

Play as problem solving tool at work: The case of a graphic design centre

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ABSTRACT

Though considerations about work and leisure have traditionally been made separately, the distinction between these two worlds has become less clear in recent years and perceptions about how the «worker» is conceived are changing. As the coming together of these two worlds is commonly seen in creative workers, this paper intends to discover more about the problem-solving tools such workers use. The information used in this study was compiled using an ethnographic study carried out for nine months at a graphic design center in Spain. Two of the core pillars that help to explain the modus operandi of the creative professionals who work at the center are the concepts of humour and play. Components traditionally associated with leisure were used as tools in the exercise of their daily profession, resulting in the production of large doses of creativity and resourceful thinking.

KEY WORDS

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY; WORKPLACE; PLAY; CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING.

RESUMEN

Históricamente el trabajo y el ocio han sido valorados por separado, pero actualmente se está produciendo un cambio en la concepción del trabajador, ya que no hay una distinción clara entre estos dos mundos. Estos modos de trabajar son más frecuentes en aquellos trabajadores creativos, por lo que el interés de este artículo es conocer cuáles son las herramientas que utilizan en la resolución de sus problemas en

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el trabajo. El alcance de esta información se ha llevado por medio de una etnografía realizada durante nueve meses en un centro de diseño gráfico en España. Dos de los pilares fundamentales que explican el funcionamiento de los trabajadores creativos del centro visitado son los conceptos de humor y juego. Estos componentes, tradicionalmente relacionados con el ocio, se traducen en herramientas que utilizan en su diario profesional y les generan grandes dosis de creatividad aplicada y pensamiento resolutivo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

ESTUDIO ETNOGRÁFICO; LUGAR DE TRABAJO; JUEGO; SOLUCIÓN CREATIVA DE PROBLEMAS.

INTRODUCTION

The analogy of play is gaining in popularity in contemporary social theory and entails considering certain behaviour as kinds of play (Geertz, 1977). For many years, studies about play and games have mainly centered on the material and equipment used rather than on aspects related to their characteristics, rules, nature or the satisfaction that they produce (Caillois, 2001). Similarly, «the study of play varies across cultural and geographical regions and in the ways, scholars observe and interpret its nature and value» (Frost, 2012, p. 117). Recent studies on «employee empowerment, motivation, and integration in accelerating innovative efforts has concentrated attention upon innovation and originality» (Falih Bannay, *et al.*, 2020, p. 480).

As for the relationship between play and creativity, Pope (2005) wondered whether creativity is a form of play and, if this is so, at what point are rules broken or a completely new game created when «playing the game». He also considered whether creating things involves some type of ordering and in that case, where does that order come from and how and when is it dissolved? As pointed out by Pope (2005), Plato made a careful distinction between play (*paedia*) and game (*ludus*) in ancient Greek society, noting that the first was an activity for children, with no structure of rules and goals, whereas the second was just the opposite. From the 18th century onwards, the concept of «play» began to be reevaluated and even to acquire greater prominence than «game». As Winnicott suggested (Pope, 2005, p. 119), creativity is an aspect of an ordinary healthy life that is playful by its nature. According to this consideration, as Bateson and Martin argued (Pellegrini, 2014, p. 93), is important to distinguish between play and «playful play» and creativity and innovation:

Play is defined... according to the following criteria: It is intrinsically motivated, it serves no immediate goal, and ideas and behaviours occur in novel, abbreviated, and incomplete forms and combinations; it occurs in stress free environments. Playful play, for the authors, is characterized by a «positive mood» which links it to creativity, or generating novel ideas and behaviours and novel combinations of extant ideas and behaviours; in contrast to creativity, innovation involves the implementation of those ideas... and involves persistence and analyses.

A review of literature based on team creativity identified the synergetic process of the information elaboration (van Knippenberg, 2004), such as the exchange, discussion, the selection of the best ideas, among other aspects. In teams with creative members, «the more outgoing advice ties to other members of the team the most creative member has, the better

this member is positioned to disseminate his or her creative contributions to the rest of the team, and to get these to be adopted by the team» (Yuan and van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 7). The creative work cannot be controlled by managing the amount of time, and creativity cannot be activated or deactivated in pre-established moments (Florida, 2010).

In relation to the above, creativity could be considered as a fusion between work and play. By explaining the underlying meaning of «play», Winnicott (1971) considered that playing is the way in which an individual, whether child or adult, can be creative and fully use his or her own personality. In the same extent, he added that the way an individual discovers his or her own self is per se a creative act. According to Knight (1933), many of the motivations that an individual has are related to «the game spirit». Whatever the «game» may be, he added, there is an absolute need to keep in mind some aim (getting an education, learning a skill at some art, making money, etc.), even though these objectives are often seized upon at random. As though it were a game, one's social life becomes a driving force, though many prefer to achieve their goals alone. For McLuhan (2001, p. 255), games, like institutions, are «the extensions of the social man and the political body». Recent research explains, through the concept of «organic fun», the contribution to «the development of relationships between the worker and the organization and to the promotion of good physical and mental health» (Freeman and Tonkin, 2019, p. 133).

