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Understanding social creativity amongst event professionals: an action research approach

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Abstract

Live events represent a significant and growing sector of the creative industries but the creative process underlying this sector is little researched in the event management context. Despite the increased consumption of virtual and online media, the live event remains a popular channel of expression for a wide range of creative art forms and commercial messages. Live
events use such messages as ‘props’ or ‘stages’ to produce memorable and emotionally positive moments for audiences.

The creative process behind developing a live event is in itself a live event, involving groups of event professionals working in a social context to conceptualise ideas for their audiences. This research fills the gap for event professionals in the creative industries by seeking to understand the creative process intrinsic to live events.

This paper suggests that social creativity is used to develop live event concepts. The phenomenon of social creativity identified from the existing literature is explored in the context of its application to event professionals. An Action Research approach is recommended to better understand the key antecedents of social creativity and how they can influence event concept development.

Keywords: Event Management, Social Creativity, Creative Industries, Action Research

Introduction

Live events are an essential component of the Creative Industries and represent a substantial contribution to the Creative Economy in Australia and other developed nations. The live event is increasingly popular as a device for creative expression for both the aesthetic and the commercial benefit of business, art and community as audiences continue to seek live ‘experiences’. However, while the commentary on creativity is substantial, the creative process in the event management context is little researched. This paper explores the process intrinsic to developing creative concepts for live events and proposes an approach to research which will help to understand this process more clearly.

Despite technological advances, coupled with decreasing costs (Moore, 1965, Mollick, 2006) and increased usage of virtual and online communications (Coffman & Odlyzko, 2001) the demand for live events as a creative medium remains significant (Petkus, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The live event has grown in popularity with organisations across a variety of disciplines increasingly seeking to build deeper relationships with audiences through live communications, or events (Gronroos, 2004; Payne & Holt, 1999). Such live events are created by using key messages as ‘props’ or ‘stages’, to produce memorable and emotionally positive moments for audiences (Holbrook, 2000; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt 1999).

Live events are developed through a creative process. The creative process behind developing a live event is in itself a live event. Event professionals operate in a socially creative environment to develop concepts for live events. These live events are in turn a social phenomenon experienced by and delivered through groups of people, i.e. the desired creative output defines to some level the creative approach taken. Although creative individuals are often considered to be working alone and in isolation, the social interaction and collaboration between individuals is an essential component of creativity. Social creativity theory suggests that in our modern and connected creative and commercial environments, the Renaissance Scholar, harnessing the (limited) power of the unaided, individual mind is no longer fully relevant (Fischer, 2005).

This paper investigates the question: what influences the social creative processes underlying live events? This fills the gap for event professionals in the creative industries by seeking to understand social creativity as intrinsic to live events in their various forms. An action research
The approach is identified and proposed in order to further understand the creative process used amongst groups of event professionals in the creative industries.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the literature relating to the convergent themes of event management, creativity and in particular the work of George (2007) and Watson (2007) on social creativity is discussed. Second, a research approach to understanding social creativity amongst event professionals is proposed. Third, this Action Research methodology is outlined. Finally, conclusions are drawn with implications for theory and practice, including indications for how the action research approach would be implemented in the field.

Defining Event Professionals

In order to define what is meant by an events professional in the context of social creativity we need to consider not only what constitutes an event professional but also which stage of the event management process we are investigating.

For example a meeting or event is described quite generally as, 'a planned communication encounter between two or more persons for a common purpose'. Hildreth (1990, p. 1). The Australian Convention Liaison Council and the Joint Industry Council’s (1993) definition: 'A general term indicating the coming together of a number of people in one place, to confer or carry out a particular activity. This can be on an ad hoc basis or according to a set pattern’. Rogers (1998, p. 17). Further to these socially oriented definitions we also need to understand more about the protagonists in this environment. Professional event management is a broad discipline, featuring a variety of skill-sets and 'players'. For the purposes of this paper it is important to clearly define what is meant by an 'Event Professional' in order to clearly identify which elements of social creativity are applicable in this context. Although there has been much work in the literature in defining events and event types, less has been written on specific definitions of event professionals, (Van der Wagen, L. & Carlos, B., 2005).

