

Investigating creativity in the production of Australian children's picture books: A foundation for future research

Chloe Killen

One of the fundamental questions in the study of communication is what happens during the creation of a message? (Cobley 1). This paper will investigate a recently developed perspective of creativity in a literary context by determining how texts are produced within the various structures of children's literature. From an analysis of the literature on creativity research over the last 60 years, this paper argues that the best approach to the examination of creativity is through a confluence approach rather than "unidisciplinary approaches" (Sternberg 12) which have traditionally been privileged in relation to understandings of creativity. Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu's notions of cultural production this paper will investigate how contemporary Australian picture book authors operate. The following case study of five authors of Australian children's literature and their relationship to the notions of domain, field, habitus, agency and structure will show that creative producers operate within a recursive system where social, cultural and individual contexts shape one another.

Keywords

Creativity, Csikszentmihalyi, systems model, Bourdieu, cultural production

[1] Literature as a general concept originated around the 1800s with the rise in Romanticism as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism. With advances in printing technology and the gradual spread of state education, literature became more widely available with everyone, including children, taught to read to develop the culture of literacy. Eventually children were recognised as a distinct marketable audience and picture books as a specific genre. Since this time, the relationship between the development and production of children's literature, and the social construction of childhood have been entwined. Karin Lesnick-Oberstein maintains "the two constituent terms - children and literature - within the label children's literature cannot be separated and traced back to original independent meanings" (4). As such, discussions surrounding the notion of childhood and "literature for children" (Winch et al. 394) often intersect and overlap.

[2] Representations of childhood are disseminated through society by means of media, photographs, advertisements, products, film and television, and significantly, children's literature. Originally thought to refer to a biological period of time, childhood, as "one of our most culturally potent signifiers" (Jenkins 15), is more a theoretical conception or social construct than an absolute fact. Instead, it is argued that childhood as a concept is created, encouraged, maintained and partially determined by adult authority figures. Jacqueline Rose suggests that, "children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book...in order to secure the child who is outside the book" (2). As such, through the communication of messages within children's literature, children are influenced and encouraged into reproducing and disseminating ideological representations of childhood.

[3] Recently, there has been much debate around the concept of children's literature, as can be seen in the work of Peter Hunt, but currently children's literature refers to books sought out and enjoyed by children, or books

considered appropriate for children by people in positions of authority such as parents, teachers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, award committees and so on. Many scholars now contend that children's books must cater to two different markets – children and the adults who are reading to the children (Hunt, "Children's Literature" 1–13; Hollingdale 248–258; Chambers 250–275). It is because of this variance in audience that the genre of children's literature is difficult to define.

[4] Similarly the definition of Australian is problematic as it "moves according to current debates and changing reading, teaching and research patterns" ("Australian Children's Literature: Scope"). A detailed explanation can be found at the *Australian Literature Resource*. However, for the purposes of this paper picture books are considered a subgenre of children's literature and Australian children's picture books are considered to be those that have been specifically designed with a child audience in mind (Winch et al. 393) that reflect and identify as Australian.

[5] Creativity is another term with a complicated history. Commonsense beliefs surrounding creativity consider it as mysterious and beyond simple explanation (Bailin 109) and avoid attempts to study what creativity is, how it comes into being and what happens when it does. Two of the most widespread and popular beliefs surrounding creativity are the inspirational and the romantic views (Boden 14–15). The inspirational view considers creativity the product of divine insight and has long been ingrained in the western Greco–Roman Judeo–Christian intellectual tradition (Lubart 341). Individuals are thought to produce ideas in and out of nothing. This belief remains prevalent with many creators claiming they are a vessel through which enlightenment was channeled, either by their Muse or "by power divine" (Plato qtd. in Boden 14). The romantic view of creativity, on the other hand, considers the individual as the sole site of creative conception, where

“talent is innate, and a gift that can be squandered but cannot be acquired – or taught” (Boden 15). This Kantian view, supposes creativity is the result of genetic or biological traits and “assumes that truly creative acts involve extraordinary individuals carrying out extraordinary thought processes” (Weisberg qtd. in Sternberg 148). The romantic view prevails in tales of genius: the obsessed and slightly disturbed starving artist in the garret “who channels his near-pathology into a socially permissible path” (Zolberg 110). These myths have persisted throughout history simply because they are “believed by many to be literally true. But they are rarely critically examined” (Boden 14).