In the present research, play is an important tool in the development of a professional context, and it appears as a part of the creative process. In this sense, Csikszentmihályi (1998) draw up five key steps. The creative work of creative professionals are preparation period (unconsciously or consciously a series of questions emerge in the professional), incubation period (ideas are under «threshold of consciousness»), the moment of intuition (possible answer or solution), evaluation, (the professional decides if their intuition is correct or not worth wasting time), and elaboration (the part that involves more time and work).

The workers developing their activities through the virtual world characterizes this context. Recent studies related to the fusion of Internet and technology in the workplace environment explain the influence of the physical characteristics of workplaces on aspects linked to office effectiveness (Nappi and De Campos Ribeiro, 2020). This happens in high-tech industries companies where there are lower levels of structural rigidity or rules (Miller, 2014) and in creative professions such as high-tech sectors (Florida, 2010). The same happens in enterprises characterized by an innovative culture that is open to new ideas and changes (Lurie, 2019) and in

cultural contexts where democracy and empowerment in the work setting is extended (Yuan and Woodman, 2021). In the same way, other studies in similar workplaces shows that «the Internet is a tool on which the workers are very dependent, but which at the same time makes them more broad-minded, adaptable, and flexible, enabling them to react to changing situations» (Serrano-Martínez, 2016, p. 148).

METHODOLOGY

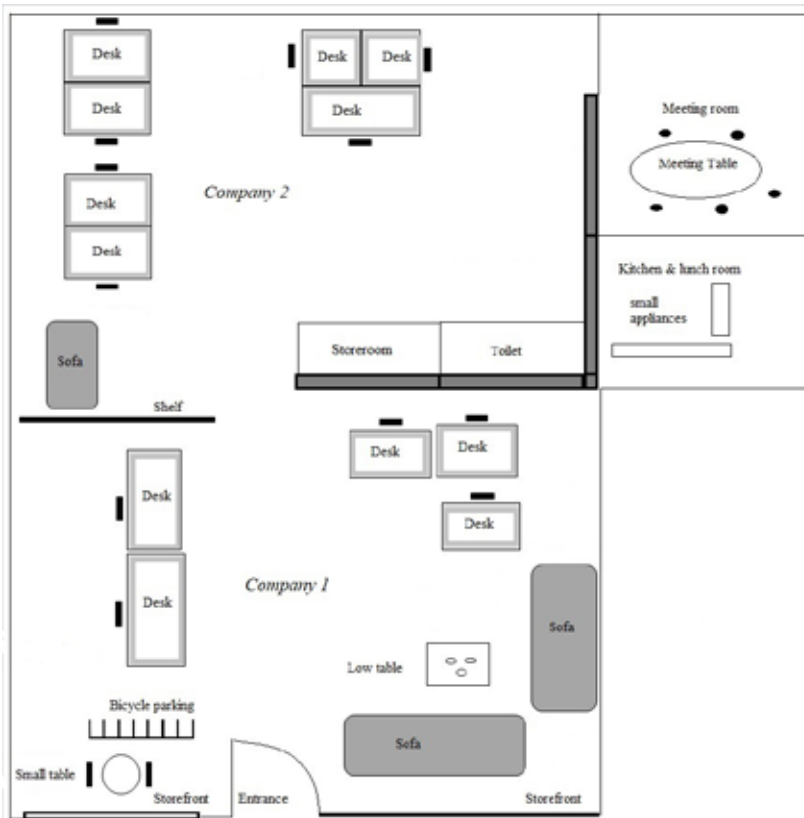
For uncovering the radically ambiguous nature of creativity and, despite this, its usefulness in the organization of work in the new economy, an ethnographic study was carried out at a center of creative workers. When selecting the creative professions, the occupational classification of Florida (2002) which includes both designers and programmers as creative professionals, was followed. As explained by Hammersley and Atkinson (1994, p. 15), an ethnographic study comprises a method or set of methods in which the principal characteristic is that the researcher participates in the daily life of the people over a prolonged period, observing what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions.

