

# Building a dangly relationship with creative collaboration

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*In this article I explore my own relationship with, and resistance to, creative collaboration. I hold the intention and hope of enabling others to recognise themselves and look their own obstacles in the eye, for the sake of that 'whoosh' moment when whatever emerges from the process of creative collaboration breaks through, and nothing is quite the same again.*

## Key words

Creative collaboration, resistance, vulnerability, trust, inhibitors, wounded self-concept

## A question left dangling

“So, what you’re going to do is create a piece of wearable art to represent your creative self, using these materials.”

Late morning, Friday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2017. I am frozen in despair, feeling small, incompetent, clumsy and completely and utterly uncreative. I am a participant on the [Advanced Diploma in Leading Creative Collaboration](#) (I guess the clue was in the title) and I feel a complete fraud. Create an image of my Creative Self? I don’t know where to start, or even if I have a creative self. The other participants move (to my mind) confidently and eagerly to the table, which is covered in a glorious array of materials, cardboards, paint guns and other assorted craft materials. There’s even the opportunity to screen print. I’m overwhelmed and still frozen.

The course leader comes over to me and encourages me to make a start. I look at her, feeling like a small child, with tears in my eyes – everyone else knows what they are doing, and I haven’t got a clue. The facilitator says something along the lines of ‘just start and see what happens’. And so, I do start. I pick up materials without any idea of what I’m going to create, and put them together.

I watch as everyone else seems to move with purpose. In the end, I create a dangly article which the co-facilitator enthusiastically suggests I could wear as a dress. She pins it onto me, and her belief in my dangly article transforms it into something which feels slightly creative. I start to feel a little better.





We end the session with a fashion parade where we walk up and down between the participants as if on a catwalk to parade our creative selves with style and pride. I channel my inner jester and do this with a flourish. To my amazement, I am not ridiculed and laughed off the catwalk, but cheered, encouraged and celebrated. It is over. I have survived. I take my article home with me and feel sick every time I look at it. Eventually, I throw it out.



Fake it until you make it!

Maybe it'll look better on?

As a facilitator, I plead 'guilty as charged'. I too have asked participants to express things creatively, perhaps by thinking of a metaphor to capture their development journey or to create a storyboard. I believe in the power of creativity, that through letting images emerge we tap into our subconscious and uncover parts of ourselves that we haven't yet met. And yet, I noticed that when I was asking participants to do that, I felt uncomfortable. At times I was relieved if we didn't have enough time to explore fully. I felt my words were wooden and my instructions were very brief, as if I didn't want to be associated with them.

As a research practitioner, I only facilitate and coach using methods that have worked for me. So, what was getting in my way here? My curiosity about how to be confident and 'me' in this space grew, both intriguing and freezing me at the same time. How could I authentically ask participants to be creative when I recoiled from this very activity myself? My shyness and lack of trust in my relationship with creativity was taking centre stage and blocking my ability to enable creativity (mine and others) to emerge. I felt stuck and wanted to create my own 'whoosh' moment, to let my creativity break through.

So, I followed my curiosity and stepped into exploring my relationship with creativity. What prevented me from embracing my own creativity? What could I do to remove these obstacles so that I could both collaborate with my own creativity and authentically ask others to do the same? So here, I share my thoughts and experience with you, in the hope that you meet yourself in there somewhere, and to encourage you to get up close and personal in your relationship with your own creativity, in whatever form this shows up.

I have realised that the aspect of creativity which scares me, which disconnects me from my sense of who I am, is the unknown. Give me a knitting pattern or a recipe, or even an idea of what you'd like me to draw, and I'll happily step into it. It's the blank page that makes me freeze. This shows up in my work as well – I will make a pre-written event my own, but the pain and angst of designing an event from scratch is immense. I understand that at its base this is about getting it right. Right for others - what is it that I can create that others will approve of? And yet, this narrowness of being and thinking blocks the emergence of what could be.

