged from pursuing at school. This is an example of the relevance of what may be called discourses or discursive resources, an instance in which meanings overflow language or talk to have a practical or material effect on people's lives: this is the kind of point which interests us in our analysis.

### **The shape of a creative career**

The sociologist Howard S. Becker, who we cited at the start of this chapter, suggests that artists have a special status in society. He proposes that this carries some exemption from the 'rules of decorum, propriety, and common sense' (1982:14) which other people are expected to follow. The creative workers who were our participants did not stand out as improper or indecorous (although that was not a focus of our study), but they did emphasise the difference between their own careers, or prospective careers, and those of people in more 'ordinary' jobs. One way in which they did this was to distance themselves from the kind of idealised age-stage progression in which the working person moves steadily over time into higher status and better paid positions. In particular, some participants specifically contrasted themselves with professionals who had studied for a similar number of years

and, our participants suggested, could expect this progressive career pathway in return.

We emphasise that we are looking at participants' discursive constructions of their past and prospective careers, that is, the ways in which they interpreted and presented their lives in their talk. In many cases, an alternative interpretation was obviously possible. For example, after completing their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, some participants had achieved good (though seldom spectacular) earnings and also considerable recognition. They had taken successive positions of greater responsibility, within institutions or independently, for example, on large-scale funded projects. In short, they did appear to have progressed steadily, although they presented themselves differently. The interest for us was in the way our participants constructed their experiences, and prospects. We argue that discursive constructions matter because they are connected to commonsense assumptions about what is good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, normal or abnormal, or, alternatively, ordinary or special, and they have practical effects on people's lives.

In this view, a particular description of a life or career may fulfil certain functions for the speaker. We suggest that one reason for participants to emphasise the difference between 'ordinary' careers and their own lives is in order to *claim* the special status which Becker described. In other words, the difference of your career pathway is cited as evidence that you are an artistic or creative person. This might be especially important in a career in which success is difficult to attain: it supports or validates a claim to be a creative worker. This might also be why a number of participants spoke negatively about more conventional lives: for example, a recent postgraduate talked about his fear of being 'trapped' in a 9 to 5 job, and a man past retirement age compared his life favourably with a friend who had made more money but had a very 'ordinary' life.

Conversely, for some participants, difference may be the starting point and being creative may function as the explanation. If your life to date has not

conformed to an expected progression, you may be attracted to a career in which an alternative path is accepted and even expected. This could be the case for people who have had negative educational experiences. They may also be attracted to take courses which seem different to the areas in which they had difficulties; we see again the effects of the idea of an academic/artistic contrast.

So far we have discussed the claim that creative careers do not follow a 'normal' trajectory (although of course many people in other fields may also consider themselves outside such a trajectory). Our research did indicate a different pathway for a creative career, which our participants referred to, often indirectly, in their discussions of their own work and lives. The idea of this alternative pathway is what we have called the narrative of the 'big break', of persisting in your work, possibly for years and even for an entire lifetime, until quite suddenly you achieve recognition and a kind of total success which resolves all problems. As we describe it here, this sounds like a rather silly fantasy, with overtones of tabloid celebrity stories. Our argument is certainly not that our participants, or other contemporary creatives, are silly, nor that they all explicitly claimed this as their expectation and ambition, although some of them came close to doing so. Rather, we suggest that this narrative, of extended effort which will bring results at *some* unknown time, underlies much of the taken-for-granted commonsense of creative lives. This commonsense was voiced by our participants, sometimes quoting tutors and other mentors, in statements like 'I'm *not* under any illusions that I'll earn money out of my art work' (Taylor and Littleton 2008). So participants accepted as a necessity that they must work hard, conserve money or fit in alternative work for an income, postpone planning or the expectation of greater security, and even avoid looking to the future at all. This echoes other research, with new media workers (at least some of whom come under the 'creative industries' according to the DCMS, quoted earlier) which noted their striking avoidance of planning for the future or even talking about it (Gill 2007).

