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Can Creative Engagement be Taught: Walking the Talk

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Abstract

How can we encourage classroom teachers to view their classrooms as creative spaces? To understand that in order to foster and develop creativity and enhance engagement in the children within that space they may be required to shift gears and both' be' and do things differently? How indeed- when the teaching examples and pedagogical practices provided for them by university educators are most often sadly lacking in both creativity and engagement. Researchers [1] assert that many education courses lack cohesion and in fact hinder pre-service teacher development and understanding. Fostering a culture of creative engagement within any classroom requires the development of a particular ethos or culture- a composite of a set of common values and beliefs [2]. This ethos is one that relies in large part on the interpersonal skills of the teacher influenced by their 'biographies, experiences and perceptions'[3]. Another important component impacting upon the creation of classroom culture is an ability to use humour and a willingness to change the traditional power relationships between student and teacher. If we are to encourage classroom teachers to explore the development of classrooms that encourage creativity and engagement, university educators must first be courageous enough to develop such spaces within their own university subjects. This paper explores just such a cultural change initiated within one university subject and charts the types of pedagogical decisions that were required to create this type of space. By first modelling good practice and then mentoring pre-service teachers through explicit discussion and the development of supportive classroom activities, many came to an increased understanding of what was possible in their own classrooms- they were able to use concept mapping to highlight and identify these connections.
Search Terms: Creative Engagement, Pedagogy, Pre-service Teachers, Classroom Culture

1. Introduction: The Call for Creative Teaching

In recent times a greater concern linked to societal change has created an urgent need for a highly skilled, flexible and entrepreneurial workforce that is capable of successfully negotiating this shifting face of a more globalised society.

Education systems must respond to the globalisation of society by recognising the need to increasingly become a 'learning society'[4] and compete on the international stage via the schooling systems. These are the factors that Hargreaves earlier called attention to that drive the need for change to schools and teachers

> ' With so many traditional Western economic strongholds looking increasingly precarious in the context of an expanding global marketplace, school systems and their teachers are being charged with onerous tasks of economic regeneration'[5]

Literature emanating from both Federal and State sources substantiates the need for educational change in schooling systems, schools and teachers by associating this need with a wider societal change related to increased technology and globalisation. The ability of Australia to foster a climate of innovation via its schooling system will be a key factor in taking part in a knowledge economy[6] that is technologically driven. Assuming our place in this global environment will ensure we remain economically viable, socially relevant and able to retain our competitive edge among neighbouring countries. To maximise the potential of Australia's youth and ensure the 'nation's social and economic prosperity'[7] it is vital that our schools prepare their students to become part of a skilled work force.

Teachers and schools are the key to ensuring that students have access to quality schooling in order that they achieve their maximum potential. Internationally too, there has been a shift in thinking about the role creativity[8] may perform. As Feldman and Benjamin report, increasingly this has moved from being seen as less about individual expression towards

> '…a more socially, culturally directed and constrained set of qualities important to a society's well being, if not its survival'[9]

To achieve this aim, educational institutions at all levels have as one of their primary foci the responsibility to develop graduates who can assist to change and transform our society in this era of globalisation. Speaking of this transformative process in terms of the university Cantor and Schomberg attest:

> '…some of the transformative quality of education comes from who we are as institutions- how we constitute ourselves, what we do and stand for, where we see our students going and how we work to send then there. In other words, some of it is a function of the kinds of places we are and continue to be in a world with many pressures to act otherwise-

to rely on convention, the known and the familiar. Some of our impact is a direct function of what we want our students to learn and therefore how we organise ourselves to accomplish this task'[10].

If we wish to develop the types of teachers who can change and transform society, who can engage their students and teach creatively, university educators may need to reconsider their own pedagogical approaches. In fact some researchers[11] are concerned about the lack of structure and cohesion within university education courses and contend that this hinders pre-service teachers development and understanding. It appears that while teacher educators advocate that our pre-service teachers should teach creatively in order to engage their students, effect positive change and thus assist to develop and transform society through the creation of an entrepreneurial workforce- we are less successful in modelling and demonstrating these qualities

2. Why Creative engagement is it important- views from the field

A realisation of the increasing importance that creativity may play in the transformation of society has resulted in a greater focus on creativity itself and caused considerable debate in the field. In the UK policy makers have allocated sizable funds, in a number of areas to creativity[12] and there are currently ongoing debates in the field that revolve around such issues as:

'… tensions between the pressures and principles of assessment, the extent to which creativity develops as opposed to being nurtured, and what sorts of pedagogical strategies help or hinder'[13].

