Valuing Creativity in the Higher Education Sector: What Price the Creative Knowledge Economy?

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Abstract
Contemporary economic and social contexts including the creative knowledge economy provide competing perspectives on ‘the future’ of higher education and the role of the academic within these contexts. Increasingly educators and educational leaders are expected to act in ‘futures’ oriented ways whilst remaining true to the professional standards of their present environments. Working in the creative industries or as part of the creative knowledge economy increasingly contributes to Australia’s strategic directions for the future but also has an influence on what is valued in the higher education sector.

This paper explores the impact of the creative knowledge economy on the higher education sector and its response to the changing educational landscapes. An exploration is undertaken of the shift towards creative industries where the value of creativity and the arts is linked to economic value. It is argued that this shift requires researchers to alter their identities from that of having ‘academic’ value to engaging with the commodification of knowledge. The paper concludes with a suggested way forward for both the creative industries and the higher education sector using Giri’s (2002) model for transdisciplinarity.

Introduction
It is difficult to engage in a discussion about education today without having to address the concept of change (Peters, 2001). Contemporary economic and social contexts coupled with competing perspectives on ‘the future’ place significant demands upon educators and educational institutions. As Crump (2002) argued: “Educational institutes are facing increasing challenges in responding to changes in the nature of their business needs, service delivery needs and community expectations. Facilities capable of responding to these changes will be very different to what they are today” (p. 1). Success therefore has become dependent on the ability of all stakeholders to negotiate, navigate and broker access to and use of information – in effect to become part of the increasing population of knowledge workers (Morris, 2000). The value of knowledge becomes linked with the idea of knowledge as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Value in this sense is also determined by the wider community and other external organisations rather than by academics themselves.

Central to these changes and challenges of what is valued in the higher education sector is the advent of the knowledge economy and the contested understandings of
what constitutes knowledge in the 21st century. Although it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss this in any detail, broadly speaking knowledge is what determines how society perceives itself – what values, ideologies and practices are important.

The Western knowledge base is predominantly rational, objective, scientific and reliable and largely organised into disciplines. However, according to van Manen (2001), “It appears that university-discipline-based forms of inquiry are giving way to new modes of knowledge generation” (p. 850). This shift is to seeing knowledge as interconnected and unable to be put into easy to manage disciplines of understanding. For example, when one is engaged in a game online one isn’t learning about this game from a technology perspective, a scientific perspective, a visual/design perspective – rather one is experiencing and learning about games from all of these perspectives. One is also bringing together other knowledges and understandings that one has in ways that may not have been thought of before. The emphasis moves away from the individualistic notion of knowledge to one that “stresses the collective (the individual being part of an epistemic community) nature of knowing” (Ibert, 2007, p. 105).

The following section discusses the shift from the knowledge economy to the creative knowledge economy and how this is linked to the commodification of knowledge and creativity.

**The Knowledge Economy, the Creative Knowledge Economy and the Commodification of Knowledge and Creativity**

The “knowledge economy” is a term coined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in a report entitled *The Knowledge Based Economy* (1996). According to this report, the economy has become a hierarchy of networks fuelled by the rapid rate of change in all aspects of life, including learning.

As discussed in the previous section, knowledge is closely tied to how we perceive ourselves in relation to our values, ideologies and practices. According to Lyotard (1984), “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use-value’” (pp. 4-5).

