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Being Creative: Not an Act but a Habit

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Being Creative:
Not an Act but a Habit

Matthew W. Smith

An Abstract of a Project
in
Creativity and Change Leadership

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2022

Buffalo State
State University of New York
Department of Creativity and Change Leadership

Abstract of Project

This project explores what it means to be creative, how to practice creativity, and how a creative practice can be used to bring about the change one wants to see in the world. Many theories and ideas from historical and modern scholars influenced the work. The literature review findings were synthesized to produce a practical and tangible creative practice prototype and a strategic action plan.

Matthew W. Smith

May 10, 2022

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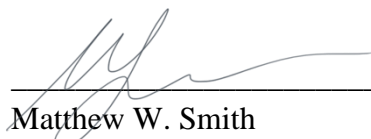
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Purpose and Description

"It is better to follow your own path, however imperfectly,

than to follow someone else's perfectly"

– Bhagavad Gita

Curiosity, Imagination, and Action

Being creative is an act of leadership. It must be. To be creative is to change things. To bring into existence something that was not there before. Intentionally. Purposefully. For you and for others. A generous beacon lighting a new way forward. A better way. Your way.

Being creative is a quest for truth. Not someone else's truth. But yours. It is an invitation to see the world through fresh eyes. To sense and then reflect on your unique experience in service of sharing your discoveries (Sheridan, 2010).

Being creative is not an outcome. You cannot follow a recipe to guarantee a result. Instead, being creative is a practice. A humble pursuit that demands a commitment to curiosity, imagination, and action (Puccio et al., 2011).

How to Practice Being Creative?

How to take on a creative person's temperament, habits, and behaviours? How to inspire motivation, strive for originality, and learn continuously? How to curate the relationship between you and your environment? How to create original ideas and share them with the world? (Rhodes, 1961)

This is the purpose of the project. To begin a practice that incorporates all I have learned and continue to learn about creativity, change, and leadership. One that weaves in my

past, and future, experiences. One that measures success based on dedication and discipline rather than outcomes and reassurances. One that allows me to do the work I want to do, serving those who want what I have to offer. One that gives me permission to do things my way. To realize my potential. To follow my own path.

Creative practice can take many forms. It is an idea expressed through the head, heart, and hands actions. The tangible product this project focused on was building out a strategy. A detailed plan of how to succeed. A prototype of the idea in action. A way to share it with the world. A way to test, reflect, and make better.

Rationale for Selection

Creative projects are a journey. A leap beyond the known into the unknown (Torrance et al., 1999), guided by a framework of curiosity, imagination, and action (Puccio et al., 2011). A constant battle between chaos and clarity (Pollard, 2020). A labyrinth filled with forked roads offers an endless choice to preserver or pivot (Crilly, 2017). This is what creative work feels like. Taking the path less travelled, not knowing where it will lead. A no-thru road or a worthwhile detour? This is how you know you are on the right path. A creative path. Your own path.

This project began as a way to develop my ability to express ideas (see Appendix A)—the consistent vein running through my professional practice for the past 15 years. The project would be an opportunity to incorporate my new knowledge and expertise into my craft by producing a creative product that stretched beyond my current capabilities. Specifically, it was focused on creating artwork that expressed ideas through objects, space, and time.

As exciting and motivating as the initial direction was, it felt like something was missing. It felt finite. Narrow. A little meaningless. Why?

A Beginning, Not an End

In the end, it felt like just another project. One I could do with or without, and it would not make too much of a difference. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to make sure my effort had meaning over the last two years. That this was the beginning, not the end.

I realized I was focused on 'the what'. What can I create that embodies my understanding of creativity? What can I make that shows I have expertise in the field? What project will make me feel like I have reached a successful milestone in my creative journey? What project would make me more creative?

There is a Pattern to Success

Jørn Utzon, the architect of one of the most iconic structures in the world, The Sydney Opera House, was fired from the project and never saw his masterpiece with his own eye (Pitt, 2018). Does this mean his efforts were in vain? I think not.

Creative work doesn't come with a guarantee. But there is a pattern to who succeeds and who doesn't. And engaging in the consistent practice of its pursuit is the best way forward (Godin, 2020).

