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Everyday Creativity on a University Campus: Crafting a challenge to journey beyond the formal

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an initiative to encourage staff, students and the wider community of an Irish university to engage in open, daily creative challenges, mediated by technology. The aim was to encourage creativity as a ritual practice, and to develop digital literacy, in an open forum. We explore how the ideas and methods of DS106[1], a course in Digital Storytelling from the University of Mary Washington (UMW) and other accessible open courses on the web, were appropriated for use within a university campus. The project, known as *Campus Create*, became both a virtual space and daily practice, encouraging creative thinking across the campus in a fun and playful way. In this paper, we describe the approach taken towards building an open, inclusive online community of learners, with a shared intention to make creativity a more frequent habit.

Author Keywords

Open online collaboration; creativity; higher education; informal learning; digital literacy; participatory culture;

ACM Classification Keywords

K3.1 Computer Uses in Education, Collaborative Learning

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a widespread recognition of creativity as and positive contributor to cognition [2], wellbeing [3], and innovation [4, 5] and educators are keen to explore how to foster this with learners. Universities and places of higher education taking note. Embedding creativity in the curriculum of a programme is one approach. But the potential exists for a co-curriculum approach that is also inclusive for staff (and not only academic staff) and the wider community to experiment with a wider open network, and invite participation, and a wider cross-pollination of ideas beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and roles.

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CREATIVITY AND PLAY

Creativity has become subject to renewed interest over the last thirty years. There is strong evidence to suggest that everyone has the potential for creative thought and action [6]. Various myths exist around the topic. Contrary to a widely held and popular belief, one does not have to be an artist, musician, designer, a child, etc. to cultivate the ability to see and think differently. Whilst some assume creativity is only of relevance to the arts and consists merely of uninhibited “self expression”, a contrary view holds that it can be taught, and has a bearing in all domains and problem types ” [7]. Still, many of us hold deep-seated beliefs that we are not creative individuals, nor do we always consider it of consequence to serious academic scholarship.

As a result, people often don’t try to make art or try new things, because of a fear of looking silly, or that it would take too much time, or because it might seem self-indulgent. However, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [8] has observed that social context is relevant, as creativity is not the result of individual action only, but is shaped by the field, domain and the individual collectively. Therefore, openly sharing the process and outputs of how we generate original ideas and actions is worthy of deeper scrutiny. In related literature, play has been long recognized for its role in learning across the entire lifespan [9]. As Danish Professor Miguel Sicart notes, play matters [10], and is something to be taken seriously.

Could cultivating a space where you can be curious, imaginative, have a look, explore possibilities, have fun, make mistakes and interact with others lead to better, more beautiful, more considered work? If so, how could creative thought be encouraged in practical terms on a university campus? In recent years, numerous books have looked at how to prompt or facilitate a creative habit or mindset [5, 11-14]. These methods illustrate how play and creative thinking can help get out of an ideas slump, and spark breakthroughs in one’s work. As such, they formed the basis of this project’s approach.

If there is any sort of stigma attached to creativity, it is difficult for educators to do what it takes to encourage it. Research has suggested that it is essential to provide opportunities to practice, value and appreciate these efforts, and for educators to model these creative behaviours themselves [15, 16]. Therefore, by providing the stimulus,

the tools, resources, and the challenge, the project aimed to embody the values of playing, making and sharing.

THE PROCESS OF CAMPUS CREATE

Background to the idea

The idea behind *Campus Create* originated from Sally McHugh’s first-hand experiences in the Burren College of Art, as part of her PhD study, where key issues in the theory and practice of creative processes were explored. Students were encouraged to explore their own creativity with the hope of impacting upon their own academic and personal projects. The tension between higher level scholars’ identities as engaged in serious research versus frivolous creativeness, was observable. Thus, the potential of a space on campus and within the wider community to make, share and remix, and be creative became ever apparent.

