

# One on One, We Are All the Same: Exploring Creativity's International Roots



Professor Johnathan Plucker and colleagues discover common ground with Chinese colleagues.

*When Jonathan Plucker began his research into creativity, he had no idea where it might lead in the international scholarly world. A Chinese scholar who saw the potential of the research changed all that, and Dr. Plucker's academic life will never be the same again.*

Five years ago, Jonathan Plucker led local and national debates on full-day kindergarten in Indiana, IQ test scores, and charter schools. As an educational psychologist and head of IU's Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP), he tempered these heated issues with hard data and analysis. Occasionally, he would bring his work on the psychology of creativity to bear on policy issues, "but creativity and educational policy don't mix well these days in the U.S."

Dr. Plucker was aware of the potential for these issues to provoke international debate. "I had students from Korea and Southeast Asia at the time when their currency suffered serious devaluation. I watched as their countries dealt with this financial disaster, and one of the things they did was to promote creativity in their schools, this as part of a larger effort to re-secure their position in the world." But the policy debates then commanding Jonathan's scholarly work had enough local and national fuel to rage on without expanding beyond national borders.

Professor Jiliang Shen, of the Beijing Normal University, had other ideas. He had seen an important article about myths of creativity and efforts to develop a working scholarly definition, and he saw useful implications for the Chinese educational system. The result was an e-mail asking if the Bloomington expert behind the article would like to come to Beijing to talk about his work at the Chinese university's expense. With a new baby imminent, Jonathan had to turn down the invitation. But three months later, the invitation came again. This time, with the appropriate domestic blessings, he decided to make the trip.

The difficulty was that while he had a passport, he had no idea what else he needed in order to get to Beijing, and he had to be there in four weeks. "On my own, it would have taken three of those weeks to figure out how to get a visa, but a call to International Services put me in touch with Joanna Snyder and Martha Wailes. They guided me through the bureaucratic layers. And Shawn Reynolds was able to answer all sorts of other questions I had and many I wouldn't have thought to ask. IU's support systems for this work are excellent. I would never have made it without the help of International Services and International Programs."



*Professor Jiliang Shen of Beijing Normal University saw the promise of Plucker's work on creativity, and their initial contact led to a series of exchanges.*



The study of creativity has been central to Plucker's research for many years, but why was China so interested? "Chinese education has built one of the finest—if not *the* finest—knowledge transmission systems in the world," he explains. "Chinese students have at their command massive quantities of information and facts. But many Chinese scholars and officials feel that something is missing from this accomplishment. They began a shift from making the acquisition of knowledge a value in itself to putting more value into the use of knowledge. Not just learning and repeating, but finding new problems in old ones, thinking divergently, and solving novel problems in creative ways."

While Chinese scholars chalk up their national approach to knowledge as an aspect of a long tradition, Dr. Plucker sees also the problem of scale. "When you have a hundred students in the class, it is easier to teach convergently rather than divergently." Still, the Chinese demanded that scholars find better ways to teach. "To compete in the world market, the Chinese government said, we need more creative people. They recognized that complaining that conditions do not allow creativity is a cop-out. There is no such thing as a normal context where it is impossible to be creative. Chinese scholars believed in the creative potential of Chinese culture. And indeed, anyone can be more creative."

Having identified the issue this way, Chinese educators looked beyond their borders for a solution. Plucker continues, "Many educators worldwide perceive the U.S. educational system as pretty good at promoting creativity in its educational system. Actually, it's not so much that we promote it, but that we quash it a lot less than other systems. The irony is that the U.S. in recent years has been in retreat from creativity; acquisition of knowledge has become the primary goal of our national education policy. My Chinese friends are stunned when they hear this."

When Jonathan agreed to go to Beijing, he didn't want it to be just a tourist trip with a lecture thrown in, so he asked his Chinese colleagues if there was anything else

he could do while he was there. Now it was China's turn to be surprised, and they responded that indeed there were a number of master's level research projects underway that he might review. The lecture was well received, and he reviewed a number of "technically superb" research projects. He also did a little recruitment. "Beijing Normal is a top university in China for education and for psychology. Some of the students I talked to were brilliant." Still, there was time

to enjoy the May Day Labor Holiday.

Dr. Plucker left behind in Beijing many faculty members and students eager for more and determined to expand their interactions with counterparts in Indiana. A few months later, Professor Shen wrote and asked whether it would be possible to spend a month at IU. With some support for housing costs from the Office of International Programs, all was arranged. During his stay, he discovered some of the other

work of the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP). When IU established the center under his leadership, Jonathan's explicit goal was to establish it as a national resource on educational policy. Now Professor Shen and others were beginning to see its international impact as well.

Almost as soon as he had returned home, Professor Shen sent a letter of invitation to three of his U.S. colleagues from CEEP: If they would come to do a full-day workshop, he would gather teachers and administrators from all over the country to attend. The CEEP group went in May, and again expanded their mission to include consulting on projects, and interviewing and recruiting students. The group used the visit to forward another research project. Heidi Ross, a colleague in Education, had secured a grant from IU to explore ways to apply IU's famous work in U.S. student engagement to Chinese education. So the CEEP representatives made a stop at Tsinghua University to talk to them about Ross's research, and that project is developing quickly.

