

# Describing the Indescribable: Grasping Tacit Learning Through Creativity

DAVID GRIFFIN

Vysoká škola manažmentu/City University of Seattle, Trenčín, Slovakia

**Abstract:** This paper is essentially a deconstructive and self-reflexive discussion on the role of creativity in the process of transferring tacit knowledge. It attempts to establish an understanding of and framework for creativity, via a survey of relevant literature and analysis of the concepts and ideas that emerge. The paper then moves on to look at several examples of companies that apply “creative best practices,” as reflected in and evidenced by their mission statements, core values and workplace environment and culture—in other words, a series of case studies that show how the theory is practically applied. Ultimately, the paper leaves the reader—in the role of teacher/coach or manager/leader—with some tips on how to foster creativity in order to capture tacit knowledge.

**Keywords:** tacit knowledge, creativity, leadership, vision, core values, culture, coaching, experiential learning.

## 1 Introduction: The Indescribable

“Creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.”

- Sir Ken Robinson

The Baby Boomers are leaving with everything we know. How do we carry on? What are the best ways to transfer knowledge, skills and know-how that are not textbookable? How best do we teach the unteachable? How do we describe the indescribable? How do we capture tacit knowledge before it “walks out the door” [1]?

So I was on Skype with my Dad recently and he asked that question that dads are prone to ask: “Sooooo, how are you PhD studies going? What’s your dissertation about?”

Throwing caution and sound judgment to the wind, I told him: “I’m going to write about tacit learning—about the things you learn that you can’t really describe.”

So Dad, being a dad, says, “Hmm...so if you can’t describe them, then how can you write about them??”

I proposed that if that’s the case—that you can’t really describe it—there must be a need for such a paper since it can’t be described. After all, this *is* academics, right?? So, being an academic myself, I said, “Well, if you give me 200 pages, I’ll do my best.” Well, here we are with a limited length for a conference, but let me do my best to give an introduction to the topic of how to describe the indescribable. But first, let me digress even further... (Shocking, I know!)

When I was a kid, the public school system back in Ontario, Canada, had this yearly speech competition. What you had to do was deliver about a 10-minute memorized speech in front of your class on a topic of your choice. From the class ‘competition,’ it would go to a school-wide competition, and then to the inter-school level, and ultimately to a province-wide competition. Just thinking about it makes me nervous even now. But my point is that invariably someone would do a speech on the topic of speeches—the process of writing and delivering a speech for the competition I’ve just described: “When writing a speech, you have to consider a topic that the audience will be crazy about, that they’ll connect with and enjoy...” “And you have to consider the judges, the teachers who are looking for something with a lot of learning value...” “And then you have to deliver it with LOTS of ex-PRESS-ion so the judges will LOVE the way you speak...”

One of the main differences between deconstructive content in a speech competition when I was 12 years old and a deconstructive exploration of the workings of tacit knowledge when I'm 50 is the role of red wine in the *creative* process. But alas, that's a matter for another paper...and another bottle. Seriously, what about that word I just jokingly threw in there, "creative." What is this thing called "creativity"?

## 2 Creativity Defined

So what then about creativity and the learning process? Let's reflect on the deconstructive nature of examining learning and how best to learn—the lesson about learning, or teaching about teaching, if you will. I would contend the transmitting or transferring tacit knowledge has much to do with creativity. But just what is creativity in this context? Aren't you sick of papers that start out with some pedestrian definitions? Despite the fact I am, let me cliché away...

Creativity has been something esteemed as the holy grail in business for some twenty or thirty years now. When you see (or hear) the word "creativity," what do you think? Painting? Sculpture? Literature? Well, obviously, unless we're in the art of publishing or fine art business, in this context creativity is something different. Let's loosely define it this way in business and education: Creativity is the ability to see a solution that no one else thought of, a novel approach that perhaps doesn't even seem logical. I did say loose, didn't I? Still, in essence, that's what companies and teams are looking for—someone who has a new or different way of looking at things. If we look at the literature, you can find similar definitions: "Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1997) described creativity as a process of flow, in which responsive feelings dictated an intensified engagement towards and experienced activity" [2]. Yeah, whatever. Ken Robinson describes creativity as "the process of having original ideas that have value." [3] As I've defined it here, perhaps that's more the effect of creativity, but creativity is a rather a nebulous concept so, just like the wind, perhaps it's best to observe its effects. At the heart of this discussion is the role of creativity in the transfer of knowledge, especially tacit knowledge.

