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Playwriting and Flow: The Interconnection Between Creativity, Engagement and Skill Development

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Keywords

skill, engagement, creativity, between, interconnection, flow:, development, playwriting

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Playwriting and Flow: The Interconnection Between Creativity, Engagement and Skill Development

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Abstract

Understanding, encouraging and developing creativity in the classroom is an international priority (Craft, 2011). This article outlines the findings of research into playwriting pedagogy. It interrogates the conceptual assumptions that surround teaching and learning for creativity, and how these ideas influence teacher practice and student experience. It argues that student engagement and creativity are fundamentally and reciprocally linked. To better understand how to teach and foster creativity in a classroom, teachers' views on creativity and creative processes are explored through Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) theory of 'flow' and the lessons this provides for understanding engagement. The article argues that the teachers' views of creativity and creative processes are of fundamental importance to understanding the teaching and learning experience and that student disengagement

can be addressed by increasing student's skills and knowledge both in creativity processes and playwriting proficiency.

Introduction

Creativity pedagogy has been impacted by longstanding assumptions that creativity, as a concept and a process, is generally unknowable and perhaps even mysterious. The Romantic view sees creativity's 'unintelligibility as its splendor' (Boden, 2004, p. 14). There is a pervasive fallacy that 'creators are seen to have the extraordinary ability to bring into being an idea or an object out of what appears to be nothing' (McIntyre, 2012, p. 4). Idealist and Romantic views suggest that creativity is innate (Weisberg, 1993) and the 'most we can do to encourage creativity is to identify the people with this special talent and give them room to work' (Boden, 2004, p. 15). This approach encourages the belief that creativity cannot be analysed, developed or taught. As Sternberg and Lubart (1999) argue, this pervasive and persistent belief in the mythical aspects has hindered the academic study of creativity.

Romantic assumptions perpetuate the focus on the individual innate nature of creativity and that creative people are special. This position is challenged by approaches that consider creativity to be a social process occurring in a system (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). In the systems approach, creativity is 'an act, ideal, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28). Creativity is defined as the ability to produce work that is both novel and appropriate (Sternberg, Kaufman, & Pretz, 2002). It is the ability to produce 'ideas and artefacts that are new, surprising and valuable' (Boden, 2004, p. 1). For Csikszentmihalyi creativity occurs in 'a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation' (1996, p.6). As Haseman (2012) suggests, creative ability is a potential present in everyone and with the right training and knowledge can be developed. From this position, creative ideas are the result of everyday thinking, enriched by skills, motivation and knowledge (Weisberg, 1993).

As Csikszentmihalyi (2014) argues, a key challenge for education is attending to problems with student engagement, the 'affective, emotional, motivational' (p. 130). This article works on the premise that engagement occurs when students are both passionately and successfully involved in a task of high quality (Munns, 2007). The definition of engagement embraces, but goes beyond, enjoyment. I will explore the extent to which the playwriting experience encouraged a 'substantive sense of satisfaction with, and a psychological investment in the classroom work being undertaken' (Munns, 2007, p. 304).

The belief in intrinsic creativity, viewing it as an individual gift or talent, means that problems

with creative expression are problems with, or for, the individual. An inability to remain engaged is therefore a problem with individual application or innate talent. If a student reaches an impasse, then perhaps they don't have 'it'. The systems model, however, explores the relationship between creativity, engagement and knowledge. Csikszentmihalyi (2008) explains that an individual experiences high levels of engagement, what he calls 'flow', when the challenge of a particular task is met with a corresponding skill level. Flow is a state of heightened awareness, characterised by deep concentration, a focus on a clear goal, a diminishing awareness of time passing and a sense of control. Activities that generate flow are so gratifying that the tasks become intrinsically motivating (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 39; 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993, p. 15), 'autotelic, that it is worth doing for its own sake' (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993, p. 15) and encourage repetition (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 39).

