

Between You and Me – Researching the Creative Process in 21st Century Canadian National Animation

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This research focuses on animation as practiced in the National Film Board of Canada, whose mandate is to record and preserve Canadian identity. Animation is considered a best practice in which to examine dimensions of creativity frequently omitted in cognitive research.

Cognitive research into creativity is problematic. Most researchers study creativity in the laboratory or as an individual mental process. On the other hand, selecting a creative expert typically is based on his/her standing among peers. Moreover, authentic design practices are frequently collaborative.

This paper addresses some of the issues that continue to hamper understanding real-world creativity, suggesting that a more integrative framework is needed to describe “creative” as a complex phenomenon in a social practice. The framework is based on an elaboration of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, particularly as developed in Russia and Finland (Vygotsky, Leontev, Engestrom). I build on key theoretical and methodological commitments of CHAT – the interplay between cultural historical goals and individual actions, mediating tools, socially validated outcomes, resolution of tensions between core elements in the activity. Thus, creativity is this viewed as emerging from and responding to these core tensions.

This paper is based on a longitudinal (18-month study) with six animators and producers. My core question is what and how the animators and producers themselves define as creativity through the animation process. In particular, two key and interrelated features emerge: the impact of rapidly changing technologies on the animation process, the tensions between engaging individual creativity within the context of national cinema.