[6] With the focus firmly on the individual, popular research on creativity concentrated on biological and psychological attempts to isolate particular traits “that ‘creative’ individuals might possess in greater quantity than others” (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 4). Sigmund Freud contemplated the relationship between conscious and unconscious drives to explore a link between genius and insanity (“Implications of a Systems Perspective” 331). Similarly, Cesare Lombroso considered physical and behavioural traits as indications of genius (79–86). J.P Guilford’s 1950 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner 4) solidified a psychological approach to investigations of creativity. Edward de Bono considered right brain/left brain duality with his lateral thinking models, and Colin Martindale provides a summary of the biological base of creativity (137–152). However, the scope of these psychologically reductionist (Simonton 304) approaches is too narrow and no longer supported by the current research (Hellige 170–178; Pope 115; Hennessey and Amabile 569–598).

[7] Perspectives began to change with the rise of Post-structuralism and the suggestion that too much was being attributed to individual creators. Roland

Barthes symbolically called for the death of the author (142–153), highlighting the importance of the relationship between the reader and the text. While Michel Foucault elaborated the role of the author–function (141–160) to concede that individuals were only one component of the machinery of cultural production (Adorno and Horkheimer 94–136). These sociological theories further considered art as a collective activity (Becker 1–39) and a product of the social (Wolff 9–25). Although these approaches identified the importance of social and cultural context, they are just as flawed as individual approaches as they view “creativity as an exclusively societal–level event” (Simonton 304).

[8] Instead current research advocates a confluence approach to creativity that acknowledges the importance of not just the individual, but their social and cultural contexts as well. Csikszentmihalyi explains that to understand creativity “we need to abandon the Ptolemaic view of creativity, in which the person is at the centre of everything, for a more Copernican model in which the person is part of a system of mutual influences and information” (“Society, Culture and Person” 336). These confluence models provide suitable mechanisms to bridge the “ideological divide between rationality and intuition” (Negus and Pickering 18) and have been addressed in the work of scholars such as Amabile; Hennessey and Amabile; Simonton; Weisberg; Wallas; Sternberg and Lubart; Dacey and Lennon; Sawyer; Negus and Pickering; Bourdieu; and Csikszentmihalyi.

[9] Based on the accumulated research into creativity over the last sixty years, confluence approaches provide the most comprehensive explanation of creativity. Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity in conjunction with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production are the most appropriate theoretical positions from which to examine creativity in the production of contemporary Australian children’s picture books. The two theories similarly

suggest that multiple components interact to “jointly determine the occurrence of a creative idea, object or action” (Csikszentmihalyi, “Society, Culture and Person” 329). According to Csikszentmihalyi it is possible to investigate moments within the creative process by examining “the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the domain, and a field of experts who recognise and validate the innovation” (“Creativity” 6). Bourdieu’s notion of cultural production similarly considers the interplay between the concepts of cultural capital, the field, the field of works and an individual’s habitus as crucial to creativity. His investigation also considered the relationship between agency and structure as the individual’s capacity to understand and control their own actions, while existing and operating within embedded institutions or cultural norms such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs and so on. According to Bourdieu it was through the negotiation of this relationship that practice and therefore creative production was possible.

[10] Considering these rational approaches we can come to define creativity as “a productive activity whereby objects, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen to be a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting” (McIntyre 1). To situate this within the arena of contemporary Australian children’s picture books, it can be seen that creativity is an activity in which an author writes by drawing upon existing knowledge in order to produce texts that are different to those previously published; the product is then presented to the relevant field for validation and, if appropriate, is accepted into the established domain of Australian children’s picture books.

Methodology

[11] This research was conducted using a case study of five contemporary Australian authors. Robert Yin suggests that social research is the action of generating facts, opinions and insights to discover patterns and meaning. A case study is the most appropriate methodology for this research as it “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 13). Additionally, Bryman suggests “qualitative research tends to view social life in terms of processes” (281). Therefore as Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production also investigate creativity as a process embedded within a social and cultural setting, the examination of the way authors operate within the field and domain of contemporary Australian children’s picture books almost compels a case study approach.

[12] According to Schramm “the essence of a case study . . . is that it tries to illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (qtd. in Yin 23). As the focus of this research is to illuminate these decisions made by producers of contemporary Australian children’s picture books, a case study with a foundation in constructionism is almost necessary. Constructionism concedes that while there are real phenomena we can engage with, all meaning is negotiated by the individual’s relationship with said phenomena. Michael Crotty suggests that “meaning is not discovered but constructed” (8) and the “subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning” (9). This approach encourages in-depth investigation into the relationship between phenomena and “social actors” (Bryman and Bell 22) to examine how individuals operate within and negotiate their way through a socially and culturally constructed environment.