Related projects

The project drew further inspiration from *DS106* [1], which is a digital storytelling open module run by University of Mary Washington, and the work of Jim Groom [17], Alan Levine [18] and the numerous contributors to the *Daily Create* [19]. Other influential approaches in the UK and Ireland, include projects such as the 12 Apps of Christmas [20], aimed at academic staff in higher education, Rudai 23 [21] for librarians, that relied heavily on daily email digests, and social media, to encourage a friendly, enquiring community of educators to share experiences and reflections. The storytelling101 [22] project was also an inspiration in how it guided people to tell a story through character development, story building and open collaboration, on the Instagram social media platform. More recently, the Festival of Creative Learning at the University of Edinburgh [23] represents a variation along the theme of encouraging ideas and play on campus.

THE DESIGN

The idea for *Campus Create* crystallized into a twelve week creative challenge from January – May 2016, and a subsequent week long challenge in March 2017, as part of a campus arts week. It aimed to develop as an open, playful virtual zone to encourage creativity as a ritual, everyday practice on campus.

The primary audience was students and staff, and to a lesser extent the local community, who were encouraged to register to receive direct communications, or view the open materials online and partake. The invitation was extended through printed posters and paper flier disseminated throughout the campus.

Each week had a different central theme around which daily challenges were sent out via email and social media. Over the lifespan of the project, sixty five prompts in total were authored. Each prompt included a weekly theme, a specific quotation relating to the day’s specific prompt, a creative commons image, and links to resources to help in the process (see example prompt in Table 1).

Participants could interpret themes and prompts in whatever way they wished. Examples included provocations to participants to try their hand at drawing, taking photos, making art, writing six word stories, blackout poetry, and more. Each was flexible to be adapted to a preferred medium or personal context. Smartphones were frequently the primary capture device and social media apps became the distribution channel making it easy to share ideas created and respond to others.

Prompt 2	Find a Reflection: Find a reflection in a puddle (or try windows, mirrors or any other shiny surface)
Quotation	“Did you ever wonder if the person in the puddle is real, and you're just a reflection of him?” -Bill Watterson
Resources	Check out a tutorial on how to take a stunning reflective photo on your phone
How to Participate	Use Twitter, Instagram or Facebook @campuscreate your response. Don’t forget to use the hashtag #waterspark. If you are not on social media, find out how to participate, drop it to us, or email us.

Table 1. A sample prompt used [24]

Participants were then encouraged to publish their responses and interpretations openly, using a specific hashtag in their work. Hashtags were used to bring contributions together across the community. In this way, the project aimed to directly link back to the participants work on their own platform of choice (their personal website, blog or social media channel), and aggregate these.

In the second iteration in March 2017, creative prompts were elicited in advance from credited members of the campus community. These aimed to widen the approach by tying in with existing networks of researchers and programmes, including linkages with other higher education institutions in the geographic region.

The playful, open approach aimed to encourage participants to enrich and further develop their creative and digital skills. But if nothing else, it was hoped it might energise participants to practice their creative thinking, and have fun, whilst engaging in documenting and sharing their process with others across the campus.

The technical design

The project was based on a WordPress blog [25], with accompanying Facebook, Instagram, Mailchimp, Snapchat and Twitter accounts. Working across multiple platforms all networked together through a social wall, powered by DialogFeed, which disseminated daily prompts, and aggregated moderated contributions. Storify was also used at the end of each week to create a snapshot archive of contributions.

An important element was the daily email digest, which sent registered participants a reminder of the day's prompt. Another important aspect was the large display on a flatscreen wall outside of library, and the showing of the social wall of contributions across all buildings on campus, on digital displays. In this way, the project was shaped by the participants, and how they appropriated the challenge.



Figure 1. The social wall of creative contributes in the library.

Reflections

From our own play and experimentation at *Campus Create* the project saw the evolution of a community of networked individuals moving their creative practices into the open on campus. An edited summary of the contributions can be seen in Figure 1's video below.



Figure 2. An edited video of campus creates [26] on Vimeo.

The data outlined below provide initial insights into the creative impact, challenges and possibilities that have emerged in our design for everyday, ritual creativity on our campus at NUI Galway. These vignettes show us how the project has supported emergent, more open and collaborative creativity, while highlighting challenges as we endeavor to extend further the impact of the innovation, to mediate and open-up further collaborative, everyday creativity on campus.

