A risky business: creative learning in education

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges that professional educators encounter as they endeavour to engage learners creatively. The recent change of government offers an opportunity to revisit assumptions about creativity that have been enshrined in policy, and evidenced in practice through such programmes as Creative Partnerships. Early indications of new coalition government policy suggests an increasingly constrained and measured curriculum and an approach to pedagogy that is less open to creative approaches to learning. Concomitantly pupil and student 'voice' have acquired a degree of status, arguably as a measure to assure quality and frequently framed within a discourse of 'value for money'. Of rather less importance is 'voice' when it is framed within the context of being listened to, nurtured, encouraged to take risks, supported in managing uncertainty, learning from failure, and critiquing the learning process. This paper argues that if learning is to develop and flourish, it is possible that institutions which provide teacher education need to be increasingly receptive and responsive to the processes that learners find more personally and professionally engaging. This paper introduces a small scale qualitative research project that aims to explore education students' 'voice' and their experience of creative learning at university. Preliminary findings are presented and suggest that adopting a more sensorial and embodied approach to teaching and learning energises and invigorates the process. The discussion is used as a springboard to provoke reflections on creativity, personal epistemology and emergent professionalism.

Keywords: creativity, student voice, learning, professional development

The emergent voice

Can you remember your student voice? That's not a question about what kind of student you were, it's a question that asks 'is there within your lived memory a 'voice' that you recognise now, of being from then, a 'voice' that emerged from you being a student'? Too distant, too singular, too undefined? Another way in is to notice if you have a 'voice' now – your professional voice, it may be blended and depend upon whether you occupy the role of classroom teacher, manager, subject leader, researcher or student. What qualities does this voice bring to your role, can you discern how it is shaped, supported, quietened or indeed silenced? What I raise here is a discussion about the voice that emerges with professional development, that is anchored by personal epistemology, and has bearing on your sense of agency. It is about the ability to be empowered and empowering – no matter what the role is in teaching that you may occupy. In this paper I want to suggest that there is a useful connection to be explored between 'voice' and creativity and I suggest that there is currency in the re-visioning of this relationship in the light of professional development.

Given the omnipresent and significant changes to education policy that the new coalition government has initiated it appears most likely that there will be impact upon the training of teachers, the continuous professional development of teachers, the curriculum, pedagogy and standards. The relationship between policy and practice will change yet again under an emergent political vision, however, the 'voice' of the professional educator, and indeed of those training to be teachers, is one that offers particular insight into the value of creative learning. As yet it is unclear what part creativity in education will take in the new coalition government's evolving agenda. It is therefore apposite to pay heed to the received wisdom on the significance of creativity and creative learning, and to reflect upon creativity in relation to one's own professional practice. In order to interrogate these themes further it is helpful first to consider the literature on creativity that can focus the debate; here then, a light sketch of the landscape of creative learning.

The context of creativity

There has been a growing awareness in the last decade of the value and benefit of adopting a more creative approach to teaching and learning in education (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education,1999). These policy documents provide the backdrop that suggests that Britain needs an education system that encourages 'widespread development of generic skills of creativity.' (NACCCE,1999). Of course creativity itself is a contested and 'messy' concept, characterised in the state guidance as:

'*First […] thinking or behaving imaginatively. Second, overall this imaginative activity is purposeful: that is, it is directed to achieving an objective. Third, these processes must generate something original. Fourth, the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective'* (National Curriculum, 2009).

Deconstructed, creativity unravels, arguably to become the nirvana of progressive education. Adams et al (2010) critique the state guidance on creativity (National Curriculum 2009) as it appears to suggest that under the influence of creativity the whole ontology of the learner undergoes a transformation. Earlier writing by Jackson (2004) who discusses education through a discourse of enablement, focuses on the fulfilment of potential and supporting students to develop their uniqueness *through creativity*. He posits that creativity enables one to adapt to the changing world and is therefore wholly and highly appropriate for education, and specifically higher education. This theme is an echo of Barnett (2000) who states that one of the purposes of higher education should be to prepare students for the ever-changing world.

