

CREATIVE LEARNING CONVERSATIONS: PRODUCING LIVING DIALOGIC SPACESKerry Chappell^{a1} and Anna Craft^b

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ABSTRACT**Background**

'Creative learning conversations', are methodological devices developed in two co-participative qualitative research projects exploring creativity and educational futures at the University of Exeter in England.

Sources of evidence

Framed by Critical Theory, the projects, one on dance education partnership, the other on student voice and transformation, sought to open space between creativity and performativity to initiate emancipatory educational change. This was undertaken over the course of five years in English primary and secondary schools, prioritising humanising, wise creativity (Chappell, 2008; Craft, 2008).

Purpose

This paper re-analyses data and methodological processes to characterise and theorise creative learning conversations in terms of social spatiality and dialogue. The characteristics are: partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action, and embodied and verbalised idea exchange.

Main argument

This re-analysis theoretically adapts Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model to situate layered engagement. Utilising Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of Lived space and Bakhtin's (1984) work on open-ended dialogue, the paper theorises creative learning conversations as producing living dialogic spaces.

Conclusions

Creative learning conversations are a way of contributing to change which moves us towards an education future fit for the twenty-first century. From a living dialogic space perspective a creative learning conversation is the ongoing process without forced closure of those in the roles of University academic, teachers, artists, students co-participatively researching and developing knowledge of their 'lived space' together. Given traditional lethargy in the educational system as a whole commitment to changing education for better futures demands active involvement in living dialogic space, where our humanity both emerges from and guides our shared learning.

Key words: living dialogic space, participation, partnership

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Opening the space

The 'creative learning conversation' is a means of engaging researchers, teachers, artists and students in investigating creativity and its relationship with educational futures. The conversations were developed by University researchers as distinct from the usual hierarchical, top down power conversations expected within schools and in their relationships with Universities. Their purpose is to flatten out hierarchies and to open up spaces which promote a sense of equality and which allow practitioners, students and others to become researchers oriented toward action. Through the conversations, those involved can enquire into their teaching and learning situation and, as appropriate, make changes to it. Creative learning conversations take place between and amongst students, teachers, parents, University researchers and/or partners external to the school and can be led by any of these people.

This paper is written by the two main University researchers who originally initiated the creative learning conversations. The process, mechanisms and characteristics of the conversations have been allowed to emerge organically over time; the ideas in this paper aim to consolidate these emergent developments, practically and theoretically. Practically, we have revisited the data collected in the two research projects within which creative learning conversations have mainly been used, and analysed the methodological processes of each. The defining characteristics of the conversations which have emerged are: partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action, and the embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas. We have worked to connect these key characteristics with pertinent theory which has assisted us in articulating what a creative learning conversation is and how and where it opens up spaces for co-research.

To contextualise understanding of creative learning conversations, the theoretical framing and the detail of the two research projects within which creative learning conversations have been examined follows next. The paper then details the ecological placing of the projects which is important to understanding how creative learning conversations function. The paper then moves on to the main methodological analysis and framing of creative learning conversations. Finally the paper steps back theoretically to argue creative learning conversations allow for living dialogic space characterised by social spatiality and dialogue. But firstly, the projects and their framing.

The projects and their theoretical framing

The two projects, **located at the University of Exeter and initiated by the authors**, are Aspire, a development and research programme with multiple funders, which offers school pupils and their teachers research tools and processes intended to support transformational school change (www.education.exeter.ac.uk/aspire), and the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded study Dance Partners for Creativity (DPC)ⁱ examining creative partnership in lower secondary dance contexts (<http://education.exeter.ac.uk/dpc>). Both projects were established with the combined intention of investigating how we conceive of and work for creativity, developing this within an effective and meaningful conception of educational futures. Each seeks not only to understand creativity, but also to action change in pedagogy, learning and curriculum. **Each therefore pushes out the boundaries of creative transformation beyond what schools typically engage in.**

The projects responded in differing ways to an increasingly 'performative' educational climate (Ball, 2003; Craft and Jeffrey, 2008). Both projects were established to challenge the narrowing focus on achievement in 'core' learning areas such as English, science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and the link made between student performance and school rewards (Boyd, 2005; Jeffrey and Woods, 1998, 2003). Evidence suggests that some teachers saw creativity

in education as a means to address performative pressures rather than as a counterweight to it (Jeffrey *et al*, 2008). Our concern was to avoid potential superficiality that might be inherent in harnessing creativity toward performativity but rather to value creativity – working with possibility – in its own right.

We thus sought to counterbalance performative educational stances. Our approaches reflected many policies highlighting creativity in education which were, from the late 1990s simultaneously in development alongside the performative discourse (Cochrane *et al*, 2008). Reflecting the ‘democratic’ stance on creativity taken by the NACCCE policy paper (1999), our work sought to harness opportunities for imagination inclusively. Our focus was on nurturing co-participant researchers’ creative engagement with evidence of practice, with the intention of improving or transforming learning and teaching and the creativity of learners. To the degree that our stance was one which acknowledged the performative environment, yet highlighted the creativity discourse, we saw creativity as a social good, democratic and ubiquitous (Banaji *et al*, 2010).

Whilst efforts were underway worldwide to develop school curricula which place high value on creativity, encouraging ‘what if’ and ‘as if’ engagement (Jeffrey and Craft, 2001, 2006; Craft, 2005, 2010), doubts were already being raised as to how far risk-taking was really possible in teaching and learning given the wider performative context (Cochrane and Cockett, 2007; Craft, 2011). In seeking to encourage risk whilst acknowledging performativity, our work began to chisel open space for enquiry between these extreme poles (Chappell *et al*, 2009), enabling possibility to emerge.