The study was carried out in 2013 over a nine-month period at a work centre located in Zaragoza (Spain). Over the same period, the profiles of the participants were also followed in social networks like Facebook and Twitter, using a netnography (Kozinets, 2010). Most of the professionals working at the centre were web designers, graphic designers, and programmers. Twelve people, eleven men and one woman, shared this workspace daily. Curiously, the correlation between gender and creativity has been recently studied. As different authors explain: «it is striking that men reported both more creativity support and creative behaviour than women across all industries» (Taylor, *et al.*, 2020, p. 459). Occasional contributions to the study came from other sources, including a marketing specialist, a clerk and cleaning staff. All workers were aged 25 to 35 and the work centre had been in operation for less than five years. Their target market was wide ranging, with activities undertaken at local, regional, national and international level. The idiosyncratic nature of the work involved made such different geographical scales workable, as there was no need for physical displacement of the creative workers whose basic tool of communication and work was the Internet.

It is a creative workplace with different communication and exchange flows; characteristic of places with high doses of creativity (Taggar, 2002; Harvey and Kou, 2012; Freeman and Tonkin, 2019; Yuan and van Knippenberg, 2020; Abdulla Alabbasi, 2020; Yuan and Woodman, 2021). Two

different companies with different projects shared the office space. The five workers of Company 1 occupied the front area and the seven workers of Company 2 were at the back of the room. Freelance workers also collaborated or worked on occasions with one or other of the two companies. Both companies share common resources and spaces as: sofas, bicycle parking, toilet, meeting room, storeroom, kitchen and lunchroom. The office was «imaginary divided» into two spaces, though there was no door to create an actual physical separation, and the companies arranged the workplaces in an inverted U-shape.

Figure 1. Main elements of the workspace



Source: created by the author

The ethnography and the netnography (Hammersley y Atkinson, 1994; Kozinets, 2010) have been analysed by the principal ideas of play, virtual world, use of the technology, humour and the fusion of work and play, as appear in recent studies about creative workplaces (Serrano-Martínez, 2016). In addition, these research methodologies focus their attention on

the flows that occur in creative work teams. In this way, the review of the scientific literature on creative work teams increased.

Laughter and play: playing at creating and creating when playing

Play should be defined as a free and voluntary activity, as well as a source of fun and joy. It is something that takes place in a particular space, with specific limits, isolated and protected from the rest of life (Caillois, 2001, p. 6). However, in this study not only are there no such clearly defined boundaries for play but play itself forms part of work and work is part of play. When ideas, suggestions and situations that arise at work are treated with laughter and humour, work and play become almost indistinguishable. For creative play and cultural experience, Winnicott (1971, p. 104) assigned a privileged position to «transitional space», since the place occupied in an abstract sense is the space where we spend most time when «experiencing life».

Our study participants make humour applicable to some details of their creations, as when they decide to give names to the servers and use the names of famous football players. One of the programmers asks them what they are doing and says «Wouldn't it be easier to just give them numbers?» The designers seek fun in their creations, as opposed to mere applicability. On another occasion, they are designing a website for a Mexican restaurant and comment that the bar design should target its publicity at the families and young people. They also think it is important that this information appears on social networks and to include photos of people who have been in the restaurant as an incentive for them to visit the website. Examples of other original ideas seen in the city are talked about and an internet search is made for a well-known place that serves giant hamburgers to attract customers.

At one point, they are working on an ingenious website that requires them to combine linguistic creativity, humour, design and programming. The website is an application that users can access, transform, and re-create with imaginative contributions and reinvented concepts that arise from something already in existence. The intrinsic humour of this website is a common factor in many of the creations of these creative workers and can have a significant effect on their success, in the same way as their design can enhance or hinder the ultimate result.

Some authors claimed that it depends principally on its surprise effect, which he called a «bisociative collision». To achieve this 'surprise' the humourist must have a «modicum of originality, the ability to break away from the stereotyped routines of thought» (Koestler, 1989, p. 91). Humour

may result in laughter which, as Batjín (1990, p. 95, 96) described it, is «a shameless reflex that can only appear in a creature whose reasoning has attained a degree of autonomy in the face of the urgency of its emotions which enables it to perceive that it has been tricked». However, laughter may be defined, the workplace of the creative professionals analysed in the present study is characterized by an environment which is impregnated with both laughter and good humour. This aspect is related to the role of a space characterized by an «organic fun» (Freeman and Tonkin, 2019, p. 133). Their activity is encapsulated more in the figure of *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1949) than of *homo laborans*, despite the fact this is their workplace. This is so because the characteristics of leisure and partying, or in other words the components most closely associated with play, are aspects that stand out from hierarchical or protestant work perceptions. Indeed, according to Huizinga (1949), human culture is born and develops from spontaneous play. In the ethnographic study conducted, both play and humour are constantly seen to result in laughter and a healthy working environment for task fulfilment. As McLuhan (2001) argued, we recover the integral person in fun and play, and so work production expands to include the intimate nature of the individual in union with the public nature of his or her work.

