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Learner inclusiveness for creative learning

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Abstract

In this article, we explore distinctions between creative practice and a practice which fosters creativity, drawing on case study data from an English nursery and first school. We suggest that, in practice, these distinctions are very blurred.

What do you think of, when you imagine creativity in early years practice?

The following event took place near the start of the school year, in a class of five to six year olds, where one of the authors was working as a researcher, alongside the teacher.

Possibilities and thinking thumbs

A small group of five-year-olds are working with a disparate selection of materials that their teacher has introduced to them. The materials include bread, glue, tissue paper, scissors water and card. During the discussion before they start on their own individual projects, their teacher encourages them to explore the properties of each resource, showing that they are thinking by wagging their 'thinking thumbs'. She talks both gently but purposively with the children, trying to maintain a relationship with each as an

individual. As the children come up with ideas of how the materials could be used, she uses language carefully to hint that each person will make up their own mind about how to use these materials. ‘**You** might be going to do that’ she mentions several times in response to ideas.

(Field note, London primary school, September 2001)

Is this acting creatively to embrace effective learning or is it a practice which fosters creativity? Or is it both? And what do we mean by these?

If we look at policy on education, we find a distinction made in 1999 in the report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999). It defined creative teaching as ‘teaching creatively’ (using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting and effective) and ‘teaching for creativity’ (forms of teaching that are intended to develop children’s own creative thinking or behaviour).

In this article, we explore ways in which children can be offered access to decision making, control over some of their activities and acknowledgement for their ideas; we suggest this is what is involved in successfully fostering children’s creativity. We use the terms ‘creative practice’ and ‘practice which fosters creativity’ to encompass the same ground as that intended by the NACCCE report, but in a way which is relevant for all early years practitioners, not simply those who are teachers or teaching assistants in classrooms.

Creative Practice

What does creative practice mean for practitioners? Studies of practice have established that practitioners feel creative when they control and take ownership of their practice, are innovative and ensure that learning is relevant to learners.

Woods and Jeffrey (1996) suggest that creative practitioners are flexible about how they apply their philosophies and methodologies to the varied and highly complex situations they meet in the classroom. They find inventive ways into children's learning.

In the 'Thinking Thumbs' example given at the start of this article, the teacher invited the children to take control and ownership of what they hoped to do with the materials with which she had provided them. She emphasised the need to make their own meaning and to develop their own personal plans, by acknowledging that each of them may do it differently. In this way she aimed to make the learning experience relevant to each child. She was, we suggest, inviting them to be innovative in their constructions, by emphasising the individuality of each person's suggestion. She was, of course, the teacher, however there will be equivalent situations for other early years practitioners, in which children can be encouraged, through task and language, to take on control and ownership.

Creative practitioners, suggests Jeffrey (1997), are skilled at drawing on a repertoire of approaches to enable children's learning:

they devise, organize, vary, mix whatever teaching methods and strategies they feel will most effectively advance their aims (ibid., p. 74).

The creative practitioner can envisage possibilities and differences, and see these through. The Thinking Thumbs teacher had decided to initiate a series of

creative thinking activities resulting in teaching for creativity. She embedded these activities into the curriculum plans made with the parallel class teacher.

Creative practices are not only developed by qualified teachers:

Beverley, a classroom assistant is leading a cake-making activity with six children, aged three and four. The activity has been suggested by the teacher and Beverley has taken the group to work in an area just outside of the classroom, near to the portable oven. Instead of passing around one big bowl with the children taking it in turns to mix its contents, she has decided to give each child their own bowl. Each child experiences the whole process from measuring out the ingredients to mixing them up and putting their mixture into a paper case.

