Chapter IV
Assessing Creativity Using the Consensual Assessment Technique

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ABSTRACT

The Consensual Assessment Technique is a powerful tool used by creativity researchers in which panels of expert judges are asked to rate the creativity of creative products such as stories, collages, poems, and other artifacts. Experts in the domain in question serve as judges; thus, for a study of creativity using stories and poems, a panel of writers and/or teachers of creative writing might judge the creativity of the stories, and a separate panel of poets and/or poetry critics might judge the creativity of the poems. The Consensual Assessment Technique is based on the idea that the best measure of the creativity of a work of art, a theory, a research proposal, or any other artifact is the combined assessment of experts in that field. Unlike other measures of creativity, such as divergent-thinking tests, the Consensual Assessment Technique is not based on any particular theory of creativity, which means that its validity (which has been well established empirically) is not dependent upon the validity of any particular theory of creativity. This chapter explains the Consensual Assessment Technique, discusses how it has been used in research, and explores ways it might be employed in assessment in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment of creativity presents a unique challenge in higher education. Although there are tools on the market for assessing creativity, most are designed for young children, and all tend either to lack sufficient validity and reliability or to assess only rather trivial aspects of creativity (or, in many cases, both). If creativity is to be assessed in college settings in a meaningful way, divergent-thinking tests like the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking and other commonly used creativity tests are inadequate because they fail to meet even the loosest standards of validity. (And unless we are teaching masonry, do we really care how many uses someone can think of for a brick? Sadly, this is the kind of question that most creativity "tests" are based on.) Self-report measures of creativity and global assessments of students' creativity by others (such as teachers) have also failed to demonstrate sufficient validity to be trusted for most uses (Baer, 1993; Kaufman, Plucker, & Baer, in press). Despite the importance of creativity, its assessment has proven to be extremely difficult.

The Consensual Assessment Technique is a fairly new method of measuring creativity that could open up new avenues for creativity assessment in higher education. First proposed by Teresa Amabile in 1982 and further developed by her and other researchers in the last quarter century (Amabile, 1982, 1983, 1996; Baer, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Baer, Kaufman, & Gentile, 2004; Hennessey, 1994; Kaufman, Baer, Cole, & Sexton, in press), the Consensual Assessment Technique is now a well validated tool for assessing creativity. It has been called the "gold standard" of creativity assessment (Carson, 2006), but its use has been limited primarily to research settings. It can be used in any field; for example, it can be used for judging the creativity of (a) students' research designs or theories in science, (b) their artistic creations and their musical compositions, or (c) the poems, stories, and essays that they write. It therefore has enormous potential for assessing creativity in higher education settings.

BACKGROUND

Why do you believe that Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers are creative? On what basis do you judge the special theory of relativity to be highly creative? Why do you think Shakespeare was a more creative dramatist than Marlowe? And how would you judge the creativity of some recent ten- and eleven-dimensional string theories?

You may be comfortable answering some of these questions, but unless you are truly a Renaissance person, it's unlikely that you feel qualified to make a defensible response to all four of them. And even though you might know enough about, say, the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe to give an informed opinion, does your opinion really "count" as much as the opinions of recognized experts in the field of English literature?

How is creativity judged at the highest levels? Why are some works of art treasured and others forgotten? Why do some theories, compositions, books, and inventions win prizes? These kinds of decisions aren't based on a procedure or rubric that awards points for different attributes of a painting, composition, or theory. There is no test to determine which historian's theories, which biochemist's models, or which screenwriter's movies are the most creative. Nobel Prize committees don't apply rubrics, complete checklists, or score tests. What do they do? They ask experts. The most valid assessment of the creativity of an idea or creation in any field is the collective judgment of recognized experts in that field. And while it's true that experts in different times and places may come to different conclusions (and pity the unfortunate artists and scientists whose genius is only recognized when it is too late for them to enjoy their posthumous fame), at any given time,

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