For the purposes of this paper, event professionals are defined as specialists who are commissioned by clients or organizations to conceptualize, design, project manage, deliver and evaluate live events. Such event professionals can be individuals such as freelance specialists, they can be employees of specialist event management companies or they can be members of the ‘in-house’ event teams of larger organizations who have an ongoing need for live events. What unites all such event professionals is the phenomenon of social interaction when scoping the creative concept for a live event. This may take the form of a meeting, creative brainstorm or workshop but the face to face interaction of the various individuals is fundamental to understanding the socially creative process taking place at this stage in the development of the live event.

Defining Social Creativity in the Context of Live Events

In order to understand social creativity in the context of live events more clearly the literature on creativity in organizations written over the last decade and more has been explored through a wide range of articles and texts from multiple disciplines. The disciplines involved include marketing, human resources management, management, organizational communication, psychology, sociology, philosophy and economics. (Sternberg, 1997; Simonton, 1997; Sawyer et al, 2003, John-Steiner, 1997; Amabile, 1996).
From the literature it is evident that there are three main reasons why creativity is important in the context of organizations. The three main reasons are as follows:

1. The creation of value and advantage
2. The creation of competitive differentiation
3. Supporting knowledge to satisfy customers and employees

It is worth explaining each of these reasons here briefly because they have arguably influenced the manner in which creatively led organizations operate both internally and externally and help us to more clearly define social creativity in the context of live events.

Firstly, creativity is essential for organizations as a means of generating relevant and long term value for their various publics (Amabile, 1988; George, 2007; George & Zhou, 2001, 2002) and is increasingly seen as essential for generating sustainable, competitive advantage. (Davila, Epstein & Shelton, 2006; Nijstad & Paulus, 2003). The power of ideas is increasingly leading to thought leadership, setting winning organizations apart from their closest competitors. In a contemporary context, Google and Apple are mainstream and universal examples of organizations which have developed a clear and sustainable competitive advantage through creativity and innovation. In the creative industries is it evident by definition that the ‘capital’ of such industries is focused on creative output and ideas rather than plant and machinery.

Secondly, ideas and workplace innovation are seen as key differentiators in mature economies when competing and emergent markets are taking leadership in more traditional disciplines such as manufacturing expertise, effective use of labor and cost efficiencies. (Amabile, 1996; Lubart, 2001; Miura & Hida, 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). ‘Creative Nations’ and ‘Knowledge or Experience Economies’ are now competing for leadership in innovation, rather than manufacturing.

Finally, maturing markets and organizations are recognizing the need for creative exchange to enhance and develop the collective wealth generated by their employees. This social capital is generated through the transfer and sharing of knowledge which can benefit both the individual and the organization (Lesser, E. 2000). Furthermore, employees themselves in such markets are seeking ‘higher’ motivations for work other than the traditional financial needs (Mintzberg, 1973) and those engaged in the process of creativity feel energized and stimulated (Nayak & Ketteringham, 1986; McDermott & O’Connor, 2002).

Much of the literature on creativity defines this organizational value in terms of ‘outputs’ such as new products, services, procedures or processes (Woodman et al, 1993) and something which people have collectively agreed is novel and useful to the organization (Amabile, 1988, 1996), especially when contextualized to social creativity.

It is worth reiterating that creativity is both wide-ranging and complex, drawing on knowledge from a variety of disciplines containing a myriad of applications, both theoretical and practical. While creativity is complex, the literature falls into three key, broad areas. The three areas are societal creativity, individual creativity and social creativity.

**i) Societal Creativity: Ideas to benefit us all**

Novelty and especially creativity in the pursuit of the generation of useful ideas has become important for maintaining our quality of life. Einstein or Darwin’s initially abstract work has proved to have huge practical significance (Wallace and Gruber, 1989). Individuals and societies are inextricably linked with each contributing to the other’s development and well-being. Our
imaginations work hard to establish links between events and the answers to multi-faceted questions (Smith, 1776). Big C creativity (Gardner, 1993) deals with ‘grander’ ideals in terms of how idea generation can have a profound impact on society such as a medical research breakthrough or discovery (Gruber and Wallace, 1999). There is also the notion that creativity is occurring on a much smaller but widespread scale as people try to solve day-to-day problems and challenges such as a quicker route to work or how to save household water (little c creativity). Creativity in society can also be seen as the process of renewal and replacement: the creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1934) which occurs as radical innovation transforms the old into something new, e.g. the ice box becomes the refrigerator, the cassette walkman the I-pod. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that an emergent ‘creative class’ can positively impact business and communities through workplace innovation, consumption of arts and other cultural activities (Florida, 2002, 2005; Howkins, 2001).