In opening space between performativity and creativity, we draw on two conceptualisations of creativity from our earlier work, each informed by recognition that even the creativity pole can be conceived of as individualised and marketized (Craft, 2005). A consequence is that childhood, youth and education itself, become focused on a set of values which emphasise competition, individualism and acquisition (Craft, 2008). And yet from empirical doctoral enquiry in primary dance education, emerged a counter-balanced version of creativity (Chappell, 2008): *humanising* creativity. This became one guiding principle for our work.

Humanising creativity emphasises that creativity happens individually, collaboratively and communally. Communal creativity is particularly important to the humanising process and encourages a strong focus on empathy, shared ownership and group identity. Empathy is key to the creative process as an emotional journey with highs and lows which is not always about ‘fun’. Humanising creativity involves conflict and difference, as such it often requires creators to engage with communities and cultures with other values and responsibility systems to those within their immediate experience. As valuable new ideas emerge from joint embodied thinking and shared struggles, humanising is the process of becoming more humane, an active process of change for the creative group.

The notion of wise creative trusteeship (Craft 2008) implies stewardship of creative engagement for the greater good and negotiation of difference toward agreed action. Arguing equally strongly against marketized, individualized and culture-blind (or universalized) conceptualisations of creativity in education, from a conceptual basis, Craft has argued for urgency in nurturing creativity with wisdom (Craft, 2008). Wise creativity attends to all those affected by creative actions, raising questions about collective responsibility and thus about the nature of ‘trusteeship’ in the 21st century, especially for professionals, teachers included (Gardner 2008).

Wise creative trusteeship can be seen as a response to the challenge posed by Fielding (2007) for educational change with implications for educational futures. Fielding suggests the challenge is to move from a situation where students are recognised predominantly through how their attainment contributes to institutional performance, to one where this ‘functional’ experience

is harnessed to the personal with emphasis on development of wide-ranging formal and informal development of wise persons.

Harnessing humanising wise creativity within Aspire and DPC was therefore a powerful impetus for the creative learning conversations. As each project aimed to nurture ethically-grounded creativity, the learning conversations at their heart are, in focus, creative. The conversations' characteristics (partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action, embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas) are geared towards meaningful creative change. That is, they generate new ideas for ways of working that are original and have value and ethicality within the peer group and/or institution in which the research is occurring. It is these characteristics which this paper seeks to detail and theorise in the context of the Aspire and DPC projects.

Aspire

Developed from the NESTA-funded Aspire Pilot (2006-7), the ongoing Aspire projectⁱⁱ seeks to engage students, teachers and parents in collaborative evidence-based school transformation. Student leadership and engagement are emphasised, together with co-participation (Fielding, 2001) and 'person-centred' engagement (Fielding, 2007). Aspire places student voice at the core of transforming learning opportunities in schools whilst recognising Fielding's analysis of the dominant model of schooling as 'high performance' (ibid). **Inherent in the project is the expectation of wise, humanising creativity at both individual and collective levels.**

Within Aspire in each of the twenty or so engaged English primary and secondary schools, is a lead team of students and staff, often joined by a number of parents and external partners. Having identified through discussion an enquiry question with the goal of transformation in their school, the Aspire lead team collect data guided by this question. The lead team, then, become researchers (Craft and Chappell, 2010), finding ways to understand how they learn best and how they can transform learning collaboratively to better prepare themselves for **twenty-first** century living. Their collaborative research underpins team decision-making on changes in school.

For example in one school the research question asking, 'how is deep learning fostered in lessons?' led to students collecting qualitative data in lessons, with a range of foci. In another, the research question 'How can homework be more effective?' led to data being collected from students, parents and teachers regarding their experience, concerns and wishes. Making sense of evidence collected by the lead team demands analysis by all involved. What this may mean in terms of change and thus transformation involves dialogue, often prolonged, within this multi-perspectival team.

In the first example given above, co-analysis led to changes in pedagogical strategies including seating plans and task focus. In the second example, homework was first suspended entirely and then re-introduced in Modern Foreign Languages at students' request, integrating use of their mobile phones into the lessons and involving students in generating oral content in the language in question as homework tasks. In a further school the question focused on student engagement and led to a restructuring of student voice and participation in the school.

Aspire seeks to operate at the level of school climate, through classroom and departmental prioritisation, organisation and culture, and to both respond to and perhaps challenge, the wider notion of what schools do. In practical terms, it involves a facilitation and research team from the University working with a range of schools, each of which aims to put students' ideas at the heart of re-envisioning provision. Alongside and entwined within the development activity in the schools, the team carry out qualitative research into mechanisms and outcomes of Aspiring guided by the research question: How can we characterise transformation in Aspire schools? Early analysis led to

the initial articulation of characteristics of creative learning conversations (Chappell and Craft, 2009). **More information about Aspire and its approach, can be found at the project website:** <http://elac.exeter.ac.uk/aspire/index.php> .

Dance Partners for Creativity

This was a collaborative study (2008-10) involving dance education researchers, artists and teachers in co-researching the question: What kinds of creative partnership are manifested between dance-artists and teachers in co-developing the creativity of 11 - 14 year olds, in dance education, and how do these develop?

Craft & Jeffrey (2008), Chappell (2008) and Jobbins (2006) have argued that in England there is growing concern that a performative culture is stifling creativity, both in dance education and more widely. In the early 21st century, at odds with the attainment agenda were policies encouraging partnerships between artists and teachers to foster student creativity in schools (e.g. Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Programme: www.ssat.org.uk; Creativity Action Research Awards 2: <http://www.capeuk.org/programmes/cara2.html>; Creative Partnerships: www.creative-partnerships.com). The Roberts Review (2006) and ensuing Government response (DCMS, 2006) suggested this renewed onus on partnership could offer a fruitful arena to re-vitalise student creativity, and, in relation to the arts, provide space to re-connect with art forms' inherent creativity. Given this context DPC aimed to significantly inform practice and invigorate young people's creativity within and beyond UK dance education to contribute to debate about partnership within educational futures.

