

A Holiday in Scotland – Opportunities for Creative Self-Expression

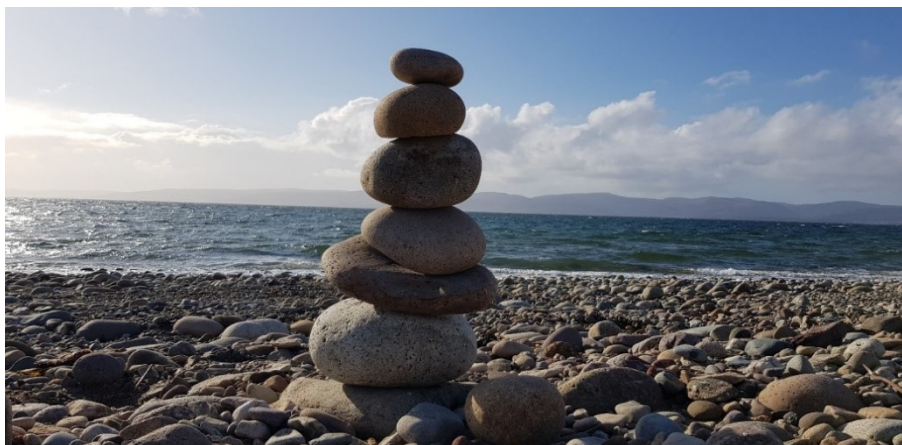
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Contexts & circumstances

I am much taken with the idea that we are ecological beings and that our creativity is derived from our purposeful interactions with the world around us. The desire to express ourselves is often triggered by feelings we are having when we are experiencing something. In early March I was on holiday with my wife in northwest Scotland where the landscapes and seascapes are absolutely stunning. Not surprising for early March the weather was mixed but in wandering through the wonderful unfolding vistas I felt an impulse to do something. I had my sketchpad and paints with me but I felt that I wanted to do something more visceral. I began to look at the landscape differently, rather than 'just' taking in the spectacular vistas I searched for ways in which I could make something.



The road on the west of Arran hugs the coast and driving past one boulder strewn beach I was struck by the idea of building a tower of stones. So we stopped the car and I went onto the beach with the specific intention of making a small tower. I spent time searching for stones that I could stack, and I took care in balancing the stones until I thought I had reached a point where I was happy with my tower. I wanted a record of my tower so I spent a while finding good angles to capture images



through photographs and video clips of my tower. As I composed my photograph I gained new perspectives on the landscape as I included different combinations of sea, sky and beach in my frame. The whole experience of making my tower and photographing and filming it lasted

perhaps 20 minutes, but that time filled me with pleasure and a sense of wonder. More than this I felt in making the tower I had expressed the joy I felt by being in that place.

Over the next 5 days as we toured the west coast of Scotland and the Isle of Skye, I made five more towers and went through a similar set of processes and feelings each time in each location. Each location sampled the beauty and geology of a particular land or seascape. I was once a geologist so a part of my interest and curiosity when visiting any place is to try to read the landscape. It was therefore natural for me to try to identify the types of rocks I was using in my tower and to think about the geology of the landscape in which I was 'playing'. It seemed natural to give geological

meaning to my structures. For example, on Arran my towers were made from granite, in Glencoe I built a tower from the Ballachulish slate, on the Isle of Skye I built three towers



from quartzite, rhyolite and basalt. In each case the rocks gave the tower a distinctive appearance and character. I decided these 'mini monuments' honoured the geology of the particular landscapes I had chosen from all the other landscapes that were available to me.

In building the towers I created physical artefacts but these were only available to me for the time I



spent with them. I had the photographs but I knew I could do more with the materials so I decided to make a short movie (using windows movie maker) from the images and video clips I had collected. I often make short movies of my garden so the technique was familiar to me. I searched for and found some beautiful atmospheric Celtic Uilleann pipe music on YouTube and used the music to create a deeper emotional response to the images. I then uploaded my movie to my YouTube channel

and shared it with family and friends through WhatsApp. You can watch it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc1v8XbTVTE>

The final stage of this unfolding journey has been to write this article to tell the story and use it to try to gain a better understanding of what creative self-expression means. Initially it started as a blog on my website after I returned from my holiday, it has now morphed into an article containing a new descriptive tool to aid self-evaluation of self-expression. The tool was developed as I reflected on the story in the light of the #creativeHE discussion. In this way it relates and joins up different parts of my life.