McWilliam (2008) draws useful connections between the pace and demands of the 21st century world of work and the relevance and appropriateness of skills and competencies that are developed through education institutions in

the light of such uncertainty, risk, and complexity. The demands of the complex world require skills of students that are sourced from a creative font – these should be nurtured throughout our education system, and not least in teacher education. McWilliam responds in part to Barnett and Coat (2005) who have questioned whether the emphasis on skills in higher education is preparing students to engage with the world. They argue that government should place more emphasis on creativity within education to achieve this goal. This tension prevails in government policy that contrarily also suggests

'Pupils who are encouraged to think creatively and independently become: more interested in discovering things for themselves, more open to new ideas, keen to work with others to explore ideas, willing to work beyond lesson time when pursuing an idea or vision' (National Curriculum, 2009).

Given this state guidance, teacher education appears to be remarkably resistant to embrace fully research that evidences a more expansive approach to teaching and learning. The institutional recalcitrance can be sourced from a more linear, objective and rational perspective that privileges particular approaches to accruing knowledge, understanding and evidencing professional practice. Outcome measures and methods of assessment both in schools and in the training of those teachers who aspire to work in schools are limited; for example little regard is paid to the subjective, sentient and emotive aspects of learning, and the curriculum is bound by frameworks that predefine the required learning (Creme 2003, Simmons and Thompson 2008). More specifically, creativity is often inhibited by predictive, outcome based course designs. These set out what students and indeed pupils will be expected to have learnt, and offer little possibility for the unanticipated or student determined outcomes. Assessment tasks and assessment criteria which limit the possibilities of students' responses are also significant inhibitors of their creativity. This would suggest that risk aversion is practiced at an institutional level.

There is an irony here; at the critical early years stages of learning, creativity is fore grounded as being of utmost importance, pedagogy is saturated with reference to teaching creatively, teaching for creativity and learning through creativity. It could be argued that the curriculum and pedagogy for the under fives adopts a much more holistic approach to learning, one that draws on body, mind and spirit, an approach that values emotion alongside reason – no hierarchy there. Highlighting early learning portends questions of a deeper order, for example at the later stages of education and particularly in higher education and professional learning why is intellect reified, self expression quelled and such great emphasis placed on performativity measures (Craft and Jeffrey, 2008). The coalition government might want to subjugate such questions, for they could disrupt the familiar and now arguably inherent 'natural order' of education. Otherwise, a line of enquiry might unfold thus, what is the impact of being 'forged' as a student teacher, or indeed as a professional educator? These are indeed disturbing questions that have far reaching implications for wider society. Whilst state guidance on creativity currently remains, early indications are that government will put greater emphasis on a narrower curriculum with no respite on measuring performance outcomes. In the light of such intensification of core measured curriculum, where does creativity fit, what value does creativity bring to learning and what is needed to teach for creativity, engage in creative teaching and creative learning?

Qualitative research by Donnelly (2004) that explores how creativity is fostered within an imaginative curriculum in higher education finds that students perceive that there is an impact on their learning. I argue, along with Jackson (2004), that there is a 'voice' that can be encouraged to emerge, a voice that values creative approaches to learning and benefits from leaving behind curricula that have been wrung dry and lost their buoyancy in making learning meaningful. Research undertaken by Jackson (2004) that examines

personal accounts of teachers promoting student creativity found that students who engage with the creative process changed their perceptions of creativity, and began to re-define themselves. Most students began warily; however their ways of thinking changed during the process. As creativity challenges one to think unconventionally students showed enthusiasm when they finally solved problems and when they were pressured to think 'creatively'. Jackson contends that creativity in the classroom allows the teacher to become more of a facilitator, enabling students to be self-directing, self-regulating and resourceful learners. So there is evidence that creative teaching and creative learning are good, so it seems. However, to what extent this approach to teaching is prevalent in our schools and universities and what experience does this afford to learners.