(Field note, Hertfordshire Primary School, November 2002)

In this example it seemed to us that Beverley took ownership of the planned work and adapted it to suit the situation. She was creative by taking control and transforming the context into an effective learning experience. She encouraged children's creativity by offering them each the opportunity to engage more actively with, and to explore for themselves more fully, each part of the learning activity. What she is doing is more than 'starting with where the child is', which is sometimes described as another feature of good teaching. It is offering children an opportunity to engage individually and in parallel with others, with more of the process of cake mixing, from start to finish, thus giving each child more space to ask their own questions and make their own discoveries. It is also exemplifying how, even where the framework of a practitioner's work is defined by someone else - in this case Beverly was asked to make cakes with

the children. It is possible to act creatively within this - demonstrated by Beverley's decision on *how* to achieve this objective, in a way she believed would encourage creativity. Both the teacher and the classroom assistant showed how there was a strong correlation between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity (Jeffrey and Craft, 2004)

Practice which fosters creativity

The NACCCE Report emphasises, as do others (Craft, 2000, Beetlestone, 1998) that creativity is relevant across the curriculum and not purely in the creative and performing arts. Children can be encouraged to be inventive, to generate possibilities, to ask 'what if?' and to suggest approaches to problems and opportunities in any aspect of their learning as exemplified by the example above.

However, we need to provide more detail as to what a 'practice which fosters creativity' involves? Recent research work in English nursery and Key Stage One classrooms has highlighted an important approach in practices which foster creativity. This approach has been named 'learner inclusive', i.e. involving the children and trying to 'hear' their perspectives on learning, to the extent they have some control over it (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003). This can be seen as a child-in-context practice, in other words an approach to supporting learning in which practitioners observe, reflect and support the individual children's learning, as well as giving children many choices and a great deal of control over what they explore and how. It could also be seen as a reconstruction of a child-centred discourse (Sugrue, 1997) but one in which teachers have taken into account the criticism that it can become a dogma (Alexander 1990, Alexander et al 1992).

A learner inclusive environment

Writing in the late 1990s, Duffy (1998) discusses the creation of conditions which inspire children, and ways of intervening with sensitivity, to enable children's thinking to be valued. Based on recent empirical work, (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003) we suggest that practices which foster learner creativity involve the construction of a learning environment appropriate to the children within it (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). In this approach, the learner is, as the term suggests, often included in the process of what knowledge is investigated, discovered and valued. It could be argued that this is what lies at the heart of good teaching. This contrasts with a definition of good teaching that emphasises outcomes - often achievement based. The two approaches are not incompatible for it is possible for children to gain high achievement levels within a learning environment where they have a strong input into the process and content of their learning (ibid.). However, we suggest that an inclusive learning environment nurtures children's creativity and it is developed through the use of possibility thinking and co-participation in particular.

Possibility thinking can be seen as being a major feature of an inclusive environment (Craft, 2001, 2002) and involves posing questions such as 'what if?' Possibility thinking includes problem solving as in a puzzle, finding alternative routes round a barrier, the posing of questions and the identification of problems and issues. It thus involves imagination and speculation. Co-participation (Emilia 1996) is one way in which learners can be included in the sharing of and creation of knowledge (Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Jeffrey and Woods 2003) countering negative feelings of being individually tested and having to compete with peers (Pollard and Triggs 2000, Jeffrey 2003). While an inclusive learning environment might be considered good teaching the use of possibility thinking and co-participation also develops children's creativity. Adopting a learner-inclusive

approach leads to creative teaching because as the child contributes to the uncovering of knowledge they take ownership of it and control over the investigation of knowledge is handed back to the learner (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003). They then have the opportunity to take authority and become innovative.

A case study of inclusive learning fostering creativity

Sarah introduced work on the body from two big books to her Year 2 learners. She invited them to tell the group about stories of personal accidents and then she asks them to children imagine what would happen if their bones did or did not grow in relation to the rest of their body. The children used their imagination to create a fuller understanding of their knowledge of the body:

I'd be all floppy if my bones didn't grow.

My skin would be hanging down off the end of my fingers.

My nose would be dangling down there.

My earrings will be down touching the floor.

If my bones grew when my body didn't I would be all skinny.

I would have extra lumps all-over me.

My bones would be stretching my body so I why would be very thin.

I'd be like a skinny soldier and bones would be sticking out of my skin.

My brain would be getting squashed. (Jeffrey and Woods 2003 p. 113)

These young children liked 'doing experiments like the lights and batteries. It is like testing things. I don't care if it goes wrong. If I was a witch and I had to make a new potion in my cauldron I would experiment' (Craig, Year 2 *ibid.* p. 104).

Being encouraged to pose questions, identify problems and issues together with the opportunity to debate and discuss their 'thinking' brings the learner into the

process of possibility thinking as a co-participant (Emilia, 1996), Sarah wanted to engage her mixed 5-7 year old children in a discussion about learning. She started with an investigation of how babies learn by asking them how they would fill up an alien's empty brain and the children not only used their imagination but they confronted each other's contributions.

