

How can we be more creative? Q&A with Dr Adrian West – an expert in unlocking creativity and innovation.

Why do you think people find it difficult to be creative?

In order to live in the world, the brain is necessarily uncreative. We don't want to be having new ideas all the time. So actually, not being able to be creative easily saves us energy – thinking is hard work! The mind is fantastic at incorporating learnt patterns and prefers to use those, so mostly we don't have to think at all – once you've learnt to drive you don't think about it. Because the mind is designed to be mostly uncreative, it feels artificial when we push it to come up with new ideas.

Why are some people more creative than others?

Some people do seem to have a natural proclivity for coming up with new ideas. Just as in sports, or maths, there are people who seem naturally talented, but even they practice an awful lot, and most of us don't. In just the same way, we can learn techniques that make us far better – better sometimes than those who are naturally gifted. I wouldn't say any of the techniques will turn you into Leonardo Da Vinci, but we can go from, for instance, 10% to 80%, and that can make all the difference.

What tools can people use to help them be more creative?

There is a lot of confusion in the field. As we just noted, there's a belief that some people are creative and others aren't, and there is a degree of truth in that. At the same time there's this idea that being creative is a mystical, intangible thing. But now we know enough about where ideas come from. There's a perfectly rational way of going about having new ideas. But it's fairly unknown if you look in the literature – even Vitae's latest document on creative thinking¹ includes a statement that 'creativity can't be taught directly', and that's just false. We know enough about these things and you can find out about it; it's just having the impetus to learn and put tools into practice.

Can our environment limit our creativity?

Oh hugely. If you include our mental environment, then one view of depression is "cognitively arrested alternatives", i.e. a complete halt to seeing possibilities. And some environments, institutions and structures unwittingly foster a kind of 'depression' in people that it's hard for them to get beyond. It's pervasive, hence hard to see, so we just keep telling ourselves to 'try harder'. For example, all the research I'm aware of on what causes people to enjoy working together, enjoy what they do, enjoy coming up with new ideas, sharing them and supporting each other, tell us that incentives, punishment and rewards don't work: mid-to-long term they're counter-productive. They skew people to fixate on the punishment or the reward, which are two sides of the same coin.

How can we make a more creative environment?

It usually revolves around people and processes. You can ask "what's stopping us", and be creative in addressing that. It's a matter of removing things that get in the way, as much as putting in things that make it happen. A simple example is the 'Six Thinking Hats'² technique, which includes the green hat for creative thinking, in a sense giving permission to arrive at new ideas together constructively. Creativity is sparked in an environment where people feel safe to express new ideas that aren't judged before being allowed to develop. That tends to happen in an environment where there's a sense of play rather than fear. Brown's book on 'Play'³ talks about this and how we undervalue play due to the association of the term with children; but adults need it just as much.



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There's an environmental balance. The brain moves into a play state where our perception broadens and we look for more possibilities. That's where all the creative stuff happens, and brain storming - which has a bad press - doesn't work in an environment that isn't playful. Play is such an important mental mode and it's very easy in a pressured environment to remove all of that. But we need critical analysis, and other modes of thinking just as much, so other parts of the process ensure that happens too.

¹ The Creative Researcher: Tools and techniques to unleash your creativity. Vitae.

http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/The_creative_researcher_Dec09.pdf

² Edward de Bono, 1985, Six Thinking Hats. Little, Brown and Company: Boston, New York, London.

³ Brown, 1999, Play: How it shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the soul. Avery & Penguin Group: New York.

Dr Adrian West co-founded the Advanced Interfaces Research Group in Computer Science at the University, and now inspires companies that want to create new futures for themselves.

Inspiring others

The University of Manchester 2012 Social Responsibility & Volunteer Award winners

The University launched a Social Responsibility & Volunteer of the Year Awards scheme in 2010 to recognise and celebrate the social responsibility activity of its members. As part of its strategic vision, the University aims to encourage greater social responsibility (Goal 3 in Advancing the Manchester 2015 Agenda) and this year saw a record number of nominations for the annual award.

This year's awards were presented on 10th May at an event in the Whitworth Hall, attended by 120 nominees and their families, University staff and representatives of partner community organisations. Nominees were split into 'Student', 'Staff' and 'Alumni' categories, with first, second and third place winners announced for each. The Awards were given out by the President and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, who outlined Social Responsibility as the third goal of the University alongside World-class teaching and research in her speech. The prizes were cheques made out to the organisation that the winners support: £300 for the overall winner, and £200 and £100 for the 2nd and 3rd place runners-up. In addition, the overall



winner in each category was awarded the University Medal for Social Responsibility, part of the suite of established President's Distinguished Achievement Awards.

Next year it could be you! Nominees at this year's award had given their time to a variety of causes. Many of you may feel inspired to take on some aspect

of social responsibility but don't know where to start. Although some nominees had taken on huge projects, such as Estelle Goodwin who founded a charity helping out communities living in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, projects closer to home are also in need of volunteer support. Setting up or helping out at local centres for underprivileged youngsters or homeless shelters is something that many of us can be easily involved in. Another theme is bringing awareness of the research we do to children in schools that are in areas of poor educational progression. Whilst there were a substantial number of nominees this year, Research Staff were under-represented at the event. It is tempting to devote our time to our immediate research and career progression, but it is now becoming a bigger part of our responsibility as members of this University to help those more disadvantaged than ourselves and shape and improve the wider community.

For more information see <http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/volunteeroftheyear/>