

Preface

For a long time, scientists have been wondering how the original inhabitants of Eastern Island produced and raised those famous giants on the beach, with their faces directed towards the ocean, some 700 years ago. Without the use of modern technology, this seemed an almost impossible task and science saw itself confronted with an unsolvable riddle. That is, until the anthropologist, Thor Heyerdahl, had the luminous idea to ask the inhabitants themselves who promptly responded, “yes of course, we will give you a demonstration”. Since then, we know that it is possible to carve these giants and to raise them on the beach without modern means, using only patience, wisdom and strength and give them an expression that seems to say: “Any idea how I got here?”

Creativity is closely associated with these giant statues on the beach of Eastern Island, just as creativity itself also seems to stare us in the face, asking: ”Any idea, how I got here?” with an ambiguous look that doesn’t display an easy path for scientists, who want to let Science speak without giving a voice to those who live and work with Creativity.

Well, this is what Helga Hohn did; she let those who live and work with creativity tell their stories. Not like Thor Heyerdahl, first making a boat out of Papyrus to visit and live with old cultures of the oceans, but by using another tool made out of paper, a questionnaire, to look up specialists of our own culture and to let them speak.

In first place, of course, she can speak for herself, as Helga Hohn is an experienced practitioner in the field of creativity. After studying clinical psychology at the University of Leiden, she engaged in a management training function in an extremely recreative (in the sense of restoring) environment, a prison. She later, as an independent trainer and consultant contributed to the creative capacity of many people. I did not even mention her active ballet training and playing the piano in small performances. Yet it is these personal endeavours in and love for creativity, which are the first and possibly most important inspiration for her research, and thus for this book.

But that wasn’t all. As befits a disciplined mind, and before making a questionnaire tour around the specialists, she surveyed the knowledge and experience in the domain of group dynamics and creativity as it has been condensed in the scientific literature of the last hundred years. In doing this, she concentrated on three fields in particular: developmental psychology and psycho dynamics, group dynamics, and creative climate in innovative teams. It is really fascinating to see how the authors in these different fields utilise their personal perspectives on the subject of creativity, while at the same time it became obvious how non-sensical a singular approach to the subject would be. The ability of Hohn to uncover each of these three perspectives, while at the same time connecting them in her research, is impressive. Some of the literature surveys can even be used as standards in a strict academic sense. For example, the overview of ‘small groups and teams’ from 1898 until 1998 is, without doubt, the best work I have seen in this area and can definitely be recommended to any teacher who wants to offer an overview of this subject to his or her students.

Then, it is the turn of the experienced specialists to speak. Seventy five specialists, both male and female, subdivided in five professional groupings: facilitators, innovation managers, artistic leaders, technical project leaders and, yes, again, social scientists. These knowledgeable people were questioned systematically and had their answers rigorously compared. The issues they were questioned about arose from the surveyed theories and from the specialists themselves. Some fascinating differences came to the surface, but the most interesting finding was the agreement between the views of the practitioners. Apparently, specialist leaders from different fields have rather similar ideas on how to allow some latitude (free room) in concert with practical constraints, in order to stimulate creativity. I will not give away these differences and correspondences here, as this is well structured and clearly presented in this book.

The work of Hohn is built around two *Leitmotivs*. On the one hand, an appreciation and great respect for the tacit knowledge of reflective practice, and on the other hand, a deep understanding of the socially constructed character of our social reality. Although the two are not independent, I'll start with the first one.

In academia, one often sees the knowledge and experience of practice as subordinate and sometimes even contrary to science. To myself, and of course to Helga Hohn, this seems to be an important mistake. Of course, one needs to push the boundaries in an academic sense, by doing *in vitro* research, but the insight gained from knowingly acting or actively knowing, should not be put aside. In fact, even 'in vitro' research is a practice, which can only be learned and passed on to following generations through participative operation or collaboration. So, why shouldn't we 'feed' our understanding of social practice, whether within the family, school, church, a company or the army, in other words, this hidden knowledge and practical expertise in an institutional setting, to pass it on to following generations? Books which make such an attempt – and I would say this is one of them – deserve a special place in our libraries, not just at home, but also in places of learning, not to mention the professional world in which this knowledge is practiced.

The other *Leitmotiv* in this book, social constructionism, deserves a separate elaboration, as there are rather contradictory opinions about this subject, ranging from blind hatred to blind adherence, which are not always based on precise and well thought through arguments. In fact, the theoretical basis for social constructionism is extremely simple: it is about transferring the founding principles of meaning (which we often address by the term 'formal object' in the social sciences) from the individual to the interaction between individuals. Of course, individuals, with their brains and atoms, are necessary to create meaning, but it is not these atoms or brain cells that develop into the meaning, but the social co-ordination between individuals, each with their own brains and atoms. The illusion of individuality, which we so easily consider to be a sufficient condition, instead of a necessary condition, for creating meaning, arises from the simple fact that we memorise and reproduce our *social coordinations* as if these were some personal discovery of knowledge contained in nature itself. Well, the appreciation, that these quasi-individual forms of knowledge are anchored, in a

socio-genetical and socio-cultural sense, in the interactions between individuals, that is, in short, the epistemological principle of social constructionism.

Many, somewhat classically oriented social scientists, believe that ‘social constructionism’ is the opposite of scientific activity, an ‘anything goes’ attitude. However, this is pure nonsense, coming from a prejudiced or even completely uninformed reaction to some label. In fact, social constructionism is exactly the opposite of ‘anything goes’ because knowledge and truth are anchored in socially transferable knowledge within communities (including the scientific community), instead of some stated truth outside of the community. The misunderstanding also lies in the common methodology of science, for example the principle that ‘to measure is to know’. Yet measuring is by definition a standard of *extensivity*, for instance length or time, which fits into some particular variable. The same is true for the ‘number’ of people with a particular thought, as the number of people is also an *extensivity*, or something we can express numerically. But, from the moment we want to learn from these people, in other words, understand the ‘meaning’ they want to express, we must use words and sentences, and in particular, we will have to speak their language. Meaning implies intent, and it is not without reason that people, as long as they have existed, express magnitude in numbers and intentions in words, even intentions that relate to numbers. This last issue is, by the way, one of the most fascinating conclusions of formal logic. As Goedel demonstrated convincingly, each attempt to express statements about numbers completely and consistently in numbers is always doomed to fail, as these will always lead to statements, which are both true and false, in other words contradictions. So, when Hohn uses figures in her book to speak ‘about’ the meanings expressed by people, it is not to understand what they say, but to indicate ‘how many’ express some particular meaning. Her conclusions are based on both forms of knowledge, how many and what, with an emphasis on the last.

Finally, one more remark. Nothing is more fascinating than to be allowed to participate in the creative play of someone like Helga Hohn, who not only possesses the capacity to play creatively, but also fully masters the foundations of music. As a fellow musician in her small dialogic orchestra, I have had the pleasure to experience this for a number of years. I hope you will read this book with the same pleasure, and that you will be inspired to discuss it with your colleagues.

I wish you pleasant reading!

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Playing, Leadership and Team Development of Innovative Teams

A Reflection on Theory Confronted with the Perspective of Experienced Leaders

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