

**Containers, Creativity and Quilt-making: an exploration of teachers' conceptualisations of creative spaces for teaching and learning**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the symbolisations and conceptualisations of creative spaces of eleven teachers who participated in an experiential Masters module, Creativity in Practice for Educators. These conceptualisations were developed through the participants' engagement in arts-based activities on the course and the creative pieces which they produced for the course assessment. The module design synthesises ideas about creativity and creative spaces, in particular Boden's notion of creativity as a process of transforming conceptual spaces and Jankowska and Atlay's development of purposely-designed spaces to enhance creativity in learning. A matrix of creative spaces, incorporating physical, imaginal, digital and conceptual spaces, underpinned the course activities and participants' explorations. The course assignments and interviews with participants revealed the impact of the course on teachers' practice and conceptualisations of creative spaces. The paper engages with the issues involved in presenting the diverse range of data which emerged from this inquiry, suggesting a quilting metaphor to represent the complexity. While the study focused on in-service teachers, its findings are applied to developing awareness about creativity in participants in initial teacher education programmes.

**Key words:** creativity; creative spaces; arts-based methods; experiential learning; initial teacher education; matrix of creative spaces

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## **Containers, Creativity and Quilt-making: an exploration of teachers' conceptualisations of creative spaces for teaching and learning**

### **Introduction and Context**

*'At the outset of our collective 'journey into creativity' we were asked to bring with us a symbol to represent creativity. Having only an empty coffee cup at my disposal I attempted to argue that creativity needed a container, a holding space, a structure, a limited, clearly defined, real and tangible space in which to develop.'*

The quotation above raises some of the questions explored in this study: about the spaces in which creativity occurs, the role of the educator in facilitating these spaces and the relationship between creativity and learning, in the school classroom as well as in teacher education. These words are from a student's assignment for a creativity module on a Masters in Educational Studies programme which originated from the author's recognition from her practice as a teacher educator that many experienced and new teachers lacked confidence in their own creativity. While this paper focuses on the practising teachers who have participated in the module, it also explores the implications of this study for initial teacher education.

Creativity in Practice for Educators is an experiential module which offers opportunities for participants to engage in arts-based activities to develop their understanding of their own creativity, as well as that in their practice. This paper explores the participants' symbolisations and conceptualisations of creative spaces, presenting the structured opportunities for exploring the theme on the module, the creative artefacts with which the teachers responded to this theme, and reflections on creative space from interviews with three of the teachers three months after the module.

The complex nature of creativity and creative spaces and the challenges involved in capturing the processes of creative exploration raised questions

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about an appropriate design for this study, and for the presentation of the diverse range of data which might emerge from an arts-based study. The study required a framework which synthesised its theoretical constructs, and at the same time contained and displayed the multiple forms of meaning making which emerged from the research. An arts-based metaphor seemed suitable, particularly one which could bring together the notions of gathering ideas and evidence as well as deliberative crafting. The image of quilt-making was used to represent the notion of containing the processes and outcomes of creativity. These processes include the gathering of ideas, the identification of patterns, the layering of meaning, of deliberative crafting and of artful display. The structural features common to most types of quilts are the backing and the central insulating layer, which form the foundation for the top one. These layers may be understood in this study as the conceptualisations of creativity and the invisible processes underpinning the participants' explorations of creative spaces. The top layer displays the results of the processes, which are artfully arranged to foreground the main themes and patterns. The stitching which binds all the layers of the quilt together are always visible, further evidence of the process and the skill of the quilter.

This paper explores each of the layers of the quilt, beginning with the theoretical frameworks and proceeding with 'showing the stitching', or how the ideas and explorations manifested in the study. Images of participants' creative artefacts generated on the course, their reflections on the module and their final assignments are woven into the paper.

