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Stumbling

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This chapter reflects on the experience of stumbling and how learning from such experiences in everyday life can make us more creative.

I will focus specifically on stumbling as an instance in everyday life leading to *learning* or resulting in *data*, which can be used for creative purposes. Examples of this include a conversation that sticks in our memory; a chance observation made at work, or in the local school; or an advertisement that provokes anger, without being immediately able to say why. When an experience constitutes an example of data, it is often because it seems so strange or awkward that we begin to reflect on it and learn from it (see also Chapter 15). Examples of stumbling data from everyday life are almost endless, showing that almost any event can provide us with valuable information (Latour, 2005).

In this sense, it is not bad to stumble. To stumble upon something is to be in a position to find out new things about the world we live in. It is through deviations or noteworthy events that the social world becomes evident, or an object to reflect upon. Deviation often fuels the imagination, and this may lead to a break with habitual assumptions about everyday life. *Imagination* is understood, here, as one of the most important dimensions in the process of turning instances of stumbling into creativity (see also Chapter 6). Imagination allows people and groups to think beyond the given, the here-and-now, to envisage alternatives, to create parallel worlds, or to travel through time, in the past or in the future. Imagination is both extremely individual – people imagine their unique futures – and deeply social, in its constituents (fed by media and other kinds of shared representations) (see Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015).

In order conceptually to understand the creative dimension of stumbling upon something, I will draw on the pragmatist epistemology

developed by John Dewey (1938). According to Dewey, most of our life is based on routine and habit (also referred to as 'tacit' or 'silent' knowledge); thinking and reflection become necessary only at the point where habitual life cannot continue unchanged. In this sense, imagining what might happen next, or thinking about what has happened, are necessary only when ordinary practices cannot continue as they were. These instances, though, which involve imagination, may be seen as an attempt to re-establish balance after an error, or to understand the nature of the apparent strangeness in order to be able to take action in response. According to the principles of pragmatism, all knowledge is connected to action, either directly (as in action research) or with respect to the development of 'thinking technologies' that enable us to deal with new situations in the future (Brinkmann, 2012).

In his numerous books and articles, Dewey diagnosed the problems inherent to '*the spectator theory of knowledge*'. For Dewey, philosophical problems and positions – such as the spectator theory of knowledge – do not suddenly fall from the sky, but are ideas that grow out of the lives of communities (Dewey, 1920, p. v). Thus, he traced the dualisms of knowledge and action, ends and means, the ideal and the real, and theory and practice, to the birth of science and philosophy in Ancient Greek society, in which a sharp division of labour was instituted between, on the one hand, slaves and women who took care of the practical work and, on the other hand, free men, who could spend their time engaging with philosophy and purely theoretical thought. According to Dewey, it was the social separation of the working class and the leisure class that 'became a metaphysical division into things which are mere means and things which are ends' (Dewey, 1925, p. 124). This social, cultural, and economic division has subsequently influenced our philosophical ideas and has, in particular, given rise to the 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Dewey, 1929, p. 23): the theory that true knowledge arises through the passive observation of reality, which allegedly is independent of the observer.

Dewey was keen to demonstrate that this epistemological idea was not only wrong as a philosophical thesis, but also that it gave rise to problematic social consequences in its separation between those who know (e.g., those educated in theoretical forms of thinking) and those who do not know and need to be instructed appropriately by those who do know (e.g., people with practical forms of education). This separation should be replaced, Dewey argued, with a perspective that insists on the fact that different people know *different things*, and that everything we know – if it is to deserve the label 'knowledge' – must have



Figure 19.1 Stumbling

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some connection with practical action. We should define something as knowledge only if it allows us to derive some benefit for human experience. This applies to even the most abstract forms of theory. What we call theory, thought and reflection are forms of human activity that are required when our habits are disturbed and suffer a breakdown, as in instances of stumbling (Figure 19.1).

How can we stumble creatively?