## Creativity

"something is born, comes into being, something that did not exist before"

(Rollo May, 1994, page 78).

The first book I read which helped me on my way was Rollo May's book "The Courage to Create". Reading this was a revelation. I realised it wasn't just me who struggled with creating something. That actually, this discomfort was to be embraced as a sign of creativity occurring. I also learned to take time, to pace myself and to let creativity emerge, perhaps when I'm out walking, sleeping or even going around the supermarket. 'Don't force the process and embrace the discomfort, you are not alone' would be my headline summary of this book. I sow the seed and let it take root, rather than expecting it to be complete in an hour.

When I'm facilitating, I look for this pain and encourage it. Voicing my experience and welcoming the pain into the room makes it a shared experience, and seems to help the participants. I'll encourage people to move around, to break when they need to, to breathe and trust.

"There is a curiously sharp sense of joy – or perhaps better expressed, a sense of mild ecstasy – that comes when you find the particular form required by your creation. Let us say you have been puzzling about it for days when suddenly you get the insight that unlocks the door – you see how to write that line, what combination of colours is needed in your picture, how to form that theme you may be writing for a class."

(May, *ibid*: 122)

Rollo May's writing also helped me to move forward from the pain of birthing to that place of trust, that moment when everything clicks into place and something new emerges. The job is done. Satisfaction and joy emerge. I know I am finished. Trusting that this moment will arise when it's ready helps my confidence in creating something, and ensures that I keep on making space, rather than narrowing and closing off my creative abilities through the frustration of not delivering.

I recognise that this feeling of being in fellowship with other struggling creators gives me courage. It also helps me build a structure to create. Acknowledging that creativity takes time, I manage my expectations. I do not beat myself up if I've not created an agenda for a teambuilding event in one hour. Instead, if I'm feeling stuck, I'll go for a walk or play with my dogs and see what shifts.



Billie-Jean



Peggy-Sue

I'll play around with ideas when I'm doing other things. I set aside thinking time when I'll sit somewhere and just allow my mind to wander. I accept that what needs to emerge isn't ready to show its face yet, and so I'll purposefully put it to one side and get on with my life. It's those in-the-shower moments when I have the best ideas.

### Spotting and dealing with resistance

"It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write. What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance."

(Steven Pressfield, 2002).

Steven Pressfield's book, 'The War of Art' has also been instrumental in building my relationship with creativity. I love the author's humour, clarity and vulnerability as he shares what gets in his way of creating. My headline takeaway from this book is what he calls his Rule of Thumb:

"The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it." .....

"So, if you're paralyzed with fear, it's a good thing. It shows you what you have to do."

(ibid)

Resistance shows up for me when I'm designing, when I'm drawing, when I'm asking others to create. It's both a physical and mental block. Accepting this resistance and again knowing it's not just me that feels it, helps me look it in the eye and make the choice that is right for me, to take the first step, to just do it. I'm also a spotter of resistance in others and find that observing and voicing this helps others to make different choices as well.

The thing that I am resisting the most is the thing which is the most beneficial for me to do. I use this to plan my day, asking myself: 'So what is it I'm resisting the most today?'. I will distract myself with work rather than going to a gallery or a garden. I will distract myself by working on spreadsheets and tidying up my accounts, rather than creating space to design a leadership challenge.

### **Fear of rejection**

I also understand that I have deep-seated feelings of humiliation and rejection when it comes to creativity. My worst fear is that I will be laughed at, or that I won't fit in. Knowing this, I choose not to create, to keep myself safe – and therefore small, and stagnant. For me, this is the benefit of resistance. Will Schutz (1958), the creator of FIRO theory, speaks about the three dimensions required to build a relationship – inclusion, control and openness. These dimensions are associated with the fears of rejection, humiliation and being ignored, and with the positive feelings of belonging, competence and acceptance. When I think of myself as a creative being, I fall – or used to fall – into the first camp, with rejection and humiliation looming large.