The knowledge economy has ensured the increasing importance of lifelong and autonomous learning. As a consequence, it is now recognised that all sectors of the economy, including universities, must respond to this new demand by equipping young people, including graduates, with the knowledge and skills necessary to operate in this new *milieu*. Higher education institutions have increasingly been forced to embrace the concept that this is a world in which learners require different skills for a different labour force to meet different challenges in order to create very different futures. Knowledge becomes a commodity likened to money that can “create advantage and profit” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 155). Recent discourse on the knowledge economy has shifted to “stress the need for what might be called ‘higher order’ notions, such as creativity or even wisdom” (Oakley, 2007, p. 9). In a creative knowledge economy, therefore, creative ideas “are the key asset in economic success – intellectual work creating intellectual value” (Thompson, Jones & Warhurst, 2007, p. 627). Value in this sense is linked to enhancing the economy rather than the aesthetic or social value which would be more traditionally associated with creativity.
Linked to these discourses is the need to become more creative about how we cope with/in the information economy in which we are situated and how this will lead to a reconceptualising of educational practices. Although it is acknowledged in this paper that the notion of knowledge as a commodity is a significant shift, what I am more concerned with here is the focus on the creative knowledge economy and how creativity “is now the decisive source of competitive advantage” (Florida, 2002, p. 5; emphasis in original). With the shift to an ideas and creativity driven environment, success follows those who can exploit intangible knowledge and information and convert them to tangible benefits – financial, cultural and social. That is, the emergent knowledge economy requires critical thinkers who can also create something – the something must have economic value. Critical and creative thinking are the two sides of the new currency.

From the perspective of Florida (2002), “what’s more fundamentally true is that we now have an economy powered by human creativity….In virtually every industry, from automobiles to fashion, food products, and information technology itself, the winners in the long run are those who can create and keep creating” (pp. 4-5). This kind of focus brings us to the kinds of programs and strategies that will deliver the social and educational outcomes that fulfil the vision of the university in the 21st century. According to Florida, Gates, Knudsen and Stolarick (2006), “the university comprises a potential – and in some places, actual – creative hub that sits at the centre of regional development. It is a catalyst for stimulating the spillover of technology, talent, and tolerance into the community” (p. 34; emphasis in original). Quite clearly, there are some techniques and tactics that will be more in tune with desired outcomes than others.

Before we can begin to discuss the implications of creative industries, it is important to understand what is meant by this concept. As with many key concepts, there is a plethora of definitions surrounding the concept of creative industries. As one example, the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport defines creative industries as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (http://www.culture.gov.uk/creativeindustries).

At the core of defining creative industries is the notion that one can link creativity with social and economic change where the shift or change is to the consumer placing value on the end product being produced by the creative worker and that creativity being the driver of this change (Hartley, 2005). Creative industries therefore join the two separate entities of creativity and industry in order to develop innovative and entrepreneurial practices for the creative professional.

The connection between traditional creative entities, such as art, design, fashion, film and video, and the move towards creativity as business relies heavily on the various sectors working together closely. As Hartley (2005) argues:

…[W]hile it [creative industries] has its corporate aspect, the creative industries idea allows for a broadening of participation in the possibilities offered by new interactive media in the so-called new economy….It means seeing success in collaboration and ingenuity rather than big business and capital. However, this is dependent upon a supportive environment and education. (pp. 22-23)
The success or failure of partnerships impacts heavily on the rhetoric of creative industry policy and how it is then implemented in practice. Just as importantly, this impacts on what is valued in terms of academic knowledge and work. “…the creative industries can be understood as an area of production where the business field and the cultural fields overlap, and thus both economic and artistic logics of practice are at work” (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007, p. 526). Creativity, knowledge and ideas have become a commodity that can be bought and sold much the same way as any other subject. Closely linked to these changes are changes in the higher education sector. The impact and implications of these changes are discussed in the next section of the paper.

Changing Higher Education Contexts

As has been alluded to in the previous section, the impact of creative industries has potentially changed the higher education sector. If the link between higher education and industry has been emphasised, so too has how higher education engages with these sectors. One of the biggest challenges that face the higher education sector with regards to engaging with creativity and knowledge as commodities is how academic knowledge is conceived and managed. One of these changes, according to Holden (2007), is that our working style has become closer to that of the traditional arts worker in that it now includes more and more “flexible, freelance, and part-time work, but also working within conventional organizations in new ways, such as being part of ad-hoc teams and temporary associations to achieve particular aims or projects” (p. 8).

