

The Serendipitous Shoemaker: Creativity and Passion in Participant Selection

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Key words:

creativity;
participant
selection;
reminder slips;
problem finding;
problem solving;
expertise

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to offer a particular perspective on creativity and to relate this perspective to how a participant was selected for a qualitative study. However, it is also hoped that this perspective on creativity and participant selection can be transferred to different contexts based on this description. The difference between problem finding and problem solving is also discussed with an emphasis on trying to raise awareness of the importance of problem finding. Additionally, heuristic thinking as opposed to analogic thinking is highlighted.

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1. Let's Start With This ...

"Pitch a lucky man into the Nile, says the Arabian proverb, and he will come up with a fish in his mouth" (N.P. WILLIS, 1806-1867)

... and now for some definitions (followed by their modern-day malapropisms)

Creativity ... characterized by originality, expressiveness, and imagination; can't stay on task!

Curiosity ... a desire to know or learn; can't mind one's own business!

Empirical study ... based on data; gotta have that control group and statistical test!

Essay ... a short literary composition usually presenting the personal view of the author; just can't handle statistics!

Passion ... boundless enthusiasm; seen any Hollywood movies lately?

Reflexivity ... a self awareness of one's values, perspectives, and beliefs; socially maladjusted!

Serendipity ... the faculty of making fortunate and unexpected discoveries by accident; just wait—he'll get his!

... for purposes of this article, we will stick with the first set of definitions!

What follows has traditionally been referred to as an "essay" and not empirical research. The difference between these two terms (in addition to the definitions offered above) seems to be that in order to garner the title "empirical," a study needs to be focused on a particular problem at a particular time using particular instruments in order to collect and analyze particular data. Juxtaposed to the mighty empirical study is the lowly essay that is often simply characterized as an opinion piece. But, what about "data" that has been collected over the course of a lifetime and housed, analyzed, and interpreted in the greatest cryogenic incubator known to humanity—humans themselves? So, I ask that as you read this "opinion piece," that you try to think of it as empirical in a historical and phenomenological sense—perhaps an empirical study in disguise! [1]

Back in 1999, when my son was three years old, my wife and I experienced a joyful walk with him on a beautiful summer Sunday afternoon in our city-like environment. About fifteen minutes into our walk, we came upon a middle-aged man ("Larry") operating a bulldozer. Larry was working overtime to widen a well-travelled road that needed to be re-opened as soon as possible. Like most other boys his age, my son was enthralled with trucks and heavy equipment and so one thing led to another and Larry, seeing the big wide-open eyes staring at him and after getting our nod of approval, stopped the bulldozer and reached down and picked up our son. When Larry let our son "drive" the bulldozer, you can imagine the joy that reverberated throughout the cab of that huge piece of equipment—my wife and I often find ourselves recreating this experience as life moves inexorably on and not always along such a pleasant road. [2]

2. Creativity and Reminder Slips

The remembrance about the bulldozer came unexpectedly to mind as I thought about an upcoming qualitative conference whose theme was creativity. I wondered what the connection might be between this flashbulb memory of the bulldozer and creativity. After some introspection, it struck me that perhaps creativity is not only about insights regarding the present or future but also about the past. These insights come about when we find that we now seem to have a new set of eyes and ears that enable us to reflectively re-conceptualize experience in a way different from how we thought about it at the time that it originally occurred. Just as a photograph dutifully retains a permanent image of the past but is interpreted in the present in different ways depending on the individual's knowledge of the original setting and her or his own experiences, the interpretation of our "mental photographs" can similarly evoke new understandings and appreciations due to the richness of our experiences that occurred following the original event. Our mental photographs may come to look, smell, and taste different as a consequence of the relentless and continuous stream of experiences that alter our interpretive lenses and hence the meanings

that we originally attached to the experience. Even though we live our lives chronologically, does it not sometimes seem to be the case that our lives are more understandable when looked at historically and from the privileged vantage point that only elapsed time can provide? How many of us have said to ourselves at some reflective moment "if I only knew then what I know now"? Memories might be likened to gifts that should be unwrapped only when the time and circumstances seem right and they are ready to yield unexpected surprises. These surprises confirm that we cannot always fully anticipate or appreciate gifts or experiences before unwrapping them at just the right time—these memories invite us to paint them in colors that jolt us into a new awareness and appreciation. [3]