FIRO is a humanistic psychological theory, and so is based on choice. I choose to resist rather than embrace my creativity. FIRO is also based on the belief that self-concept is at the heart of everything we do and everything we be. Schutz would describe my beliefs in my creativity as having a wounded self-concept, and I agree with him. So, bit by bit, I am choosing to include myself in my own creativity, to control when and what I do, to experience the openness and joy of letting emerge what wants to emerge. I notice when I am creating and accepting myself as a creative being. I pay attention to how I block myself, and instead ask myself what choice I want to make? What needs do I have that are not being met, and what is getting in my way? I am choosing to heal my self-concept and trust myself, to heal my inner creator.

Brené Brown in her audiobook 'The Power of Vulnerability' (2013), talks about the impact of shame on being creative, and describes the immense vulnerability we display when we step into our creativity. She talks about a moment very similar to my experience of being frozen and in tears when being asked to create.

Brown expands further on the struggle to create, by describing the negative impact of comparison. She talks about children stopping being imaginative as they progress through school and start to compare themselves to their classmates and start thinking 'I don't fit in, I'm not good enough anymore'. How many of our participants go through this exact emotion when we ask them to draw something, write a poem or act something out?

"To create, to innovate, to share something that hasn't existed before – to do that is to become incredibly vulnerable. "

(Brené Brown, 2013)

On the same creative collaboration course, I was asked to wander round an exhibition taking photos of exhibits which spoke to me of my creativity. I felt awkward doing this but thought I'd give it a go; after all, I wanted to fit in and please people.



Looking at the photos again now though, I can recognise my creative self in there. Throughout all the photos there is a clear sense of colour and structure. There are lots of angles on many of the photos.



Photos were taken at The Whitechapel Gallery, 77-82 Whitechapel High Street, Shadwell, London E1 7QX

There's something reassuring for me in being able to label something, in making the unknown known, or the implicit explicit. I have a sense of awakening my creativity: there I am, that's how I do it, I feel safe, I feel like I belong – to myself.

## Embracing acceptance



For me, building a relationship with creativity is first of all about acceptance. Then it's about walking alongside and giving it a go. It's about accepting and embracing the struggle so that I am comfortable in the struggle and open, rather than alarmed and closed.



### First truth first

Will Schutz has a brilliant concept called 'First truth first'. What is the truth I don't acknowledge, or voice (even to myself) that is getting in my way? What is my first truth about being creative – that I'm scared I'll humiliate myself, that I'm anxious that what I create will not be what you want me to create, that I'll get it wrong? By naming my truth I am able to step into my creativity. When I facilitate, I name my truth about creativity when I ask others to do the same, and I encourage others to name theirs. Name it, get it out of the way to enable what wants to emerge to come through.

### Making choices: keeping a metaphor diary

Will Schutz talks about choices, choosing the life we lead. I realised that when I was facilitating, I was choosing to skip over the creative parts, briefing instructions rather than telling stories. I would also be frozen in plenary – how on earth would I comment on other peoples' creations?

One of the exercises I found particularly difficult to facilitate was asking participants to draw an image which described their development journey. I realised that I didn't easily think in pictures, and found it a challenge to stimulate their thinking to enable their images to emerge. I felt stuck. So, in true practitioner researcher mode, I decided to take on the challenge myself and to keep a metaphor diary. Every day I draw a metaphor to describe my day, my pictures are getting bolder and bigger. I look forward to doing my drawing, rather than resisting it. When I first started I hadn't a clue what to draw, so I began with drawing a smiley face, or a heart, or sun and cloud. Then I began to experiment with structure, which is part of my creative self, so I'd ask myself: if today was a food, which food would it have been (spaghetti bolognese), or I'd draw highlights of my day and then draw an image of the feeling I was left with. I notice now that walking through my day, I'll start to get images in my head of how I might draw what's happening, what I'm experiencing. My confidence in facilitating this exercise is building as well. I now find myself giving examples and enjoying being in conversation with the participants as their images emerge.