The trend towards what would be termed a more entrepreneurial or business model of education has implications for how academic work is conceived and who and what is valued in a higher education contexts. According to Coaldrake and Stedman (1999):

It places pressure on the ideal that all academics are equal members of a scholarly community, or at least that differentiation and status should be determined primarily by academic authority.…While control over the conditions and direction of working life may shift away from individual academics in some areas of the university, others will enjoy greater freedom and authority if their work is demonstrably valuable to the organisation. (p. 12)

The dilemma lies in what is seen to be valued. If knowledge and creativity are the commodities then the academics who can engage with these discourses more freely are likely to be more successful. As mentioned previously, a key feature of the creative knowledge economy is the ability to work across boundaries, engage in networks and partnerships and work closely with industry. Closely tied to this is the idea that knowledge production is becoming more complex and that the way in which the individual academic works has shifted. “The key change is that it is becoming less and less a self-contained activity. As practised currently, it is neither the science of the ‘universities’ nor the ‘technology’ of industry….Knowledge production, not only its theories and models but also in its methods and techniques, has spread from the academy to many different types of institutions” (Gibbons, 2003, p. 453). As discussed in a previous section, traditionally academic knowledge has been organised into disciplines. The knowledge that was valued was empirical, objective and rational.

Linked to this is that in the shift within the higher education sector there is a move “…which shifts authority and control away from the individual academic. Academics are
increasingly working in teams for both research and teaching” (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999, p. 12). This is a fundamental change to how the traditional academic would previously have worked and what was previously valued. The linking of the work of the individual academic to what the institution deems as important is problematic for the average academic. According to Coaldrake and Stedman (1999):

Frequently [this shift] is attacked as managerialism and opposed on grounds that it represents an attempt by management to control academics and remove their academic freedom… Academic freedom remains an important cornerstone of higher education, but it has always been circumscribed [–] for example, by professional accreditation of courses and by the requirement to observe the law. (p. 13)

A major criticism of the move to a more employment and skills focused university sector as is encouraged with creative industries and the higher education sector is that this is a move away from traditional research structures where academics determine what is legitimate knowledge. “These research practices set the rules of the game: that is[,] the terms of what shall count as a contribution to knowledge, who shall be allowed to participate in its production, and how accreditation shall be organised” (Gibbons, 2003, p. 450). The challenge then, according to Hinchcliff (2006), is that “…if our new post-industrial university is going to be a positive influence for society’s survival into the distant future, our educators and administrators will need to review their epistemological and ethical assumptions” (p. 80). The argument becomes whether universities are equipped or even should be equipped to cope with this change to a more business model of learning which is “increasingly dominated by the utilitarian virtues of the marketplace, rather than the spontaneously inquisitive, sometimes sceptical, and occasionally quixotic virtues of scholarly inquiry” (Hinchcliff, 2006, p. 81).

The rhetoric surrounding these contexts needs to be positioned in terms of whether or not the price of embracing these changes offers opportunities or will ultimately diminish the value of the higher education sector forever. As Blackmore (2002) noted, “There is now significant debate as to whether universities are in crisis, in demise, or merely being restructured to meet the needs of knowledge-based economies” (p. 419). The proposal in the final section of this paper is for a way forward through these conversations.

**A Way Forward – What Price the Creative Knowledge Economy?**

It is naïve to think that many of the changes discussed here will be discontinued and that the nature of academic work will back to a ‘utopia’ where individual academic knowledges can operate independently of the economic sector. How therefore can we move forward and try to navigate this changing landscape whilst ensuring that the commodification of knowledge and academic work can still maintain quality and integrity? The key here will be that quality and integrity will be determined more by the partnerships and different viewpoints than by the individual academic themselves. One of the keys to the way forward to navigating this changing landscape, I propose, may be found in the literature on transdisciplinarity.