There is also something else that may be going on here and I have come to visualize it as a "reminder slip" that somehow becomes attached to the original memory photo—I suppose in this era of the iPad/Pod/etc., this would best be thought of as an electronic signal. My reminder slip or electronic signal seems to attach itself to an experience not long following the actual event and conveys in a low and somewhat incoherent yet insistent voice that "something is not quite right here—there is something unfinished that you will need to revisit—until then, I'll periodically remind you as you go about living the rest of your life." In fact, I now see a possible causal link between these little reminder slips that connect who we were in the past to who we are called to become in the future. [4]

These bothersome reminder slips suggest a sense of unfinished business that we sometimes do not completely see or appreciate at the time they register in our brains but they appear to have a long shelf life—measured in years and decades—following their initial appearance. If we are lucky, unresolved bits and bytes foreshadowed by a reminder slip fall into place as a result of the jostling of our neural pathways caused by additional experiences and discoveries and they then find a niche within newly created schema. Harkening back to the bulldozer experience, I recorded my thoughts recently and of course, as I spoke, I thought, and as I thought I recorded, and as I did both, some clarity began to form regarding this experience and then somehow (we may never know how these things work in this world—and isn't it wonderful!) these thoughts got connected to the topic of creativity. [5]

While I certainly remember that I experienced the aforementioned summer walk as a delightful memory of my son's childhood and early parenting, I also remember that even at that time and place, I felt that something was missing—what was it? Although even now I do not claim to be certain, it seems that I may have felt either unworthy or unready to fully appreciate this experience *at that time*. My perspective on this is that because this wonderful bulldozer experience happened unexpectedly, I didn't have time to prepare a mental and emotional place for it to reside and that there was something more that I needed to do in order to fully appreciate it—that's when my sub-consciousness may have first transcribed the little reminder note so that I would not be able to forget about my remaining responsibility to revisit this experience at some indeterminate time in the future—and here it is some 11 years later! [6]

It may very well be that we need to have a perceived sense of control in order to fully appreciate experiences that come our way and until such time that we have garnered this control we may place unexpected experiences into compartments (as some of us are prone to do) and then retrieve them when we are inexplicably aroused to do something further with them. Whether this is an accurate interpretation, of course, is trumped in my view by the notion that we are all engaged in an evolving process of interpreting experiences (past, present, and future); that is, we are all "under construction" much like the road where my son met Larry. However, our completion date may not be as clear or explicit as it was for that road that was under construction! [7]

Creativity has been intimately connected to problem solving (AMABILE, 2001; BERK, 2005; SCOTT, 1999; WEISBERG, 1993). For example, in the movie [Apollo 13](#), when Tom HANKS and crew were in danger of not being able to return to earth in their space capsule, the ground crew had to try to figure out how to accomplish a life-saving mission. The most dramatic moment occurred when the ground chief cast an array of equipment on the table and said that these objects were the only things on board the craft and so the ground crew had to fashion a particular type of connection using only these objects and communicate their solution to the space crew or all would be lost. So, the assembled engineers worked with things that were intended for one purpose in order to construct something that was for a completely different purpose ... and they were ultimately successful in accomplishing this creative act! In a more explicitly educational context, FURTH (1958) and many others after him promoted the idea of *giving problems* to students to solve that would require creativity and higher-order thinking skills. While I endorse this instructional method and count myself as a problem-based proponent, the phrase "giving problems" always bothered me for some unknown reason and so my friend (a reminder slip) apparently attached itself somewhere in my cognitive maze and remained obstinately attached—until now. I am happy therefore to announce for the first time (drum roll!) that this reminder slip has now apparently done its job because it has now become unstuck! [8]

