

The Misconstrual of Creative Practice in The Arts: Initial Advice Paper

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Abstract

The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) defines creativity in terms of the development of ideas new to an individual and seeing an existing situation in a new way. Their approach is underscored by a mid-twentieth-century modernist and psychological conception of creativity. It is further augmented by the status accorded to the strands of generating, realising and responding as 'experiences' common to the arts. These strands, along with the definition of creativity, misconstrue how something original, innovative and of value to the visual arts is produced that advances students' creative interests. My ethnographic studies reveal a markedly different account of creative practice. Taking selected cases from secondary art classrooms I show that creativity is an inherently social practice transacted between expert teachers and students in making art. Creativity is a product of an embodied, although overlooked, history that accrues in its value through reiterative compromises between teachers and students in the genesis of possibilities and in the resolution of artworks.

Creativity

The paper defines creativity in terms of the originating subject. Under ACARA's terms, creativity is also synonymous with creative. ACARA states:

'Creativity enables the development of new ideas and their application in specific contexts. It includes generating an idea that is new to the individual, seeing existing situations in a new way, identifying alternative explanations, seeing links, and finding new ways to generate a positive outcome. Creativity is closely linked to innovation and enterprise and

requires characteristics such as intellectual flexibility, open mindedness, adaptability and a readiness to try new ways of doing things' (ACARA, 2010, p. 28).

The creative subject is responsible for their creativity. It is the psychology of the subject that accounts for ideas new to the individual and their applications in a context to be creative. Intellectual flexibility, open-mindedness and adaptability are privileged mental traits. Acquisition of these would ensure creativity is spontaneously expressed. This commonsense view of creativity had its genesis in the mid-twentieth century psychological studies of Guilford (1966, 1968), Torrance (1974, 1978, 1989), and Eisner (1966). Other theorists and researchers cast doubt on these accounts that have retained some currency in education and the popular imagination (for instance, Beardsley 1979, Briskman 1981, Gardner, 1986, Csikszentmihalyi 2004, Brown 2005, Weisberg 2006). Bourdieu explains that while artists' intentions should not be overlooked, we may have looked in the wrong direction for creative causes (Bourdieu, 1997, p.100).

The advice paper also states that 'creativity in the sense of engaging the imagination to make anew is present through all strands' (p.4). Thus, ACARA universalises creativity in the mental traits of the performer and as a common entity in the arts (and by implication to the art forms of visual arts, media arts, dance, drama, and music), which are unified by imagination.

The Strands

ACARA proposes Generating, Realising and Responding as the organising strands, principles/processes/three dimensions of experience (as they are variously described) for the Arts. This reinforces a psychological view of experience as practice. It mistakenly accepts that the creative process and understandings about art are inherently intuitive. All that is required is that the strands provide students' thinking and doing with a structure to manage the raw material of experience in forming an expressive impulse, imaginatively managing materials, apprehending artworks and so on (ACARA, 2010, p.7-8; Brown 1996). Experience is mediated, however, by a semiotic approach that equates elements as the conduit for making

and meaning (ACARA, 2010, p.7). This approach is reminiscent of a late 1960s-mid 1980s approach to art education in NSW schools. It fails to grasp the centrality of motives for action (Brown, 2005, p.2) and how the field's intentions have changed theoretically and practically over 25 years. It begs the question: why would a teacher be motivated to act if a student's psychology and knowledge of elements is all required to cause a creative performance and a valuable outcome?

This is not how creative practice functions.

Bourdieu helps understand the error. He explains that practice can never be reduced to the psychological 'I'. Practice is loaded with anticipation, like the game (Bourdieu, 1997, p.66). It is field dependent, socially constructed, contextually located and reconciles objective and subjective states in how it is enacted and reflected on by players and their audiences (p.53). Practice is not reducible to a mechanical means-ends relation or an ordinary state of affairs, as the strands assert (Bourdieu, 2000, pp.11, 165). It involves investment, desire and a commitment to common purposes, values and goals (Bourdieu, 1997, p.66). It also entails the critical social competencies of recognition and misrecognition by players so that symbolic and material advances may be shored up by tactfully optimising opportunities and the players' interests, despite their disavowal (Bourdieu, 1997, p.113).

Echoing Bourdieu, Brown cautions practice is susceptible to false rationalisation (Brown, 2000). We see a breathtaking example of this in the strands. Practice cannot be reduced to this means-ends relation. For a student to achieve a credible performance in the visual arts, some state of affairs, over and above the strands, is required. As Brown says, creative practice necessitates 'a commitment to practical reasoning in the intelligent rearrangement and making of things' (Brown, 2005, p.1).

The strands may misdirect teachers' and students' who wish to produce novel, original and intelligible works.