## **Effort and uncertainty**

The 'big break' pathway we have outlined implies the need for sustained application over an uncertain period of time, during which the creative work may not be producing much income. For some of our participants, the solution was one we call 'the double life': alongside their primary, creative work, they would do a separate job to earn money to support themselves (and others). Ideally, this job would not be too demanding, although some participants did develop a whole second career, whether in a related area, like teaching, or a different field, for example, as a chef or sub-editor. Living such a double life obviously requires enormous energy and effort, but it provided some participants with a stable if tiring life situation in which they could pursue creative work.

Other participants had working lives which were more fragmented. Although the creative industries have been claimed as an area of economic new success and the source of new jobs, commentators have noted that much of the work which is available is part-time or short-term, project-based, and often low-paid. Many creative workers therefore spend considerable time pursuing job possibilities, sometimes even doing unpaid work to promote themselves. This was the situation of new media workers studied by Rosalind Gill (2007) and web-designers studied by Helen Kennedy (2010). Some of our participants described similar situations. A positive view is that such 'portfolio' working can offer freedom, flexibility and interest (Leadbetter 2004): it has been claimed as the model for the future of work. Some of our participants also appeared to embrace the uncertainty as an alternative to '9 to 5' working which they saw as stifling their creativity. More negatively, portfolio working has been criticised as exploitative, with the flexibility favouring only the employers, not the workers themselves. For example, our participants described the difficulty of 'juggling' multiple commitments, including pursuing contacts to find further work.

Both of these work patterns, the 'double life' and portfolio working, require huge effort of creative workers. It has been suggested that such effort is

encouraged, and tolerated, as a consequence of the personalised nature of creative work. To understand this, we need to look back to a conventional image of artistic or creative production which centres on a solitary individual 'maker', driven by her or his (usually his) passions and personal inspiration. Of course this image has been challenged by a number of academics. For example, Howard S. Becker (1982) has written about the heavily peopled 'art worlds' which sustain and enable artistic or creative work, including by providing materials and markets and an audience to recognise and value it. Somewhat differently, psychologists have explored the collaborative nature of creative work (John-Steiner 2000; Miell and Littleton 2004; Sawyer 2008; Sawyer 2003), proposing that this involves more people than one named individual maker. The conventional image also excludes the networking which commentators have indicated is essential for contemporary creative workers. Nonetheless, the idea of creative working as individual and personal is one that persists, and it has been suggested that this attracts and motivates contemporary creative workers. In an influential book, Angela McRobbie (1998) suggested that young people are attracted to creative work as self-actualising, that is, a means of making yourself through what you do. Other writers have noted that for contemporary creative workers, the distinction between work and leisure is blurred because your work is 'about' you. More negatively, this search for personal fulfilment through work is seen to lead to creative workers putting in long hours for little return, often on insecure contracts, for little or no pay. If you regard the work as your own, unshared, and assume that success depends on your own continuing efforts, then there is never a right time to stop; these combined assumptions result, in McRobbie's words, in the 'self-exploitation' of creative workers (McRobbie, 1998: 103).

Our research confirmed many of these previous claims and findings about the personalised and individualised nature of creative work. Our participants referred frequently to their 'love' of their work. They had been encouraged to immerse themselves fully in their courses, especially at postgraduate level, and this came to seem a necessary condition for creative working: the work had to take priority over other parts of life. (In a previous study, postgraduate

art college students had frequently described themselves as 'selfish' for their involvement in their work.) They had also learned in art school contexts to talk about their work and make connections to their personal experience.

After art college, personalised working had certain implications. First, the blurring of the boundaries between working and non-working life led, inevitably, to conflicts in the areas which more traditionally have been seen as personal: relationships with partners and even friends; parenting, actual or prospective, and sometimes the demands of other close people, like parents and siblings. Second, participants valued the ownership of their work, aspiring to work for themselves, or to keep their *own* work separate from work for others, such as employers or certain clients, in the 'double life' we have noted. The personalisation of creative work therefore, somewhat ironically, provided both the requirement for overworking and the motivation to sustain it.