I needed to shift my attention from 'the what' to 'the how'. Not just in this project be in how I measured success in my life. Being creative is not an outcome; it is a practice. Who you are is not what you do but how you do it.

SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE

This project is about creating change. My initial research was focused on better understanding the ingredients of change. Specifically, focused on understanding how creative products—a novel and useful idea expressed in tangible or intangible form—are adopted by individuals or groups (Puccio, 2011). What are ideas? What role do they play in our lives? How can better understanding ideas help me express them better?

John Locke (Locke et al., 1689) and Seth Godin's (Godin, 2020) work had the most profound impact on the project. Locke helped me understand the role ideas and creativity play in the human experience. He positioned them as crucial elements of human understanding and knowledge in the constant and imperfect pursuit of truth. Godin gave me the paradigm-shifting realization that creativity should be judged by how you create, not what you create. He also put creativity and ideas into a modern context of change, organizing, and marketing.

Seminal Historical Philosophers

Philosophers have pondered creativity and the concept of ideas as far back as the Athenian philosopher Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.). Thinking about where ideas might exist (Macintosh, 2012), how they are experienced (Watson, 2009), how they are born and grow (Rhodes, 1961), and how to make them clear (Peirce, 2011). A common thread weaved through most of the early philosopher's work was the notion that ideas and creativity are synonymous with being human. Understanding their work helps us better understand ourselves.

Haldane, J. B. S., & Dronamraju, K. R. (1963). Book reviews. *Journal of Genetics*, 58(3), 450–464. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02986312

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Creativity Scholars

Many seminal creative scholars saw the concept of ideas as synonymous with the concept of creativity. From Rhodes (1961) defining original ideas as the by-products of a human mind synthesizing new connections of a subject—competently articulated, through to Sternberg's (1999) A Propulsion Model of Types of Creative Contributions, they have continued to build on the early philosopher's foundational work.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper and Row.

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Sternberg, R., & Krauss, G. (2015). *Handbook of Research on Entrepreneurship and creativity*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Vehar, J. R., Firestien, R. L., & Miller, B. (1997). *Creativity unbound: An introduction to creative problem solving*. Innovation Systems Group.

Contemporary Literature

Ideas in the modern world are being explored by many contemporary scholars. From design and entrepreneurship (Crilly, 2017) to art curation (Litchfield, 2013), focus areas are wide-ranging, offering a comprehensive perspective of ideas' role in our current environment.

Crilly, N. (2017). 'fixation' and 'the pivot': Balancing persistence with flexibility in design and entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Design Creativity and Innovation*, *6*(1-2), 52–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/21650349.2017.1362359

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Kohn, N. W., Paulus, P. B., & Choi, Y. H. (2011). Building on the ideas of others: An examination of the idea combination process. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47(3), 554–561. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.01.004

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Modern Philosophers

Like Peter Singer (2017), many modern philosophers build a convincing argument about the change it brings when people understand the role ideas play in their lives. A connection was made in my mind between a better understanding of how our world works and the value it brings by giving us the tools to change it for the better. After reading *Ethics in the Real World* (Singer, 2017), I have become a 'flexitarian' and now donate 1% of my earnings through effective altruism initiatives like GiveWell.org. Experiencing change through education has inspired this project. If I can change from reading a book about ideas, perhaps I can invite others to do the same by expressing those ideas.

Dweck, C. S. (2017). *Mindset: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential*. Robinson.

Epstein, D. (2019). *Range*. Penguin U.S.A.

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Gladwell, M. (2013). *The tipping point*. Abacus.

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        University of Minnesota Press.

Dawkins, R. (2019). *The selfish gene*. Folio Society.

Sinek, S. (2019). *The infinite game*. Penguin Business.

Singer, P. (2016). *Ethics in the Real World: 82 brief essays on things that matter*. Princeton
        university press.

SECTION THREE: GOALS AND OUTCOMES

A Clear Challenge

How to evolve my creative practice to incorporate all that I have learned about creativity, change, and leadership so that I can do the work that I want to do, that I am proud of, and that better serves those who want what I have to offer?

With Simple Goals

1. Design a practical way to sustain intentional creativity

2. Apply what I have learned about creativity, change, and leadership

3. Make it tangible, measurable, and evergreen

Pursued Creatively

I have been practising creativity as a profession for the past 15 years. My way of doing things and how I think are firmly engrained. For better or worse, it is on autopilot. To interrupt my pattern and rewire my brain, I must deliberately pull myself into a creative state. To do this, I used a creative problem-solving method called the Thinking Skills Model (Puccio, 2011).