Some reflections on this example of my creative self-expression

We often read creativity backwards – here is the product of self-expression how did it come about? We trace the steps backwards and it all seems to make sense. The reality is rather different. When you begin to express yourself you don't know where it will lead – we experience creativity moving forwards through our life - it's an emergent phenomenon. Carl Rogers's points out, "We must face the fact that the individual creates primarily because it is satisfying to him."¹ Paul Klieman captures the idea of self-expression quite well, "*when we do something, make something, say something, write something, create something that originates in the inner core of our being and is expressed unfiltered by social conventions.*"² But I would add to "*when we do something in response to something*". The desire to do something is driven by feelings/emotions that grow out of our interactions with our social, cultural, material environment. It's the psychological environment created in response to something that provides the motivation for action and frames the search for ideas on how to act. The urge to express myself as I drove through the landscape was compelling. The idea of building a tower was simple, quick and easy and the fact it wasn't raining helped. I didn't need to think 'what medium should I use'? The medium was the materials of the beach and the camera on my phone. My actions satisfied my desire to be amongst the rocks on the beach. And when I had built and photographed my tower, I felt satisfied: I had expressed myself.

I had never built rock towers in the landscape before so the idea and act was novel to me but it did not require much effort or skill to build the tower. While the building of the tower did not feel creative in itself, photographing them and then making a movie did. Creativity for me was not so much in the individual things I did as in the whole project that involved weaving ideas, actions and experiences together to make the synthesis movie and later this narrative. These then become part of a larger body of work (e.g. the movies I have made, the articles I have written exploring creativity). Creative self-expression does not stop at the making of an artefact: the what has been done and learnt is always available to be related and connected to something bigger. One view of creative self-expression is that it is nothing more than finding affordances (opportunities for action) in an environment. Indeed, Withagen and van der Kamp offer an interesting definition of creativity as *“the discovery and creation of unconventional affordances (action possibilities) of objects and materials”*^{3 p.1}.

Once we have an idea and we decide to act upon it we read the environment in ways that allow us to find opportunities that will enable us to realise the idea. I have recently been reading an article by Eric Rietveld & Julian Kiverstein called ‘A Rich Landscape of Affordances⁴’, in which they develop a much richer concept of affordance than I have hitherto appreciated. Gibson’s classic concept of affordances⁵ is generally understood as possibilities for action provided to an animal by their environment but ER&JK argue that affordance is related to particular individuals with particular capabilities, and motivated by their concerns, who engage with their environment in particular social-cultural settings and practices and select from a wealth of possibilities for action from a small field of affordances that they act upon.

Seeing creativity as an individual’s way of perceiving, being motivated by and acting upon a specific set of affordances in their particular environment makes sense to me. In my story, my wandering through the Scottish landscape created an impulse – a desire to do something in and with the landscape. The idea of making small towers in and from the landscape came to me as I wondered how I might express myself in the amazing landscape we journeyed through. The landscape was full of rocks and they were easily accessible, so it is not surprising the idea came to use them. The towers were quick and relatively easy to make and the act of constructing and photographing them satisfied my impulse to act. Out of the massive landscape that was available to me I selected a particular place that was not always easy to access – perhaps it solicited me and I utilised the materials in the place or within perhaps 20 meters of my tower. What I did was novel to me I haven’t made stone towers in the landscape before. Neither have I seen others doing it so I guess I might claim its non-normative behaviour. The making of the towers required little skill other than finding stones that could be placed on top of each other without falling over. Perhaps there was meaning in the way I placed the towers in the local landscape, and I also tried to photograph or video them in a way that captured their presence and aesthetic meaning. If there was skill in the process of making it was in the making of the movie that wove together the scenes I had created enhancing the aesthetic meaning through the music I had chosen to accompany the scenes.

Finally, I might add that while writing this account and making explicit to myself the process I went through I realised that it created an opportunity to develop a tool or framework to evaluate it as an act of creative self-expression. This is a backwards recognition as in truth the tool evolved with the account and the process of self-evaluation – in other words new affordance emerged through the very act of creation and not after the event.

But nothing would have been brought into existence without me being moved to act by my experience of being in this landscape and being solicited by affordances that enabled me to express a little of how I felt by making these small stone towers. So everything is linked and the one would not have happened without the other.