3. Creativity in Problem Finding versus Problem Solving

Why has the strong bond been broken between the phrase "giving problems" and my reminder slip? While the ultimate problem for Apollo 13 was quite clear (getting the crew back safely), problems in our real lives don't come neatly packaged and ready to be solved; rather, we often have to first identify and define the problem that *needs to be* solved whether as an antecedent to solving a larger problem (such as Apollo 13) or sometimes because we experience an unexpected insight, realization, observation, or perhaps a curiosity that leads us to almost involuntarily desire to explore it. This latter quest may initially be murky, ill-defined, and clouded with different types of impediments that militate against spending time or resources to think about it let alone act to resolve it. Impediments may include such mundane yet urgent problems as earning enough money to pay the rent or simply a feeling that it's probably a waste of that most valuable of commodities—time. There is also that ultimate impediment—

wondering whether anybody else will find this exploration worthwhile—like journal editors and reviewers! [9]

Problem *solving* versus problem *finding and defining* has now become crystallized in my mind as a result of the nagging function of my reminder slip and I now see that there is a dimension of creativity that precedes using creative strategies to *solve* problems. I now recognize this dimension as a nurturing capacity to entertain, find, and then define *good problems* to solve (see, for example, BRUNING, SCHRAW, NORBY & RONNING, 2004); that is, problems that are worthy of solving, and are at the root of problems that had been previously defined in more superficial terms. This strategy was promoted as far back as SOCRATES who used questioning to elicit ever clearer conceptions of issues from listeners who thought, prior to experiencing a *Socratic Jolt*, that they not only knew how to solve a problem but that it was also the *proper* problem to solve! [10]

I wonder if this finding and solving dyad does not to some extent find its counterpart in qualitative and quantitative research where it is often said that qualitative research, because of its inductive and exploratory focus, can provide problems that can be answered more *precisely* via the deductive confirmatory approach used in quantitative research. Sometimes when I hear this, it makes eminent sense and I see it as the kind of rapprochement that I deeply desire to see (being a conflict avoider and also a split personality when it comes to quantitative and qualitative methods). However, other times I feel like this arrangement is demeaning to qualitative researchers because it smacks of a subservient attitude (sensitivity issue!). [11]

COFFEY and ATKINSON (1996) place a different perspective and a more positive spin on this state of affairs when they say "in dealing with qualitative materials, then, analysts *make* problems, grounding them in the everyday realities and meanings of social worlds and social actors, rather than *taking* problems from policymakers, general theorists, or others" (p.5). This view is not intended to demean quantitative methods but simply points out that the qualitative tradition is profoundly attuned to identifying problems that if solved could make a real difference in people's lives because they emanate from and are rooted in "everyday realities." Further, although there may be occasions when the precision of quantitative methods might contribute to a problem solution after a salient problem has been identified, this is not always the case—qualitative methods are surely robust enough to point the way to possible solutions of challenging problems because of the very fact that they promote a richer and deeper understanding of phenomena and their relationships. [12]

Finally, from an educational and pedagogical perspective, it appears that we spend a lot more time teaching *problem solving* skills that result in answers and solutions rather than doing creative thinking focused on finding or constructing good problems to solve. Related to this emphasis on problem solving is an emphasis on the use of algorithms and convergent thinking. Algorithms (both literally and figuratively) are designed to help recall exact knowledge (declarative knowledge) and the exact steps to be followed in order to apply this knowledge to

solve domain-specific problems (WOOLFOLK, 2011, p.343). On the other hand, conditional knowledge refers to the capacity to know when and under what conditions to apply this knowledge and procedures. Even though conditional knowledge lies closer to creativity and problem finding, it is still at the margin. Outside of the margin is the idea of developing a heuristic capacity that promotes discovery and divergent thinking rather than recall (KORF, 1999). It might also be related to BLOOM's Taxonomy where application (although requiring the use of knowledge to a problem in a new context) is not the same as the revised top tier of creativity (see BERNAUER, DAVIS & TOMEI, 2011). As a final word on this particular subject, although creativity is critically important for finding novel and effective solutions to age-old problems, discovery learning and creativity should also be used to help re-define problems and in the process of doing so, new problems may be found that get at the heart of our woes and may offer new insights into this milieu that we refer to as "everyday realities"! [13]