The Thinking Skills Model is rooted in a non-linear cycle of curiosity, imagination, and action. The Clarification stage helped me articulate a vision and pinpoint the most promising opportunity that would help me realize it. The Transformation stage helped me generate creative ideas to take advantage of the opportunity. Finally, the Implementation phase helped me formulate an action plan.

There were specific thinking and affective skills that played a pivotal role in the success of my creative process. They are listed below:

Keeping Open - At the beginning of the project, I was fixated on researching the concept of ideas. I wanted to use the insights I had found and express them creatively. For a while, it was enjoyable, and I made many fruitful discoveries. However, a real breakthrough occurred when I gave myself permission to step back from it all and look at what I had with fresh eyes. Resisting the tension to complete the project in the predetermined way I set at the beginning of the project, I Assessed the Situation. I decided to cycle back through the Forming Challenges stage. I asked myself, "Looking at what I have now, my new understanding and knowledge, how can I best meet the project challenge?"

Playfulness - When things get overbearing, out of control, serious and overwhelming, I will remind myself to let go and enjoy the ride. Be free to appreciate the process and see where it takes me.

Putting Ideas Into Context – How can I create something of purpose with my ideas? Something tangible and meaningful to others, as well as me. How can it impact my life? How can it help guide all aspects of my life from here? What role does this play in the context of my life? My business? Family? Personal goals and aspirations?

Empathy – Who is it for? The way they think, feel and act. How can I understand them better? Why create change if we do not know who it is for?

Produce Original Ideas

My creative practise manifests itself through my business, Mammoth Design. It is the way I ship my creative work. The way I serve others with my ideas. The way I invite them to listen to what I have to say. To turn the idea of this project—develop a creative practice—into a tangible creative product, I decided to produce a creative business strategy for the financial year 2022/23.

The Outcomes Include:

- A strategic idea

- A detailed solution; and

- An implementation plan

That Creates Meaningful Change

I have produced a detailed plan for how to successfully run my professional creative practice so that I can do the work I want to do for the people who want what I have. It repositions my business from a creative agency to a creative practice. It has defined a way to ship my work.

Project Timeline

Table 1

Project Timeline with Milestones

Task	Start	Due	Notes
Concept Paper	1/2/2022	13/2/2022	Develop and submit the concept for the Master's project.
Phase 1: Clarification			
Inquiry: Scholarly Research	15/2/2022	28/2/2022	Explore scholarly research to deepen my understanding of creativity, change, and leadership.
Synthesis: Gather Insights	1/3/2022	14/3/2022	Review the finding to form my own opinions, takeaways, and insights.
Formulating Challenges	15/3/2022	18/3/2022	Use my synthesis of the research findings as Key Data to help refine the project's vision into a creative challenge statement.

Project Write-up: Section 1-3	13/2/2022	21/3/2022	Assignment is due.
Phase 2: Transformation			
Exploring Ideas	19/3/2022	1/4/2022	Explore ideas using brainstorming and experimentation.
Developing Solutions	2/4/2022	15/4/2022	Assess the reasonableness and quality of the ideas to develop workable solutions.
Project Write-up: Section 4-6	21/3/2022	17/4/2022	Assignment due.
Phase 3: Implementation			
Exploring Acceptance	18/4/2022	21/4/2022	Explore acceptance through collaboration.
Formulating a Plan	22/4/2022	25/4/2022	Build out a detailed action plan.
Project Write-up: All Completed	18/4/2022	2/5/2022	Project completed. All sections are refined. Submitted to Blackboard for review.
Completed Project Uploaded to Digital Commons	3/5/2022	11/5/2022	Feedback from Dr Sue applied to write up. Upload to Digital Commons for the world to see.
Presentation	12/5/2022	18/5/2022	Prepare a 7-minute presentation.

Evaluation Plan

The project is about creating change. It is about me adopting the idea of being creative so wholeheartedly that it becomes part of my identity. The project goals would be achieved if I can demonstrate proficiency in keeping open and having fun while I did it.