## Deepening the bond: embracing the darkness and light

“I have come to believe that creativity is our true nature, that blocks are an unnatural thwarting of a process at once as normal and miraculous as the blossoming of a flower at the end of a slender green stem.”

(Julia Cameron, 2016, page xiii)

To deepen my relationship with creativity, I decided to embark on Julia Cameron's 'The Artist's Way' (2002), which she describes as a 12-week journey to recover creativity. Following this week by week programme, I am meeting different aspects of my creative self, understanding more about what enables blocks me, and learning to take delight in being creative, rather than being scared of it. I am holding my creativity by the hand, saying, 'Come on, take a breath and step forward. I've got this, we can do it'. I'll step into something creative rather than hold back. Going to galleries, drawing, writing poetry, I feel shy, but I'm becoming more comfortable with this new friend. We've met each other, now we are deepening our bond. I am embracing both the darkness and light of creativity, the struggle and the joy, learning to trust my own and other's creativity.

## Implications for my facilitation role

So, what does this mean for me as a facilitator? My 'so what'? is that I don't freeze as much, or draw as many blanks when asked for examples. I am able to join my story with those of the participants when we explore what their creative expression means. I am able to enter into conversation with the participants and what is getting in the way of their creativity, rather than what the output should be. I feel like me rather than a fraud.

What does it mean for me as a human being? I have a sense of exploration, of boldly colouring in my own life. I pay more attention to my surroundings. I hear the birds, I wonder at the sunlight dappling the woods, and my phone is now brimming with photos of things which have caught my attention and made me stop and look, rather than just walking by. I have a greater sense of self-acceptance and confidence in who I am and what is within me. As Brené Brown says:

“unused creativity is not benign, it turns into rage, grief, shame, judgment”.

(Brown, op. cit.)

Will Schutz tells me to make the choice, and the choice I make is to trust and welcome my creative self.

I end with the poem that I wrote on that self-same creative collaboration course about my creative self:

I look out through the door at the creative world.

It's my choice to step out and explore, or not.

Balancing risk against desire,

Expression against conformity

and approval.



Come out,  
walk alongside me others say,  
I'll share with you,  
Together, we'll play.

I step out, I pause, I make my way.  
My footsteps find their path,  
I trust.

I draw a box, I colour it in, I add,  
I squiggle, I swirl, I allow.  
Losing myself  
in what is emerging, I let it be  
– acceptance of it, acceptance of me.

My creative self is messy and structured,  
colourful and real.  
I trust myself,  
and others trust me.  
Creativity enables what will be to be.

Oh, the wisdom of the subconscious. As I re-read these words, I realise that I now believe the words and meet myself in them. I am starting to like myself as a creative person, and enjoy enabling others to build their own relationship with creativity.

“I learned to get out of the way and let that creative force work through me”

(Cameron, 2016, page xiv)

I hope that my journey in getting to know who I am as a creative being encourages you in your own exploration, and I wish you joy in discovering and deepening your own creative force.

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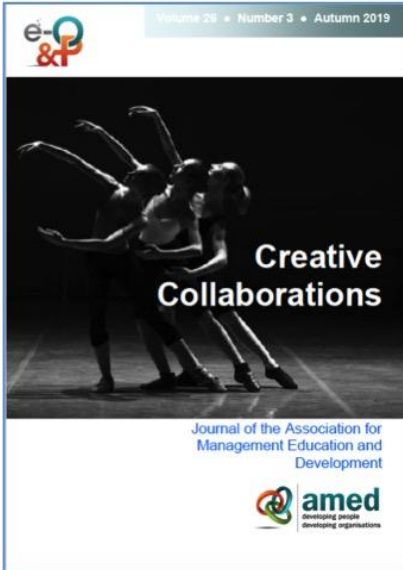
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