[13] The five authors in this case study were selected from the Children's Book Council of Australia's (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award list as a representation of the population of Australian children's picture book authors. The study was limited to those authors who have either won, been honoured or shortlisted on the CBCA award list since 1990. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and analysed in conjunction with and supported by secondary sources of data such as previously published articles about the authors, the material they produced and observation at literary festivals. No statistical analysis was used in this qualitative study. Rather, a grounded theory approach was undertaken to uncover patterns as "pattern seeing must be a consequence of knowing what you are looking for" (Lull qtd. in Inglis 143). This meant data was analysed as it was collected to find relevant information relating to the theoretical perspectives and establish logical chains of evidence. The grounded theory comparison of the empirical pattern was then compared with the predicted one to confirm the original hypothesis and achieve validity under the systematic case study protocol.

[14] It must be acknowledged that as with all research methodologies, there are limitations (Priest 31) to a case study approach as it is impossible to "study everyone everywhere doing everything" (Miles and Huberman 27). This case study was conducted using a convenience sample (Lull 19) and as Hsia has argued any sample, regardless of how it is drawn, contains errors, "because it represents the population but is not the population" (115). Hammersley and Atkinson claim, "we are part of the social world we study. This is not a matter of methodological commitment, it is an existential fact" (15).

[15] There are several advantages to the use of a case study as a research methodology. The investigative nature of case studies is “significant because they illuminate in detail larger [external] forces” (Marshall and Rossman 11), in a real life context that are often difficult to quantify or explore through other methodologies. The use of a case study for this research allowed a unique investigation of personal opinion, private practice, social constraints and revealed issues participants had considered but never vocalised before (French). Of particular importance are issues surrounding researcher objectivity, which were relevant to this study. For example, as the participants were professional storytellers, at times they employed particular narrative techniques, such as metaphorical language and referring to themselves in the second person, in their interviews that required deciphering. The participants were answering direct questions about themselves, but it was necessary for the researcher, as a participant in the conversation, to make that connection. It should be argued at this point that, “the social and physical setting...and internalised notions of norms, traditions, roles, and values are crucial aspects of the environment” (Marshall and Rossman 57). In relation to this research it was essential that the study “be conducted in the setting where all this complexity operates” (Marshall and Rossman 57).

Results

[16] By applying Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity and Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production to the production of contemporary Australian children’s picture books, this research explores the idea that a necessary set of elements shape the framework for creativity. Csikszentmihalyi considers creativity to be the result of the relationship between three “dynamic links of circular causality” (“Society, Culture and Person” 329): the domain, the field and the individual. Similarly Bourdieu

considers each element: cultural capital, the field, and the field of works as equally important and necessary to produce cultural products. Combining these two approaches we can understand how authors of Australian children's picture books engage in a systematic approach to creativity. Through the acquisition of and engagement with a domain of knowledge, and interaction with a larger social structure or field, individual authors are able to negotiate their agency to produce novelty.

[17] Although the starting point is "purely arbitrary" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, Culture and Person" 329) the domain, a unique cultural experience, is perhaps the most tangible proof that creativity exists. Knowledge is transmitted through cultural symbols to create domains of knowledge that are "made up of its own symbolic elements, its own rules, and generally has its own system of notation" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Creativity" 37). The most important way the domain can aid in the production of creativity is through the domain's "clarity of structure" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Creativity" 38). A clear structure reveals the operational construction of a domain making it more accessible to individuals who can easily assess where or how their work might fit. Bourdieu's concept of the field of works is similarly important. The field of works can be defined as "all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation" (Harker, Mahar, and Wilkes 1). According to author Shaun Tan, an individual must "understand broader cultural contexts and movements" and gain knowledge relating to the operational construction of their chosen cultural field so that they can access and operate within it. From this perspective it is only possible to make a "creative contribution" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Creativity" 40) when one has acquired enough knowledge of the relevant domain.

[18] Domain acquisition is a constantly occurring phenomenon, and in this case is the immersion “in the domain of literature” (Sawyer 210). It is a product of our “beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes” (Webb, Schirato, and Danaher 38) and in relation to Australian children’s picture books it represents “everything that we as adults think and feel about ourselves, both as individuals and as societies” (Dolin 7). The process of acquiring knowledge is both conscious and unconscious and often begins before we are aware of it.