Suppose I walk away with a tangible, measurable, and evergreen creative practice that sustains intentional creativity and embodies all I have learned about creativity, change and leadership. In that case, I will have achieved the desired project outcomes.

Benchmarks

1. Define a prototype creative practice
2. Use that creative practice to develop a solution for the project's challenge statement
3. Share, listen and improve.

Feedback

Find opportunities to test out my creative practice to collect feedback (see Appendix B). Test it out when working with clients through my business, independently on my own projects, and even throughout my entire day outside of work. Match this field research with a formal feedback session with colleagues, my college cohort, friends, and family. The feedback gathered should be evaluated and added to my practice as a hypothesis to be tested.

SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES

In 2015, I chose to leave my cushy six-figure Creative Direction role at a global leading marketing firm. It was a leap of faith, driven by a burning curiosity to learn more about creativity, design, and change. I imagined a better way to realize my potential, and I took action.

Since then, I have had the privilege of working with some of the world's biggest brands—including Cochlear, Deloitte, Genentech, and Intuit—I started a Masters of Arts in Communication Deign, and I am about to complete a Masters of Creativity and Change Leadership.

The mission is the same seven years later. The cause is more apparent than ever. This project is the launching block into the next phase of my journey. To get me there, it focused on producing two tangible assets: a creative practice prototype and a strategic action plan.

Creative Practice Prototype

Challenge: How to Develop my Creative Practice?

How to develop my creative practice to incorporate all that I have learned about creativity, change, and leadership so that I can do the work that I want to do, that I am proud of, and that better serves those who want what I have to offer?

Idea: From a Creative Agency to a Creative Practice

My creative agency is where I share, learn, and practice being creative. It is a manifestation of my personal vision and mission. It is in service of the change I want to make in the world. The idea was to formalize my practice in the context of my professional creative business. Define who my creative practice is for, what it is for, and how I go about doing it. Doing so creates a practical prototype of how to sustain intentional creativity in a measurable and evergreen way.

Solution: Build the Identity of my Professional Creative Practice.

Make a Promise: We help leaders create transformational change. By telling stories, making connections, and building experiences, we engage imaginations and shift sentiment from 'that's not going to work' to 'I always thought that. Ultimately, we change dreamers to leaders and sceptics to believers.

Define the Mission: We help leaders create change by accelerating the acceptance of their transformational ideas.

Set our Values: Curiosity, imagination, and action. Inspired by the heart of each phase of The Thinking Skills Model (Puccio, 2011), my values are bumper guards that softly guide my steps toward intentional creativity.

Table 2

Values—People Like Us Do Things Like This

Curiosity	Be curious. Always asking questions. Questioning the question. Interested in the world. How things work. Why they work. What if they didn't work? Why do we do it like that? Make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.
Imagination	Apply imagination to solve old problems with new thinking.
Action	A bias toward action. A ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships were built for.

And How We Think: Start with empathy, stay open, take risks, and play with intention. My philosophy is an adaptation of creative affective and thinking skills (Puccio, 2011) that resonated the most with me, articulated in a way that is meaningful to me and my practice.

Table 3

Philosophy—Committed, Creative People can Change the World

Start with Empathy	Sonder – the realization that each random passer-by is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. Ask: Who is it for? Have sensitivity to the environment. Put ideas in context: give them a story.
Stay Open	Avoid premature closure, resist the tension to complete things in the easiest way possible, don't predefine the answer, let the answer reveal itself. This is being creative. Having a predefined solution is not.
Take Risks	Creative change presupposes risk. Without risk, you can't lead change. Creative change leadership. Leader vs follower. Problem solver vs creator. Be contrarian. Tread your own path. Create tension. Take up space. Lead the way.
Play	We all want optimal performance. But just like success, the more you focus on it, the less like you are to get it. When we play, we are truly free. Free from worries, concerns, status, and perceived limitations. We are open, flexible, curious, mindful, and present. We are in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).
With Intention	Cut the fluff. Drop the jargon. Shut out the noise. Highlight the essence. Ask: What would really matter here? Not to me, not to you, but to the people you are trying to serve. What is it for? What is its purpose? If this didn't happen, would it even matter? How can I do something that would be indispensable?