There are days when a problem arises and the tone of voice they use to speak about it is lower than usual. Such changes of mood can have a strong effect on the tone of voice they use to express the situations that arise because of a project under development. Nonetheless, the generally good humour at work can at least partly be put down to the fact that these creative professionals enjoy their work and can identify with it. Their profession also brings with it a social identity (as a designer/programmer), defined by some aspects of their work and considered by many to be 'alternative' in nature. That is, they offer up the idea that theirs is a fun and contemporary profession connected to different realities, people, the web (virtual world) and under a constant state of renewal to satisfy the demands of the new work that comes in. This virtual world, which somehow, they are living in, offers them an extension of their social capital that goes beyond the mere physical. Virtual connections can build social capital through the repertoire of existing connections. Moreover, work groups and teams maintain the understanding and trust that they have developed face-to-face through e-mail and other long-distance communications that do not entail any physical contact (Cohen, 2007). In addition to the above, nowadays, technology data also serves to «identify employees' social behaviour, physiological data and emotional estates associated with productivity» (Nappi and De Campos Ribeiro, 2020, p. 71).

Achieving catharsis through humour

Diverse studies explain that humour «promotes the interpersonal relationships and plays a positive role in promoting creativity of group members» (Amjed and Tirmzi, 2016, p. 594). In that sense, enterprises will give positive outcomes if workers feel relaxed and positive (Avey *et. Al.*, 2010). That's why affiliative humour encourages positive context in the companies which supports positive thinking (Huo, Lam and Chen, 2012).

The criteria of the humourist's technique are «originality or unexpectedness; emphasis through selection, exaggeration or simplification; and economy or implicitness which calls for extrapolation, interpolation and transposition» (Koestler, 1989, p. 96). Koestler (1989) suggested that the creative act connects dimensions of experience that were previously unrelated and this enables the attainment of a higher level of mental evolution. It constitutes an act of liberation or a type of catharsis in which originality supersedes habit. Habits are considered by Koestler (1989) to be the indispensable basis for the attainment of stability and ordered behaviour. As for catharsis, Vygotsky (Sannino and Ellis, 2014) argued that it involves transfiguration of the material and the emotional in their transcendence from the individual to the social.

The workers in the present study speak about problems that arise at work through humour and using anecdotes. To give a specific example, one day they are standing and chatting while one of them is making some tea, working but joking and laughing. A position is noticeable in their conversation of 'superiority' over their clients in terms of know-how. They ridicule them and comment on the faux pas they have made, the result of their ignorance about Internet related questions and the use of websites. The ease with which they can visualize the tasks they have to perform is clear. They joke about the clients' situation, commenting on how complaining is a habit for them and how they tend to create difficulties. They use jokes to outline a situation and downplay it, as though it were a cathartic resource. In this sense, play responds to the idea of McLuhan (2001, p. 264) in that these are artificial and controlled situations. Games are like extensions of group consciousness, the consequence of which is to allow a rest from the usual patterns of behaviour, as in the case described above.

This type of 'momentary working catharsis' seems to release them from some of the burdens involved in the different situations they have to deal with. It should also be said that they do not always discuss their problems or perceptions to receive advice or approval, but rather to let off steam or simply share them. In different conversations, they show their

disapproval of the behaviour of demanding clients. These clients are telling them to modify various aspects of the websites under design. What the workers want is productive time and they are not amused by having to deal with what they consider minor details. These ideas of humour and duty at work are related to the third of the ten traits found by Csikszentmihályi (1998) in creative persons. Creative people combine playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility. There is no question that a playfully light attitude is typical of creative individuals (Csikszentmihályi, 1998).

Intragroup functioning is based on complicity while the outward appearance of the company is more traditional and serious: their responses to clients are polite, company meetings are held as determined by collective agreements, calls from clients are dealt with and meetings with clients scheduled and attended in the correct manner. In brief, on the surface there is a politically correct image, but the way they act and behave internally is more informal, with lots of laughter, music playing as they work, swear words and jokes bandied around, they talk out loud about their lives and the issues they have, etc. This suggests there is a duplicity of being/doing which cuts straight across their two selves (external/internal). This duplicitous game of client-company and external-internal that has been observed is clearly explained through an adaptation of Johari’s window applied to the reality of worker-client relationships, as it makes clear the different aspects that these creative professionals know and see of themselves as well as those they do not. In the same way, the clients occupy the position of the ‘other’ by means of which they know and see aspects of these creative professionals.

