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Creativity as social: the progress of a promising idea. Interview with Dr. Ronald Purser

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For centuries we have been used to attributing creativity to the individual, traditionally the lone genius and, later on, to each and every individual taken separately. However, in previous decades more and more voices argued for a social conceptualization of creativity, one that would recognize the collaborative efforts that make creativity possible. Among these voices is that of Dr. Ronald Purser who advocated for the study of social creativity especially in organizational contexts and who has generously offered to answer some of our questions on this topic.

Ronald Purser is Professor of Management in the College of Business at San Francisco State University, and an adjunct faculty member and Benedictine University, Fielding Institute, and Colorado Technical University. He is past Division Chair for the Organization Development and Change division of the Academy of Management and has been an active consultant and researcher in both the private and public sector. He has published over sixty refereed journal articles and book chapters on high performance work systems, design of new product development organizations, environmental management, social creativity, and participative strategic planning. In addition, Dr. Purser is co-author and co-editor of five books including 24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society (Stanford University Press, 2007) ,The Search Conference: A Powerful Method for Planning Organizational Change and Community Action (Jossey-Bass, 1996), Social Creativity, Volumes 1 & 2 (Hampton Press, 2000), and The Self-Managing Organization (The Free Press, 1998). His book, The Self Managing Organization, was selected as one of the Top Ten Management Books for 1998 by the Management General mega-website. His research has been featured in such places as Fortune, The Washington Post, and Training magazines. His guest editorial article, "Shallow versus Deep Organization Development and Environmental Sustainability" appeared in the Journal of Organizational Change

Management won the 1995 Best Paper Literati Club Awards for Excellence. His new book, Creativity in Organizations, will be published by SAGE Publishing in 2009.

EJOP: Since the `80s there has been an increased interest in the social dimension of creativity synchronized with a consistent criticism of the `lone genius myth'. You and Dr. Montuori have consistently engaged in deconstructing this myth. How would you appreciate the progress of social creativity as a field over these last decades?

Ronald Purser: Our article "Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth," appeared in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 1995. Shortly after it was published in that journal, a number of scholars were quite critical of our call for a social understanding of creativity. Some responded with accusations that we were minimizing the role of individual—which is not at all what we were saying. We simply were trying to show how Western culture, since the early 17th century was progressively emulating and propagating a cultural myth of creativity. Creativity was mythologized as coming from the gifted and lone genius, who rebelled against the masses, often depicted as somewhat deranged or odd, and having emerged without having any need for social interactions, hard work, or discipline study of their field. Unfortunately, our critique fell on deaf ears until perhaps the early 90's. Then we begin to see a growing recognition that innovation in the private sector requires greater degrees of collaboration. You begin to see a lot of talk about cross-disciplinary and cross-functional teams, and then, Robert Reich publishes a seminal article in the *Harvard Business Review* called "Entrepreneurship Reconsidered: The Team As Hero."

In 2000, we published a two volume edited series called, *Social Creativity* (Hampton Press). At that time we looked around and found a handful of people who were thinking along the same lines as us, and we published those books to try to shift the field more in this direction. Many of our colleagues at this time--like Teresa Amabile (now at Harvard), Keith Sawyer, Mihaly Cszentmihalyi, James Olgivy, and Richard Woodman were in simpatico with us—and we were happy to see their contributions.

In the last five years, I have seen a dramatic shift to really focusing on the importance of social creativity. In the management literature, we now see articles explicitly examining team creativity, the role of team processes, and so on. Also, since the mid-90's, we saw a surge of interest in such concepts as improvisation, emergence and lots of writings on the jazz ensemble as a metaphor. These all seemed to be pointing to a new perspective on creativity that was based much more on a social and an interactionist view. Keith Sawyer's recent books, such as *Group Genius*, along with others like Warren Bennis' *Organizing Genius*—helped to

get these ideas out into society. It is probably no coincidence that the growing interest in sustainability, the "greening of business," has been happening in parallel to the recognition that creativity actually occurs within a context, and that context actually has a major influence on whether creativity can be sustained over time. The industrial paradigm grew out of the modernist view that organizations were simply machines, based on an economic model of human behaviour. We see now that such a view is not sustainable, given its horrific impact on the natural environment. In this sense, the modernist paradigm of creativity has also run its course. The creativity of lone geniuses working alone in isolation simply is not sustainable in a network society and in an environment that is increasingly interdependent.

EJOP: One of your main interests has been applying social creativity to the field of organisations. After co-editing the second volume of 'Social Creativity' in 2000, looking especially at organisational settings, you are about to publish a new book, 'Creativity in Organisations'. Which would you say are the main changes in this field over the past 9 years?