### **The nature of creativity**

The backing layer of the quilt establishes the conceptualisations of creativity and creative spaces on which the study is based. These conceptualisations are not easily articulated; it needs to be acknowledged that creativity is a complex and elusive concept. The processes of creativity are both intriguing and difficult to explain; it is perhaps this tantalising ambiguity which has led to curiosity about it and a range of attempts to explain it. While the literature

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about creativity is diverse, this study focused on the theme of creativity in learning and the role of educators in supporting this process. This theme is particularly relevant in Northern Ireland; creativity is an integral part of the Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland (CCEA, 2007), now known as the Northern Ireland Curriculum. The focus of this curriculum, which spans both primary and secondary school, is on the development of personal and interpersonal skills and capabilities, incorporating the dimensions of moral character, ethical awareness, citizenship, cultural understanding, employability and environmental responsibility. The curriculum areas include managing information, thinking skills, problem solving, working with others, self management, developing ICT skills and 'being creative', which is defined as follows: *Children should be able to use creative approaches to be imaginative and inventive, to explore possibilities and take risks in their learning* (op. cit: 5). Other aspects of creativity included in the curriculum are free play, problem solving, developing ideas collaboratively and responding to others' creative work.

The role of the educator in facilitating creativity is one of the main themes in the literature about creativity in learning. Over three decades ago, the idea of teachers' responsibility for their pupils' creativity was embodied in Chambers' large-scale study of the impact of teacher behaviour on student's creativity; the teachers were identified through an evaluation of the research of those doctoral students who had studied under them and who nominated them as having either a profoundly negative or positive impact on their creative development. (Chambers,1973) The key characteristics which facilitated creativity were the enthusiasm and encouragement of pupils beyond the classroom. More recent research analyses the behaviours and teaching styles of 'creativity-fostering teachers', (Cropley, 2001:138), and their strategies in dealing with attitudinal factors which impact on pupils' engagement in art classes (Pettersson et. al., 2004). The study described in this paper acknowledged the need to explore methods for facilitating pupils' access to creative spaces. This study develops Tracey's model of creative reflection

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(2007), which provides a framework for engagement in creative inquiry in learning. In the current study, this framework has been articulated as a matrix of creative spaces for learning and teaching; this is elaborated in the next part of this paper.

Another theme in the literature across the last three decades about creativity in learning has been the relationship between the facilitation of creativity in the classroom and teacher autonomy; a number of studies contain examples as to how the latter may be constrained by the demands of the system and standardization (Gorton, 1971; Huddle 1985; Nalin, 2002; and Evans, 2002, provide just a few examples).

In the last decade, creativity has been foregrounded in educational policy in the United Kingdom. An influential document was the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999), which fed into the review of the National Curriculum. In their review of this document, Jeffrey and Craft (2004) suggest that the report makes a false distinction between the creative practices of teachers and the intention to teach for creativity. They postulate the need to recognise that teaching for creativity can occur spontaneously, and suggest that the focus should be on creative learning rather than on creative teaching. An implication for this study is the need to provide opportunities to engage teachers in creative learning themselves so that they might understand the processes involved.

This study builds on Boden's conceptualisation (2004) of creativity as a process of engaging with conceptual spaces. Boden differentiates between three types of creativity: combinational, which involves the juxtaposition of dissimilar concepts; exploratory, which refers to conceptual explorations of the thinking styles and frameworks of fields of knowledge and enquiry; and transformative creativity, which results when the process of exploration generates new ways of thinking and ideas. This study examines the idea that teachers' own conceptual frameworks about creativity can be expanded by

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their own explorations of creativity. Eisner's conception of the innate 'artistry' involved in the craft of teaching (2002, 382-383) suggests that arts-based methods might be appropriate for supporting teachers in these explorations. Green (1995) and Eisner (2008) both argue that arts-based learning offers opportunities for expanding ways of knowing and meaning making.

## **Participants**

All of the eleven participants in the Creativity in Practice module were female, in their second year of study on the Masters, and aged between 24 and 55 years. Their teaching experience varied from one year to 28 years (mean=7years). Of the two outside the school sector, one was an Education Officer at an interactive discovery centre; the other was an adult literacy and numeracy teacher in further education. Seven of the remainder were primary school teachers, one working with pupils with special educational needs. The others were distributed evenly between Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The remaining two participants were secondary school teachers, one specializing in science and the other in English. Three participants volunteered for interviews three months after the course.

## **Findings: framework for creative spaces for teaching and learning**

The matrix of creative spaces which underpins this study includes the categories of *physical*, *imaginal*, *digital* and *conceptual* spaces. The criteria for regarding them as *creative* spaces are: their accessibility to all learners, their capacity to offer opportunities for individual and collaborative meaning making and exploration, and their potential to expand conceptual frameworks and facilitate boundary crossings. The distinctions between the types of spaces are not precise, as there are overlaps. The Creativity in Practice module offers teachers arts-based opportunities to engage in these and reflect on the implications for their practice.