There has been an incremental shift across education in recent years to pay heed to 'voice', be that of the pupil, student, participant and more recently customer. Successive government policies have increasingly adopted a more market driven, consumer led, education agenda. The backdrop has been a culture of audit and performativity which have become significant, arguably *exclusively significant*, measures of quality across education (Avis 2007). Pupil and student 'voice' have acquired a degree of status, though primarily as a quality assurance indicator and frequently framed within a discourse of 'value for money'. Of rather less importance is 'voice' when it is framed within the context of being listened to, nurtured, encouraged to take risks, supported in managing uncertainty, learning from failure, and critiquing the learning process. If learning is to develop and flourish, it is possible that institutions that provide teacher education need to be increasingly receptive and

responsive to the processes that learners find more personally engaging.

If as educators we subscribe 'in theory' to include a more comprehensive approach to learning, how can this be practised within the confines of a

university or school based professional learning strategy? Strathern (1997) asks if the curriculum, framework for learning, environment and culture allows for innovation. Alltree et al (2004) identified several conditions that appear to facilitate students' creativity which include the following dimensions: having sufficient time and space in the curriculum to allow students to develop their own creativity, having sufficiently varied and diverse working situations to enable all students to be creative. She goes on to suggest that allowing students the freedom to work in new and interesting ways, and challenging students with real, demanding and exciting work is also significant. Finally, she acknowledges the issue of assessment; designing assessment which allows for outcomes which are not narrowly predetermined, fostering a climate within a module, programme or department which encourages experimentation, risk taking, observation/awareness, evaluation and personal development for both staff and students. The issue of measurement and assessment is worthy of another paper, suffice to say at this juncture that Elton's (2006) critique usefully circumscribes the current status quo in regard to assessing creativity in higher education and suggests a way forward that is built upon the guiding principle of interpretivist assessment.

Prompted by the literature and the emergent discourses in education policy which emphasise student 'voice', a small scale qualitative research project was developed to explore undergraduate perceptions of learning creatively in higher education. The students invited to participate (n= 30) were undergraduate and postgraduate education students, enrolled on QTS and non QTS programmes. Each participant took part in one of three focus groups that focussed on their perceptions of creativity and their experiences of learning creatively whilst at university. The focus groups provided the structure for generating the data. Each group was facilitated by a researcher who offered a variety of creative media, for example a range of arts materials,

to participants to support exploration of their conceptions of creativity and to metaphorically illustrate their understanding and experience of creative learning.

The purpose of utilising such an approach in the method was to provide a congruence between the focus of the research and the research process undertaken by the researcher and research partners, thus paving the way for dialogic engagement. The illustration below is an example of the material that was gathered, and analysis of the findings is currently underway.

Fig.1

'It's about thinking outside the box, about expanding your thoughts on stuff…..But I have gone and put a cross all the way through it {Fig 1} because I don't think there's enough of that, it's like your being told what to know, that's my feeling …… You're always being told what they want you to know still, I don't think there's much room at all for expanding your own ideas' (J: undergrad education student).

A preliminary reading suggests that the discourse of personalisation permeates the narratives of student experience, and that undergraduates and postgraduates engage differently in their perceived sense of autonomy and the meaning ascribed to independence in learning. This is particularly evident in those who are focussed on their emergent professional role. Issues of critical thinking and empowerment to think 'outside the box' are further themes

that are raised across both undergraduate and postgraduate domains, though it is those working at postgraduate level who scrutinize creative learning more specifically in the light of their relationship to professional practice. As one participant remarked in the research

'I mean I don't know if I'm going to end up being a teacher but if I did then there's not really much scope for me to work creatively with kids because we've never really been shown how' (H: undergrad education student).