Ronald Purser: I think much of what I said above tracks some of this, but there are other factors at works as well. One, is that we are rapidly shifting to a creative economy. A lot has been written on this, so I won't go into it, but essentially there are massive and fundamental structural changes happening in the global economy. Many jobs that we never thought could be outsourced—like those in engineering and software development—are now rapidly being lost to countries like India, Russia and Eastern European countries. We have already lost manufacturing, and it is not coming back—no matter how many bail-outs are given out by Washington. I think a lot of senior managers are waking up to the fact that true competitive advantage will be the ability to create and innovate. That requires a whole new mindset, as Daniel Pink might say. The skills and competencies for the 21st century appear similar to those of a good jazz ensemble player. Such abilities as the ability to collaborate, cooperate—yet also take initiative, risk and lead; to be able to listen, work with conflict and differences, and display empathy. The ability to be provocative, bold and original—yet being cognizant of the context and schooled in the discipline of one's field. All these competencies are essential to improvisation and social creativity.

Also, the role of paradox is now becoming much more mainstream. The whole notion of working with paradox used to seem extremely academic and tucked away in obscure academic journals and overlooked books. But if we are to really understand the nature of creativity in organizational or social settings—we also need

to think differently—we need to learn how to embrace paradoxical ideas. If you go back even to the early work on creativity by Frank Barron—who did groundbreaking work at UC Berkeley's Institute of Personality Assessment Research in the late 1950's and 1960's—you will find eminently creative persons were found to be a bundle of contradictions. The creative person was described in paradoxical terms—open, yet closed; flexible but also stubborn; complex, but also valued elegant simplicity; sicker mentally, yet also more sane than the average person. Now we see that creative organizations also appear as being able to manage polarities effectively. This is also pointing to the emergence of a new logic, perhaps a higher level of cognitive complexity. Albert Low calls it a "logic of ambiguity," Edgar Morin refers to as "complex thinking," and Roger Martin uses the term "integrative thinking." That the United States elected President Obama perhaps signals that the shift to postmodern forms of leadership is now legitimate. We see here an executive capacity that recognizes the complexities and ambiguities of systemic issues, and can tolerate tensions rather than try to deny or negate them.

EJOP: There has always been a debate on whether individuals are more creative than groups or not. From both your theoretical position and practical experience as a consultant and researcher, what would be your answer in this debate?

Ronald Purser: Yes and no. You see, the very posing of your question in these terms reveals a classical logic at work, and "either/or" way of perceiving situations that would like you to pick sides...are either individuals or groups more creative? The reason I answered yes and no is that it all depends on the context. If you are conducting a laboratory study of idea generation, we all know that individuals working alone as compared to "brainstorming" groups—will outperform groups. We have no way of knowing how good those ideas really are of course, or whether they would have real value or utility. Most creativity researchers seem to agree that creativity is not merely having a bright idea—but also a very good idea, one that can have a significant impact on society—and that usually translates as having utility or value. Now for the artist, that may be shock value. We all know that creative ideas are not necessarily welcomed with open arms. The point I am trying to make is we have to be somewhat careful when we ask a question of this sort. I am sure we all know of some individuals who may consider themselves as creative because they are never short on ideas, but they never have actually implemented their ideas or turned them into real products that have value.

While I believe every human being has the potential to actualize their innate creativity, I don't equate that with the view that all individuals are equally creative.

We know from the work done on eminently creative individuals that the key personality traits, personal characteristics and dispositions—the profile of the creative person—is very different than the average population. So there is no denying the fact that some individuals are much more creative as compared to the normal population. The problem is when we make widespread cultural assumptions that creativity then must only be reserved for these few, unusual, and perhaps elite individuals—the lone geniuses. When that assumption is operating, we don't expect to see creativity in groups, nor do we bother to study it at that level. In fact, the attitude is that groups (or teams) just get in the way of the genius.

We know, however, that there are many examples of groups, teams, or partnerships that have been exceptionally creative. In fact, creativity in this case is the product of such social interactions. This is why we see so much interest in studying examples from the performance arts—such as jazz ensembles, improvisational theatre groups, movie productions, and so on. On the other hand, we have all been in groups that were antithetical to creativity. Boring and useless meetings, committees that go nowhere, or even product development teams that simply don't amount to anything.