Before I take you any further down this garden path, let's resist the omacka by recalibrating this discussion entirely and look at a few cases of organizations where creativity seems well-supported, and then work backwards to distill what it is about what these organizations do that fosters creativity.

## 3 Creativity Applied: Examples of Organizations That Have a Culture That Supports Creativity

As I said, let's begin this exploration in a more concrete fashion by looking at a few examples of organizations that apply a mission, vision and core values that firmly identify and build a culture of creativity. We can all think of multinational companies that are well-known for having such "crazy" cultures, so the discussion will begin with a few such examples. Somehow, perhaps given the communist heritage or conservative nature of the organizational culture within Slovakia, the presupposition may be that there are few or even no example of these types of organizations here, so let's smash that myth and look at a number of examples of local companies that foster creativity.

### 3.1 Google

Google is well known for its unusual corporate culture. Here's their official statement about their culture from their own company website: "It's really the people that make Google the kind of company it is. We hire people who are smart and determined, and we favor ability over experience.... We strive to maintain the open culture of often associated with startups, in which everyone is a hands-on contributor and feels comfortable sharing ideas and opinions. In our weekly all-hands ("TGIF") meetings—not to mention over email or in the café—Googlers ask questions directly to Larry, Sergey and other execs about any number of company issues. Our offices and cafes are designed to encourage interactions between Googlers within and across teams, and to spark conversation about work as well as play" [4].

This statement is then followed by a series of photos from Google locations around the world. What you see in these pictures are lots of greenery, bright colours, comfortable chairs, pool and foosball tables, friendly-looking cafes, a bowling alley—in a word, fun!

So what can we take away from Google’s statement of culture? If the point is indeed to foster creativity, it looks like the hiring process is critical: they obviously look for “smart” and “determined” people who have signs of the “ability” they “favor.” Having an “open” culture—one that invites and encourages the sharing of ideas across the whole organization, to the very top “execs,”—seems important. They refer to the employees affectionately as “Googlers.” The offices and cafes and working environment is general looks comfortable, which may well be the main ingredient fostering creativity at play here: A friendly, comfortable, fun atmosphere will encourage people to take risks, to speak their ideas knowing they won’t be judged, so creative ideas will emerge.

### 3.2 Virgin Atlantic

When Richard Branson recently announced that Virgin Atlantic employees can take as much vacation time as they like, I immediately thought, “Hmm, perhaps here’s a company that’s a little radical in its thinking that has a culture that fosters creativity.” Indeed, you can see a lot of similarities in their statement of company culture with Google’s: “As much as we’ve grown, there’s still this feeling of family and home that really makes Virgin Atlantic a special place to work.... Our people are a passionate lot, united in creating something really special and something different.... It’s always been like this. It’s in our DNA and it was ignited within us from the moment we starting [*sic.*] flying.... To get us off the ground every day, there’s a lot of hard work involved with lots of different kinds of people doing different jobs. It’s the fact we all love the airline, believe in what we do and have a lot of fun doing it....” [5]

Again, it’s all about the hiring process, with a focus on getting people on board who have “passion,” and about a comfortable work environment that allows creativity. And having ample time off can’t hurt either.

### 3.3 Unicorn

Moving closer to home, Unicorn is an IT company based in the Czech Republic with a markedly different approach. According to its “Work Methodology” on the company website, “we have established a working environment in accordance with the ‘Work by Play’ philosophy,” which “defines a working environment that is

- Creative
- Performing
- Effective
- Motivating
- Promising
- Fair
- Transparent” [6]

These core values again point to a “culture of fun” that encourage creativity—and creativity is identified as a core value itself.

### 3.4 Sygic

So now we arrive at an example from home, lest we assume, “It’s all very nice, but such companies do not exist in Slovakia.” Our first example is Sygic, an innovative company that offers a GPS app. Let’s look at their mission, vision and core values from Sygic’s company website:

“Our mission

We enable people to go anywhere and explore any place with confidence.

Our vision

We envision guiding each and every person on the move.

Core values

Innovation – To us, innovation means creating new customer value by increasing perceived customer benefits and decreasing perceived customer costs. Innovation is what drives business development at Sygic.

Staying focused – At Sygic, we focus on strategic issues, rather than just on those that are interesting. We focus on what moves us forward quickly, not on what just keeps us busy.

Challenging ourselves – At Sygic, we are energized/inspired/motivated by ambitious dreams, goals, projects and tasks. We keep pushing ourselves beyond the familiar, beyond our comfort zone and beyond our past performance. That’s how we make things happen.

