

Guest Editorial

Creativity is a modern concept. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows the word *created* appearing as early as 1393, *creative* in the sense of imaginative does not show up until 1745, *creativity* in 1820, and *creativity* in 1875. These last examples all refer to poetic imagination. Creativity in arenas other than the arts appears to be an even more contemporary notion. We now speak of creative thinking, creative problem solving, and creative living. A minor flood of books has appeared to help us learn how to apply creativity to our work and lives—often carrying fanciful titles, such as Roger Von Oech's *Whack on the Side of the Head* and *Kick in the Seat of the Pants*.

Can we be creative in the workplace, particularly one that is as heavily systematized, bureaucratized, and interdependent as an academic library? Is there a paradox in trying to be both creative and systematic? Or is it possible to have systems that encourage, reward, and promote creativity?

Some of the most-discussed creative minds of recent history have worked with a medium that is the zenith of system and rigidity—the simple-minded on/off computer bit. Names that spring to mind include Nolan Bushnell and the video game; two guys named Steve creating Apple Computer in a garage; Bill Gates dropping out of Harvard to write the first BASIC for a small computer, which led to Microsoft Corporation; Raymond Kurzweil inventing the talking reading machine for the visually impaired . . . the list could be much longer, obviously.

James Watson and Francis Crick's *Double Helix*, the best-seller that chronicled the discovery of DNA, made a lasting impact on me. The mystery and wonder of two slender intertwined threads that carry the secret of life, however, offered a stark contrast to the obvious laziness, competitiveness, and mental playfulness in which the discoverers were engaged. Racing to be the first to uncover the exact structure of DNA, the pair spent more time in British pubs, gossiping, and otherwise avoiding work than they did in the sober and systematic pursuits of the laboratory. What they were doing, clearly, was thinking creatively, sometimes systematically, but mostly by indirection, by using play to "unleash hidden potential," as the creativity gurus like to say.

In the December 1986 issue of the *AAHE Bulletin* Patricia Hutchings writes about the value of creativity as an outcome of liberal education and how it might be taught to undergraduates. She implies that creativity is not so much a skill as a mental mode that can be fostered by three classroom strategies. Creativity in our professional lives, I think, can be encouraged in much the same ways. Risk taking needs to be encouraged. A 1986 study, "The Effective College President," found that effective leaders take more risks and encourage others to be creative as well. Risk taking is more an everyday frame of mind than a matter of gambling on big issues. Small risks include accepting and accommodating a certain amount of ambiguity, trying out untried approaches to problems, thinking out loud, and trying out ideas before they are fully formed. Divergent thinking is the ability to see concepts and problems in a new way, to raise further questions that illuminate. It is the antithesis of leaping to the solution before the problem is fully understood. One of the most powerful and effective faculty committees on my campus spends a substantial amount of time without a formal agenda, "just sharing ideas and concerns." For some committees, this might be wasted time; in this case, it sets the tone for wide-ranging and divergent thought on important issues.

The link between humor and creativity is fairly well documented. I am struck by the number of meetings I attend in the library, in the university, and in the profession where there is little if any humor expressed and where playfulness is unheard of. The message that appears written in the dust in *Jitterbug Perfume* comes to mind: "Lighten up!"

If librarians are to move successfully into what is clearly an uncertain future, we must be able to do more than react and adapt to our changing environment. We need also to get ahead of the game and shape the future according to our own visions. This can only be accomplished by looking at the present from fresh perspectives, envisioning possible futures, and then deciding what we are working toward. Only then can we learn *how* to shape and direct our future.

"Fostering Creativity and Innovation" is the ACRL presidential theme this year. It is my hope that by focusing in this direction ACRL programs and activities can help us think about creativity in our professional lives, in our jobs, and in the association. By thinking and talking about it, we may also move toward possessing that quality of mind.

JOANNE R. EUSTER,
ACRL PRESIDENT 1987-88

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