<div align="center">**The Strategy**</div>

<div align="center">"We're creative because we ship the work.</div>

<div align="center">We don't ship the work because we're creative."</div>

<div align="center">– Seth Godin</div>

Challenge: How to use my Creative Practice to Bring About Intentional?

My strategy aims to share my creative practice with the world. Turn my ideas into action. Share, listen, and make better. A way to create change.

Idea: Organize a Movement

If you want to create change, begin by making culture (Godin, 2021). It is *not* about building a business to market my things to people. It *is* about making intentional and meaningful change happen. It is *not* an ego trip about me building my public profile. It *is* about bringing together a community of people to act—united and motivated by a shared mission. It is about making culture.

Solution: Story, Strategy, Experience

According to Marshall Ganz (2011), Harvard professor and adviser on Barack Obama's Hope campaign, organizing a movement has three critical elements: story, strategy, and experiences.

Story is about creating a public narrative for action. It is an exercise of leadership by motivating others to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose. The goal is to identify sources of your calling (Story of Self) to the purpose in which you will call on others (Story of Us) to join you in action (Story of Now).

Table 4

Crafting a Public Narrative

Story of Self	A story about my transition from who I used to be to who I have become. A chance to show that I'm a person like you. That my actions led to change, one you can hear and see and understand. The change has happened to me that I want to see in others. "I was like you. I had a challenge. Then I learned something, and now I am here
Story of Us	Is the kernel of a tribe. Connecting my transitional story to those I want to join me. How can I make them see that I am one of them, and they are one of me? People like us do things like this. "I did not do this alone. And I see in you the very pain I saw in myself. Together, we can make this better."
Story of Now	What urgent challenge do I hope to inspire others to act on? What is my vision of successful action? How can they act together to achieve this outcome? How can they begin now, at this very moment? "But if we hesitate or leave the others behind, it won't work. The urgency of now requires that we do it together, without delay, without remorse, without giving into fear."

Strategy is about solving the challenge: How to earn and keep the attention and trust of a minimum viable audience (100 true fans) by speaking to them in their language, with a story they want to hear?

Experience is about solving the challenge: How to show up at every interaction and keep my promise. How to give them options to do deeper?

Plan: A Plan for Action

- Craft my public story for action

- Start telling it. Listen. Reflect. Back better. Tell again.

- Develop a strategy about how to tell my story to those who want to hear it in a language they are keen to understand.
  - Define my minimum viable audience
  - Collect insights about their worldview, concerns, dreams, values, and desires. Hypothesis about what they care about, who they associate with, what status they are and want to be, what they pay attention to, who they trust, and who are their champions.
  - Come up with a core strategic idea to earn and keep their attention.
- Build out a community experience
  - How to make it visible?
  - How to make it sticky?
  - How to show up often and keep our promise?
  - How to give options to go deeper into the experience?

SECTION FIVE: KEY LEARNINGS

Act with Intent, Purpose, and Enjoyment

I learned about who I am, what I stand for, and what I have to offer. I learned how to work the way I want to work; with the people, I want to work with. I learned to see the common thread that weaves my expertise, knowledge, and interests together so I can bring about the change I want to see. I learned how to act with intent, purpose, and enjoyment.

I learned that creativity is not an outcome but a practice. And the only way to be creative is to pursue it. Being creative is a choice. You are creative because you do the work; you don' do the work because you are creative.

Creating Change is Creating Culture

I learned that my perspective was skewed. That my creative practice was not a solo venture, out to make a buck by selling my things to people who do not really need them. Instead, I started to see my creative practice as an opportunity to bring together a community of people—united by a joint mission—who collectives create the change they want to see. I learned to see that my practice is about creating change. That it is about creating culture.

Being Creative Takes Dedication and Commitment

Ultimately, I learned about the dedication and commitment it takes being creative. What that means, what that feels like, and how to sustain it over a lifetime.

My Identity, Principles and Worth

What worked well was having my purpose, goals, and desired outcomes at the forefront of my mind during the entire project journey. What started out as a fun exercise to expand my skills and knowledge has blossomed into a creative change movement that has helped shape who I am, what I stand for, and what I have to offer.