Table 1 My subjective evaluation of my own creative self-expression

1. The context, circumstances, affordances, mediums & media for creative self-expression					
Context & circumstances: I was inspired/motivated to make some small stone towers by the awesome scenery while on holiday in the Scottish Highlands. I also photographed and filmed them and then made a movie and this narrative.					
Affordances (opportunities for action): in the landscape and the materials of the landscape					
Mediums & media: the materials of the landscape, photographs, video, moviemaker, WhatsApp, YouTube, writing					
2. Estimated mix of contexts/approaches to learning, doing & creating					
100/0	80/20	60/40	40/60	20/80	100/0
Formal					Informal
Individual					Collaborative
Directed					Self-Directed
Planned - <i>following a plan or design</i>					Emergent
Motivation – <i>extrinsic</i>					Motivation – <i>intrinsic</i>
Motivated <i>by need</i>					Motivated <i>by interest</i>
Problem solving or solution finding					Playing or improvising
Cognitive (my evaluation tool)					Emotional
Imagination – <i>use of an existing idea</i>					Imagination - <i>my own idea</i>
Something I have done before					Something I did for first time
3. Subjective evaluation of creativity judged against my own norms/experiences					
Elements of the process of creative self-expression	1 <i>little</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>very creative</i>
1 The idea of making towers					
2 Locating and making the towers					
3 Photographing and videoing the towers					
4 Making the movie in movie maker					
5 The whole process woven together					
6 My story and sense making					
7 Development of this tool					
4. The value of the experience & outcomes to me					
Value of your creative self-expression to you	1 <i>small</i>	2	3	4	5 <i>great value</i>
Novelty - <i>new perspectives, new ways of thinking / doing (new skills)</i>		A			
Artefacts – production of <i>new objects/tools</i>		B1		B2	
Usefulness – <i>fulfils a practical need</i>		C			
Aesthetic – <i>fulfils emotional needs</i>			D		
Other?					
5. The audience for my creative self-expression					
Me and only me					
Me and a small number of other people (e.g. my friends and family)					E
Me and other people e.g. making it available through an article or website					F
Me and many other people e.g. posting on social media and actively promoting it					
Me and people working in my field / organisation					G
Me and people in the future who might be interested					H

NOTES

A- a way of perceiving, interacting with and representing the landscape

B1 photographs, movie, B2 narrative & self-evaluation tool

B- providing a flavour of the holiday; a process/experience to describe and learn from

D - gives me pleasure every time I see and hear it – it's uplifting

E – initially I made it for myself, wife and other members of my family.

F - I posted the movie in my YouTube channel which I use to populate my own website with my own movies.

G – The #creativeHE conversation created a new context within which I could make use of the story. I wrote the article and undertook this analysis to share my understandings with other people in my field.

I - This account will be included in Creative Academic Magazine so it will be available to future generations

Self-evaluation

In the interests of trying to understand the idea of creative self-expression I developed a framework or tool (Table 1) to evaluate my own creativity and used my story to evaluate it. This framework is of course entirely subjective and my generalised ratings on a 5 point scale are based on my perceptions, my norms – my previous experiences of what I have judged to be creative. *“Self-assessments are notoriously unreliable but CSA’s [Creativity Self-Assessments] should be considered exactly what they are: self-reported activities, evaluations, and beliefs about people’s own creativity abilities, process, or the construct itself,” “but CSAs can offer information and insights beyond performance-based measures.”*⁶

My belief about creativity is captured in exquisite detail in Carl Rogers concept of a creative process: *“the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other.”*¹ My rock towers were for me a novel relational product growing out of my uniqueness as a person (my history as a geologist being an important element) interacting with the materials that were ready to hand in the circumstances of my life. Echoing the words of another of my heroes, John Dewey – I encountered an environment engaged me emotionally, I did something to it and it did something back to me – it changed me. *“When we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return.”*⁷ p46

The self-evaluation tool (Table 1) is divided into five sections. The first describes the contexts and circumstances for creative self-expression including the environment in which it was enacted, the affordances for action and the mediums and media through which it was expressed.

The second section identifies the mix of approaches used to learning, doing and creating together with the sources of motivation and the cognitive/psychological environment in which creativity emerged.

The third section identifies the elements in the process of self-expression. In this example I identify 6 elements including the synthesis (the whole process as it was woven together) and this story which has become part of this process. I try to rate each element in terms of what I felt was creative. In the fourth section of the template I try to evaluate the value to me of the overall act of self-expression in terms of production of novelty, artefacts, and the usefulness and aesthetic value of the experience and outcomes.

The fifth section evaluates whether the act was entirely for myself or whether the products of the act were shared with others.

The intention is to use the structure and prompts in the tool to focus attention on the detail of sustained acts of creative self-expression. The rough profile that is created facilitates a deeper understanding of the dynamics and outcomes of a process of creative self-expression. It is of course entirely subjective, but as Carl Rogers’ points out it is important for people to develop the critical faculty to evaluate themselves. *“Perhaps the most fundamental condition of creativity is that the source or locus of evaluative judgment is internal. The value of his product is, for the creative person, established not by the praise and criticism of others, but by himself. Have I created something satisfying to me?... If to the person it has the “feel” of being “me in action,” of being an actualization of potentialities in himself which heretofore have not existed and are now emerging into existence, then it is satisfying and creative, and no outside evaluation can change that fundamental fact.”*¹

I encourage you to try using the tool on your own acts of creative self-expression and I welcome feedback and suggestions for improving it. A word version can be downloaded from my website : <http://www.normanjackson.co.uk/creative-academic> Blog post 15/04/20 Evaluating our own acts of creative self-expression

Acknowledgements

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Sources

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