Structurally DPC involved four university-based and eleven school-based researchers working across four school sites, a lead researcher in each site guiding progress. An example of partnership activity within which the research was taking place is as follows. The East of England site focused on an annual six-week dance project culminating in an informal sharing, involving pupils aged 13-15 from the main secondary school partner, pupils aged 7-11 from a local feeder primary school and 16 and 17 year old dance students from the local Further Education College, led by a visiting dance artist and the secondary school's drama teacher. For full details of all sites see the DPC website (<http://education.exeter.ac.uk/projects.php?id=343>).

All four sites were connected by and contributed to the ongoing DPC umbrella research. Within each, partner researchers and lead researcher used creative learning conversations to unpack what it meant for them, and develop a site-specific sub-question. The aim was to negotiate and develop research guided by a generic pattern of involvement stretching across up to five academic terms but negotiated and open to creative adaptation in each site.

Ecological placing of Creative Learning Conversations

As stated above, the ecological placing of the research projects is important to understanding the layers within which creative learning conversations function. So we have found a way to situate the projects and inherent conversations of students, teachers and others in education in relation to macro-level policy for creativity and performativity by drawing on Jonsdottir and Macdonald's (2009) interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological theory. This provides a model in which local phenomena are nested within their larger ecological (i.e. social, cultural) environment. It can be appropriated to understand the role and position of creative learning conversations, which occur in the opened space between creativity and performativity.

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1: Ecological model of CLCs

At the heart of our version of the model, is the *personal* – or the individual, whose dispositions influence development. This might include personal dispositions including stance (recognised in earlier studies as an influence on creativity – eg Craft *et al* 2007, Cremin *et al*, 2006) of those participating in the learning conversation.

The personal is nested in what Bronfenbrenner refers to as the microsystem, where individuals interact. In the case of creative learning conversations the microsystem might include students and teachers and their relationships; families/home life, close friendships, fellow students and colleagues. They are influenced by the personal and may also bring influence to bear upon the personal through interaction within the microsystem which itself has a dynamic influence on learning conversations. For example, the personal sits at the heart of Aspire, yet seeks to operate through acknowledging participants' microsystems (families/home life, close friendships, fellow students and colleagues at school). DPC seeks to acknowledge and embrace the personal and to work closely with microsystems (those of the external dance partner researchers and school dance partner researchers; also those of the university researchers).

Microsystems interact with one another in what Bronfenbrenner called the *mesosystem*, i.e. the inter-relationship between two or more microsystems. Mesosystem factors in creative learning conversations may include classroom culture, departmental culture, priority placed on student representation in the school as a whole, policies on parental involvement. Like Aspire, DPC operates at mesosystem level, encouraging dialogue and interplay between all the researchers' microsystems, as these multi-perspectival teams seek to make sense of data together.

The *exosystem*, refers to one or more settings or contexts that do not necessarily demand active involvement or engagement yet which affect a person's life. In the context of creative learning conversations the exosystem might include a funding body or local education authority's prioritisation of researchful co-learning. Exosystem factors in DPC include the schools' own attitudes toward creativity in dance at this curriculum stage, expectations of all partner researchers in terms of dance and the research process, and the research stance of the four university-based researchers. All researchers bring unique perspectives referencing wider values although some overlap with one another, as was the case in the theoretical stance of this paper's authors. The exosystem thus may reflect wider values enabled through funding, so is vulnerable to priority changes at policy level in the macrosystem.

The *macrosystem* is the wider complex set of inter-connected systems which reflect patterns of practice, belief, ideology and organisation of the social institutions; the generalised 'blueprints' for how each sort of setting is established and operates. Macrosystem factors relevant to creative learning conversations would include government policy on schools organisation, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, learning, together with approaches to engagement and inclusion. In Aspire these included student voice/participation policy, national partnership framing and funding and the different funding body's national wider research priorities.

In seeking to theorise the space of interaction between the extreme poles of performativity and creativity in education, the ecological model enables recognition of multi-layered contexts in which creative learning conversations occurred **as explored in this paper**.

Methodological analysis and framing of creative learning conversations

Having provided the context for creative learning conversations in terms of the theoretical framing and detail of the two research projects, as well as their ecological placing, we move on to the main methodological analysis and framing of creative learning conversations. The conversations at the heart of the two projects reflected their common qualitative methodology underpinned by an epistemological standpoint acknowledging the social construction of reality. This drives the projects'

working methods investigating how participants construct meaning. Both projects are broadly informed by critical theory oriented toward critiquing and changing, as opposed to theory oriented only to understanding or explaining (e.g. McCarthy, 1991). In relation to this, Giroux (2003, 38-39) argues:

Theory cannot be reduced to being perceived as the mistress of experience, empowered to provide recipes for pedagogical practice. Its real value lies in its ability to establish possibilities for reflexive thought and practice on the part of those who use it... the crucial element in both its production and use is not the structure at which it is aimed, but the human agents who use it to give meaning to their lives.