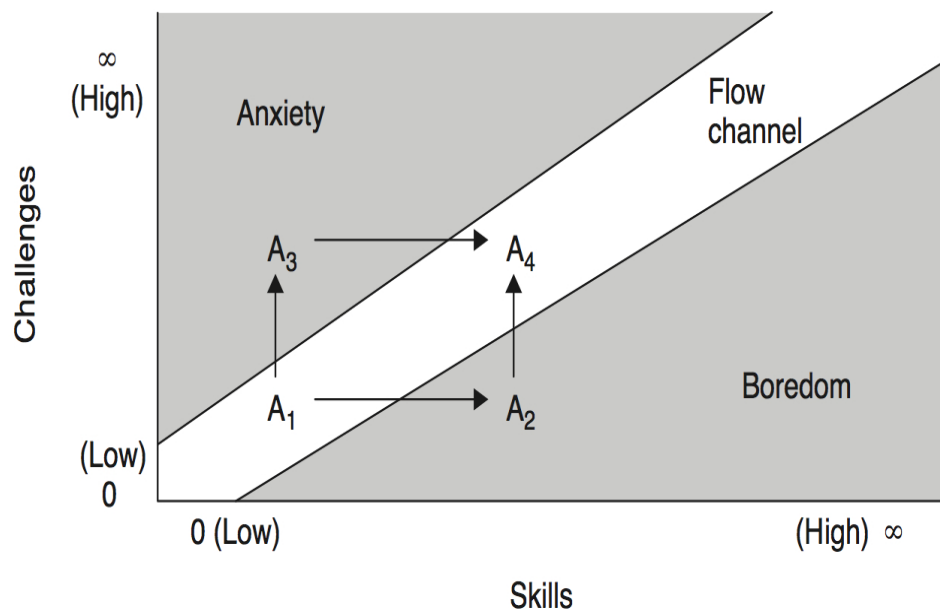


Figure 1. The Flow Channel (Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 74)

To remain in flow there needs to be an optimal match between skill and challenge. This dynamic process pushes people to higher levels of performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), as 'flow' encourages students to increase their skill development to increase engagement:

Flow leads to complexity because, to keep enjoying an activity, a person needs to find ever new challenges in order to avoid boredom and to perfect new skills in order to avoid anxiety. The balance of challenges and skills is never static. (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993, p. 15)

While describing moments of extraordinary focus, linking motivation and skill can help us understand more common experiences of productive engagement. Flow is particularly valuable for our understanding of self-directed learning in all students, not only those working on a play. For a student to engage and then maintain that engagement in a creative and challenging task, their skill level must continue to match the increasing challenge. The idea of flow challenges the belief that creativity is best fostered by a non-interventionist pedagogical approach. The systems theory, and flow in particular, suggests that neither engagement nor creativity are innate, and that active pedagogy is needed to develop and maintain both.

Playwrights manipulate the elements of drama and use theatre semiotics, with its signs and symbolic language, to create metaphor and communicate to the audience (Aston & Savona, 1991; Elam, 1980). The playwriting student therefore needs ‘dramatic literacy’, an ability to ‘speak’ the language of the stage and its ‘verbal, ... visual and acoustic codes’ (Pfister, 1988). Learning to understand and manipulate ‘imaginative shorthand’ (Smiley, 2005, p. 160), the signs and symbols that constitute stage language, and knowledge of the unique qualities of the play text with its multiple simultaneous signs (Hayman, 1977) will equip students with the ‘tools’ of creation (Jefferson & Anderson, 2009). As Burton (2001) argues the ability to create effective drama texts ‘depends on our ability to use and understand symbol’ (p. 114). As the audience will read everything that happens on stage as possessing semiotic significance (Elam, 1980, p. 11), control and clarity are crucial.