Being Creative is a Learning Experience

It is difficult to say what I would have done differently because the project's success comes from the journey it took me on. The project itself was a learning experience. I learned firsthand what happens when I prematurely lock on a solution. It stunted my creativity and limited the project's potential for meaningful change. Could I have saved time not following that rabbit hole? Sure, but what would I have learned? There were many detours, roundabouts, and stops in congested traffic. But this is what the creative process is. A rummage in the chaos, searching for moments of clarity.

SECTION SIX: CONCLUSION

"We are what we repeatedly do."

– Aristotle

Being Creative is a Habit

It takes deliberate, focused, and determined practice. It does not come with any guarantees. But with commitment, being creative can make change happen.

Being creative is a quest for truth. Not someone else's truth. But yours. It is an invitation to see the world through your own eyes.

Being Creative is an Act of Leadership

Bringing together a community of people—united and motivated by a shared mission—to take collective action. Being creative is to offer a generous beacon lighting a new way forward. A better way. Your way.

Being Creative is a Beginning, Not an End

It is my prototype of how to be creative. A hypothesis of how being creative can make change happen. With repetitive, dedicated practice, I will continue to develop my idea of creativity and continue my journey of making the change I want to see.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Brainstorming

Mural Board

A Mural board visualizing the concept phase of the project.
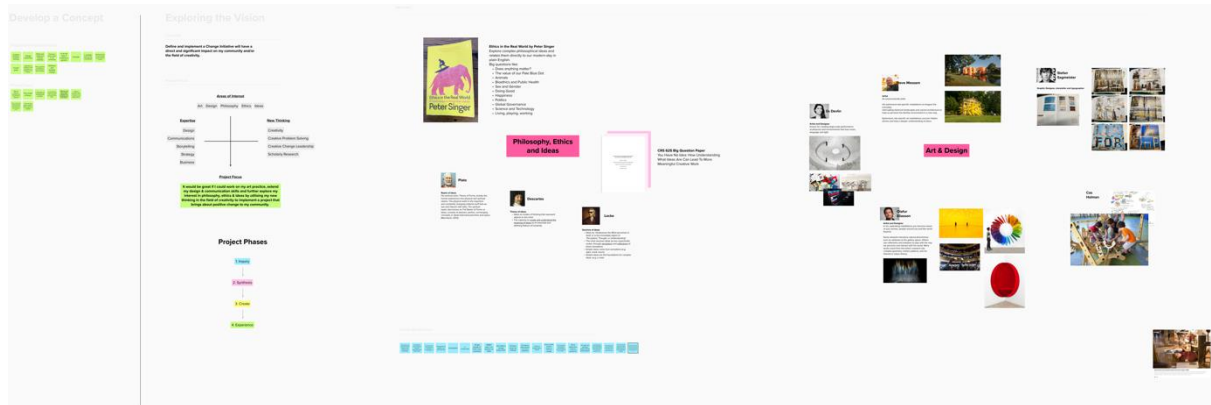
Whiteboarding

Early-stage whiteboarding visualizations from a creative problem-solving session.
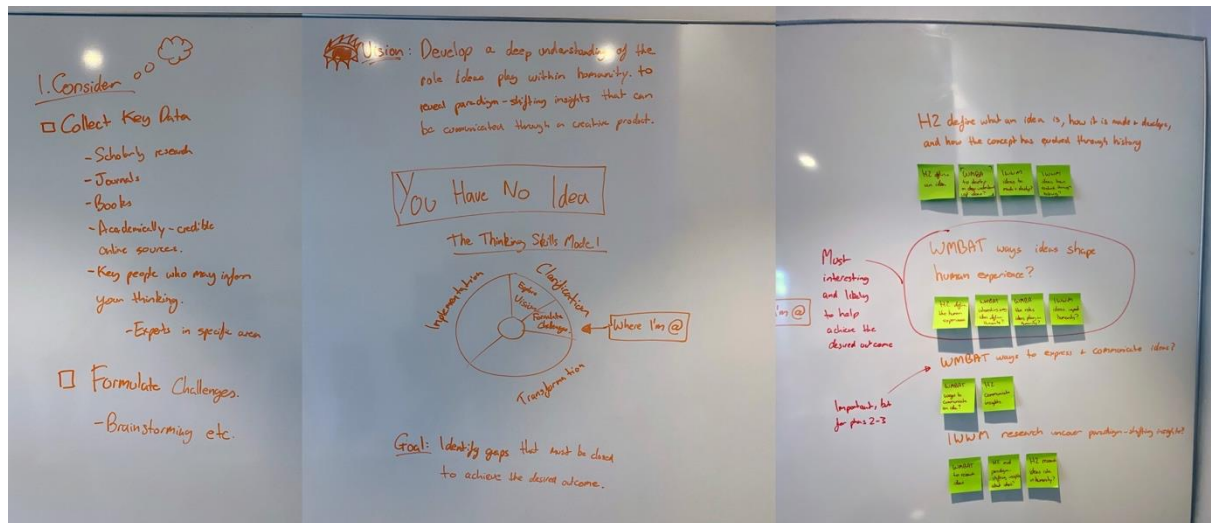
Post-It note wall

A Post-It note wall collected ideas as they developed.
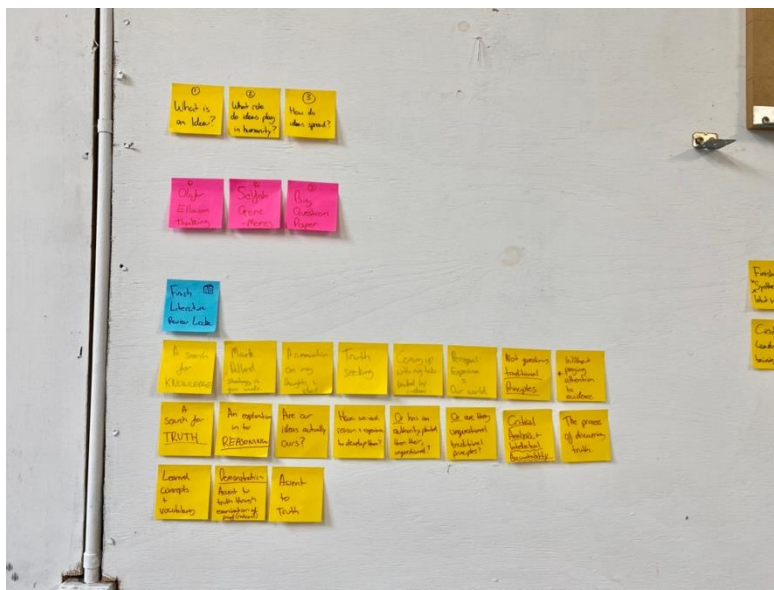
Mind Maps

Mind Maps were used to plot out and expand on ideas.
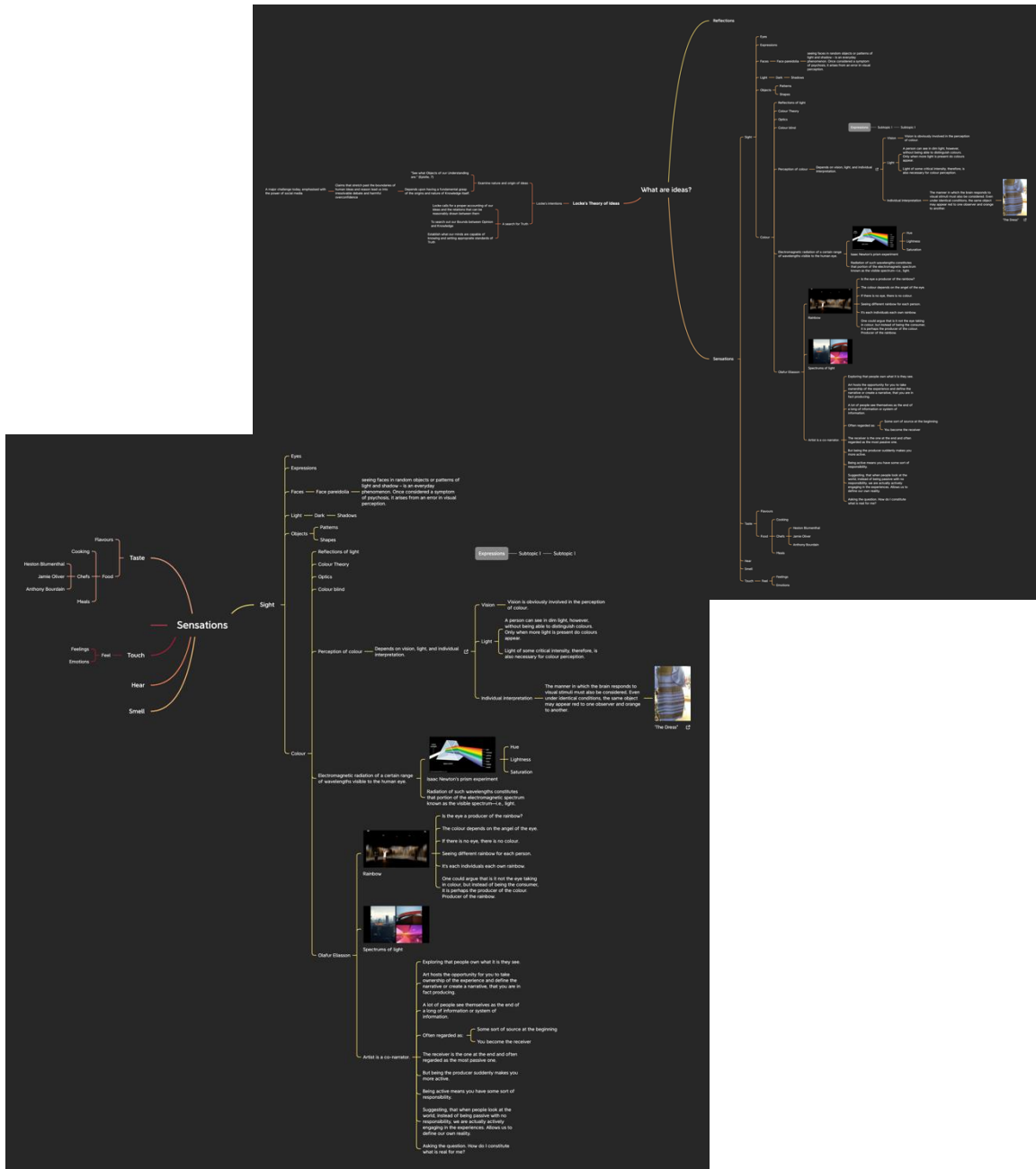
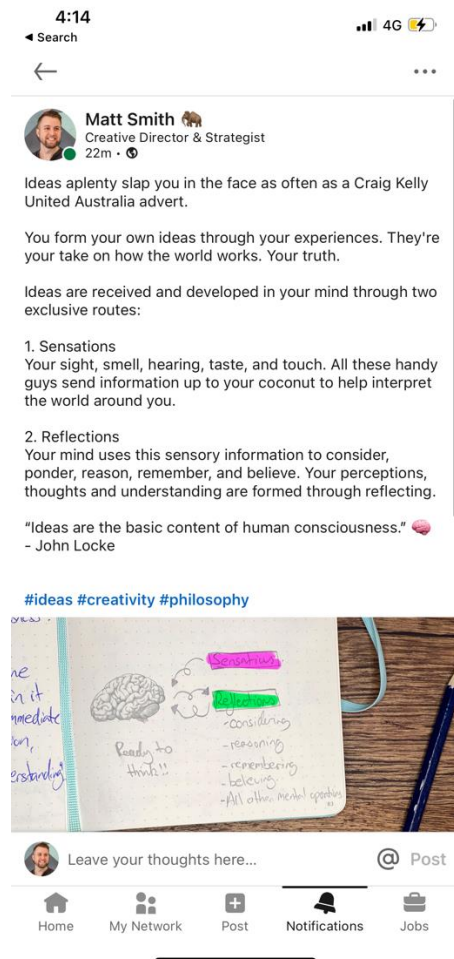## Sketches

Writing and drawing helped me work through my ideas.
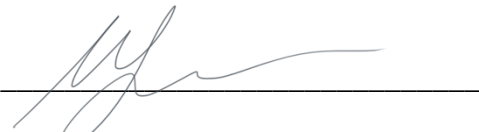
APPENDIX B

Feedback

LinkedIn Post

I started sharing some of my findings and ideas on social media as a form of feedback

Permission to Place this Project in the Digital Commons Online

I hereby grant permission to the Department of Creativity and Change Leadership at Buffalo State college permission to place a digital copy of this Master's *Project Being Creative: Not an Act but a Habit* as an online resource.

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Matthew W.Smith

Date 05-10-2022