Both Aspire and DPC acknowledge the spectrum of views on how critical theory may be understood, along a continuum of 'modernist' to 'postmodern' approaches. University of Exeter researchers lead the teams in moving beyond modernist views toward post-modern critical theorising. In so doing, both projects recognise Ellsworth's (1989) arguments for the potentially disempowering influences in practice of modernist critical pedagogy founded in arguments for rationalism. For further detail on how the projects go beyond what de Sousa Santos (1999) refers to as "Celebratory Critical Theory", rather adopting what he describes as 'Oppositional Critical Theory' which demands a version of critical theory which sees knowledge as emancipatory, and "normativity constructed from the bottom up and in a participatory ... fashion" (ibid, p42) see Chappell, Craft, Rolfe and Jobbins (2009). Both research projects also acknowledge Gore (2003), who warns against critical theory researchers themselves, working in an "unreflexive" fashion. A key point from Ellsworth, which the research teams have heeded is her assertion that all knowledge is 'partial': "the meaning of an individual's or group's experience is never self evident or complete. No one...group could ever "know" the experiences and knowledges of other...groups" (p318-319). Thus – as well as opening a space between creativity and performativity, both projects also seek space for change in how all those in the role of researcher interact with each other in research, classroom and studio practice. **Inherent to each project has been the expression of lived beliefs and perspectives from all participants: students, teachers, external partners, researchers, making visible their engagement with the creativity-performativity spectrum. Whilst all co-participants shared a belief in and a commitment to 'democratic creativity', there was a broader spectrum of opinion on the appropriate balance between creativity and performativity. This was particularly the case in DPC where some teachers – especially those with leadership responsibility - 'owned' the pressures of performativity more than others. The project sought to allow for the dynamic and honest expression and interpretation of diverse perspectives.**

Informed by these arguments and approaches from critical theory, our work has also been informed by critiques of scientific and 'evidence-based' approaches to educational research/practice both in the UK (Biesta, 2007) and the USA (Denzin, Lincoln and Giardina, 2006). Denzin et al argue global uncertainty has led governments to favour a kind of "methodological fundamentalism...in which only randomized experiments produce truth" (p770) but point out that what is needed rather is research which builds a collaborative, reciprocal, trusting and mutually accountable relationship with those studied, and where notions of truth are replaced by acceptance of meaning grounded in lived experiences. It is these kinds of relationships and priorities that we have endeavoured to promote within creative learning conversations which honour partiality, emancipation, participation, debate and difference, openness to action, embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas.

Before discussing the detail of the 'creative learning conversations' development, a set of accompanying issues which need consideration are ethics, trustworthiness and rigour. Ethics around learning conversations were carefully negotiated within guidelines of the University Ethics Committee, and committee colleagues have continued to support and advise us throughout the process. As holders of the ethical statement for the projects the university researchers have also

been guided on its interpretation and implementation by the opinions, feelings and advice of our partner researchers.

Initially, it was felt appropriate that the research adhered to qualitative principles of trustworthiness, quality and rigour (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), developed by various researchers such as Ely et al (1991) since then. We were careful that rigour resulted from close fit between our epistemological framing and ontological position, and methods chosen for data collection and analysis (Gavin, 2008). Given emergence of theory from data analysis and the social and cultural framing of the study within the Oppositional Critical Theory stance as detailed earlier, we were clear that researcher and reader or audience of the study, all contribute to the interpretation of meaning – a hermeneutic process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Acceptance of multiple realities, and as Ellsworth (1989) states ‘partial knowledge’ means we have to acknowledge a lack of ‘objectivity’ but seek, following Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability/confirmability; whilst allowing for ongoing debate regarding the purpose and outcome of these processes.

We have found Sparkes (2009, 301) helpful. He acknowledges current issues in qualitative research regarding the crisis or turning point of representation, arguing “readers of ethnographic work make informed, principled and responsible decisions about the criteria they use to judge different and novel forms of representation”. He considers two approaches; firstly the criteriological (“which believes that agreed, universal and preordained criteria can be established against which *any* piece of qualitative research should be judged”) and the relativist approach (“in which criteria are seen as characterising traits or values that influence our judgements that are subject to constant reinterpretation as times and conditions change”). We find this distinction a useful starting point for debate in generating research processes, outcomes and accompanying trustworthiness criteria which acknowledge partiality. Frequently multiple contributors/ authors from the team debate this together, and often outputs from different team members are disseminated in parallel using overlapping research data perhaps with different justified interpretations. This area of the methodology is thus under constant negotiation and development within the journey.

Developing creative learning conversations

As stated earlier, the process, mechanisms and characteristics of the conversations have been allowed to emerge organically over time. In order to consolidate our understanding of them practically and theoretically we have revisited and re-analysed the data and methodological processes of the two projects within which creative learning conversations have mainly been used. We have looked for recurrent defining characteristics of creative learning conversations. Through cycles of analysis we can now characterise the conversations as partial, emancipatory, ‘bottom up’ and participatory, featuring debate and difference, openness to action, and embodied and verbalised exchanges of ideas. They are distinct from the usual hierarchical, top down power conversations expected within schools and in their relationships with Universities. Creative learning conversations take place between and amongst students, teachers, parents and/or external partners and can be led by any of these. Thus, in DPC sites lead researchers opened up creative learning conversations between external and school partner researchers, and partner researchers engaged students in enquiry-focused conversations; in Aspire schools, with support of University staff, students are encouraged to collaborate with staff in critiquing and offering suggested developments to practice.

Empirical work within Aspire (Chappell and Craft with Jonsdottir and Clack, 2009) initially highlighted two important characteristics: re-positioning and listening-actioning. We now see these as the mechanism by which the conversations’ characteristics occur. Re-positioning involved subtle

shifts in relationship (e.g. by creating spaces at two conferences in which students and staff could hold their Aspiring discussions in a more equal, environment than usual). Primary school staff and students physically repositioned themselves in this way in their conference discussions.

The 2009 empirical work also revealed listening and actioning in tandem; students felt staff seriously considered students' ideas and where appropriate took time to work with students toward action. **The following students' views gave a flavour of this.**

“when people can just like, if they can just have an idea they can just tell it to a member of staff and, you know, actually consider if it can be done” (primary pupil)

... and from another, secondary-age student: “you can talk to teachers in a different way”.

This was corroborated by staff, one of whom, in a secondary school put it like this: “it’s been good to get feedback from a student... students identify other issues than [those chosen by] Ofsted”.