The job as drama educators is to ‘make the mysterious knowable, but more than knowable: it is to create a structured understanding of... aesthetics and to allow students to use that aesthetic to create their own work’ (Anderson, 2012, p. 53). A skills based pedagogy would create teaching and learning activities that develop students’ knowledge and skills in creative processes and playwriting semiotics. Activities that deconstruct how meaning is made on the stage and provide students with opportunities to develop and exercise those skills, much like a musician learning and practicing scales in various styles and modes, will address the fundamental skills needed for aesthetic understanding and aesthetic control (Anderson, 2012). This knowledge will not only enable the playwright to learn the conventions, but awareness of the spectrum of genres, techniques and conventions, past and present informs and enables the creation of the new (Esslin, 1965). Writing of a play has always required knowledge of past practices (Gombrich, 1966; Hardy, 1993; Waters, 2012) and innovative works re-imagine existing conventions (Castagno, 2001; Esslin, 1965). The pedagogical approach would also include thinking explicitly about creativity (Lassig, 2013) to develop students’ awareness of their own creative processes. Thinking metacognitively about creativity encourages students to experiment with approaches and self-assess their creative experiences (Lassig, 2013, p. 11), increasing their skill at completing challenging creative tasks.

The research explored the role of teaching and learning practice in developing a student's playwriting 'skill' and maintaining engagement. As Martin (2008) argues, engagement requires three types of positive relationships; interpersonal (with the teacher), substantive (with the task) and pedagogical (with the teaching). To maintain engagement with the playwriting process, the pedagogical practice needs to address these relationships to ensure students' needs are met. As Jeffrey and Craft (2004) argue a 'focus on the relationship between teacher and learner makes creative practices discernable' allowing 'creative teaching and creative learning to be identified, characterised and assessed' (p. 85). Through the study, I interrogated the effectiveness of the assumptions of intrinsic creativity to enable students to remain engaged and to reach their creative potential.

The study

The research adopted a case study approach and aimed to understand the playwriting teaching and learning experiences of students and teachers in Australian, specifically New South Wales (NSW), secondary schools. The study focused on writing for external assessment, in this case the Scriptwriting Individual Project in the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) Drama examination¹. It explored the playwriting pedagogy aimed at teaching the short play form – plays that are 15- 25 pages in length². The research asked the question 'what are the teaching and learning experiences of students and teachers preparing a script for external assessment for the NSW Higher School Certificate Drama examination?'

I gathered data from teacher-student pairs in five sites: five teachers and five Year 12 (final year) student playwrights in five schools. The participants were from independent schools: Sarah and Mrs Bell, and Phillipa and Mr Sewell, were in single sex schools in Sydney. Sam, the only male student, and Ms Bates, were from a co-educational Sydney school. Two pairs came from a regional area south of Sydney; Ms Murray and Lucy from a co-educational, and Patricia and Mr Bovell, from a single sex school. The students had all chosen Scriptwriting as their option for their Individual Project but had limited experience of playwriting. While identifying themselves as writers, many had never written a play before this project. The teachers were varied in levels of experience with some (Mr Bovell and Mr Sewell) having marked the scriptwriting project and others (Ms Bell and Ms Murray) had experience marking other HSC Drama projects. Ms Bates was a relatively inexperienced teacher of HSC Drama

¹ Students in their final year of school in NSW complete the Higher School Certificate (HSC). The HSC Drama course involves three components: The study of core content (Australian Drama and Theatre and Studies in Drama and Theatre) assessed through a written examination (40%), as well as a Group Performance (30%) and an Individual Project (30%). The Individual Project allows students to choose to complete work in critical analysis, design, performance, scriptwriting or video drama.

² The plays are marked using a set of published criteria. They are marked in three areas, concept /vision, dramatic action and dramatic language. These criteria are used to guide the pedagogical process and teacher and students evaluate the play based on these three criteria.

and this was her first scriptwriting student. As an Individual project, most of the work on the play occurred outside class time and student-teacher interactions took place in one-to-one meetings. To ensure anonymity, the participants and the schools are referred to using pseudonyms³.