4. The Bulldozer and the Librarian

Thus far, I have tried to tell a story about a kid and some thoughts on creativity. So, you may ask, what about the shoemaker and how does he fit into this narrative, and more specifically creativity in general and participant selection in particular? Let me test your patience a bit more by throwing yet another story at you and then I promise to get back to the point! [14]

One of our university reference librarians although well-trained in the latest electronic search strategies, describes the treasures that are sometimes unearthed by casually browsing the stacks and finding something of value as a "serendipitous search strategy." While this librarian certainly does not endorse this strategy as the primary way to conduct a literature search, she (and I) have both benefited by keeping alert as we walk through the library stacks on the way to the restroom or coffee dispenser by finding books that have turned out to be quite helpful in our intellectual forays. [15]

I am beginning to see a connection between this willingness to be open to recognizing value in things that happen to be "found along the way" with the bulldozer experience. There are things of value "out there" but we need to first possess a disposition or willingness to see and appreciate them even if they can't be "assimilated" into our existing perspectives but rather require a little "thinking outside the box." As PIAGET (1954) would say, they demand "accommodation" because we recognize that our existing way of looking at things may not be large or inclusive enough to capture this new reality that has thrust itself upon us while we were looking for something else or simply enjoying the day. [16]

Going a bit further, I thought about the following heuristic expression of unknown origin (at least to me), "you gotta believe it before you can see it," versus the more common expression "you gotta see it before you believe it." These expressions incite in me respectively dyads like induction and openness versus deduction and hypotheses or divergence versus convergence as seen in the current way that we score and interpret tests (POWELL, BERNAUER &

AGNIHORTI, 2011). Finally, I often wonder why the field of educational psychology with its associated quantitative mindset continues to dominate in educational testing and decision-making even when the realities of the classroom have told us for at least a hundred years that the complexity of kids far exceeds the ability of experiments to capture this complexity (see for example STAKE, 1995). What really irritates is why we still have to conform to the rules of "scientific publishing" including using capital letters only for the first word in a journal article or book and so on—isn't it time that we put our foot down! [17]

5. The Bulldozer, Librarian, and Serendipitous Shoemaker!

In a paper on "identity" (BERNAUER, 2012), I described my journey from quantitative to qualitative researcher. A part of this story was describing my first attempt to conduct a qualitative study. I was enamored with the wonderful notion that interesting things could be found in the commonplace and what more of a common place than your own neighborhood? I was also (and still am) interested in the notion of "expertise." So began a marriage of my neighborhood and the concept of expertise when I began to spend time at local establishments (restaurant, auto body, dentist, remodeler) where I was struck by the tremendous creativity (there's that word again!) that goes largely unnoticed in our everyday lives. Unfortunately, I simply did not know how to go about making sense of the data using a multi-case approach and then other things intruded (like teaching classes and attending meetings) which has unfortunately relinquished these data into temporary holding facilities, aka computer files. [18]

However, still being very charged up ... and naïve, I decided to launch another study that I thought might be more manageable. This study involved interviewing young workers at a local fast food store. While my initial conversation with young workers seemed to portend rich findings, it ultimately fell flat because I simply could not corral these kids long enough to talk to them nor was I enough like them to become a participant observer and join their culture, aka being too old! I was discouraged and ready to disband the idea ... and then I walked into the shoe repair store. [19]