### **Some implications of the research**

The preceding sections presented some of our findings about creative work and careers, which we suggested derive from an established image of the artist or creative maker. We have indicated how this image influences our participants' own interpretations of the shape of a creative career and the way that they work and live. Does it have further implications for lifelong learning, for course providers, both teachers and institutions, and for the learners themselves? To explore these questions, in this section we will discuss our findings about who studies Creative Arts and Design, and what they expect of such an education and the institution which provides it.

The question of who studies and, relatedly, the advantages or disadvantages which some of them face is often considered with reference to conventional categories and markers such as age group, ethnicity, previous educational qualifications (for all of which some statistics are available) and class, which is a more difficult concept and one on which there is limited information on Creative Arts and Design students. We will not discuss our findings in these terms, for several reasons. First, in any social research there is a question of which category is most relevant: is a particular participant's position or

experience or prospects or world view best explained with reference to her gender, race, age or class? And, relatedly, should these be separated? For example, are there special issues faced by, say, white working class men which will be missed if a study focuses on the category of 'men' only? A third issue around the conventional categories is that some, including class and race, are obviously difficult to define.

An additional issue for a qualitative research study like the one we conducted is that there are inevitably too few participants to generalise about in such category terms. There is a danger that a small number of, say, Black participants will be interpreted as 'types', as if every part of their situation and everything they say is a consequence of being Black so that anyone else who is Black would have the same experience and say the same things, which is clearly not the case! For the same reason, we are not simply summarising the experience of our participants and saying what they did or did not experience or decide. Rather, as the word 'implications' indicates, we are presenting an argument, or several arguments, about advantage or disadvantage, based on our data but going beyond it. We therefore present our answer differently, in terms of categories which emerged from our own study.

### **Academic or creative?**

We have already introduced the 'academic' and 'creative' distinction which emerged from our data. A number of our participants emphasised that they had been unsuccessful at school, for different reasons. For some of these, Creative Arts and Design presented an opportunity for study at a higher education level which they had not previously considered. (One aim of the National Arts Learning Network, which funded our research, is to reach such learners.)

One prominent group which emerged in the study were the participants who attributed their previous study difficulties to dyslexia. It was not part of our

study to debate the nature or diagnosis of this condition; our interest was in its meanings for participants. It could function as an explanation for previous failures and therefore, for some people, as an important and welcome exoneration. A few people went further and took dyslexia to be an extra indication of creativity: this is a variation on the academic/creative distinction.

For education providers, an important implication is that participants with a history of education difficulties wanted creative courses to 'look' different from academic ones. For example, a number of participants, including people who had completed postgraduate qualifications, recommended strongly that Masters-level courses should not include a written dissertation.

We also found, of course, that our participants did include people who had been highly successful in their earlier studies. Some of them had moved on directly from school to study 'creative' subjects (although these people were not the main focus of this particular research study) but others had followed less direct routes into creative work. Some had come to it indirectly, through an alternative specialisation. For example, there were participants who had studied engineering and then moved into design. Others had entered and followed whole different careers before changing to study on Creative Arts and Design courses as mature students. Some women participants had made such a change after a break to raise a family.

We noted that participants who had made this later career change sometimes expected their new qualifications to open doors automatically; in other words, they transferred their 'other career' expectations of age-stage progression into creative fields, and were disappointed. For these participants, the academic experience perhaps took precedence over a view of themselves as entering larger networks, communities or fields of activity in which they would later work. One relevant point for an educational institution here is its own place within larger 'art worlds': we return to this below.

### **The influence of family**

Family background was relevant to participants' study experience as an influence on course choices and a source of advantage or disadvantage in several ways. Those participants who might be characterised by others as 'middle class' (and in some cases described themselves in this way) mentioned some obvious advantages which their families of upbringing could provide. One was a degree of financial support, including in the form of a place to live during or after studying. Another was guidance in the processes of choosing and applying for courses, based on a general familiarity with Higher Education; this is the kind of knowledge and competence which is often linked to social or cultural 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984 /2010: 59).