ii) Individual Creativity: The Stoic and Lone Thinker
The predominant focus of the creativity literature is on individual effort as the key driver of creativity. Traditional roots of the study of creativity ‘have focused overwhelmingly on the individual as the main, and often only, contributor to creativity’ (Ford & Gioia 1995 p21). There is further the romantic notion of the ‘lone genius’, (Flam, 1965; Kearney, 1988; Lukes, 1973; Tonelli, 1973), whose creativity is born of their refusal to accept the status quo. The individualistic creator is ‘pitted against the conforming masses’ (Taylor, 1992). The Western approach to individualism romanticizes this perception of the solitary creative process. Rodin’s sculpture ‘The Thinker’ represents a lone and stoic view of creative inquiry in humankind (John-Steiner, 2003). There has been less research conducted on social and group creativity.

iii) Social Creativity: Collaboration, Co-creation and Communication
This relatively new and less-explored area of the literature suggests a social view of creativity in organizations where the interaction of a group under the right conditions will stimulate greater levels of creativity than isolated individuals. Examples include the environmental influences on creative individuals such as social interaction (Madjar, 2005; Perry-Smith, 2006), social networks (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), organizational factors (Amabile, 1988, 1996) and the effect on individuals operating in environments with a multitude of social interactions (Ford, 1996). Adopting a social perspective in teams as well as with individuals may produce creative outcomes (Barlow, 2000; Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997), and larger systems, like organizations, may have environments that engender creative behavior or are creative themselves (Robinson & Stern, 1997). It is clear that there are a series of complex variables at the individual, group and organizational levels with regard to social creativity as it does not sit within any particular process or is delivered by any specific individual. It does not occur at a particular point in time or at a specific place.

This paper offers one perspective on the myriad approaches to defining and understanding creativity, specifically social creativity in event organizations. The approach is to take up the calls from George (2007) and Watson (2007) who have reviewed the social creativity literature extensively. This literature has become the exploratory platform upon which to recommend an action based research strategy to understand more clearly the key influences on social creativity amongst event professionals.

Firstly Watson’s approach is discussed, followed by George. Watson has identified each ‘protagonist’ of social creativity and proposes what kind of creative output is produced through which medium. This is drawn predominantly from the literature on person, process, product and place (Drazin et al, 1999; Simonton, 1988; Taylor, 1988). Initially the person or protagonist who is involved in the creative process is identified. These protagonists are identified by Watson as
individuals (such as freelance event professionals), social units (such as groups of event professionals) and organizations (such as event management specialist companies or in-house event teams). The mode of creativity (i.e. process) is then identified in terms of how the protagonists go about generating creativity as well as the environment in which this creativity takes place such as in a team or a group. Finally the products, or suggested outcomes of the creative process are shown in terms of both individual and social outputs. Due to the multiple meanings of social creativity Watson provides a useful guide through the complexities of the subject area. The key variables identified and explained in terms of creativity execution correspond with the three key areas of creativity detailed in the literature: Societies, Individuals and Social Groups (in this context, event professionals).

While Watson in her paper details a variety of collaborative patterns and the level to which they influence social creativity, she does not identify specific contextual influences. George (2007) provides an additional perspective by exploring in detail the issues of contextual influences on social creativity thus helping us understand more clearly the context in which event professionals are operating. George has identified from the literature 4 key contextual factors as both a potential catalyst for but also a distraction from creativity:

i. Signals of Safety
This refers to the notion that creativity always brings with it ideas which are both useful and not useful (George and Zhou, 2007). There is therefore some element of risk and the level of perceived safety of ideas generation is a determinant of the level of creative contribution.

ii. Creative Prompts
Such prompts can be utilized to foster a culture of creative behaviors in organizations. For example, the creativity requirement of a job role, i.e. how the individual or group sees their role as delivering creativity or pressure to deliver a creative solution against a deadline, which can also be seen as a creativity inhibitor.