After I gave a pair of shoes in need of repair to the owner, we began to chat. His accent was clearly Italian and as he worked and talked simultaneously, I marveled at how effortlessly he went about repairing boots and shoes. I thought to myself "here is what I have been looking for!" Well, it did turn out to offer a good site from the expertise perspective but the real bonus was something that I never would have imagined—the discovery of a different informant—one who struck me almost immediately as somebody I really wanted—no, really needed to get to know ... and it was not because of any expertise; rather, it was because he hit a chord that resonated in a different way ... but resonate it surely did! [20]

Although the concept of expertise was important to me, it was actually part of a larger context and that was the distinction that we draw between "white collar" and "blue collar" workers where it seems that the latter group is unconsciously and implicitly deemed to be inferior to the former. My innate sense of justice (and

the fact that my father was a blue collar worker) in retrospect seems to have drawn me to the realization that without these blue collar workers, we would not have electricity, running water, heat, or computers in our homes ... let alone homes in which these modern wonders would reside. As I discovered over the course of subsequent visits, "Doug" worked in the shoestore since he was 17 years old—he was 43 at the time I met him. His story unfolded over a period of several months and it enveloped his family life, aspirations, disappointments, and frustrations. His story connected with my nascent interest in blue collar workers (Kids who don't go to college—what do they do? How do they find a job? How do they fashion a career?). Over the nearly six months that I met with Doug over coffee both in the shoestore before it opened in the morning and sometimes in a nearby supermarket that had tables and coffee, I became involved in a story that went far afield from my initial interest in expertise ... but, the funny thing was that I came to think about expertise in a way that I never anticipated and that was the critical role that career and technical education can play in our national life as well as the individual lives of so many students who are not college bound. [21]

Just like Larry the bulldozer guy and like the library books found unexpectedly just waiting to introduce themselves to me when my plan and focus would take me right past them as if invisible, Doug, in retrospect, seemed to be waiting for someone to tell his story to—somebody who took an interest in him and was willing to listen—this was certainly a win-win situation since I was consequently able to effect a fast recovery from my fast food debacle and my sense of foreboding that maybe I wasn't cut out for this kind of work. While the focus of this talk is not Doug's story *per se* (but rather how he became my serendipitous informant), suffice it to say that as a consequence of this experience, I really began to experience what an in-depth interview is like and the resultant bond that can develop between interviewer and interviewee. But how was I able to switch gears so quickly? Why was Doug of interest to me? [22]

After reflecting on these two questions (both informally and as a consequence of writing this article since writing is indeed thinking), I have tentatively come to the conclusion that if we cherish and nourish our own reflexivity it opens up the portals of curiosity. Once entering through these portals, curiosity becomes like stepping stones that lead to creativity and, as a consequence, the serendipitous becomes more of a regular event—still serendipitous but less surprisingly so since life is now seen as filled with surprises and anomalies and so the "serendipitous" becomes more of a "regularity." [23]

In conclusion, I now think of creativity in terms of the serendipitous finding of things and people that have intrinsic as well as instrumental value. However, openness and flexibility seem to be a necessary antecedent for creativity—in this case in terms of participant selection. Witness how the "fast food kids" became "the serendipitous shoemaker" and the different yet engaging new topic of career and technical education segued from my original topic of expertise. Perhaps the key to understanding this is that an underlying openness to people and things may have allowed my "fast food kids" morphing into Doug. Finally, I wonder whether *passion* (as defined by the *first* definition in the introduction!) is perhaps

the underlying building block for the entire research enterprise. Ask yourself (as I have often asked myself) what would you do, what would you be like, what would life be like, devoid of a passion for learning and writing? Is passion, in fact, the underlying real generator of creativity? Do you sometimes feel a sense of compassion for those without a passion? [24]

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Citation

Bernauer, James A. (2013). The Serendipitous Shoemaker: Creativity and Passion in Participant Selection [24 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 14(3), Art. 11, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1303113>.