We need a methodological and epistemological perspective that can help us to see that creativity is not restricted to atomistic individuals, nor is it merely sociological. For example, let's say that a bright person is tested using all the sophisticated assessment techniques for measuring "giftedness" and creativity, similar to what was used at UC, Berkeley's IPAR. Let's imagine that this exceptionally creative individual is dropped into a company whose corporate culture is conservative, risk-averse, and punitive of employees who make mistakes. Group meetings are facilitated poorly, dissent is not tolerated, and authoritarian leadership is in full force. In such a cultural context, it is highly unlikely we are going to see much creative fireworks from our individual bright person. And certainly groups in this company will not even register on the creativity map. Now let's say we take an average person, who doesn't score as exceptional on the same battery of creativity assessments—and we drop this individual into an organization that is buzzing with freewheeling groups, empowered to experiment, play and test out new ideas and products. Suddenly this average person seems to feel and think more creatively. And this person does so, not alone, but with other individuals in a group that is synergistic and generative. In addition, this freewheeling group also feels supported by the larger cultural context. I would venture to say, that in such a hypothetically creative group, individuality is valued as much as team cohesion. That is, what we would see is an unequivocal respect for individuality and idiosyncratic self-expression—at the same time—a loyalty and commitment to enriching the group as a whole. This is very different than the

simplistic conceptions of teams and team work that has been prevalent in companies over the last several decades.

If we subscribe to the view that individuals are more creative than groups, then we should expect that by assembling an "all star" team of exceptionally creative individuals—that we should expect to produce a "supra-creative team". But this is not necessarily the case when the product of a group is dependent on emergent properties. In other words, creativity in groups is not a simple additive function. Forming a team with exceptional all stars is no guarantee that the group as a whole will be creative. It is not just the individual talents of team members that accounts for group creativity, but the quality of interactions among them. David Harrington noticed this in his study of how the personal computer was created, in what he termed value-enhancing interactions. When it comes to group creativity, emergent properties becomes a critical variable.

So when you ask, is it either individuals or groups... you also have to ask what sort of groups? Groups that suppress dissent and conflict? Groups that cannot effectively manage the polarities or tensions between individualism and collectivism, individuality and group cohesion? If you mean these sort of static groups, then I would place my bets on individuals. If you mean dynamic groups that can manage these polarities, I would say both—because dynamic groups often create products that individuals alone never would have created (like the songs of Lennon and McCartney, or Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak's Apple Computer, or the Miles Davis group that produced the album, Kind of Blue)—in this case, the group wins out. Moreover, individuals that have been part of such dynamic group experiences then later venture out on their own, resulting in a second wave of creative production. It is as if these dynamic groups spawn individuals to even greater heights of creative performance.

EJOP: Considering the notion of 'methodological reductionism' you and Dr. Montuori have used, how should researchers interested in social creativity design their studies to avoid falling in this trap?

Ronald Purser: I think it comes down to trying to capture the interdependencies within the context of the study. Essentially it means a frame of reference that can account for multidimensionality of complementary relations, opposing tendencies, dualities or polarities. Rather than trying to measure or capture one side of a polarity—which amounts to a form of reductionism—the research should try to observe, describe and measure emergent properties, or mutual reinforcing

interactions between variables—rather than just the variables isolated from their context. This presents challenges, of course, as traditional analytical tools won't work. Basically, you have to ask, how can I study the behaviour of the whole, rather than simply the behaviour of the parts.

EJOP: You also have a profound interest in issues related to time and temporality in today's world. In fact, your most recent co-edited book which Stanford University published, "24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society" addresses these issues. How are creativity processes taking place in the '24/7' society?

Ronald Purser: This is a very interesting question. Certainly it is obvious that the Internet revolution, cell phones and information communication technologies have created a networked society, where space and time have radically been transformed. The whole movement towards social networking and Web 2.0 has, for example, made it possible for grass roots movements to explode. Even Obama's political campaign depended on this capacity of the web to organize at the local level. Information technologies are making it easy for people to self-organize into groups and networks, which are not confined or limited by traditional organizational hierarchies and authoritarian leadership. We now see teenagers developing applications for the Apple iPhone and becoming wealthy overnight. In some ways, the conditions for social creativity are easier to foster. On the other hand, we have counter-forces at work, large corporate conglomerates that would like to control what is now a free public commons—into a commercial space owned and operated by private interests. The legal structure—such as the current heavy-handed copyright laws, were based on protecting the individual creator--are also being wielded to disenfranchise ordinary people (in many cases teenagers) from sharing and mixing ideas to reproduce something new.