Passion – We believe that people with a passion for what they do are capable of great achievements, because they have an inquisitive attitude, an open mind and the ability to drive things forward. At Sygic, we all love what we do.

Teamwork – We acknowledge that tiny atoms bound together into molecules and molecules joined together as substances, ultimately make up the universe. At Sygic, the team is the “the star”. And within the team, it is the individual performance of each member that counts.” [7]

So what do we notice here? First of all, the tone of the statement is different—let’s say more ‘serious.’ Yet at the same time we again see a focus on hiring for “passion” and creating a comfortable, supportive atmosphere where employees can actually feel safe “pushing...beyond [their] comfort zone.” Hard to believe, but this is a Slovak company who’s philosophy mirrors the focus and language of Virgin Atlantic.

### **3.5 ESET**

On its company website, ESET antivirus software describes “Who We Are” as follows: “Mindful of our humble beginnings, the company culture continues to embody the same principles on which it was founded: honesty and fairness in our relationships with our employees and clients alike.” It goes on to say, “The belief in individual intellect, passion for computer science and devotion to honesty combined to set the company on a steady growth path which continues to this day.... We see a direct parallel between the quality of our solutions and the quality of our people. This is why we consider our employees our most valuable asset.... We realize that fostering a climate of constructive dialogue while encouraging innovative thinking....” [8]

Do you see some themes emerging here? These companies seem to value people and passion above all, encourage “dialogue” in a supportive and caring setting where the employees can feel free to take risks.

### **3.6 Staffino**

Surfing the Staffino Website, I was unable to immediately locate an explicit statement of their core values. Be that as it may, the language and content of their pages demonstrates a company culture that fosters creativity. For example, there is an emphasis on “team spirit”; the company personnel each have a statement about “My customer service hero”; the descriptions of the personnel also include personal details and are written in friendly way. [9] Once again, there is an emphasis on passion, and building a comfortable, supportive environment in which to employees can take the risks they need in order to be creative.

## 4 What We Can Learn From These Organizations About Fostering Creativity in the Classroom

From the above six examples, companies that encourage creativity seem to emphasize the following traits:

**Comfort:** Comfort can be both literal, which cushy chairs, ergonomically-designed spaces and lots of plants, as well as figurative, where the employees are treated in such a way that they feel comfortable. Comfort, acceptance and support are critical in fostering an environment where the employees feel they can take risks, to soar and still have a safe landing pad, as it were.

**Fun:** Time and again, the examples above espouse a “work by play” approach. Playing gets us out of our safety zone, and encourages innovative ways of looking at things, hence inspiring creativity.

**Support:** Related to comfort, a management team that listens, first and foremost, is integral to fostering creativity. The very wording of these company’s statements of their core value, while differing in tone, either explicitly or implicitly say the door to the CEO’s office is wide open, and new ideas are encouraged. Also notable is a work environment that is friendly to the employees and sensitive to their needs.

**Flexibility:** As part of the support, many of these examples make it clear that paying attention to a work-life balance and valuing the importance of personal life and interests is integral to fostering creativity.

**Friendliness:** The above examples build a family atmosphere, and often refer to staying true to their original mission—big companies that retain their start-up feel, and keep the same core values that got them where they are.

**Teamwork:** All six examples above identify the importance of a team approach. However, the individual is never lost in the team, and voicing creative ideas is always encouraged.

**Passion:** Another prevalent theme in all these companies’ mission statements, passion and love for what these companies do is highly valued. This point is almost too self-evident to say anything further: If you love what you do, you will more likely than not put the time and energy into it that will inspire creativity.

**Risk-taking:** Back to the first point of feeling comfortable, which is the foundation for risk-taking. And if you’re not afraid to be wrong, as many of these organizations’ web pages point out, you will take risks and come up with creative ideas. And as Ken Robinson said, “If you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original.” [10]

So, simply put, these are the things we need to do in the class. Lastly, let us consider a couple things that may be inhibiting creating in an academic setting. It’s important to know who your enemies are...

### 4.1 Enemies of Creativity?

To wrap up this discussion of creativity, let’s turn to a couple common practices in the classroom and critique their value in terms of establishing an environment where creativity can flourish.

