Ethnopsychiatry fosters creativity and the adoption of critical and reflexive thinking in higher education students: insights from a qualitative analysis of a preliminary pilot experience at the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, University of Genoa, Italy

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Abstract: Creativity is an ability that plays a major role in the modern economy and society. It should represent an important component of the medical syllabus. However, it is often overlooked by the formal courses at universities. The current study aimed at evaluating whether the interactive educational models, recently adopted by the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, at the University of Genoa, Italy, would favor the adoption of critical thinking, attitudes to changes, cultural diversity acceptance, and the adoption of relational soft skills versus traditional and frontal didactic teaching. Thirty students, who attended the last year of health care professional course at the Faculty of Medicine, volunteered to take part in the study and were randomly allocated to two groups: one group receiving an innovative, interactive excellence course and the other group receiving a more traditional approach. Ethnopsychiatry was chosen as the topic since it was hypothesized that it would have contributed to generation of a new approach toward diseases and patients. The first group of students, exposed to interactive lectures with the aim of promoting the adoption of critical thinking, were more satisfied than the second group. Participants who were involved in an active manner and had to work in small groups, actively finding their own solutions to solve the problems, perceived the utilized teaching method and experience more stimulating, involving, and effective. Implications for education policy makers are also envisaged.

Keywords: creative thinking, clinical case/example, medical education, medical syllabus, medical teaching

Introduction

Creativity is an ability that plays a major role in the modern economy and society.¹–³ As stated by the European Parliament and Committee (2009), instruction and vocational training should foster creativity and propensity to innovation, as vital life skills.⁴

It is particularly difficult and challenging to define creativity. Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, have attempted to characterize and describe it, but this concept has remained so far rather elusive.

Wallas has proposed seven stages leading to creativity, namely encounter, preparation, concentration, incubation, illumination, verification, and persuasion.⁵ Guilford, who has been a pioneer in the scientific study of creativity,⁶ has stated that “the creative person has novel ideas. The degree of novelty of which the person is capable, or which he habitually
exhibits ... can be tested in terms of the frequency of uncom-
mon, yet acceptable, responses to items.” Stein has claimed
that “the creative work is a novel work that is accepted as ten-
able or useful or satisfying by a group in some point in time.”

Mednick has defined creativity as a “capacity to form
new combinations,” that is to say the ability to “put together
in a useful way ideas usually far from each other.” In other
words, creativity is seen as a process that gives birth to a
new product.9

According to Bruner, creativity is the “production of
what generates a real surprise,”10 while May defines it as “the
process which brings something new in life.”11 According to
Rogers, creative processes represent “the birth, the action of
a new relational product which on one side stems from the
individual’s unity, and on the other hand comes from the unity
of materials, events and life circumstances.”12

Torrance has defined creativity as a combination of ability,
skills, and motivation.13 Motamedi has modified the Wallas’
theory, underpinning the following seven components at the
origin of creativity: framing, probing, exploring, revelation,
affirming, reframing, and realizing.14

However, some scholars have emphasized how these
definitions are biased, being context and culture specific.
Treffinger has claimed that “creativity is one of the most
complex of human functions.”15 Ford and Harris, taking into
account the limitations of the above-mentioned definitions,
have defined creativity as “a modifiable, deliberate process
that exists to some degree in each of us. It proceeds through
an identifiable process and is verified through the uniqueness
and utility of the product created.”16

Creativity, generally meant as ability to produce some-
thing new or as a way to interpret in a new and original way,
recasting, and reframing what has been already realized or
acquired, can be found, at different levels and degrees, in
every human being and can be implemented by means of
education.17 Being able to keep the interest for creativity alive
in young individuals represents, indeed, one of the biggest
challenges for educational systems.