Undertaking empirical research within DPC and Aspire during 2009-10, the research teams engaged in creative learning conversations guided by the earlier identified characteristics of re-positioning and listening-actioning, deepening understanding of creative learning conversations and collaboratively developing varied media and mechanisms for data collection and analysis.

Data collection mechanisms used within learning conversations include: conceptual mapping (see Figure 2 - 5), creative journey mapping (e.g. Snakes and Ladders boards – see Figure 6), phrase completion exercises (e.g. ‘Teacher is....Artist is....Partnership is....’), drawing on Teacher Artist Partnership techniques (2009), and student body-outline graffiti-ing. Mechanisms used for analysing and representing ideas within learning conversations include: shape-based sorting and prioritising exercises, photographic montage, conversation-style conference presentations using interrupted voices (drawing on a practice developed by the RESCEN team at Middlesex University, Bannerman, 2004), and filmed conversations. It is impossible to offer detail of all techniques here, but two examples are given from different phases of creative learning conversations. It is not the intention to analyse the content of the examples, but to show how creative learning conversations emerged creating spaces which enable the above-detailed notions of partiality, emancipation, ‘bottom up’ and participation, focus on debate and difference, openness to action (with an emphasis on dialogic engagement), an embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas, and, where appropriate inclusion of an arts-based ethos.

The first example begun early in the DPC process is conceptual mapping. Developing Veale’s (2005) work on sociograms in participatory research, this mechanism was designed to encourage partner researchers and participants to think about partnership, roles and relationships in their situations. The tool uses a similar premise to Samaras (2010), i.e. using arts-based symbols and the accompanying dialogues as mediating tools in research conversations. Within DPC, conceptual mapping allowed representation of places and people and how they work together in their involvement in the dance education partnership project. Each map was created on a large scale using coloured pens, with those mapping talking about ideas being represented as the map emerged. These discussions were audio-recorded. The first map created within the East of England DPC site is shown in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2: East of England Partner Researchers’ first conceptual map

The onus was not on the researcher ‘researching on’ participants but using a mechanism which allowed them to re-position as partner researchers. Partner researcher participation and emancipation are central, with an emphasis on the map and accompanying conversation being *how*

they see things. So it seeks their perspectives as unique views on the partnership practice. In each site partner researchers mapped at least twice. During later mappings they also compared current and previous maps, all conversations audio-recorded.

Repeated mapping and discussion allows for and captures conceptualisations changing over time. Figure 3 shows the last conceptual map created by East of England partner researchers.

Insert Figure 3 here

Figure 3 East of England Partner Researchers' final conceptual map

Here the partners represent their ongoing journey over time, departing from the more static representation in the first map. They also now show themselves as separate lines within the journey rather than a central pair as in Figure 2; partner researchers are visibly, actively re-positioning themselves. In Figure 3 'the University' has become 'Kerry' (the name of the site's Lead Researcher), one of the three lines stemming from the circle of the project on the left of the drawing. They have also portrayed one of the emotional dimensions of the project (the stress of sharing findings at various conferences). The maps therefore reveal changing views over time, and include aspects which are perceived as important to the drawers. Here the maps show a much stronger inclusion of the partners' role as researchers rather than more as practitioners in the first conceptual map.

Where possible other people in the research/project site also created conceptual maps. In the East of England site two groups of students completed maps with audio-recorded discussions. These are shown in Figures 4 and 5:

Insert Figure 4 here

Figure 4: East of England 13-14 year olds' conceptual map

Insert Figure 5 here

Figure 5: East of England Further Education students' conceptual map

The maps, then, allowed teachers, in some sites other adult professionals and students to participate noticeably by putting forward their perspective. Empowerment was encouraged, emphasising that there was no 'right' way of drawing; the focus being communicating perspectives.

The different forms that the maps take demonstrate the importance of difference. Figure 4 shows 13-14 year olds' collective representation of stick people; the idea of 'working together' - one of the concepts in their map. Interestingly and key to the notion of partiality, the students focused more closely on their immediate engagement in the studio space (square containing an image of the gym bench) and their activities, contrasting with the broader project conceptualisations from the partner researcher adults (Figure 3) and even the Further Education students' map (Figure 5). The mapping allows for this kind of difference to be alive within the research and its conversations without expecting closure or a 'right answer'.

The mechanism also allows partner researchers to be open to change practice in response to repeated, deepening dialogues. Actioning change was seen through to different degrees in different sites dependent on partner researchers' perspectives. But no matter the degree of change, these creative learning conversations were not purely informal exchanges. Difference and debate in exchange were crucial to inherent potential generative change through dialogue. Following deepening conversations the artist in the London site summarised quite neatly the shift in practice which had occurred there: "perhaps a new model could be created where ... an artist is brought in to make work but to have the process as about a sharing of skills". Through ongoing creative learning conversations, with Linda their lead researcher, in recorded phone conversations and at times quite

literally ‘in action’ together in the classroom, they actively changed partnership practice from a more traditional polarised teacher-artist model to one where skills and roles were exchanged and shared.

Importantly, change is generated from the ‘bottom up’ and is not about practices and policies imposed from above on the partner researchers. It was also verbalised and embodied in practice cyclically as mapping and conversations developed.

Partiality is inherent within the multiple maps and their surrounding conversations. Referring back to Gore, “the meaning of an individual’s or group’s experience is never self evident or complete”; the maps are created in this spirit. Their meaning is not transparent or in some way truthful. They were interpreted and taken on in different ways and for different means by members of the research group. We are clear that while we interpret the maps for the purposes of responding to an overarching research question, we do not “know” the partner researchers’ experiences, our interpretation is a partial representation.

Absent so far from the above example of the creative learning conversations is the question of interpretation and dissemination. It is important that conversations are not suddenly packaged into ‘one answer’. The challenge is to find a way to communicate to the different researchers’ peers what is important in a way that is credible and valuable. This brings us to the second example, drawn from an Aspire secondary school.