However, this background could be disadvantageous too: for example, parents who were professionals in salaried positions often had a clear expectation that students would follow conventional age-stage routes and that their study would lead directly into a secure well-paying job. In contrast, families with experience of self-employment or running small businesses could be more tolerant of career uncertainty and so place less pressure on students to present clear plans for the future. But some students from less academic backgrounds also faced the family expectation that all the time and money invested in study should produce an immediate return of higher earnings and greater employment security. These students were usually expected to maintain themselves by working alongside their studies, and in some cases, to financially support or otherwise take responsibility for other family members.

Participants whose families of upbringing had some connection to creative work seemed to be at an advantage: they were encouraged in their career choices or at least had less need to justify them. We have noted elsewhere how even quite distant or tenuous connections could also be cited by participants as validation for their own choice of a creative career (Taylor and Littleton 2006). Family members who were creative could provide useful examples of how to manage career uncertainty and self-employment. For some participants, family connections meant that art colleges were 'known places', so that the process of applying for entry was less daunting. However,

for a few participants, there was an unwelcome sense of competition with other members of the family doing similar creative work, and some people had even changed their area of practice to avoid any possible comparison.

For many people, the family of upbringing was less relevant to their study experience than their own partners and, in some cases, children. We noted several different domestic patterns, marked by a central tension. The student or novice creative worker wanted to prioritise creative work, 'selfishly', as we have noted, and the claims of other people interfered with this; yet, in the long indefinite pathway of a creative career, those other people were also a vital source of support, whether emotional, financial, or both. Reconciling study with parenting was particularly difficult, although some participants managed it. Some women who had left previous careers to raise a family decided to take up creative work at the same time, or some years on when their children were older, but in this situation there was usually financial support from a partner with a secure income. Men with children often looked to the female parent to provide a steady income.

### **Implications for education providers**

We have noted the unsurprising preference for creative courses to 'look' different from conventional academic study. There was a clear expectation that learning, like the creative work, would be personalised. As students, our participants valued personal attention from tutors; many referred to current or former tutors as strong influences. They also favoured courses which were flexible enough to be matched to their own interests. The process of matching your study to yourself extended to the courses and subject or skills areas. Participants often resisted fixed categorisations and described themselves as not *only*, say, a photographer, sculptor, painter or animation designer but as combining interests in different fields or subjects or media. A similar blurring occurred around 'applied' fields and 'fine art' which is why we have not used these distinctions to categorise our participants.

Perhaps as part of the same flexibility, participants spoke very positively about the experience of communicating with fellow students on different courses, being able to view and discuss their work, and of the more general influence of their peers. The importance of both tutors and peers may be that, like family members and other known people, they can offer practical examples of how to manage the uncertainties of a practical career. Education may offer similar support and an injection of energy and confidence at difficult times. The pathways described by many participants featured a complex intertwining of work and educational experience: they had returned to art colleges and other institutions to for short courses, further degrees and to work as teachers and tutors. This was one of the way in which institutions functioned to connect current and former students into larger 'art worlds'.

Teaching institutions, therefore, had a value for participants which went beyond the immediate provision of teaching and training. First, as noted above, colleges provided a point of connection into the larger creative contexts which students aspired to enter. One way this occurred was through degree shows. Current students looked for the contacts which the show might produce, and former students went back to their colleges to degree shows to look at current work and renew old contacts. Second, colleges could provide reassuring validation to set against the uncertainty of a creative career. This was given by the initial experience of being selected, whether through a competitive process or a favourable encounter with a single member of staff. Participants' memories of the selection process varied but the satisfaction of being accepted was an enduring one. Participants also took pride in having a prestigious qualification. A frequent comment was that, although success would ultimately depend on the quality of your work, the 'name' of a college or course might increase the chance that someone would open an application or portfolio in order to look at that work.

### **Concluding comments**

Our research investigates creative workers' own views of their (current or prospective) careers, and the assumptions which influence their interlinked

working and personal lives. Creative working has been characterised as precarious and the economic downturn will add to its uncertainties. However, it may be that the particular expectations and love of their work which characterises creative workers will also help them to deal with these additional difficulties. Our research indicates that the validation and connection provided by education providers, at the level of institutions and also individual teachers and trainers, may be an important additional support.

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