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This part of the paper quilts together a discussion on the nature of each kind of space, some examples of activities on the course which explore the spaces and responses to these activities from group reflections, the interviews and the course assignments. The course assessment required students to respond to the main themes of the module, the nature of creativity and creative spaces. The format of the assignment offered a choice between a reflective learning journal, with an entry relating to each of the course sessions, or an original creative piece which synthesised the themes of the course. The course assignments are referred to below according to the primary type of creative space which they foregrounded, although on most occasions there were overlaps with other types of spaces.

### *1. Physical spaces*

This category refers to the classroom environment, the equipment which might be used to engage in creative activities, the layout of the room, students' capacity to move around the room, and the availability of resources for engaging in creativity, as well as opportunities for the display of creative work.

The design of the learning space for the Creativity in practice for Educators module was based on Jankowska and Atlay's (2008) model of purposely-designed spaces for enhancing creativity in learning and student engagement. This model is underpinned by the recognition of the significance of the relationship between learning and the space in which it takes place. The 'C-space' (creative space) was deliberately designed not to resemble a traditional classroom. It provided a range of equipment and spaces which allowed learners to manipulate ideas and brainstorm together; this freedom to use all of the resources and to change the layout of the learning space was incorporated into the Creativity in Practice module. The classroom in which all of the course sessions took place, with the exception of the time in the computer laboratory using Windows Moviemaker, was a large ground floor room with rows of traditional chairs, an area with a comfortable seating area to

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one side and sufficient surfaces for art material to be spread throughout the room and used both individually and collectively.

In her interview, Mary noted how she took her experience of the learning space on the course back into her classroom, setting up a 'quiet space' for private reflection. At the same time, she has reservations about her right to change the physical learning environment: *'I wouldn't feel comfortable going into someone else's classroom and moving the tables and chairs around like I do in my own; having said that, it would be acceptable in my school, but I wouldn't feel happy doing that.'* This contrasts the autonomy which teachers have in their own classrooms with that in the wider learning environment. Two of the assignments focused on physical space: one was a puppet theatre, and the other was a playhouse in the shape of a boat, constructed outside the teacher's classroom for her Key Stage 1 pupils. These spaces engaged pupils in creative play and offered access to imaginal worlds.

## 2. *Imaginal Spaces*

These were spaces for playing with ideas in which the focus is on using the imagination. These activities incorporated creative thinking exercises and the use of art materials and props.

### *Choosing images and quotations about creativity*

In this introductory activity, participants were asked to choose a few images and quotations which conveyed their ideas about creativity from approximately a hundred art postcards and photographs, and about fifty quotations about creativity and learning. The quotations were printed separately on a piece of coloured card, approximately half the size of a postcard. This is an example of one of Tracey's 'threshold activities', aimed at supporting learners in engaging the imagination and accessing creative spaces (Tracey, 2007). This activity also builds on two facets of Boden's model of creativity: while it begins with the first stage, combinational creativity (juxtaposing image and words), it

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develops opportunities for participants to explore and enhance their understandings of creativity and thus links into the second, exploratory, stage.

This activity inspired one of the assignments: a box with textured sides and a range of stimulus material for creative writing, including images and writing frames.

### 3. *Digital and virtual spaces*

The incorporation of digital literacies and technologies into learning raises questions of inclusion not only for students but for teachers. The module offered teachers opportunities to explore creativity and technology through easy-to-use free software, Windows Moviemaker. One of the participants, as an education officer in an interactive education centre, was familiar with this as well as more complex packages. Another had used Moviemaker in her personal life; however, none of them had incorporated this into their practice. A ten-minute demonstration of this software was followed by a two-hour session in a computer laboratory, in the course of which all of the participants made their own films and showed them to each other.