[19] This is related in a sense to Bourdieu’s notions of cultural capital and habitus. Cultural capital is a “form of knowledge, an internalised code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts” (Johnson qtd. in Bourdieu 7). An individual must develop an understanding of the knowledge, codes and manner of thought unique to their cultural domain before they can “be accepted as a legitimate player” (Johnson qtd. in Bourdieu 8) and make judgements about the creative work being produced. This cultural competence is acquired through a long process of inculcation or engagement with the knowledge until the individual develops a feel for how it operates. According to Bourdieu, this “practical sense” is habitus (Johnson qtd. in Bourdieu 5). Habitus accounts for a person’s cultural preferences and taste, their desires, ideas and narratives produced individually and as a shared cultural experience. While habitus is also cognitive, the embodiment of habitus is called hexis and refers to the signification of how social actors carry themselves. Hexis is revealed in ways of using, moving, holding and presenting the body including walking, gesturing, eating, sitting, physical appearances, patterns of speech and so on. For Bourdieu, the body assimilates personal and cultural history to produce and reproduce history and structures in ways generally unconscious to individual social agents.

[20] In this case study all of the authors were born in Australia and attended compulsory schooling from an early age. They were all taught to speak, read, understand and deconstruct language, and even consider the Australian identity through both formal education and indirect experiential learning. More than half of the participants pursued further education and had been involved in the domain of children's literature prior to their writing careers as teachers, students, parents, or employees in the field of publishing. Toby Riddle explained that he spent a lot of time "soaking up all the information [he] could about books and publishing". Through years of knowledge accumulation, authors of contemporary Australian children's literature develop a form of useful tacit knowledge (Schon 49).

[21] In addition to the development of tacit knowledge, all the participants agreed that they sometimes actively pursued domain acquisition through research. Jackie French claimed that "there is probably no dividing line between my life and the research . . . I'm what you would call a mental omnivore. I spend most of my life in unconscious preparation for what I am going to write". Gary Crew also noted the intricate relationship he has with research: "I'm an Associate Professor now so it's part of my life . . . I just like research so my ideas usually come from a source". By knowing and understanding the domain of children's literature, an author can identify a specific area to focus on, they can sharpen their knowledge and skills in this particular area, and use their knowledge to assess the relevance of their product before submitting it to the field.

[22] Csikszentmihalyi says, "the easiest way to define a field is to say that it includes all those persons who can affect the structure of the domain" ("Society, Culture and Person" 330). Consisting of relevant experts or cultural

intermediaries (Negus 67), the field mediates the domain by recognising and validating innovative cultural products. Bourdieu also emphasises this relationship explaining that the field constitutes the people who work within the discursive frameworks of the domain. In examining the field of contemporary Australian children's picture books there are several important arenas (Dolin 12–13) in which the cultural intermediaries “pass judgment on all novelty created to decide whether it will eventually become accepted as part of the culture” (Csikszentmihalyi, “Creativity” 41).

[23] The first is the field of authors. For an emerging author, it can be difficult to understand the structure of the field they have chosen to operate within. Csikszentmihalyi suggests it takes approximately ten years of constant work within a field before an individual has internalised the structure enough to produce creative innovation effectively. Jackie French illustrates this idea when talking about her experience as an emerging writer, “I had absolutely no idea what books people were writing, what books were being published . . . I found it extraordinarily difficult in the first, probably within the first ten years, really knowing what was expected of me”.

[24] The next crucial element in the field of children's picture books is the arena of publishing. This is where most of the decisions regarding the value of innovation are made and includes major players such as editors, agents, commissioning agents, copy editors, proofreaders, members of publicity and marketing departments, and designers. For example, authors must trust that as cultural intermediaries their editor or publisher has internalised the values of the domain and is capable of correctly judging value in relation to the field. It is well known by authors that certain publishers have a specific agenda, particular identity or “construction of childhood” (Crew) they wish to promote and books are chosen in accordance with those guidelines. By understanding the operations of the field authors are better equipped to

produce appropriate work and develop successful relationships with key players.

[25] People who are involved in the mechanical production contemporary Australian children's picture books are also important in the field. These people are not often seen, but they play a significant part in the field as they facilitate the production and authorisation of discourses, activities and novelty for the decision-makers to validate. They are sometimes crucial to success for as Becker suggests if books require "innovative printing techniques publishers are not equipped for" (Becker 27) it is unlikely that the book will be published.