iii. Supervision and Leadership
This plays a key role in influencing creativity in that it provides an appropriate work context in which the spectrum of creativity can prosper or stifle. (Shalley et al., 2004) This influence can be attributed to both style of leadership, especially in terms of fostering a sense of trust and justice and also performance measurement and feedback on the part of supervisors or managers (Janssen, 2005).

iv. The Social Network
The network of an individual can impact profoundly on the nature, type and frequency of their creativity, with individual creativity based on the influence of others. (Perry-Smith, 2006). Networks which are highly localized and tightly connected can facilitate creativity to a degree but if the connectedness becomes too high it may be difficult to break out from the collective mindset. (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005).

It must also be stated that the group members themselves play a role in influencing context based on personal communication style and their operation with the team culture. Watson and George provide a stimulating insight and summary of social creativity issues from the literature. However, further investigation in the field is required to place social creativity theory in the context of event professionals.
Proposed Research Approach

The ‘mystery’ of the creative process and how both individuals and groups come to creative ‘moments’ would be difficult to solve. Centuries of academics and practitioners have investigated the phenomenon of creativity in its various guises and within its broad range of environments.

This paper does not assume to propose a solution; rather it presents a simple notion for discussion in the field: that social creativity is an effective form of creativity amongst event professionals, given the unique collaboration, environment and challenges faced by those professionals when called upon to ‘create’. In order to build upon the theoretical framework of social creativity and to evaluate its application in the context of event professionals a next step is required. The theory of social creativity in the context of event professionals as they engage with it practically needs examination.

Action research is proposed as a methodology. Event professionals will themselves become the subjects, rather than the objects of the research approach (Fricke, 2006). In this form, the arena of practical discourse can be entered with a view to engaging in a form of co-operation and democratic dialogue with those in the field (Palshaugen, 2006).

Action Research Defined

Action research seeks to combine ‘practical transformation’ (Huxham & Vangen, 2003, p. 384) with the generation and advancement of knowledge (Ferkins, 2007). Often action research is seen as a device through which theory and practice can work together to stimulate and create change (Gustavsen, 2001).

Action research challenges the notion that the social scientist should remain the ‘objective’ observer of human interactions and should rather be the collaborator with their research subject. (Lewin, 1948). The methodology is in itself collaborative, aiming to understand and potentially solve a problem but also to generate new knowledge in the field (Coghlan and Brannick, 2002). This approach suggests a bridge between researcher and practitioner in order to view the issues with different emphasis from each party. Both groups of ‘knowledge workers’ are able to contribute to both practice and theory in different ways and from different perspectives.

Like creativity there are a myriad of different forms and approaches to action research. Much of the approach taken is dependent on the philosophical stance taken by the researcher and the nature of the subject under investigation (Cassell & Johnson, 2006).

Cardno (2003) cited in Ferkins (2007) noted that such a range of philosophical stances leads to a range of approaches. Such approaches include the use of action research as a tool for personal reflection and learning, as a method for improving upon current practice and development, as a way of creating democratic inclusion and participation amongst the different players involved in the process and also as a device for scholarly investigation and co-operation. In order to define an action research approach in this context, firstly the philosophical stance will be identified in the context of event professionals.

The event professional has been previously defined as originating from a variety of organizational and professional backgrounds. The social nature of the creativity being investigated implies a form of collaboration between the key players. Therefore an approach will be considered based around the following assumptions drawn from the contextual creative influences highlighted by
George (2007) and applied in this instance to event professionals and their organizational environment:

- Event professionals recognize creativity as essential to their job/organizational function
- They recognize that creativity is an organic phenomenon and can be continuously developed and improved upon
- There is risk involved in the creation of new event ideas (i.e. they may not work/may not be adopted)
- The nature of creativity in the events context is often a social one, with groups of people from diverse backgrounds coming together to conceptualize ideas
- Dynamics such as the role of leaders, the role of self and other environmental elements will influence social creativity

Given this context a form of action research which considers inclusion and participation as well as proposing a ‘critical’ approach to exploring current creative practice is recommended. The notion that creativity is a social phenomenon implies that no one individual thinker ‘owns’ the creative process. In the spirit of this democracy a participatory approach is proposed whereby a critique of the status quo and simultaneous emancipation of each player in the process is undertaken (Cassell & Johnson, 2006). This form of action research focuses on critical theory to enable all to take ownership of creativity and stimulate dialogue, development and positive change.