"In a culture with a deep tradition of valuing education, the formal study of the ways to engage students in their studies is a good fit," Jonathan explains. "Chinese interest is top down—researchers will begin by trying to understand how Chinese college students become engaged in their studies." Tsinghua has sent one of its faculty members, Yuo Lan, to



*Dr. Patricia Muller, CEEP senior associate director, Meihua Qian and Nathan Makel, current doctoral students in education; and Jonathan Plucker after their keynote presentation in Beijing, 2007.*

Bloomington for a year to work with the CEEP and Heidi Ross. Together they will transform IU's prestigious survey instrument into versions that will provide similar data about Chinese students. Students at three Chinese high schools and three universities will complete that survey during the coming year.

Meanwhile, the School of Education hired a new faculty member, Xiangdong Yang, born in China, who upon hearing about these CEEP activities abroad, offered to put the center in contact with colleagues at another top tier institution, the East China Normal University in Shanghai. This was another connection to scholars working intensively on issues of creativity and educational policy. East China Normal University asked Jonathan to give the prestigious Daxia Lecture. He returned to China in late September, now a seasoned traveling scholar, as only the second psychologist of 48 distinguished scholars invited to give the Daxia Lecture.

Asked how the international experience changed his scholarly perceptions, Jonathan replied, "When I was in China, I inquired about the age children typically start school. The answer was that in cities, children as young as two were going to school full time. I used to perceive the value of starting children at a younger age in terms of

fairness—especially for children at risk. Now, I find myself wanting that option for my own children. I never had that thought before. Emerging economies are giving new emphasis to creativity in education and world economies are becoming intertwined. My children are going to have to compete in that world, and if they are going to be successful, I would like to be able to have the choice to offer them education from the time they are three—and it needs to be an education that goes well beyond daycare into problem solving and creative thinking."

On Dr. Plucker's agenda for 2008 are two trips to Asia: one in the spring to Korea ("with a short side trip to China to practice my Mandarin"), and one in the fall to a conference in Beijing. Now Dr. Plucker gets e-mails several times a month from abroad seeking information and pursuing possibilities for exchange. He must winnow these to projects that fit best in the work to which he and the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy are already committed, and it is an embarrassment of riches. Still, there is no turning back. "In my first trip to China, I found a whole world opening to me that I didn't know was out there. The international potential of my and CEEP's work is much more exciting to me now. My research will never be the same again. I can't imagine retreating to a purely national focus."



*The wind at Simitai was brutal and truly life-threatening at times. Even the guides got down on all fours to keep from being blown off the wall.*

## Humor is Universal ... Almost

I like to show photos of my children when I start a big talk, in large part to help the audience see why I'm so motivated to do the work I do. Creativity, education policy, talent development: it's all about making the world a much better place for our kids.

The first time I showed the photos in China, during my first visit, a funny thought popped into my head. One of the photos shows my son, at about five months of age, sitting on a plastic horse, with a cowboy hat and cute cowboy pajamas. I said, "The funny thing is, he's the only thing in that picture that wasn't made in China." Crickets. Actually, it was quieter than that: It was the noisy absence of all sound, including breathing. I thought, at first, that it was just a language issue, but the group laughed at most of my other jokes right on cue, so I suspected the joke was a bit offensive.

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A couple months later, I tried the joke with an American audience, which exploded in laughter. For good measure, I followed with, "You know, you found that joke much funnier than they did in China," which brought the house down, as they say.

Emboldened by success, as I showed the photos of my family during my third and most recent trip, I decided to try the joke again. After all, it struck me as an insightful commentary on how our countries' economies were tightly intertwined, and, quite frankly, I still thought it was really funny.

They, however, did not. After my talk, over dinner, I asked my host and colleague, Dr. Pang, about the joke. He remarked that it wasn't offensive, it just wasn't funny, and most people just didn't get it. Ouch.

To the three people who laughed in Shanghai: I salute you. To the rest: I'm not giving up on this joke, at least not for another couple trips.

— J.P.

## My Research

by Jonathan Plucker

I've been interested in creativity research since the start of my career, but I had a crystallizing experience about three years after arriving at IU. After giving a guest lecture on my creativity work to a doctoral seminar, the professor teaching the course pulled me aside, thanked me for participating, then wryly noted that she couldn't believe that educational psychologists still didn't have a good definition of creativity to guide research efforts.

That comment hit close to home, and it made me think about the limitations and advantages of having an agreed-upon definition. Upon further reflection, it occurred to me that many of my concerns about creativity—conflicting research findings, the preponderance of myths and stereotypes about creativity, low academic regard for the study of creativity—could all be viewed as unfortunate results of the lack of a common definition of creativity.

So Ron Beghetto, who was completing his doctoral studies at the time, and I began to work on a definition. The resulting paper was eventually published in *Educational Psychologist* in 2002, after some additional assistance from Gayle Dow, who had just joined our team.

Our proposed definition was:

*Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context.\**

At the same time we were working on that project, Ron and I were building a new undergraduate creativity course at IU. The course quickly coalesced around the definition, with a cognitive and social lens on most issues related to the topic. Our success with the course is due in part to its strong research base, but also to the flexibility of IU administrators and colleagues who allowed us to teach the course and encouraged their students to enroll in it—which is significant, since the majority of students have always been from outside the School of Education.

The main message of the course is that creativity can be increased, but that each individual needs to take responsibility for their own creativity and can't blame a lack of creativity on external factors. Those factors are certainly important, perhaps even critical, but they need not become the be-all-end-all of whether someone (or a group of someones) can be creative.

\* Jonathan A. Plucker, Ronald A. Beghetto, and Gayle T. Dow. "Why Isn't Creativity More Important to Educational Psychologists? Potentials, Pitfalls, and Future Directions in Creativity Research" (*Educational Psychologist*, 39[2]), 90.