EMERGING THEMES

Sparking creativity

Our approach was to develop and reply on prompts to encourage participants to interpret the theme from within their own worldview. Comments from participants illustrate that enjoyment was a major part of their experience:

I am absolutely loving your ideas for campuscreate, it is brilliant to see the interest in it and will certainly grow week on week...I for one am really enjoying it. - Participant 1, 2016

[I am] Really enjoying the creative motivation. Just at the right time of the year too!! – Participant 2, 2016

I am really enjoying the project and haven't painted for 30 years and now love doing this. – Participant 4, 2016

It really helps to engage with the campus in a different way - Participant 5, 2017

Cutting and gluing communication across networks

The project had over 1,322 responses over the period from January 2016 – April 2017. The source of most responses came were via Twitter (77%, N=1,013), followed by Facebook (17%, N=226) and Instagram (N=83) (ref. Figure 2 below).

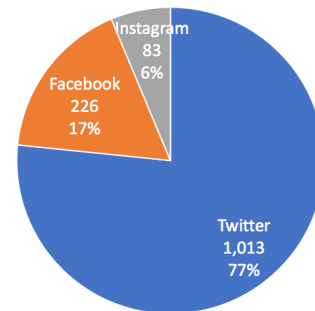


Figure 2. Responses across social media platform

Within this there were forty regular contributors. These comprised mostly of staff, mature students, postgraduates and artists, from across a range of schools and colleges. However, these figures need to be placed in context, as the student and staff population is over 16,000 people, meaning that the overall participation from a minority of active contributors is very low.

Moreover, the curation and moderation of these posts to both the Dialogfeed social wall for display around campus, and to the weekly aggregated Storify was a time-consuming and labour intensive process.

Further insights from Twitter analytics activity reveal that the majority of contributors via this medium were aged between 25 to 34 (43%) and also female (63%) (see Table 2).



Figure 3. A sample of contributions Image: Nathan Quinlan, Hilary Morley, David O'Reilly, Isabella De Luca reproduced with permission

Online Stats	From Jan 2016-April 2017
Website views	Blog Posts: 99 blog posts Views: 3,024 views
Twitter	Tweets: 281 tweets Followers: 402 followers Favorites: 843 Gender: 37% male; 63% female Age: 43% aged between 25 to 34; 24% aged 35 to 44 22% aged 18 to 24 Mentions: 397 users mentioned
Facebook	Likes: 127 likes
Instagram	Own posts: 67 Followers: 70 Contributory posts: 83

Table 2. Participation across platforms

Having conversations in the open

Initiating conversation and maintaining connection emerged as a key theme. We strove to value and appreciate every mention, and contribution, by liking posts and initiating conversation around participation directly, wherever possible. The benefit of this was evident where key contributors became and remained actively involved with the project.

The establishing of a connection to established networks and communities on campus and beyond proved challenging. Several formal programmes with digital media students at masters level did not engage in any meaningful way with the project, despite being repeatedly communicated with around its existence, and invited to participate, directly by their lecturers. Therefore, considering how best to build connections, from the informal and open nature of the project into the formal curriculum merits further investigation.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This project illustrates a case study of making overt an open network on campus of participants with a willingness to make creativity a habit, within and between disciplinary boundaries. At first glance, we made assumptions around how enthusiastically the project would be appropriated, but we found these assumptions to be false. A core group of networked participants became involved on a daily basis. The initiative wasn't adopted by most members of the campus community. However, the enrichment and positive experiences of those who engaged and were willing to openly publish and become part of the conversation were strongly evident.

The authors hope to continue to adapt and grow the work, considering the design sensitivities uncovered. If we want to instill creative habits in a campus community, we need to understand more about the connections and linkages into the formal curriculum, and participants' willingness to share openly. The project helped us gain an understanding that participation in creative rituals is a very human phenomenon- mediated by people as much as technology - and paying due attention to supporting and growing underlying connections between people is critical to its success.

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