Proposed Approach in the Field

In order to engage in such a participatory dialogue a longitudinal case study is proposed where exploration within a real-life, bounded context (Miles and Huberman, 1994) will support the development and understanding of the research area (Yin, 2003).

This will enable the cycle of discourse, action, intervention and subsequent review and action required to develop a critical approach. It is important to be able to develop ‘reciprocity’ (Lynch, 1999: 57, cited in Cassell & Johnson, 2006) so that each research subject is able to understand their current situation but also make changes to it. This level of empowerment is in line with enabling the development of critical thought from researcher and subject, theory and practice.

The proposed case studies are from two forms of event organization based in Melbourne, Australia:

- An international corporate events organization which also develops creative concepts for the opening/closing ceremonies at mega events such as Olympic Games
- A locally based community festival organization which attracts local and international visitors to Melbourne and the surrounding region (the state of Victoria, comprising a geographical area approximately the size of England)

The rationale behind the choice of organization was based on simple criteria of access and geographical location but also the differing structures within each organization. One acts as a ‘pulsating’ organization flexing in size, depending on seasonality and need, while the other uses an international corporate infrastructure in support of an autonomous business unit at the local level.
The research process will involve working closely with the events teams for each organization in order to frame the existing realities of the social creative process and seek participatory interventions over a timeframe of at least six months. This will enable engagement with a variety of different creative challenges with social groups of event professionals forming with different structures depending on the creative output required. The longitudinal aspect of the research will also enable participation in the 'end to end' process of creation over time rather than the 'soundbites' achievable through focus groups and other forms of research and will further engage the broad range of stakeholders required for the 'critical' and democratic nature of the research approach.

It is proposed that the author acts as practitioner-researcher in the context of this exploration and that an element of reflective practice is included to enable subjects to consider and act upon both current practices and future recommendations — initiated in a collaborative and co-operative environment.

**Conclusion, Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice**

In conclusion this paper provides insight into how social creativity theory can be applied to live events in the creative industries. In investigating the question 'what influences the social creative processes underlying live events', recommendations have been made on a research approach focusing on the practice of event professionals. There is however limitations to the detail of the research approach and more investigation into the practice of action research is required. Furthermore a dialogue between researcher and practitioner should be opened in the spirit of participatory action research to develop and refine the research questions in the context of a joint understanding of what is to be achieved.

The output of this paper has implications for event researchers and practitioners. Firstly, the implications for researchers are that whilst there have been many studies on the nature of creativity and in the last decade a burgeoning literature on the characteristics of group, or social creativity, most of the work on group creativity has been based on desk research (George, 2007, Watson, 2007). There have been no studies to the authors' knowledge which focus specifically on the group creative process in the context of event professionals. Specifically there is no study on the influences behind the creative process of developing live events for the creative industries. There is generally a slender body of knowledge around the exploration of event professionals' creative processes and creativity.

Secondly, the implications for practitioners include developing a greater understanding of the creative process as it applies to the context of live events as a component of the creative industries. Further research will enable event professionals to be more strategic in the development and utilisation of the live event concept as a creative tool to meet new global challenges. The creative process is an essential aspect of event management contributing not only in terms of the effectiveness of the event itself and the motivation of the individuals involved but also to the final live experience of the audience. Finally, the paper proposes a research approach which engages practitioners in the discourse of how social creativity for event professionals can be investigated in a wider event organisational context, enhancing understanding of how to harness group creativity for the conceptualisation of live events.

The research agenda for the events sector calls for more investigation into the ways in which event professionals can manage their processes more effectively as well as enhance collaboration (Harris et al, 2000). Recommended research in the field of social creativity suggests engaging with practitioners to understand more about the influencing factors of such creativity (Watson and
George, 2007). Therefore more detailed research in the field and in close consultation with practitioners is recommended to develop a credible and detailed understanding of the social aspects of creativity amongst events professionals.
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