Table 1. Johari's window applied to group functioning and group aspects publicly revealed to clients

Clients know, see	They know, see Efficient, decisive and polite <i>Free area</i>	They do not know, do not see Alternative, young and full of life <i>Blind area</i>
Clients do not know, do not see	Jokers, effective, use of informal language (swear words, colloquial expressions, etc.) <i>Hidden area</i>	Their relationalities are intense. In many cases they are friends as well as work colleagues <i>Unknown area</i>

Source: personal compilation

Jokes and wisecracks form a natural part of their conversations and their way of dealing with different issues. Seriousness in its pure form is something not observed among these work colleagues. The tone used in communication is cordial and friendly. Some are fonder of a laugh than others, but there is a pleasant working environment. Some of them

joke about the word «*WhatsApp*» and imitate people saying it. Wisecracks about sexual-related situations are very common. One of them mentions that the 500 gigabytes of his computer's hard drive have been used up and the others ask him if he has been downloading porn. In fact, one folder of 300 gigabytes was full of software applications and could not be erased. They speak quite naturally about subjects that, in many social contexts, would be considered taboo (excrement, sex, desires, etc.). The comments about sexuality made by these workers are wisecracks which Koestler (1989, p. 87) defined as primitive jokes about aggressive, vulgar, and sexual subjects which entail a minimum of ingenuity. He added that, even in this type of crude humour, emotions are being exploited in relation to admiration for the cleverness of a joke and satisfaction for the intelligence employed in 'getting' the joke. Attaining this level of communication requires mutual trust or intrinsic personal characteristics related to extroversion, a lack of inhibition and an open mind, etc. Indeed, this may be tied into the creative activity itself, in that not being afraid to make a fool of oneself may give rise to more and superior examples of ingenuity.

THE CREATIVE RESOLUTION OF PROBLEMS THROUGH PLAY

Play has to do with the enjoyment of activities and fun in the development of work, which leads to the realization of the production target. Also, recent studies show that «the role of play and playfulness in the workplace is increasingly seen as a means of encouraging creativity and innovation, as well as of enhancing motivation, commitment and job satisfaction» (Freeman and Tonkin, 2019, p. 133). In the same way, work process literature explains the impact of creativity flows when team members share information, exchange ideas and new perspectives, etc. (Taggar, 2002; Harvey and Kou, 2012; Yuan and van Knippenberg, 2020).

Enjoying an activity also depends on whether the structure allows a person's skills to match the demands of the environment, the control of that person's actions, the feedback received, etc. (Graef, 1975). The enjoyment of an activity can be understood through Csikszentmihályi's concept of flow (1975), which he also used in reference to the flow of activities and diversion. The traditional and commonly accepted distinction between work and leisure is no longer applicable. For Graef (1975), «flow activities» are arbitrary patterns that people use to give shape to their experience. They are arbitrary because they are not dependent on needs, and this freedom gives flow the potential to be the most creative and most satisfactory kind of experience. The most prominent key characteristic of flow is the sense of control over the environment (Csikszentmihályi, 1975).

Given that its appearance is usually unplanned, the role of play in resolving problems can be likened to a semi-subconscious tool. There exists in play the possibility of attaining various utopias. In relation to play as a semi-subconscious tool, it was Jung (1976) who first recognized that there were two sides to creativity, conscious design, and unconscious force. Jung suggested, «Every creative person is a duality or synthesis of contradictory aptitudes. On the one side he is a human being with a personal life, while on the other side he is an impersonal creative force» (Jung, 1976, p. 123). The conscious and unconscious occupy a position in popular contemporary thinking about creativity, and creativity arises fundamentally through unconscious processes (Pope, 2005).

As for play in communication, improvisation, and brainstorming figure strongly in the present study. Regarding improvisation, Fisher and Amabile (2009) proposed two distinctive characteristics; the preparation that precedes the improvisation process and stages that are «fluid», with the almost simultaneous presentation of a problem and generation and execution of an answer. What is interesting here is that questions and answers are given with the aim of understanding the nature of the problem. In this respect, Rickards (1988) made a distinction between close-ended and open-ended problems. The former is characterized by the asking of questions which follow the logical consequence of the nature of the problem, while with the latter the correct questions are not asked for different reasons, either because the problem is not well defined, because of a disagreement as to the nature of the problem, or because of the existence of different points of view among those who are taking part in the question-formulation process. It is the open-ended kind of problem that is most seen among creative types contributing strongly to the attainment of creativity as it transcends the habitual and gives rise to various interconnected questions without following a linear blueprint.