A provocation used with around 40 students and six teachers (including senior staff) involved in this one-term intensive intervention at Hilltop Secondary School², was construction of collective Snakes and Ladders boards, representing barriers to and opportunities for outstanding learning in classes. Each group involved students and one member of staff. The construction of the boards involved sharing perceptions of the opportunities and challenges experienced in lessons. As half of the group worked on the board, the other half documented what they saw as going on, acting as qualitative researchers (Figs 6-8).

Insert Figure 6 here

Figure 6: Aspire students and teachers construct Snakes and Ladders whilst **other** students document

Insert Figure 7 here

Figure 7: Examples of student documentation

The Snakes and Ladders exercise invited representation of multiple ideas in one space, with some evaluative discussion; observations of the group’s work offered opportunities for multiple representations and interpretations of activity. Half-way through the board construction, the two sides of the group swapped roles so that those documenting were now involved in the action, and vice-versa. At the end of the activity, participants shared perspectives on what they had noticed or discovered, about learning in their school and about how the group itself worked. Observing these conversations were the university research team.

Insert Figure 8 here

Figure 8: inviting multiple perspectives

As a mechanism within the wider creative learning conversations occurring in the project the Snakes and Ladders exercise and ensuing conversation re-position staff and students as equals (see Figures 6 – 8 where staff work around tables with students) and in so doing emancipate students to

² Name of all schools – and students - anonymised

speak more freely, and teachers to offer a different kind of opinion to that normally be expected. A student at Hilltop School, put it like this: “it helps your confidence ... you have to do a lot of discussion work with people you don’t normally speak to or you don’t even know... we did things where we were talking to adults “. Another student, characterised this work thus: “everyone’s taking part and everyone’s learning something and everyone’s sort of like giving their own ideas” (Hilltop, Sept 2010).

The game board exercise promotes participation but encourages debate and difference. As with the DPC method, perspectives emerge ‘ground-up’ based on experience and evidence from that particular school, where exchanges are often frank. At a different Aspire School, the University researcher documented a conversation between Pam (student) and Rachelle (teacher):

“... I heard Pam asking Rachelle, ‘Miss, do you actually find it easy to teach or do you find it quite hard?’ ... I couldn’t hear Rachelle’s response but It indicated a real interest of trying to understand the ‘other’s’ perspective.... it also indicated that Pam seemed confident to pose such questions.” (Park Edge, June 2009).

A teacher in the same school reflected that working in this way had “broken down the barriers and led to a more democratic approach” (Park Edge, July 2009). *In the same school, Jamie commented that working as a researcher alongside the teacher meant he was now “seeing the teacher’s point of view”, appreciating the multiple responsibilities a teacher has and that a teacher needs to spread their attention all the time to see what is going on. “I see now how difficult it is for a teacher,” he said.*

Evidence-based conversations are taken into the everyday life of school, once staff and students in the Aspire Lead Team are confident with a range of ways of recording and talking together. For example regularly embedding student observers in lessons, with time for a creative learning conversation to make sense of data with other observers and with staff. *This can be challenging, as the ethos of Aspire can sometimes be in tension with that of the school. As Charmain said, of her experience at Park Edge, “the way teachers talk to students... is very different here [in the Aspire group] than it is in the classroom. It makes me feel... a bit more equal with teachers.”*

Gathering multiple views through a robust qualitative research process and the evaluation of these in a learning community focusing toward action, is inherent in Aspire (further examples of Aspire processes and methods: <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/aspire/>). A key element is a commitment to recognising that whilst multiple perspectives may be represented, the interpretation of these involves humility in acknowledging the partiality and inhabited nature of representations and as with the DPC example, recognition that meaning is neither self-evident or ‘knowable’ beyond subjective experience. We also acknowledge potential for use or misuse of power by researchers and so engagement ethics are explicit throughout the working process.

In Hilltop Secondary, interviews with participants also generated visual representations of the experience. Two examples in Figure 9 – one from a teacher and one from a student – highlight the part played by an open and equal space for sharing, as well as some of the frustrations and worries – articulated in this case more by the teacher than the student.

Insert Figure 9 here

Figure 9: students and teachers represent the Aspire dynamics

The open and sometimes conflictual space was summed by one student as follows:

‘today’s talk made me realise the differences between people’ (14 year old student, 2010)

Nevertheless, in each of the Aspire sites, engaging with differences led to change. Examples of change included reconsidering how space and time were used in school, re-writing parts of the curriculum, integrating technology into lessons through hand-held devices owned by students, deciding to cancel homework for a period of time. Initiatives were usually characterised by giving students more involvement and responsibility (for example, helping design the learning environment either indoors or outdoors, having key responsibilities in planning a day or residential visit, co-designing a teaching and learning session, or taking on role of teacher and or leader in specific ways).

Change stemming from this kind of openness to action was also strongly evident in the DPC project. For example, one of the DPC research initiatives documented how the partner researchers' process had focused on analysing their roles and relationships and changing their practice (Malcomson *et al*, in press), which in turn changed how the young people created. The partner researchers concluded that:

“DPC provided space to allow for exploration of the partnership, and the roles and relationships which evolved. It meant letting go of her ego for Bim and giving space for the teacher's and young people's voices. This allowed Bim to use her creativity in a different way, to work more creatively with Caroline, exploring roles and models of practice. Both partners focussed on themselves not only on the pupils learning, which empowered the young people to collaborate and become intrigued by an exploration of their relationship.”

The other sites also recognised how their involvement in creative learning conversations had changed their practice. One explained how taking part in the research “articulates your thoughts in way that you don't, because you don't have the time, you don't think of it that way. So this, this will now change how I think about how we run the next project”.