In the above, knowledge is not something mirroring nature, or achieved by passively observing things; rather, it is something that arises when there is a disconnection between existing understandings of a phenomenon and the here-and-now encounter with the phenomenon we are trying to understand. To take a specific example: one day in the supermarket, you meet a friend. You have not seen her for many years. She says ‘Hello’ to you, but you do not immediately recognise her. The friend’s appearance has changed; she now dresses in a more grown-up way and her hair is shorter and turning grey. You might find it difficult to recognise her as the ‘same’ as before. As a result, even in only minor ways, you might have to change your assumptions about your friend; accordingly, new knowledge arises within the situation. You now know her as a different person, at least going by her appearance. Meeting her

again, you become curious. Has she also changed her political opinions? What about sports and music, which were her favourite topics of conversation years ago? Is she still with her husband and what about her job situation? In Dewey's sense, you now begin an enquiry, initiated by bumping into your friend by chance.

If you do not stumble on a regular basis – or, at least, are not aware of this happening, one of the most important things you can do in order for creative deviations to occur is to re-learn the joy of experimentation and *learning by doing*, including *learning by failing*. A renowned Danish fashion designer, Henrik Vibskov, frequently talks about the importance of 'learning through failures'. During a TV show quoted in Tanggaard (2014b, p. 6), he said 'Failures are my main means of learning'. According to Vibskov, mistakes can initiate a creative process because they point towards something that could not be imagined before venturing into the experience. This is the impetus that is familiar to many of us: contact with, or resistance afforded by, the materials with which we work gives rise to new ideas. Creative imagination is fundamentally relational, arising in the space between subjects and objects – even if immediate experience might give us the impression that good ideas pop into our heads seemingly out of nowhere.

Many large international companies take these findings into account, knowing that creativity cannot be provided on demand, but requires space and time for incubation. A famous example of this is Google's 20 per cent rule. For 20 per cent of their time, the employees at Google are allowed to experiment with their own projects. In his book *What Matters Now*, Gary Hamel (2012) mentions that many large American companies run similar schemes, because innovation is seen as a key ingredient in ensuring their survival. An innovative company, Hamel writes, is able to see itself and its environment as a portfolio of skills and assets which can be combined in an infinite number of ways to create new products and technologies. However, the problem is that many companies do not invest in ways of increasing employees' innovative skills. They operate a kind of innovation apartheid whereby only the chosen few are allowed to define themselves as inventive. They perhaps feel that they have enough ideas in the first place; but they forget to ask themselves how many of these are potential 'game changers'.

The point is that they should encourage 'wild ideas', permit experimentation and 'error', develop others' ideas and ensure that conditions allow for plenty of new proposals to be put forward. In his work developing a theory of innovation, Hamel discovered that innovators are not necessarily 'super sharp' or artistically gifted people; rather, they are

people who have developed a kind of routine in which they regard the environment as a sea of opportunities. They turn dogma on its head. They see more clearly. They utilise what they can and they tune into customers' feelings. In many ways, they are anthropologists who seek to explore every chink and crack, every opening that errors create in the space between dream and reality.

Experiments allow for unexpected discoveries. Many scientific discoveries are the result of the phenomenon I call 'stumbling'. This approach sees errors as positive. After all, we talk about '*coming across*' or '*stumbling across*' a great offer, or a good idea. Again, stumbling is a positive thing. To 'stumble upon things' (in this figurative sense) is a precondition for being able to see the world in interesting ways. It is when stumbling that we can break with the habitus that characterises most of our everyday lives. What we call thought is, from a pragmatic perspective, an attempt at redressing an imbalance caused by a failure or fault; to understand that which at first seems incomprehensible and to achieve more appropriate means of acting.

To benefit from instances of stumbling upon something, we must be open to the new data we encounter whenever we happen to run into new solutions (see also Chapter 8). To do this, we must keep our 'antennae out' and be curious about the world: this will often set the powers of our imagination in motion. Imagination is very often prompted by a break within our current situation, a kind of disruption resulting from what Peirce, cited in Zittoun and Cerchia (2013, p. 2), calls '“irritation” due to the suspension of belief in things as they are'. And yet, imagination starts quite concretely from things as they are and moves them further.