Giri (2002) talks about this as “border crossing with a difference”, adding that “Academic disciplines have exercised a dominant influence in the way we think, perceive and seek to understand reality and the universe in the modern world...[W]e
make sense of the world through particular, specialized and bounded disciplines” (p. 104). As has been discussed previously, the rise of the creative knowledge economy and the valuing of creativity have meant that what is now valued is moving between these borders and rigid structures. Giri also proposes a model to prepare for transdisciplinarity that I think is useful to adapt here as a model for crossing the borders between economic and other understandings of knowledge. This model is:
1. Dialogue
2. The art of authentic embeddedness

The concept of *dialogue* in this instance is about bringing together different groups of people and creating an environment where we not only start the conversations and begin to share one another’s languages but also take ourselves out of our comfort zones in order to look at the world differently. As Zohar and Marshall (as cited in Giri, 2002) explain:

> Once the participants in dialogue have let go of clinging to their own points of view, the second stage begins – the resynthesis. People discover they can listen to each other in a new way, that there is a common ground to be discovered. When the rigid, tacit infrastructure is loosened, the mind begins to move in a new order. This new order is a whole new, emergent level of consciousness. (p. 108)

The dialogue among university management, individual academics, industry, community and the student body needs to be systematic and structured to ensure that all voices are heard and opportunities sought. As an academic working in these contexts, I have found that how I work has fundamentally changed. Community engagement and partnerships have become central to what I do and research. This is very different from previous expectations or values where this was an afterthought or a minor part of my work life. What was considered valuable and important for study would have been determined by myself as the authority.

Dialogue itself is just the beginning. The next phase in the model according to Giri (2002) is *authentic embeddedness*, which “calls for an art of authentic embeddedness in one’s discipline and...does not mean cutting off from the ground where one stands but widening one’s horizons...[and] enables us to realise that our own discipline has within it multiple perspectives” (p. 108). This is about respecting the knowledge and experience that we have but stepping outside our comfort zones in order to foster creativity and multiple understandings and knowledges. The inclusion of a variety of perspectives in authentic situations can allow academic knowledge to be just as valued as either industry or institutional knowledge. “In this context, one role for universities might be to act as a broker, intermediary and focus, to bring relevant knowledge to bear on particular problems in partnerships with other stakeholders” (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999, p. 14). Another role for academics is actively to seek connections that might not be readily apparent within the discipline in which they are most familiar and seen to be an authority.

Which brings me to the final part to the model: *courage to abandon*. Pick up any book about what it means to be an entrepreneur and it won’t take long before one comes across the phrase “risk taker”. What Giri (2002) talks about here is that one needs the “courage to abandon one’s home discipline in the pilgrimage of one’s quest and
research” (p. 109). Although this on the surface appears to be a straightforward proposition, it can be difficult for an academic to do this. This is made problematic within the formal structures of a university that implicitly and explicitly discourages this kind of collaboration and exploration. The solution in part is for academics firstly to value this kind of knowledge and risk taking and secondly to rally actively against the traditional structures of the university.

Conclusion
This paper has discussed the changing understandings of knowledge, with particular emphasis on the commodification of knowledge, ideas and creativity. A further discussion has been of the impact that the creative knowledge economy and the combining of creativity and business under the banner of creative industries have had within the higher education sector. Of particular interest has been the changing higher education sector and the valuing of academic knowledge and how the outlined changes have impacted on the construction of the academic.

What we need to do in order to engage with our collective creative futures is to have the courage of our convictions and then actively seek out different ways and means of understanding. If value in the creative knowledge economy is associated with creativity and ideas, the price of not doing this is probably too high too pay. The complexities, changes and way forward outlined in this paper are just the beginnings of the kind of research and practice that need to be continued in order for higher education institutions and individual academics to evaluate which knowledges and values will be dominant in the sector in the 21st century.

References
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