These examples from DPC and from Aspire, demonstrate how our understanding has moved on from the mechanisms of re-positioning and listening-actioning to articulate a more detailed picture of creative learning conversations as entailing partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action, and embodied and verbalised exchanges of ideas.

Toward living dialogic space: social spatiality and dialogue

Having detailed the main methodological analysis and framing of creative learning conversations, we now step back theoretically and consider the nature of the spaces that we argue we are opening up at the beginning of the paper. Drawing from human geography we have found approaches to *spatiality* rich in helping us to understand reciprocity (Massey, Allen & Sarre, 2005) between social and spatial: the recognition that not only is the spatial socially constructed but that the social is also spatially constructed. Although we initially articulated this spatiality in terms of Zeichner's (2008) understanding of third space (Chappell et al, 2009), this turned out to be a stepping stone to further conceptualising creative learning conversation space. It is Lefebvre's (1991) spatialisation of thinking which now resonates most strongly with our attempts to represent creative learning conversations.

Lefebvre delineates perceived, conceived and lived space. Perceived space is equated with spatial practice, incorporating observable reality of performing everyday routine - in this case production and reproduction of partnership practice in dance education or teacher and pupil relationships. Conceived space is about representations of space; tending towards systems of verbal signs, through abstraction of principles - in this case conceived roles and relationships of teachers, artists, students and researchers which identify what is lived and perceived with what is

conceived. For Lefebvre this space is not 'secondary', but dominant space controlling how we think about, analyse, explain, experience and act upon or 'practice' human spatiality.

Lefebvre argues articulating spatial practice and representations of space in this way is a form of reductionism akin to other mistaken western binaries. Confined thus, the imagination could never capture the experiential complexity, fullness and perhaps unknowable mystery of actual *lived* space. Lefebvre's argument then is that two terms are never enough; –there is always a third process: representational spaces of bodily experience directly lived through symbols and images. They are the space of some artists, tending "towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs" (p39). For Lefebvre they are "alive" with an "affective kernel...It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations...it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic"...the only products of representational spaces are symbolic works" (p42). And so, Lefebvre in his notion of 'perceived, conceived and lived space' seems to offer a theory of social spatiality in which multiple possibilities are made manifest.

Particularly resonant is the idea that lived space requires openness. It is something of this that we see in creative learning conversations – a space where potentiality is extrapolated, shaped and constructed through physical and social occupation of shared space. We refer to space created by the learning conversations as Living Space acknowledging the inhabiting, the embodiment, openness, lack of closure and thus capacity for change inherent in the creative learning conversations exemplified above in *Aspire* and *DPC*. This *capacity* for change can, at times, be actualised through dialogues going on within these spaces.

In understanding the dialogic aspect of our living dialogic space, we have found the application of Bakhtin's ideas in participatory action research pertinent. Bakhtin's ideas were developed during the twentieth century in the context of understanding language and literature for example through critical analysis of authors like Dostoevsky. Bakhtin argues that "the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic life is the open-ended dialogue...To live means to participate in dialogue...every thought and every life merges in the open-ended dialogue" (1984, p.293).

Hajdukowski-Ahmed (2003) has interpreted and skilfully employed Bakhtin's work to better articulate participatory action research (PAR). Like ours, PAR is a research practice grounded in critical theory. Hajdukowski-Ahmed finds Bakhtin's ideas useful because Bakhtin rejects the dichotomous mode of thinking but also because in its dialogic foundations it is supportive of what he calls 'participatory thinking' to inform social change (p355). We have found considerable resonance with this idea as we have worked to encourage debate, participation and social change through creative learning conversations.

In understanding Bakhtin's work on dialogue in relation to ours, Wegerif's (2010) clarifications have been particularly useful - reminding us that in Bakhtin's work dialogue is "shared enquiry in which answers give rise to further questions forming a continuous chain of questions and answers" (p25). Even more importantly, dialogue goes beyond everyday conversation and, from his work with children Wegerif argues, includes the ability to listen to others, change your mind and argue against your own position by identifying with the space of dialogue. In our research, the living space of dialogue is that theoretically articulated through the ideas of Lefebvre (1991) above. If we look back to the creative learning conversations exemplified above we can see how conceptual maps, snakes and ladders boards, and use of classroom observation encourage dialogues which cumulatively build answers to research questions around partnership roles and relationships, and also how the maps in themselves raise new questions which continue to move on thinking. The process is one of ongoing change as demonstrated in the conceptual maps in *DPC*, in prioritisations emerging from the snakes and ladders boards, and suggestions for action emerging from discussion of classroom observation data in *Aspire*.

Returning to the DPC example we see how continuous change is nurtured. The summary from the artist in the DPC London site detailed above demonstrates one settling point where dialogue between herself and the site teacher has seen them both move from their traditional teacher/artist roles to the new skills and role sharing model she describes. Very quickly however both practitioners were raising new questions about what this meant for their future practice. The tools of creative learning conversations, as well as keen listening skills for all involved, and, as Wegerif (2010) also points out, researchers literally leaving silent spaces for dialogue to continue, are all vital contributors to this dialogic interaction of question and answer and question.

In working to understand the role of dialogue within creative learning conversations and Living Dialogic Spaces it has been important to us to maintain an awareness of the embodied and fluid nature of the process in question, alongside the role of verbal and written interaction. Lefebvre's description of lived space bears repetition here: "towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs" (p39). For Lefebvre they are "alive" with an "affective kernel...It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations...it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic" (p42). For him the lived space and for us the living space, with its very embodiment and fluidity is impossible to pin down to an observable, decipherable, film-able instance in which we can demonstrate living dialogic spaces in action. But what we can offer here is the articulation of the tools of creative learning conversations, examples of the question and answer spiral in action and theoretical connections which we bring together to enable us to better understand our process, methodology and the characteristics of the space they produce and change they have the potential to generate.