In talking of 'stumbling' or 'deviation data', I am also referring to the subject's transactions with an environment that he or she, at certain moments, 'happens to cross' and wonders at. This reiterates something I have frequently highlighted (Tanggaard, 2013, 2014a): creativity is, in fact, rooted in *socio-materiality*, an insight that takes its inspiration from a number of ontological and methodological considerations within Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004), with particular focus on improvisation in distributed relations (Ingold & Hallam, 2007). The materials-related concept of creativity offers a sharpened awareness of the ways in which materials, objects, and environments suggest innovative measures and also provide an opportunity for innovation within social activities. The significance of material factors has been neglected in most of the existing psychological research on creativity. There has been a marked tendency to adopt an intellectual

understanding of creativity that is restricted to the individual person, where creative potential is often defined in terms of divergent thinking. In this sense, the environment plays a subordinate role, acting as the bowl containing the soup, but not being part of the soup itself (Guilford, 1950). The problem with such an individualised understanding of creativity is that we lose sight of the fact that environments are, in fact, constitutive for creativity (Glăveanu, 2014; Tanggaard, 2014a).

The ontological consequence of a materialised and relational view of creativity is that we are forced to move away from a dualism in which the individual subject is opposed to the object and, instead, examine the ways in which materials and environments invite people to innovate. This dialectic is a general characteristic of all social practice, and if we are to achieve a greater degree of analytical sensitivity as to how basic material conditions affect our ways of expressing ourselves creatively then, as Schraube (2009, p. 300) highlights, we should bear the following in mind: 'it is not only the subjects that do something with the things; *things also do something with the subjects*' (emphasis added).

Here, we can briefly turn to a contemporary illustrative example. The Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson – known, for example, for his temporary physical transformation of New York City through the work 'The New York City Waterfalls' – told of how ideas are not given to him, but actively taken from something and then embodied in a dialogical interchange as a continuation of his work with materials. In an interview with the Danish magazine *Weekendavisen* (Bonde, 2009), Eliasson talked about the need to manipulate ideas before knowing their value. The journalist asked the question 'How do you get your ideas?'

It is not that ideas are created in a vacuum which exists after finishing one work and waiting for a new idea to arise. Ideas are generated in continuation of previous work – as the result of a dialogue. I do not think that creativity comes from within; rather than having an idea, you embody ideas and, in this way, you are testing whether they are viable.

If we are to follow Eliasson's phenomenological description, ideas are not seen as coming from within or resulting from a definite moment of inspiration. Rather, they are embodied in our practical work in the world.

Certainly, our knowledge of the world is a practical affair, and it is something grounded in our habitual conduct. We *know how*, Dewey says, 'by means of our habits'; the knowledge involved 'lives in the

muscles, not in consciousness' (Dewey, 1922, p. 177). When we develop habits of dealing with the world, we develop an understanding of the world, which, therefore, cannot be ascribed to a disembodied 'mind' (see also Chapter 18).

Conclusion

This chapter is based on the premise that we must reflect on instances of stumbling in order to be more creative. This type of deviation may arise inadvertently, or be instigated deliberately (see Chapter 17). Once we become aware of errors and instances of stumbling in everyday life and begin to learn from them, we have the opportunity to make discoveries and create something new. This suggests an understanding of creativity that:

- (1) disregards a specifically harmonious view of the creative process in favour of one that may be characterised by failure, mistakes and the realisation that we need to re-think things;
- (2) celebrates the importance of making small, gradual steps and movements, rather than being an imagined hero who creates amazing things out of thin air; and
- (3) expands the pragmatist understanding of knowledge, in which creativity is theorised as that which makes a difference in practice by using new tools to manage specific challenges.

All of these emphasise the fact that creativity is a process and a phenomenon that is found in the *transactions* between subject and object, where ideas emerge from the materials with which we work.

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