The two faces of creativity or an interstellar ox hunt
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There is an old story from China about a farmer who lost his ox. The ox ran off into a forest and the farmer ran after him with a harness. But the more the farmer chased him, the further the ox ran. After exhausting himself the frustrated farmer tried a new strategy. He stood very still with some fresh grass in his hand pretending not to be at all interested in the ox. When he had almost given up all hope he felt the ox's muzzle in his hand. Quickly he put on the harness and led the ox home.

This story describes two different approaches to solving a problem, one is attacking it directly the other is stepping back from it and just waiting. In this case the waiting was more successful. This might seem a strange strategy but there are many examples of it in descriptions of the creative process. Einstein wrote that his best ideas came to him in dreamlike states. He thought up the theory of relativity when sickness forced him to stop working and go to bed for few days. Beethoven similarly claimed that his best work came to him in dreams.

Creativity is a contradictory notion. On the one hand many people see it as being about individuality and freedom from rules and judgements. On the other hand we use the term creativity almost exclusively in relation to products that we value. Models of creativity tend to be celebrated high achievers, Einstein and Beethoven for example, whose work was not only original but also of excellent quality. With this in mind the government are keen to promote more creativity in the curriculum. Their thinking seems to be that if the education system can produce more creative people, then Britain PLC will be able to compete more effectively in the global marketplace.

It could be that the apparent contradiction between these two views of creativity - one as a kind of freedom and the other as a route to success - reflects the double nature of creativity itself. In the story I began with, the farmer had to learn not to try to catch his ox in order, in fact, the better to catch it. Similarly being creative sometimes seems to involve suspending all prior judgements, just playing aimlessly, and waiting for connections to emerge. It is as if one part of the mind, the conscious and controlling part, sometimes needs to be quiet in order for us to listen to ideas that emerge from another part of the mind - a part that has been called the unconscious. Creativity occurs when these two parts of the mind work together: the one to set up goals and criteria for their achievement, the other to mysteriously generate unexpected solutions.

The late Douglas Adams provided an image of the double nature of creativity. His best known book 'The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy' features a space ship powered by an 'infinite improbability drive'. The ship travels by disappearing from its current location while simultaneously re-appearing elsewhere in the galaxy. It does this through first setting co-ordinates for a goal state, then suspending reality entirely and generating an infinite number of improbable alternatives, finally the alternative reality that best corresponds to the goal state is selected for and a leap across the universe is achieved. 'Infinite improbability' alone would leave the ship everywhere at once and so no-where in particular. In my view this is like leaving a child to play
indefinitely with no direction and no assessment. However harnessing the power of infinite improbability within a mechanism that first sets up goals and then assesses according to these goals produces an extraordinarily effective form of interstellar travel. This is the challenge of bringing creativity into the curriculum: how to combine targets and criteria for assessing their attainment with the opening up of spaces where something mysterious - infinite improbability perhaps - can enter in.