My studies of creativity in NSW senior art classrooms and more recently in Illinois, have identified substantive features concerning creative practice as an interconnected network of institutional agreements (Thomas, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). While far from exhaustive, I have explained that creativity cannot be explicitly taught or learned, nor can it be spontaneously expressed. Creativity is conceived as a kind of apprenticeship, which is, ironically, overlooked. It is a dialectical collaboration between students and teachers, who apply 'judgement in the intelligent and politic application of knowledge', of great importance in the students' performances and in the conceptual and aesthetic properties of the artefacts they make (Brown, 1988, p.26). Creativity involves wily ploys by teachers that paradoxically facilitate students' realisation of authentic expression. The ambiguity of teachers' actions is needed for the redemption of good in the making of the artworks and in their assessment in the classroom and beyond (eg, in their examination and the exhibition of ARTEXPRESS) but this conduct *is* enacted within the variables of the education system (Brown, 1988; Thomas, 2008 a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b).

Following are three brief episodes observed and interpreted in my studies. To protect anonymity, names, genders and references to artists have been modified. They reveal the practical limitations of ACARA's proposal.

Negotiating the social reality of the student's ambitions (beyond the limitations of generating and realising) to realise creative ends

Peta's images are neatly organised in a folder she flicks through as she waits for the teacher. She cannot count on his time or favour. There is tension between them. It makes her argumentative. He is often busy advising or amusing others. Peta is hungry for direction. She sits poised, playing with her pencil.

'Can I put something like colour on top?' she asks, and before the teacher has time to finish, prepares a further assault. 'Should I leave it straight [the object in the picture] or have it reflected?' Peta knows the teacher knows how the work could proceed. She feels entitled to a direct answer. If she can call him to account, her passage will be straightforward. If his assurance is guaranteed, there is more

chance of reaping benefits in the examination assessment. The teacher avoids her appeal. He comments 'see what you want', throwing the onus back on Peta, distancing himself from her decisions but also luring her in.

Negotiating the social reality of overcoming the student's conceptual limits for their artworks to realise creative ends

The teacher reminds Harry about the look she knows he wants for his artwork, even though he might not know it himself. She senses the urgency to import the reference into his thinking. Wanting more for him, the timing is close to when the artworks will be submitted. To capture his attention she appeals: 'You know Tracey Moffatt, do you remember Tracey Moffatt?' referencing the contemporary artist. The teacher's tone, although warm, hints at her frustration. She is obliged to bring him around. Harry, alone, would not make the association and might not push himself further. More than satisfied by the large digital prints, he would not dream of this next step. He had just paraded the images around the room as if he had just won a trophy, declaring he was finished.

The teacher can ill afford to let the student give up. The reference will develop the work's identity and its credit, rescuing it from a potentially middling assessment. Later, she affectionately forgets her own labour but remembers their social bond. Fondly, she recalls his cheekiness and vulnerability. 'He ...[was] different' she says. What she does is the only thing to do.

Negotiating the social reality of a student's practical not knowing to realise creative ends

Dominique is frozen. Where should she place the screen on the drawings and how should she pull the squeegee to get the quality she and the teacher knows she needs? She lowers the screen towards the drawing. The teacher signals approval. Assuring the student, the teacher's guarantee registers with watching students, captivated by the magic of the process and the teacher's know-how. 'Here we go, here we go', the teacher cries, her theatrics leveraging command over Dominique and the work, while building group suspense.

Dominique hesitates. 'Should I tape this to the table?' she asks uncertainly. It is difficult: Dominique must declare her limitations before classmates before she can go on. The teacher could announce her ignorance and show her up. But she must do everything to have Dominique continue. 'No, no, no', she responds rapidly, almost automatically, well rehearsed. The teacher capitalises on the moment. 'Butt it up so it's nice and flat,' she insists, showing Dominique what is required and building her belief in her own capacity. The teacher keeps up the pressure. 'Now, two hands and I'll hold this,' she says, directing Dominique in how to hold the squeegee while she (the teacher) holds the screen in place, careful not to let it slip. The teacher watches with expert assurance, attentive to the difficulties that could derail their efforts.

Conclusion

These episodes provide a glimpse of creative practice in the social reality of the classroom, with all of their hopes, uncertainties and fears. They reveal how the practical reasoning in the making of creative performances and the students' artworks necessitates a collective commitment from teachers and students, to achieve common purposes and goals. Creativity is not fixed, nor reducible to students' imagination or psychology as ACARA asserts. Rather, the students' creative performances emerge in the contextual history of events, as opportunities arise and underperformances are hedged against. The results are dependent on how social relations between teachers and students are conducted tactfully. While these exchanges are often forgotten, they persuasively transform students' creative faculties, as symbolic and material advances, or what can be described as creative capital, are recruited into the performance relation, reshaping further possibilities and the resolution of the artworks.

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