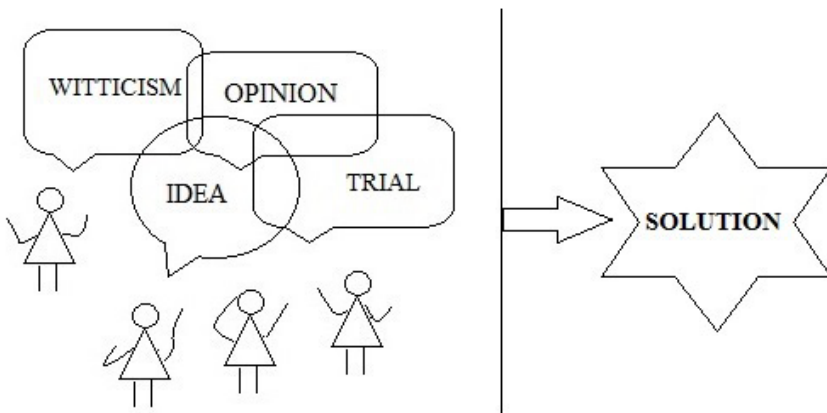
On many occasions, the workers in our study performed brainstorming activities spontaneously, without the need for a scheduled session. The purpose of this technique is to obtain the resolution of a problem through group collaboration. The modern origin of this technique has been attributed to Osborn (1953), who brought this method to popular attention in the middle of the last century in his book *Applied imagination*. However, this technique is in fact far older and was even being practiced in Asia over three thousand years ago (Rickards, 1988). For Amabile (1983, p. 190), the most important principle of brainstorming is the «deferment of judgment». Amabile (1983) argued that during the brainstorming process no member of the group, not even the person who suggested the idea, should criticize any idea that has been formulated. She also included a second

principle that the more ideas that are generated the more likely it is that one or more of them will be useful and original.

The advantage of organizations imbued with diversity and heterogeneity lies in the fact that such a variety of perspectives means that each idea or opinion of each member of the team will be considered to have validity. Specifically, workplace diversity improves creativity, flexibility, and innovation; and promotes «work and cost relationship effectively by using the better talent of employees» (Sri Handayani, *et al.*, 2017, p. 398). Various studies, as in the brainstorming experiment conducted by Larey (1994, quoted in Sawyer, 2011), have shown that groups choose between different ideas better than an individual person. There are different versions of this technique but, in all cases, those who practice it confirm the major benefits it confers (Rickards, 1988). The benefit gained is not just a commercial one, as during the search for solutions the participants gain enjoyment from sharing ideas and thereby generate an individual benefit. Csikszentmihályi (1990) reached similar conclusions in an artist-based study in which many creative individuals indicated that in their work the formulation of a problem was more important than its solution, arguing that «real advances in science and art tend to appear when new questions are asked, or old problems are viewed from a new angle» (p. 193). This is the case in the work centre on which the present study is based, where throwing opinions into the air forms part of their conversations in which they contribute ideas without meaning to do so. Using a very different argument, Sternberg (2006) claimed that to be creative it is first necessary to decide upon the creation of new ideas, analyze them and sell them to others. However, our workers share their ideas with no commercial purpose in mind, as there is a spirit of mutual help which is not based on monetary or commercial interests. For example, on one occasion one of the workers explains to his other colleagues that a particular Web domain is free but for some reason the application will not allow him to register it. He takes advantage of this to ask the opinion of his colleagues about the idea for the name that he has. One of them reckons he would use something else more closely related to home television and they all join in with a short debate about the name. This is an example of the spontaneous brainstorming spoken about previously. They attempt to give shape and detail to that which has been created, to perfect it through the conjunction of group-based opinions. This is an informal approach, in which those who believe they have something to say about the question at hand give their opinion. This conjunction of diverse know-how is what Rickards (1988) defined as «interpersonal skills», which are the basis of the work that is developed via brainstorming. The recipe of his «We Think» idea is based on a bal-

ance between three ingredients: participation, recognition, and collaboration, arguing that the «We Think» concept enables social creativity by the masses (Leadbeater (2008, p. 82). This creativity takes place when various participants, with different knowledge and points of view, come together and combine their capacities and tools for independent thinking to attain a common cause and shared aims. Teamwork can still be an «integral part of delivering creative outcomes when the creativity of these outcomes is driven by the most creative member's contributions» (Yuan and van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 4). The flows and exchanges that are observed are based on a set of individual ideas thrown into the pot and which, on being captured by the strength and mass of the group, generate an interconnected result that is enriched by collective contributions.

Figure 2. Interconnection of ideas-individual know-how and the collective result



Source: created by the author

These techniques that they use to creatively resolve a problem are based on series of opening up and closing down sequences, which is what Rickards (1988, p. 27) defined as processes of convergence and divergence. According to Rickards, opening up entails the deferment of judgment, the use of techniques to challenge mind-sets and the accumulation of a series of possibilities, while closing down involves choice, focus and development. The approach to structuring the problem entails passing through three diverging/converging stages in which the problem, the ideas and the solutions come into play. However, it should be borne in mind that creative individuals operate in a more 'circular' way than the approach proposed by Rickards. 'Circular' refers to the notion that their way of thinking consists of bouncing their ideas around, leaping from one possibility to the next, returning to the original proposal, and so on successively. The

solution to a problem entail bridging a gap and routine problems rarely depart from pre-established matrices, even though they may require certain adjustments to find a solution to the problem (Koestler, 1989). In the case of the workers in the present study, they are dealing with original and unique problems; each client and project requires a different way of operating, so they try to bridge the gap with the emergence of new ideas and unexpected solutions.