Returning to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Figure 10 shows how creative learning conversations create living dialogic spaces strongly located in the *mesosystem* which encourages and acknowledges potential for counter-engagement between microsystems touching the personal. It is perhaps in the mesosystem where the greatest tensions are experienced with external framings of the exosystem literally in dialogue with the personal and microsystems.

Insert Figure 10 here

Figure 10: Creative learning conversations create Living Dialogic Spaces

The Living dimension emphasises how past, present and future meld in the 'now' as directly and intuitively experienced and expressed through feeling. It is intensely personal, as well as highly dynamic as lived experience comes into play with values within microsystems in conversation with each other through the mesosystem.

The Dialogic dimension emphasises the open, multiple nature of these learning conversations at mesosystem level, drawing on microsystems and the personal. Characterised by their potential for conflict and difference, without necessary resolution, they are highly reflective and also embodied. The dialogic dimension is where the exosystem and macrosystem become visible in framing the enactment of the mesosystem. In the engagement between microsystems in the mesosystem, influences, constraints, opportunities are experienced emergent from the wider exosystem (of funding and priorities) and macrosystem ('blueprints' for educational engagement).

Given the dynamic nature of each ecological level the Space dimension of living dialogic space seems highly important in locating not as a fixed or hierarchical space but as a space of counter-possibilities, where conceptual, emotional/affective, identity and other exploration can occur. The spatiality of our work seeks to emphasise its extensive, 'spacious' social engagement and its two-way relationship with the meso and the macro.

Because of the very real emergence of values and politics within microsystems and the creative learning conversations within them, we have, to date, found that creative learning

conversations do not always produce living dialogic spaces as 'perfectly' defined as the descriptions above. The process is delicate. The multiple influences of meso-, exo- and macro-system can act against each other to stifle potential research-driven change (and, we are sure, at times will continue to do so), as well as also leading to productive engagement and educational transformation.

Futures relevance

It seems to us that creative learning conversations may be exemplifying humanising creativity and also wise creative trusteeship, in their processes and commitment to change education and in using these values as guiding beacons across both DPC and Aspire. Which in turn brings us back to one of the reasons for exploring the underpinnings of creative learning conversations: as a way of contributing to change which moves us towards an education future fit for the 21st century. From a living dialogic space perspective a creative learning conversation is what is currently happening in research sites: it is the ongoing process without forced closure of those in the roles of University academic, teachers, artists, students co-participatively researching and developing knowledge of their 'lived space' together. It is knowledge in action geared towards changing educational teaching and learning relationships to contribute to allowing young people and adults supporting them, to live fruitful lives.

In a changing English political landscape where coalition government between Conservative and Liberal Democrat politics has produced a new educational exosystem and macrosystem, potential for non-commensurability in dialogue may grow and new polarities may emerge to replace or extend the performative-creative one explored in our projects and therefore in this paper. Given this situation and traditional lethargy in the educational system as a whole (Claxton, 2008) commitment to changing education for better futures demands, we would suggest, active involvement in living dialogic space, where, as Fielding (2006) proposes, our humanity both emerges from and guides our shared learning.

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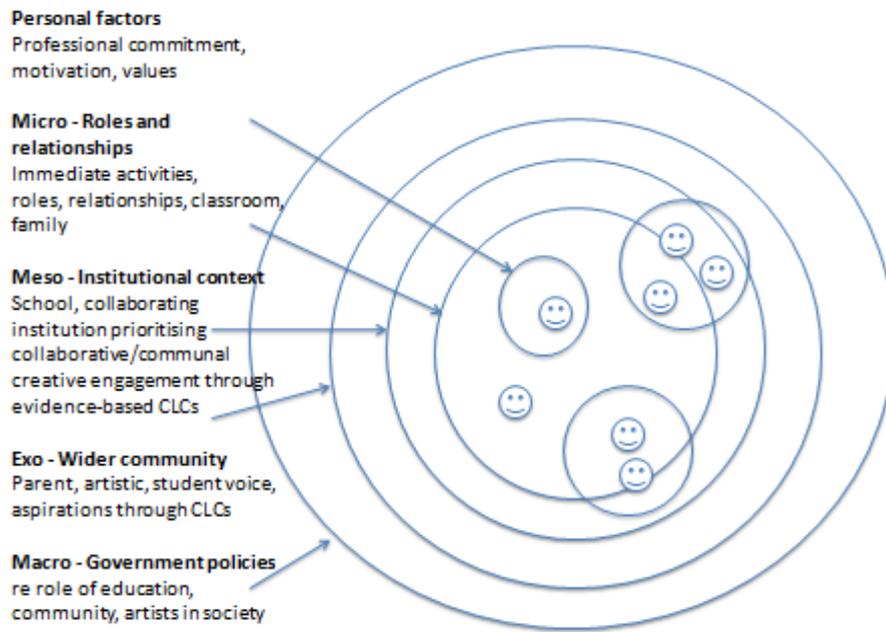


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 8



Figure 9

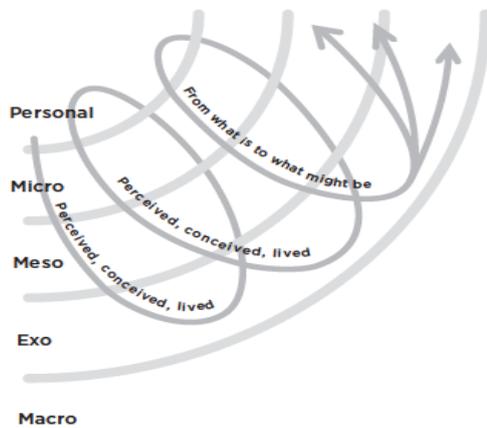


Figure 10

ⁱ Project number AH/F010168/1

ⁱⁱ Funders include Creative Partnerships, SWGate, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority