

# The Accidental Creative Expert: One Possible Divergence from Friedlander's Outstanding Synthesis

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I greatly enjoyed Friedlander's (2024) synthesis of creativity and expertise; as she notes, creativity tends to not be well-represented in the expertise literature, and her book is a much-needed contribution. Her integration of Hoffman's (2017) model and the Four C's (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) got me thinking quite a bit.

Hoffman (2017) proposed categories of increased proficiency in a field, going from a Novice with no experience to a beginning Initiate to an actively learning Apprentice to a reliable Journeyman to the respected Expert to the elite Master. The Four C's start with mini-c, which is personally meaningful but purely subjective creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007). As someone shares their efforts and is recognized to some degree by their family, peers, community, and mentors, they could be considered at the little-c, or everyday creativity, level (Dumas & Kaufman, 2024). Pro-c is when one begins to have at least some impact on their chosen field or domain; it is, unsurprisingly, the most explicitly reflective of expertise. Finally, a few creative geniuses make contributions that are remembered long after they have passed away, and they would be considered Big-C (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2023).

The two models align quite well together—and, honestly, one common critique is that Pro-c is too broad, encompassing too wide a range from a first-year professor with a few publications to an emeritus legend who is an odds-on favorite to be remembered for

generations. Perhaps we should have split Pro-c akin to Journeyman/Expert as well. Rather than critique her synthesis, I would rather explore ways in which a creative trajectory might vary from the “standard” path.

One key to advancing beyond Journeyman and little-c is to engage in extensive deliberate practice over many years. Friedlander (2024) reviews work arguing that the deliberate practice needed to become an expert is “inherently unenjoyable” (p 9). Yet much creative activity is specifically enjoyable, so much so that drawing and writing can distract one from feeling sad, angry, or anxious (Drake & Hodge, 2015). It's not just the arts; being creative in science can also improve mood (Li et al., 2025). There are a myriad of additional benefits for little-c creators that span mental health, meaning in life, and social connection (see review in Kaufman, 2023). In addition, expertise acquisition is intensely cognitive. Creativity is definitely related to cognitive ability, particularly when the creative process is studied, but this relationship is weaker for creative person- or product-centric views and varies by domain (Serban et al., 2023).

I would argue that these circumstances enable a certain type of creative trajectory, which I believe does happen. Someone could engage in a creative activity as a long-term hobby or leisure project and, because the task may be less cognitively demanding and pleasurable, may not even realize that when they create they are engaging in deliberate practice.

Over years, they may become an accidental creative expert and find themselves reaching Pro-c without being aware that they ever advanced through little-c. There is scholarship on accidental creative discoveries (Ross, 2024), but not on accidental creative expert acquisitions. Yet we know that creative metacognition exists on a spectrum, with some in tune with their abilities and others oblivious (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). It is more common to conjure the image of the overconfident dilettante. However, there are many whose creativity stays hidden because they are unaware of their abilities or even what is considered creative in the first place (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 2022).

Expanding evidence for the benefits of creativity in older adults (Adams-Price & Morse, 2024) and the growing inclusion of crafts as “counting” as creative work (Glăveanu, 2013) may enable such hidden creators to eventually blossom and, ideally, be recognized. Some may assume they are at the level of Initiate or Apprentice only to discover later in life that others see them as an Expert. This scenario may be less likely in cognitively-heavy domains or areas that would constitute someone’s occupation, but in the world of creativity, I think it will be happening more and more frequently.

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