Beyond these processes of participation and collaboration, Pope (2005) explained that work, like the action of playing, is a continuous and open process which entails the workers (players) freely involving themselves in the game before and after. These games are defined by a set of rules, which allow any number of matches to be played (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Recent team process studies show how «team creativity flows from synergetic processes in which team members collaborate to exchange and integrate information and perspectives» (Yuan and van Knippenberg, 2020, p. 2). One example of this sort of free play and involvement in work occurred in our study when one designer asks another to pass some files onto him. They speak about the most suitable formats and resolve the problem as a group spontaneously and informally.

Though their image to the outside world is a serious one, their actual work in the office is fun, friendly, direct, etc. They make jokes about the clients and themselves, suggesting calling a client and pretending to be from a public relations firm. This duplicitous way of behaving is related to the eighth of the ten traits found by Csikszentmihályi (1998) in creative individuals, observing that generally creative people are thought to be rebellious and independent. Yet it is impossible to be creative without having first internalized a domain of culture. And a person must believe in the importance of such a domain to learn its rules; hence, he or she must be to a certain extent a traditionalist (Csikszentmihályi, 1998). The possible reasons for this double identity come from the fact we live in a society in which traditional values still rule. The creative individuals in our study make use of this to sell themselves and live off the system, but they apply their own sense of the organization of labour in their internal operational manners.

There are no predetermined roles, nor any notable hierarchies. They give the appearance of friends playing at the computer and having fun. This non-hierarchical and non-traditional structure can be seen in what Khandwalla (1977, p. 177) defined as a «non-formal organization», an organization in which relationships, commercial criteria, rules and activities arise spontaneously. Khandwalla argued that human relations

orientation can be analysed in terms of «group dynamics» and «style of supervision and management». The former concentrates on the study of group structure and functioning and how this affects human behaviour in the organizations, while the latter deals with employee orientation and participative management. One of the strong points in the case study in the present article is that the organization has a very solid human relations structure, based on trust and clear and direct dialogue. For Khandwalla, the human factor in organizations is key and by observing the needs, attitudes, desires, beliefs, etc. of its different components, it is possible to get an understanding of the operational functioning of an organization.

When one colleague is collaborating with another from a different specialty, each may have extensive know-how of the other's field but may not share all the nuances of that other field, and so each moves to a plane similar to that of the apprentice who know all that they hear without fully understanding it. The difference lies in the fact that the apprentice has a master, whereas the colleague's position is one of professional equality, but the corresponding specialties of the two are different. Information exchange is multidirectional. The level at which the individuals are moving is what Gardner (2010) called «field level»; as soon as they solve a specific problem, they make a general conceptual proposal, create a product, and have a defined way of acting. Of the various 'levels' that Gardner described, the fifth level includes high-risk actions. This fifth level can be observed in the case analysed in this article with the spontaneous decision-taking of the creative individuals. In the same way, these professionals encounter a certain reciprocity among their colleagues, which leads to the formation of alliances.

Some of the observations made during the present ethnographic study of the behavior of the workers when using play to bring to life diverse ideas, can be related to the ten traits of creative professionals uncovered by Csikszentmihályi (1975) which reveal the role of play in the workplace. Csikszentmihályi explained that classical theories of play assume that play provides the stimulation necessary for psychological needs and to attain the optimal level of excitement. However, he recognized that many of these theories dealt with the subject of play at work based on levels of abstraction, which he also used in his «flow» model. This flow model refers to the subjective experience of an individual when involved in different activities. In the creative centre observed in the present study, the levels of abstraction and play are two powerful forces in the creative development of the activities that are carried out.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

One of the cornerstones that explains the functioning of the work centre analysed in this study and of the creative professionals who work there is the concept of play. This concept is employed as tool for use in their daily professional work and generates large amounts of applied creativity and decisive thinking.

The workers have a real and wide capacity for action. They have fun and are happy with their work, frequently laughing and joking. They share experiences from their personal lives, openly take a position and voice their opinion on ideological questions despite, on occasions, having opposing visions. Other traits of these workers include their ability to contribute opinions aloud while at the same immersed in the Web and their decision-taking by more or less informal consensus. Thinking aloud is another commonly observed trait among these creative professionals. They frequently say what they think or whatever thought might come into their head, even though it may have little or nothing to do with what the other work colleagues are doing.