[26] The audience is a critical element in the field of contemporary Australian children's literature as they are the cultural intermediaries who ultimately determine the commercial success or failure of a creative product. As R. Keith Sawyer contends, the "ultimate test for a creative work is whether or not it is accepted by a broad audience" (127). Csikszentmihalyi goes one step further by arguing that, "what we call creativity is a phenomenon that is constructed through an interaction between *producer and audience* [italics in original]. Creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individuals' products" ("Implications of a Systems Perspective" 314). As a result of this it is important for authors to foster collegial relationships with their audience. Sawyer further suggests that audiences "have an influence on the creative process" (128) as an imagined audience for the creator and as constructors of meaning in their own right through their engagement, consumption, and deconstruction of texts (Barthes 142-153). It is evident that the field is a necessary element in both Bourdieu's ideas on cultural production and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of systemic creativity as these influential players make decisions about and stimulate production of children's picture books.

[27] The final component of Csikszentmihalyi and Bourdieu's confluence approaches is that of the individual. It is this role that is most commonly mistaken as the "whole phenomenon often resulting in what we believe is a narrow, unsatisfying vision of creativity" (Sternberg 12). Both approaches consider creativity to come "from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Implications of a Systems Perspective" 1). For Bourdieu, the individual is at the same time both constrained and enabled by the symbolic systems they work within, as "practice is always informed by a sense of agency (the ability to understand and control our own actions)" (Schirato and Yell 5). It is by working within the structures presented to them that the individual is able to produce innovation. From these theoretical perspectives it is the individual's task to draw upon their foundation of knowledge, the domain or field of works, in order to begin the process of creativity as, "original thought does not exist in a vacuum" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Implications of a Systems Perspective" 315). In examining his own beliefs regarding romantic conceptions of creativity Shaun Tan also dismissed them as "myths" (Boden 14) saying: "I've never liked terms like genius because they just set up a real distance between you and the person that's saying it. It's a really meaningless term".

[28] These individual authors acknowledged that indeed there were times of sudden inspiration (Wallas 70-72), but these tended to consist of "several insights interspersed with periods of incubation, evaluation and elaboration" (Csikszentmihalyi, "Creativity" 80) over an extended period of time (Sawyer 74). When directly questioned, the authors in this case study all preferred to consider their creativity as the result of hard work. Nette Hilton said, "we seriously treat it like work. If there is a group of writers together we will talk about it like it is work. You treat your hours like its work and it causes you grief like its work and it has all of the prerequisites of work". Jackie French

similarly agreed, “basically the more work you give it, the harder you work, the better you are able to concentrate, the better the piece of work is going to be and that is invariable”.

[29] Finally, it became apparent that the authors had at one time or other experienced a negotiation between their personal agency and external pressures, or structures. In relation to this struggle, Nette Hilton’s says “I think that you are creative in response to a problem...if you are really challenged”. This is in line with Bourdieu’s discussions of cultural production, which according to David Swartz, can be seen as investigating “one of the oldest problems in the Western intellectual tradition, namely, the relationship between the individual and society” (96). It is the individual’s task then to work within the structure of the field and domain. These structures can be both enabling and constraining (Giddens 169; Haralambos and Holbern 903–907). Janet Wolff asserts “everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by, social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part” (9).

[30] Additionally the participants all mentioned constraints such as deadlines, marketing pressures, relationships with editors and publishers, along with the physical limitations of the texts: 32 pages, minimal text, age appropriate language, engaging plotlines, appropriate themes and so on. While, these elements were regarded as limiting to a certain extent, it was the general consensus that when confronted with these problems the authors all worked “extremely hard” (French) and often believed they produced their best work when working within these limitations. Nette Hilton concluded that, “in the beginning it was limiting [but]...the fact that I was limited in what I had to do really did push me very hard to come up with the goods”.

[31] In conclusion, taking a rational approach to studying creativity is imperative as it “requires us to look critically at our own cultural assumptions about how creativity works” (Sawyer 33) and confronts “our most cherished beliefs about creativity” (Sawyer 33). Through the examination of five prominent authors of contemporary Australian children’s picture books it is clear that the production of “literature reflects cultural ideologies” (Winch et al. 408). By applying Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model and Bourdieu’s notions of cultural production to creativity in contemporary Australian children’s picture books it can be seen that creative products are produced through the author’s individual interaction with a domain of knowledge and a field.

[32] Additionally, by reconceptualising the wider conceptual understanding of creativity research of this nature has the possibility to affect the production of creative products within and outside the industry of Australian children’s picture books. Utilising confluence approaches in other fields investigate the relationships between individuals and their society we can “enrich the culture and . . . learn from this knowledge how to make our own lives directly more interesting and productive” (Csikszentmihalyi, “Creativity” 10). In a practical sense, research into creativity can change the way we operate. By understanding the creative process we can be proactive cultural producers and increase our productivity both as individuals and as a society.

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