According to the prominent French philosopher and
sociologist Edgar Morin, universities should stimulate indi-
viduals to rely on their critical and creativity abilities, rather
than depending only on what has been learnt and memorized.
For Morin, creativity, meant as ability to ask new questions,
to generate a high variety of ideas, and to reflect about the
solving problems process, represents a strategic resource
that needs to be cultivated, recognized, and developed.18,19

Thus, cognitive and meta-cognitive skills such as critical
and reflexive thinking are also required,20–22 as Piaget has also
claimed.23 Critical thinking can be defined as the “ability/
process of raising discriminating questions in an attempt to
search for better ideas, a deeper understanding and better
solutions.”2,24

In particular, in the field of medical education, critical
thinking should play a major role in the medical syllabus.24,25
The extant literature shows that long-term tutors, problem-
based learning (PBL), workshops, web-based tutorials,
role-playing games (RPGs), and clinically oriented courses
seem to favor critical thinking and foster critical thinking
and creativity.24

Therefore, universities should adopt innovative and inter-
active methodologies26–29 and integrate traditional and new
ways of teaching different paradigms for learning.30 This is
especially true for health care courses and degrees31 in that
health care workers often make use of these skills and abili-
ties to make clinical decisions.32

**Aims of the current study**
The current study aimed at evaluating whether
1. the interactive educational models, recently adopted by
the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, at the University of
Genoa, Italy, would favor the adoption of critical thinking
versus traditional and frontal didactic teachings;
2. interactive educational models would favor attitude to
changes, cultural diversity, and differences acceptance;
and
3. interactive educational models would promote the
adoption of abilities that could improve the relationship
between the health care worker and the patient, such as
empathy, also from an ethnocultural perspective.

**Patients and methods**
Thirty students, attending the final health care professional
courses at the Faculty of Medicine, volunteered to take part
in the study and were randomly allocated to two groups: one
group receiving innovative interactive excellence courses
and the other group receiving a more traditional approach.

In particular, both the groups were given the same clinical
cases/problems, but
1. the first group was involved in activities focused on
ethnopsychiatry, promoting analytical skills and critical
thinking, reflecting on the importance of acquiring aware-
ness of a proper relational style with the patient.
2. the second group attended traditional lectures, without
being interactively involved or being taught explicitly
relational, reasoning, team, and problem-solving skills.
Ethnopsychiatry was chosen as topic since it was hypothesized that it would have contributed to generate a new approach toward diseases and patients, helping students to contextualize patients within their own culture and to recognize and respect different, apparently bizarre etiological explanations. Students had to cope with their doubts, prejudices, and ambiguities, overcoming their simplistic assumptions and assuming new sophisticated and complex forms of thought.

The research team utilized the following tools:

1. Brainstorming in order to evaluate students’ motivation and expectations.
2. In-depth interviews in order to qualitatively evaluate the process.

**Results**

During the first meeting, dedicated to the presentation of the project, students were asked to reflect on their expectations as well as to propose potential suggestions. The ideas that emerged in terms of expectations and suggestions are summarized in Table 1.

Once the experience was concluded, it was found that the first group of students, exposed to interactive lectures with the aim of promoting the adoption of a critical thinking, were more satisfied than the second group. Participants who were involved in an active manner and had to work in small groups, actively finding their own solutions to solve the problems, perceived the utilized teaching method and experience more stimulating, involving, and effective.

**Conclusion**

This preliminary pilot project began with the hypothesis that by encouraging creative skills, higher education students could understand the processes and the steps leading to the creative product, making learning more effective.

Unfortunately, university professors usually overlook the importance of creativity, neither applying it in teaching nor identifying it in the students they work with. Also the current forms of assessment often prevent students from being creative.

For its mission, the university system should, instead, promote relational and soft skills, and turn itself into what Checkland has called a soft system, that is to say a field in which one does not make use of prearranged schemes and algorithms, but a reality in which unpredictability and complexity of thinking, of relations, and of human actions represent a major source of inspiration and richness.  

This study indicates that a topic such as ethnopsychiatry, usually not taught or overlooked at least in Italy, can promote new attitudes in medical students. However, despite being innovative, this study has a number of limitations that should be properly recognized, namely the small sample size and the lack of standardized questionnaires and approaches. As such, it should be considered as a preliminary pilot study, calling for further research in the field.

**Disclosure**

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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