A response to Moviemaker from a module evaluation form notes that:

*'I hadn't used this before, but it was easy to use and you see the results very quickly.'*

Five out of the eleven participants used Moviemaker for their course assignments. Mary, who made a film to support the teaching of reading, comments:

*'The MovieMaker possibilities were endless. ... That's what appealed to me, because it was so versatile. I can see the potential for using it so many times for so many different things.'*

### 4. *Conceptual spaces*

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These are spaces in which the focus is on the exploration of concepts and ideas, such as the nature of creativity itself, on a curriculum area, or on the curriculum itself.

Participants explored their creative identities and autobiographies individually through the use of art materials, producing collages which incorporated images of their families, arts practices, and life histories.

In a small group activity, participants worked in two groups to reflect on the theme of creative spaces, creating images to convey their ideas.

Figure 1: Reflection on Creative Space



At first glance, this image, a simple spider diagram, appears to lack complexity. However, it incorporates the significant aspect of time for creativity to develop, and two key dichotomies of creative space: chaos/ order, individual/collaborative. In their presentation of this image to the plenary

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group, the teachers explored the wider dimensions of creative spaces and revealed how these spaces exist in a number of dimensions: in nature, in interaction, as well as in the individual mind. In the final course evaluation, one participant reflected back on this activity, suggesting about creative spaces that

*'It is all about the comfort zone. We have to foster positive comfort zones for creative concentration.'*

Five assignments focused on conceptual aspects of creative spaces: they included two installations, two interactive resources supporting learning about the colour wheel and the parts of a flower respectively, and a chart depicting creativity in science in the Northern Ireland curriculum; it explored the notion that this curriculum offers spaces for pupils to play with the ideas which the learning of science generates.

## **Discussion**

The conceptualisations of creative space of the participants in the module appeared to be informed by the nature of the art form, the ages and developmental stages of the pupils, their own personal definitions of pupil creativity, and the degree of freedom of movement which they perceived for themselves and their pupils in the physical learning environment as well as in imaginal spaces. Teachers' reflections identified some of the external factors affecting the development of creative spaces for learning and teaching. The notion of the school as a supportive container for creativity was juxtaposed against the limitations imposed by curricular and institutional constraints. A recurrent theme was the importance of adequate time for developing creative ideas and exploring conceptual spaces, especially in post-primary schools.

This study explored teachers' individual and collaborative responses to creative engagement, using a matrix of creative spaces to frame this

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engagement. Their participation in the course activities and the assignments which participants produced in response to the themes of the module suggest that this matrix supported the development of their understanding of creativity in learning and practice. They identified with the idea that the physical space of the classroom is a significant factor in supporting creativity, recognising that it is important to set aside spaces for creative work and to offer pupils choices as to how they wish to use the learning environment. It should be noted that those assignments which developed physical spaces for creativity, the playhouse and the puppet theatre, were created by Key Stage 1 teachers; their ideas might be applied by practitioners working with older pupils.

The course assignments suggest that exploring imaginal spaces on the course stimulated ideas for developing these spaces in the classroom, through imaginative play and the teaching of creative writing. With regard to digital spaces, the positive responses to the possibilities offered by Windows Moviemaker affirm the benefits espoused by Mirrer (2006) of using the readily available 'low tech' approaches to digital storytelling, and suggests that time needs to be provided on teacher education programmes for students to explore relevant software for use in their practice; this should be extended to the exploration of arts-based materials in general.

Those assignments which focused on the conceptual spaces of creativity appear to be related to the second level of Boden's model of creativity, the exploration of conceptual spaces (Boden, 2004). These explorations included personal conceptualisations of creativity, a framework for the science curriculum, and applications of aspects of the biology and science to the classroom. This paper suggests that both initial and in-service teacher education might benefit from incorporating opportunities for teachers to explore the conceptual aspects of practice and curriculum.

Exploring the creative spaces matrix with the teachers proved useful for engaging with the course assignment and for identifying and distinguishing

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between some of the processes of engagement in learning and creativity. However, the notion of boundary crossings between the different types of spaces needs to be developed. The matrix needs to be extended to encompass the interactions between the learning spaces in the classroom and the external spaces which impact on this learning – the school and the social, cultural, political and policy environments.

The findings of this small-scale study raise questions about the roles and responsibility of teachers in designing and supporting engagement in creative spaces for learning, recognizing that this work takes place in a wider policy context which impacts on teacher autonomy and on understandings of the nature and purpose of creativity. This is supported by Troman et al.'s reflection (2007) on the relationship between the current cultures of performativity in primary schools and the implementation of creativity policies. They suggest that these relationships are complex and their demands on teachers need to be acknowledged.