I would do it in a laboratory.

I would do it by telling.

You can't. Because it hasn't got anything in its brain to think with.

He wouldn't be able to remember anything.

You could make him go to sleep and then open his head a little to put the right information on his brain.

The process of discussion opened up avenues for learning, which included a philosophical debate:

The following question came out of the blue and was taken on by the others. 'This question is a hard one because how did the first person in the world know all the things about the world'. 'God taught them' 'But he was a little baby'. 'How did the world get made'? 'How did the first person get made'. 'How did the whole universe gets made'. 'How did life grow'? There followed lots of chatter permeated with questions and assertions and answers (Field Note, November 2001).

These discussions of knowledge and investigations opened the possibility of an analysis of the processes of learning:

The answers not only contribute to knowledge but the contributory climate encourages them to share their knowledge. 'I listen and you teach us'. 'You need to use your ears to listen, your nose to smell and your eyes to see'. 'You need to listen most of the time and to be quiet'. 'It is like you have dots in your brain and they are all joined up'. 'You think about it and stuff like that as well'. 'Your brain is telling you how to use your eyes'. 'The college tells you what to tell us and you tell us and we get the answer' (Field Note November 2001).

A learner-inclusive approach includes learners in the subjects to be investigated, values their experiences, imagination and their evaluation of the learning experience (Jeffrey 2001).

We have found that practitioners who at first intend only to use a creative practice to enhance learning effectiveness find it difficult not to respond creatively to the potential creative learning they meet.

Justine, (Yr 1 teacher), commented on how the topic had taken off, having fired the children's imaginations.

I have been caught up in this. It has encompassed the children's imaginations and sustained the interest of all the children from five to seven, from new children to experienced ones. It has been more successful than I had ever dreamt it was going to be. They ran with it. Children were sneaking off behind me to start instead of waiting for me to say, 'Come on, now let's sit, and let me talk you through it'. I would turn round and there would be children behind me doing it, and doing it correctly. It was a project where children didn't need stimulating. One of the things that I enjoyed about it was sitting with the children and talking about what they were doing, and listening to them enjoying this session. It is very relaxing

and I also think they genuinely had a very strong sense of achievement
(Jeffrey and Woods p. 73)

Justine provided an environment which led unintentionally to learner creativity, as children came up with their own ideas and put them into practice; for children naturally experiment with imaginative constructions and play with ideas (Craft, 2002).

It became learner inclusive, as the children took ownership and more control of the project. Abigail, who was six years old was involved in a topic in her classroom on the art and craft of William Morris. This project had originally been a light touch look at designs in materials but developed into a major project with children constructing their own designs from materials in the environment. In discussion with the researcher, Abigail said:

We did our own designs on a piece of paper. They were photocopied at lunchtime to make lots of copies. In the afternoon we stuck them on to a piece of paper how we wanted them. This is the design I chose. I have repeated it. We need to do each section the same colour to make it look like a design. If I did them all different colours it would not look much like a design. It is all the leaves and flowers on a theme. We brought these things in from outside. There is a fir cone, this is a catkin. I often see this sort of design being done on a computer. You can see designs on walls, cushions, bedclothes, wrapping paper, jars, and clothes (ibid p. 102)

Abigail showed us how included she felt in this theme of work; her teacher had provided her with an experience of a practice which fostered creativity, and a learner inclusive environment.

Does creative practice and practice which fosters creativity always occur together?

A creative practice does not necessarily lead to learner creativity, but it provides open contexts for both teacher and learner to be creative, to use the spaces provided to maintain and develop their own creative learning. Children may also be encouraged to be creative as a consequence of being subjected to their teacher's creative practice, a form of modelling.

A practice which fosters creativity depends on practitioners engaging creatively to galvanise children's creativity, providing a context that is relevant to them and in which they can take ownership of the knowledge, skills and understanding to be learnt. However, a practice, which fosters creativity, goes further by actively involving the child in the determination of what knowledge is to be investigated and acquired and ensuring children a significant amount of control and opportunities to be innovative. Co-participating with learners models innovation as well as celebrating it.

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