#### 4.1.1 The PPT Generation of Teachers

I’ve been teaching for some 23 years, and have been observing teaching for some 45 years. I first saw a PC desktop projected onto a wall in 1991. It was in my Psychology of Education class at the University of Western Ontario. The contraption that cast the image of the computer screen onto the wall looked not unlike an overhead projector. The students in the class were all amazed, and you could hear the gasps as the professor manipulate the words and icons on the screen. But over the years, PowerPoint has mostly lost that wow! effect since it’s so widely used. Only the most skillful of computer animators and slide designers are likely to get the jaded audience even to notice the slides.

In teaching and in business, I have noticed a different effect: PPT has had much to do with the loss of actually presentation skills. Many presenters now have about as much excitement in their style as Ferris Bueller's teacher: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS6f1MKpLGM>. I've also heard teachers become desperate if they can't quickly get their hands on the slides that the publishers produce to go along with the textbooks, or when they talk about prepping for a class, what they mean is creating slides. I get the feeling that if you took the slide projector out of the classroom, about half the teachers out there couldn't teach anymore.

One problem, as I see it, is that the slides themselves are not very good. They are often over-texted and under-graphicked, and many times the presenter just reads the slides. Rather insulting, since most of us can read. But even if the slides are great, often the actual presentation is not.

Another problem, and the core issue here, is now slides stifle creativity, both of the presenter and of the audience. Let me give you an analogy: I was recently teaching a high school class in Vrbove, Slovakia, and during the course of one discussion, one student was recommending a particular book and movie. I asked which was she preferred, the book or the movie, and her answer was typical: the book. I asked her why, and she said, "Because you can use your imagination." Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, people do prefer the book to the movie. When you paint a picture with words, it opens up the imagination; when you give people the actual picture, it can often impose a the director's vision on the audience, and therefore can greatly limit the imagination. There's also a sedative effect of passively watching a film.

These effects are also typical of a PPT presentation: The teacher's vision of the topic is too concretely presented—here's how it is presented before the students' eyes—and therefore imposed on the audience. Secondly, there is a sedative effect, where the students are lulled into a passive state. Note-taking is a dead art. Students either take a picture of the slides on their smart phones or just download them from Blackboard after class. The mental processing of the ideas necessary when transcribing notes, the summarizing and synthesizing into the student's own language, seldom happens anymore. And don't get me started on teachers who just read their slides to the students!

#### **4.2.3 Pseudo-quantitative Research**

A second creativity killer in academics is what I'll term "pseudo-qualitative research," which I'll contrast with the often-undervalued quantitative research. I say "pseudo" as I'm referring to primary research that is gathered via a survey and then analyzed in what is supposedly a scientific fashion, and presented in papers in pretty graphs and charts. Two problems here:

One, the surveys themselves, often in the form of multiple-choice questions, limit the options and, similar to the over-use of slides in the classroom, impose the survey author's vision on the respondents.

Two, the conclusions that can be drawn are much more subjective and open to interpretation than the statistical analysis seems to indicate. Often, in fact, the data can be manipulated to support the author's biases and is hardly quantitative at all.

Qualitative research, by which I mean personal interviews of experts in the field, is often undervalued. After all, expert systems are built through a series of interviews with experts and then 'interpreted' into code, so there must be something quantitatively of value in the information. According to Andrea Stropkova, "One way to foster creativity is to ask good questions." [11] Indeed, good questions, and questions that follow up on the subject's answers to explore a topic thoroughly, are a means to build a dynamic dialogue that fosters creativity.

Don't get me wrong—I don't want to throw out the baby with the bath water here. There is, of course, a ton of top-quality quantitative research out there. I merely want to help rebalance the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy in the name of allowing more opportunities for creativity.

## 5 Conclusion: What Have We Learned Here?

You may have noticed I still haven't made an explicit explanation of how fostering creativity can underpin the transfer of tacit knowledge, the very heart and soul of so many organizations that is walking out their doors as the Baby Boom generation retires. But I hope I've actually tacitly explained it. Tricky of me to say that, I know.

What have we learned then? Read section 4 above again, with its conclusions and themes from organizations that have core values that support creativity. In a nutshell, what you need to do in the classroom is create a supportive atmosphere where students feel they can take risks, and that all ideas are valued and the needn't be afraid to say anything. And above all, have fun!

The ultimate lesson here, of course, is never answer your dad's general questions about how your PhD is going.

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### David Griffin, M.A.

Vysoká škola manažmentu, Bezručová 64, 91101 Trenčín, Slovakia

[dgriffin@vsm.sk](mailto:dgriffin@vsm.sk)