I think social networking exposes what actually has been happening throughout history—but which we have tended to ignore. We have romanticized and glorified the single individual creator, and pretended that such individuals created from a blank slate, immune to social and historical influences. Social networking is like a technological peep hole into the creative process—except that it takes place over the web—at least initially. More importantly, social networking thrives on collaboration and sharing—the same sort of processes that we see occurring in creative groups. Just look at such recent companies as Google, Youtube, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, and the old hat eBay; they all depend on the idea that the community adds value. The network society is not just a technological change but also a shift in zeitgeist. It is almost as if an isolated "lone genius" type of creativity is misplaced in social networks—appearing as aberrant and presumptuous.

EJOP: Continuing on the topic of time, one that has been largely discussed in relation to theories of organisational change, would you see the idea of time (maybe the notion of 'flow time') introduced in creativity theories and if so how?

Ronald Purser: I think the idea of "flow time" is already is beginning to emerge. Albert Low, a thinker that I really admire, has a concept which he calls "dynamic unity," which , to me, is equivalent to "flow time." Think of a musical composition, perhaps a symphonic piece. Why do we enjoy and marvel at Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? A musical composition or even an improvised jazz tune are expressions of dynamic unity. Unity is not static, it's dynamic. When we experience dynamic unity through great music, or some other artistic performance, something in us resonates—art in this sense has a healing function. We seek unity—but it can never be attained once and for all in some sort of static state outside of time and space. Instead, dynamic unity is a lived experience. In Zen Buddhism, we would say it is coming to awakening--that ordinary mind is the way. This may sound a little too spiritual for some people, but flow-time could be understood as a human drive for integration—or being fully at one with our experience. But here is the crux—that oneness is dynamic—and full of contradictions. It is absorptive and fully accommodating of the entire context—all seeming opposites harmonize—yielding this sense of flow which, on a temporal level, is a timeless quality. Of course, our colleague Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was a pioneer in this area way before us.

EJOP: Finally, a question of great interest for everyone, from researchers and managers to lay people: how can we cultivate the benefits of social creativity in our daily life?

Ronald Purser: I like your use of the word "cultivate" because that is what it is about. I like using the analogy of a garden or ecosystem—social creativity is really about developing and sustaining a healthy ecosystem. How do we do that? We have to cultivate our garden—in this case, our social networks, communities, and the environments we live and work in on a daily basis. We also need to tend to our own internal garden—our own psyche—which is also a network of selves. Even good old Freud saw that that human psyche was not a unity—although I disagree with much of his theories. Given that creative individuals have a greater capacity for absorbing and utilizing contradictory energies and tendencies, we could view this as an enhancement of conscious awareness. A step in this direction is to stop viewing the human being as a simple unity—as a single and unchanging self. Accepting and being open to the inner complexity of one's own psyche allows for greater

openness. And greater openness allows for more complexity. Once we are more comfortable with the notion that we are a multiplicity of selves—we can cultivate our awareness of these selves. In other words, we can strengthen our capacity for conscious awareness by learning to separate or dis-identify with the various parts of ourselves. This is the process of cultivation of our inner garden. We become the "Master Gardener," rather than identifying with any particular plant, flower, tree or weed. Once we make this step, the whole notion of personal identity becomes open to further questioning. We begin to see that our sense of individuality is dynamic and relational in nature—that the stories we tell about who we are as individuals is not the whole truth. We also see that personal identity is contingent on our history, our changing contexts, and our actions.

When we see that is true for ourselves, we also see that it is true for others as well. Creativity, as the late Frank Barron pointed out, is very much aligned with psychological freedom and health. Our quest may be for a sense of psychological freedom, but that freedom always will be found within the context of a social and natural environment. It is similar to the practice of Zen. The student of Zen may be seeking enlightenment, but awakening will only be found in the here and now, in one's everyday life.

This raises the question of moral creativity. I don't think we can sustain conceptions or forms of creativity that ignore social and environmental contexts. Take an obvious example—nuclear warheads. Was the work of the scientists on the Manhattan project creative? The products of these scientists was the atom bomb, designed to obliterate life as we know it on this planet. It is ironic that the government agency at the time in the United States—the Office of Strategic Services (now known as the CIA)—funded research to identify the most creative scientists for the Manhattan project and other Cold War military projects. This is an extreme example, but we have many more "normal" cases that call into question our collective judgments of creative products. The point I am trying to make is that social creativity goes hand in hand with the concept of sustainability. As Prof. Montuori has recently suggested, we can no longer sustain a modernist view of creativity that ignores social and environmental contexts. We have done so since the Industrial Revolution and now we have the climate change crisis and global warming—among other global problems.

So, to come back to your question, we have to think and act in ways that sustains our own creativity, and also use our creativity in ways that sustains our social and natural environment. I can't tell you what it would like for you—that is a process everyone has to discover and work out themselves.