A number of reports and studies have flowed from this research on creativity including the NACCCE (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education) report[14]. This report made a distinction between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity- a distinction that some researchers[15] contend had the potential to fracture the field further if education researchers took up one position or the other. However, the NACCCE report did make the connection that teaching for creativity would involve teaching creatively and that teaching for creativity could be thought of as concerning 'learner empowerment' while teaching creatively could be thought of as 'effective teaching'. It would appear that in order to foster an educational climate that promotes creative engagement that teachers need to spend some time reflecting upon the type of factors that promote and support that type of environment

3. How might that be realised in the classroom?

Each teacher creates a particular climate, atmosphere, culture or ethos[16] in their classroom that is a reflection of their own teaching beliefs and philosophy. This climate or culture according to Cropley can be thought of as a '…metaphor for describing a combination of behaviors, attitudes, values, and feelings that are common to the people in the classroom'[17]. This classroom climate illustrates what is considered appropriate in the context of that particular classroom and involves such aspects as interpersonal relationships with both teacher and peer group. It also includes the types of classroom activities developed, the type of feedback that is instituted and the social demands considered usual in that environment[18]. Like the culture of all organizations, the classroom culture can be either positive[19] or negative[20]. The classroom climate or culture that teachers create serves to mould perceptions of what is regarded as acceptable in that space; flag the level of tolerance for any deviations from that norm and the types of punishments or rewards that can be expected[21].

In the interests of creating and supporting a classroom culture that fosters creativity, teachers need to engender a space where '…variability is welcome and that people who generate it are respected'[22]. In order to ensure that our pre-service teachers are able to create and foster such supportive teaching and learning spaces, teacher educators first need to model and demonstrate this type of climate in practice.

4. How can we encourage the perception of classrooms as creative spaces?

If we want classroom teachers to embrace the notion that fostering creativity in the children they teach is a powerful means by which to ultimately transform society then we need to provide them with some type of modelling or demonstration of how that could 'look' in their classrooms. Without this type of scaffolding or support it would be unlikely that novice teachers would have the degree of self-efficacy required to facilitate this type of process. While we know that teacher self-efficacy both as an individual and collective process plays a vital role in any change process and contributes to school culture, we also know that the majority of novice teachers are less likely to exhibit positive self-efficacy with respect to their teaching[23]. Teacher educators could provide this type of scaffolding for the pre-service teachers in their classrooms by explicitly modelling the types of behaviours and pedagogical strategies required to foster creativity.

Jeffrey[24] reports on international research with an ethnographic focus across a varied array of research sites that included early years classes through to secondary schools as well as higher education institutions and adult learning situations. The CLASP project identified some teaching strategies that promoted creative learning. One of these included the creative use of *space* that often involved:

> '…altering the nature of the space in which teachers and learners usually worked or the whole group was moved to unusual spaces for the development of creative learning'[25].

This is consistent with the enactment component of sensemaking theory [26, 27] that identifies that people create the environment that contains their actions in order to make sense of action in their world, this same environment also functions to constrain their actions. 'When people act they unrandomise variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and literally create their own constraints'[28]. So through enactment people construct an environment in order to both reflect upon their actions and to: 'provide opportunities for future actions'[29].

Another factor that teachers manipulate concerns *time* that involved '…adjusting temporal boundaries for time spent on activities beyond the normal length of lessons'[30]. Here teachers variously manipulated the allocated amounts of time in order to free up time for a focal activity or re-adjust the typical time allocations to allow more time to be spent in other areas.

> 'These special arrangements for extended periods for creative activities modelled the importance of the critical event for creative learning and the increased interest and commitment that time can give to the value of creative learning'[31].

Another important aspect was that of *modelling creativity*, here teachers acted as '…models for learning, for creativity itself and for creative learning'[32]. This included the interpersonal aspect of teaching- the value teachers attributed to interactions between themselves, their students and other involved stakeholders. It also included demonstrations of teachers' spontaneity, their ability to change and modify plans at short notice when classroom circumstances changed.

Many of these creative factors were instigated when we[33] moved to change the ethos; flow and sequence of a university subject on literacy teaching

and provided the means to explore how some of Jeffrey's[34] notions could work in practice.

5. Encouraging and promoting creative engagement

This final year elective subject with a focus on language and literacy has approximately 30% of final-year students in attendance. They have previously experienced two core language and literacy subjects, one with a focus on reading and the second with a focus on writing. The usual teaching mode for this subject was a two hour lecture focus followed by 2 x one hour tutorials conducted simultaneously. In order to promote and encourage greater interest and engagement we moved to revamp this subject in a number of ways that relate to those discussed by Jeffrey[35]. Initially we needed to rethink the structure of the subject and in doing so modelled for our students alternate ways they could consider traditional *pedagogical strategies* used in the classroom.