The motivation that every worker has is one of the principal resources for the development of creativity. Several skills make an appearance among the group as a whole and these functions as tools in the development of applied creativity. The different personal abilities that are seen in their professional profiles enhance group development. In general, both innate and acquired skills can be observed. Each skill has different qualities which enhance creativity and with which they put into practice their professional activity. These abilities were observed in the way of working in the workplace. For example, they apply their graphic design knowledge, learned in their academic or autodidact training (acquired skills), with humour and with a positive attitude (innate skills), sharing ideas with their colleagues. Many innate skills such as proactivity, decisiveness and adaptability can be gained and learnt with the passage of time, but as skills they appear closely tied to the individual, as though they had been interiorized in the functioning of that individual. The same thing happens with active listening and motivation, which can be included as part of the activity of the worker and so would be considered innate elements. Nonetheless, and given how they deal with their working day, these are skills which they have either learnt through experience or have developed over time in the course of their work. For this reason, attitude is of fundamental importance for understanding the real applicability that each of these virtues has in the workplace of these professionals.

The fusion of their skills and attitudes gives an advantage to the way these teams work (Serrano-Martínez, 2016). These aspects appear during the ethnography and along diverse casual meetings. These workers combine their professional experience with proactive towards the team, helping each other in each project. They all share information and contacts with no qualms, even though this may lead to competition among themselves. In the selection of promising ideas, they appropriately use a combination of intuitive and logical methods, anticipating or proposing possible solutions, however far-fetched they might appear at first hand. They voice their opinions aloud and use humour to generate an atmosphere that makes the undoable doable. This *modus operandi*, along with their attitude and the proximity that they maintain through sharing a common space of dialogue, benefits them all. Communication is multidisciplinary, with the workers being mainly designers and programmers. The level of productivity differs depending on the time of day and intergroup communication is fluid. Several of the traits of creative individuals that were described by Csikszentmihályi (1998) and which he considered «antithetical» were also observed in this group. Finding these traits is key to linking humour and play with creativity.

As for the virtues that they display as a group, a series of traits appears which come together to create a sort of set of common tools that belong to both work teams. Many of these were evident throughout the analysis: multitasking, feedback, adaptability, imagination, active listening, sense of humour, etc. Some of these tools, as imagination, were found in qualitative studies related to the main components of creativity (Abdulla Alabasi, 2020). These skills are in constant interaction with other elements of the actual socioeconomic and personal context of the individuals, including personality, environment, society, economics, etc. In the same way, an imaginary aspect is also observed driven by the impulses, desires, appetites, symbols, and archetypes present in these individuals. All of which creates a magma-type flow of constant interactions which give rise to the creative process, to the development and status in the group of these individuals, to the professional results they achieve, and ultimately to the creation and existence of a core of creativity.

This research is important for the study of creativity because it breaks with the binomial between play and work. Their activity is encapsulated more in the figure of *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1949) than of *homo laborans*, despite the fact this is their workplace. This is so because the characteristics of leisure and partying, or the components most closely associated with play, are aspects which stand out from hierarchical or protestant work perceptions. Indeed, according to Huizinga (1949), human culture is

born and develops from spontaneous play. In the ethnographic study conducted, play is constantly seen to result in laughter and a healthy working environment for task fulfilment. As McLuhan (2001) argued, humans recover the integral person in fun and play, and so work production expands to include the intimate nature of the individual in union with the public nature of his or her work. In addition, this research gives an important value to play as a professional attitude in the performance of the tasks. In addition, play ends to stimulate individual and group creativity of these workers, which is important for the study of the essence of creativity at creative workplaces.

This core of creativity comes into being through the interactions of four main blocks or segments, namely the economic (market, clients), the social (environment, community), the imaginary (desires, anxieties) and the union of physical and psychological elements (skills, attitudes, personality and means). The resulting magma from the union of these components favours the creative process as, depending on the synergies of these components, the results that are achieved will contain a greater or lesser input of creativity. These segments or blocks encapsulate a significant part of the interactions these professionals partake in daily and which impact on their *modus operandi*, as well as playing a part in stimulating task-applied creativity. This core of creativity benefits from the positive attitude and active listening of the workers at the centre. The proactivity that characterizes them is key to the success of their projects, as well as to their own personal development through play and humour. This constant flow of micro-environments and micro-sensations in a single space contributes to a better working environment and generates a space of multiple interrelated items.

In brief, the association of work with play is key to understanding some idiosyncrasies present at a work centre full of creative professionals. Therefore, this research is essential to learn the *modus operandi* of a group of creative professionals who work at the centre are the concept of play. In addition, social researchers can learn more about the principal components of the creative activity of those creative workers that use it as a main work tool. For this reason, this research is an interesting contribution to the study of creativity at work.

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