### **Quilt makers, creative spaces and implications for Initial Teacher Education**

The findings from this study indicate that the participants expanded their conceptualisations of creativity and creative space, as well as their confidence about engaging in these spaces through the use of arts-based methods. One remarked in her assignment:

*Ultimately, I believe that this module has enabled me to comprehend the importance of exploring my own creativity in individual terms, as a member of a collaborative group and also as an Early Years Educator. It seems apt to comment on Whitmore's belief (1990, p. 215) that in order to become better educators we need to count ourselves into the equation.*

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*We need to bring 'the child out', to permit him to express and to act, to experiment, to make mistakes – and to give the same gift to ourselves. By reconfirming our own autonomy in learning, taking time to 'play' and experiment with our creativity, we are therefore better equipped to share this gift with our pupils.*

Creative explorations, as these words suggest, support teachers in making meaning about creativity and learning and their own identities as individuals, group members and educators. Drawing on Leitch's notion (2008) that arts-based approaches support teachers in reflection and self-direction, this paper argues that there is a need for spaces for all teachers and teacher educators in which to engage with creativity. The Creativity in Practice for Educators module offers one kind of model for this exploration; other examples might be workshops and seminars offered in continuing professional development programmes.

At the start of the Creativity in Practice module, teachers displayed relatively little belief in their own creativity; however, their participation in the activities and their assignments point to their growing sense of agency. Returning to the quilting framework introduced at the start of the paper, it appears that the teachers are coming to see themselves as quilt makers, responsible for constructing and managing spaces for creativity in their practice. Responses to the final evaluation of the module indicate that it enhanced awareness about planning and preparation for creative activities, as well as the organisation and use of the physical learning environment. Teachers' assignments revealed how they were able to apply their learning to their practice. These findings about the practical and conceptual aspects of learning suggest that initial teacher education might fruitfully incorporate spaces for exploring creativity.

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The matrix of creative spaces developed for this study needs to be adapted to account for the needs of student teachers. Initial teacher education might provide 'a holding space, a structure' for creativity, as the comment at the start of this paper suggested. This space should provide student teachers with opportunities to link their experiences of creativity to their evolving understanding of learning and practice. The relationship between the physical learning environment and creativity might be a useful focus for the early stages of initial teacher education; student teachers could be given opportunities to create, manipulate and reflect on learning spaces. They also might develop an observation template for use on teaching practice to support their understanding of the impact of the learning space on creative exploration.

The first stage of Tracey's model of creative reflection (2007) incorporates 'threshold activities' which prepare participants for engagement with creative spaces; these might be incorporated into initial teacher education. Some examples might be creative thinking activities, or the selection of images and quotations about learning and creativity. These activities support access to imaginal spaces and active explorations of meaning making.

Other arts-based methods for enhancing learning in initial teacher education include collage, creative writing and three-dimensional artwork such as self boxes (Leitch, 2008), in which images are gathered to represent aspects of teacher identity. Initial teacher education should also offer opportunities for the exploration of digital spaces through the use of accessible programmes such as Windows MovieMaker.

To stimulate their creativity, student teachers might be required to develop their own learning resources, inspired by examples of other teachers' innovative work, such as the playhouse, the films and the creative writing box designed by the Creativity in Practice participants. Making their assignments supported these teachers in discovering what creativity meant to them

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personally, as well as in their practice. Requiring participants in initial teacher education to design their own creativity assignments might enhance their understanding of the processes of assessing learning.

## **Conclusion**

At the heart of this paper is the belief that teachers require deliberative spaces for reflecting on creative engagement and developing connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985) in the field of creativity in learning; the Creativity in Practice for Educators module offered a matrix of these spaces. The participants' responses to the module suggest that their explorations of creativity and learning enhanced their awareness of these processes and of their own creativity.

This paper began with a comment by one of the teachers about creative space; it ends with a reminder from another participant:

*'There are many aspects of physical space (and time) that cannot be changed within the school/work place so the metaphorical ideas of creative space play an important part in school life/ education.'*

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