Our creative interpretation of the traditional university model of lecture->tutorial meant that we were able to manipulate both *time* and *space* in order to create an environment that was more interactive and supportive of our students needs. We shortened the lecture component and developed a series of workshop activities for students to engage in and report upon based on this input material. Then, by negotiating adjoining (or close to) tutorials spaces were able to use these spaces for students groups to report within. Often students from one group reported to and engaged with students from the other tutorial group. We then reformed as a whole class and team-taught the last component that make active classroom connections and raised implications for teaching. This manipulation of both time and space[36] by us did not remain an abstract concept; we actively and explicitly discussed this creative use of space and time as having application in their professional lives.

In terms of modelling the *types of behaviours* Jeffrey[37] refers to as encouraging creative engagement, again we were very explicit about why this subject assumed a different format. We use our own behaviours and pedagogical approaches regarding the re-structuring of this subject as a model or demonstration of the types of behaviours and pedagogies that our students can utilise within the classrooms they will later occupy. For example:

- Drawing students attention to the initial needs analysis in their first lecture where they identified gaps in their knowledge about the teaching

of literacy. Their challenge is then to implement something similar in their own classrooms.

- Identifying the role of an environment or ethos that supports learning and promotes and shifts the balance of power from the teacher to the learner. Citing the use of inclusive language- such as 'us, we, our' that demonstrates the commitment to sharing power and control with our students.

- Reminding students that the initial needs analysis was built upon and the flow and sequence of the curriculum negotiated. An additional challenge they could initiate with their own students.

- Advising them about the need to become used to and find comfort in feelings of ambiguity- and accept this as a natural part of teaching life- they don't need to know it all.

- Explicitly discussing our own reflective process regarding changes made to this subject. Relate this to the process that Schon[38] referred to as 'reflection-in-action' where practitioners can mentally slow down time[39], return to selected aspects for further exploration[40], mentally try out a variety of actions or strategies[41] and suspend or control some of the impediments of the situation[42].

In order to assist students to make further connections between the types of behaviours and pedagogies they have experienced in this subject and the looming reality of a classroom of their own, they are asked to summarise their knowledge.

6. Building bridges by making the tacit explicit: Promoting creative engagement

As part of the engagement process in this subject students are asked to undertake the completion of two concept maps as a type of pre and post-test instrument. In tutorials in the first week of session students create a concept map using the phrase 'Literacy teaching is…' that is dated and collected. In the final week of session they are again asked to use the same phrase and complete another concept map, and their first concept map is returned. The creation of these maps enables students to make their tacit knowledge and understandings both explicit and accessible to themselves and to others. Students are always surprised by how their knowledge and understanding has developed. Many relate that they can see the value in initiating the type of explicit process regarding both behaviours and

pedagogy that have been identified and discussed in this subject into their own classroom practice.

Notes

1.   Hoban, 2002.
2.   Peterson, 2002.
3.   van den Berg, 2002: 583
4.   Ramsay, 2000:4.
5.   Hargreaves, (1994:5).
6.   DEST, 2003.
7.   NITL, 2005:4.
8.   Jeffrey, 2006.
9.   Feldman & Benjamin (2006:330).
10.   Cantor & Schromberg (2002:6).
11.   Hoban, 2002.
12.   Burnard, 2006.
13.   Burnard, (2006:314.
14.   NACCCE (1999)
15.   Jeffrey & Craft, 2004.
16.   Jeffrey & Woods, 2003.
17.   Cropley (2006:128).
18.   Reeve, 2006.
19.   Peterson, 2002.
20.   Rosenholtz, 1986.
21.   Cropley, 2006.
22.   Cropley, (2006:130)
23.   Onafowora, (2000:52).
24.   Jeffrey 2006.
25.   Jeffrey, (2006:405)
26.   Weick, 1995.
27.   Weick 2000.
28.   Weick, (1979:164).
29.   Mills, 2003:70.
30.   Jeffrey, (2006: 405)
31.   Jeffrey, (2006:405)
32.   Jeffrey, (2006:406)
33.   McKenzie & Kervin, 2007.
34.   Jeffrey (2006)
35.   Jeffrey (2006)

36.   Jeffrey, 2006)
37.   Jeffrey (2006)
38.   Schon (1983: 62)
39.   Schon (1983:160)
40.   Schon (1983:160)
41.   Schon (1983:161)
42.   Schon (1983:162)

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