The initial findings from this small scale research informed teaching project evidences the 'voice' that expresses a desire for learning experiences to be more engaging of the human spirit, more meaningful and less prescribed. However such progressive concepts of pedagogy run counter to the audit/assessment culture commonly found entrenched in other areas of government policy (Craft and Jeffrey, 2008). If the pupil/student/customer 'voice' is genuinely heard then education really could become a 'business' that embraces risk – and a professionally challenged sort of risky business at that. However, the early indications of new government policy suggests an increasingly constrained and measured curriculum and an approach to pedagogy that is less open to creative approaches to learning. The rhetoric on creativity and learning that had littered aspects of the previous Labour government policy for more than a decade and had dripped steadily into school's development plans, curriculum and pedagogy may be on the cusp of a period of drought following the new coalition government's spending review cuts which impact upon the dissolution of programmes, for example Creative Partnerships 2002- 2011. It is timely therefore that the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation have recently funded a new longitudinal study that will track student teachers perceptions of the state guidance on creativity as they emerge into professional practice as newly and recently qualified

teachers (Adams, Cronin, Elton-Chalcraft, Hiett, Smears, Walsh, 2010). Such research has the potentiality to present data about professional emergence in a time of great change in education, and offers an opportunity to re-energize the debates about creativity and reflective practice.

The learned voice

This paper considers learning creativity, it ruminates on how engaging with creativity impacts upon our professional practice as educators. As I reflect of these themes it is apparent that the art of teaching and learning has never been obvious nor easy, yet always creative. The demand is never ending, to teach on the cusp of certainty and chaos, to support students and pupils in their reach and grasp of that which is just beyond them in the present, just outside their comfort zone – this is difficult work. Does bringing an embodied presence as either teacher or learner support more active learning – deep learning? Sparkes (2008) suggests just this. He argues that by acknowledging and drawing attention to our corporeality and our senses in particular, we create the opportunity to expand our consciousness, and to integrate, whole heartedly, knowledge and understanding. Additionally, Smears (2009) argues that the senses have value added to any learning experience, and our job as teachers is to invite students and pupils to have an intention to pay attention to this level of our being. Developing this theme is research by Newton and Plummer (2009) who investigate the effects that creativity has on reflective practice. Their findings suggest that using a variety of experiential and creative approaches to learning enables students to 'associate personal meaning to their learning' (2009:75) The authors conclude that 'the use of creative arts as a pedagogical strategy enables individuals to better understand themselves to stimulate thinking and enables learning to be shared' (2009:75).

So let's take a creative risk. Here I introduce poetry as a way of stretching the boundary of how meaning is communicated in an academic journal. I ask that you suspend judgement as I depart from the more familiar academic register. I ask you to play with words - seriously. The poem below is illustrative of a more expressive style of writing that foregrounds the politics of the personal, a meta-communication that re-visions knowledge through the process of knowing. It is not objective, linear, and rational, but infused with subjective experience, poised for reader engagement. A piece of writing that shape shifts from words as memories, to words that alert the senses, to words that invoke emotion.

Nana's big strong lively arthritic hands

the ones that used to knit in turquoise,

the hands that shuffled in rummy,

intent and committed to the game, always a proper game

the hands that knifed the slab of butter onto the hot toast,

unlike the scarcity of the war years,

the hands that took hold of mine

striding me up the Anfield roads

on a wet Sunday morning after mass,

collecting for the Missions, with zeal,

the hands that gripped and pulled on the handrail

as we stepped to the top deck of the bus

on our way to Southport,

the hands that tied bows under my chin too tight,

those dreaded plastic rain hoods,

the hands that endured the shears

as they cut and cut and cut again the privet

the hands that stained yellow at their tips

of duty free smokes from the cruise

the hands that meant something lost

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as they clutched and crushed my body

in their hellos and goodbyes

the hands that in strength and recognition

toasted me in Drambuie as they began their farewell

and the hands that took my head between them

and in silence rested me with their parting grace.

Have you written poetry, how do you exercise your creative professional self? The content of this poem is not at issue here, however the process of creating poetry or reading poetry is of relevance; it is about igniting that breadth that gives breath to one's professional self. What part does a sensory and emotional engagement have in your professional learning? How does your imagination infuse your aspirations? What I question here is the priority afforded to the sensory, emotional and creative elements of learning that have been historically relegated or indeed denied, as we each strive towards and acquire professional status in education. Are there grounds to embrace a more complete appreciation of how to 'learn at our best' and if so maybe there is a need - and arguably a professional responsibility - to give 'voice' to our experiences of creative learning.

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