The qualitative data collected consisted of semi-structured interviews (referenced as Int. 1 etc. in the data), student logbooks, observations of teaching and learning sessions, and workshops of the students' scripts. The teachers and students were interviewed twice, once during the writing process and once after the plays were complete. The first interview explored issues of playwriting literacy, engagement and agency, with the teacher-student observation occurring on that day. From analysis of this data it became clear that the students' experience was impacted by their, and their teacher's, views of creativity. The second interview explored the themes that emerged from the first, paying particular attention to the connection between engagement, creativity and knowledge. Interview data formed the major focus for this analysis because, as Fetterman argues, 'what people believe to be true is more important than any objective reality: people act on what they believe' (Fetterman, 1988, p. 18).

Where possible, I observed a play reading workshop. Most students received a moved reading of their work, though at one site the student and teacher read the play aloud at a table. Generally, the play reading workshops formed part of the assessment procedures and occurred late in the process. I also collected and analysed copies of the plays in draft and final form, as well as the students' logbooks. These logbooks recorded the student's creative process and formed part of the internal assessment process for all projects. They also represented the students' record of the pedagogical process undertaken over the full course of the project, including the student's collation of resources given by the teacher, their drafts and any other text work. These books were independent of the research and were an invaluable in corroborating the interview data.

The data were analysed and explored through mindmaps, annotations and memos, identifying links, themes and common ideas. The data were then further analysed through the lens of these categories, looking for connections across sites. The data were examined not primarily to understand the specifics of the cases but on what they can tell us about the experience of playwriting pedagogy. I used this 'thick data' (Denzin, 1989) to respond to the complexity of experience, and the 'multiple dimensions and layers of behaviour' (Johnson, 2008, pp. 34-35). The research sought to characterise (Craft, Chappell, Rolfe, & Jobbins, 2012) the experience, collecting detailed data to form a 'montage', where interpretations were constructed 'simultaneously' not sequentially (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Further, to respond to the

³ The teacher participants' pseudonyms are the names of Australian playwrights.

complexity and subtlety of the situation, meaning is constructed through crystallisation (Richardson, 2000) exploring where the multiple perspectives support, elaborate and contradict each other. The case study approach allows us to document alternate understandings of the same event (Winston, 2006, p. 47). Understanding the specific chosen cases 'will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorising, about a still larger collection of cases' (Stake, 2005, p. 446).

Findings

In general terms, the playwriting pedagogy observed in the study reflected teachers' choices to *facilitate* the process and to minimise teaching and learning interventions. Strategies or exercises that focused on knowledge and skill development were not prioritized and the main pedagogical process consisted of point of need student-teacher feedback sessions. The teachers reported that they did not follow a 'program' or consult texts in preparing for their interactions (Ms Bates) and believed that a structured course was unnecessary and unhelpful. Their role was to guide the 'process of discovery' (Mr Sewell) through shaping and editing drafts of student work (Ms Bell). They expressed views of creativity that suggested the student's unique talent and individual voice needed to be protected from the limiting effect of rules and knowledge. The belief in the intrinsic nature of creativity was associated with the belief that inspiration was more important than education (Swander, Leahy, & Cantrell, 2007, p. 15). These assumptions impacted their understanding of and approach to student engagement. Any problems encountered during the process were seen to be a product of application and perseverance, both viewed as issues for the student, not the effectiveness of the pedagogical process.

The teachers in this study expressed the belief that student interest, enjoyment and/or personal investment were crucial to success in this creative task. Mr Sewell stressed that a student 'will do better work if their imagination is excited by what they are doing' (Int. 1). Ms Bell agreed and encouraged students to find a connection to the project based on 'personal relevance and meaning' (Int. 1). Ms Murray agreed:

Ms Murray: I think it's... pretty important that the student ...owns it and feels comfortable with it... (Int. 1)

For some of the teachers, personal interest was considered more critical than skill or ability:

Ms Bell: She is really interested in the subject matter and I think that is everything. (Int. 1)

Mr Bovell, indicated that for him to endorse a student's choice of scriptwriting they needed to 'show, not a high level of writing skill but a commitment to writing, that they enjoy writing' (Int. 1).

In the teachers' view, passion was necessary to enable the students to persevere and complete the task and was *more* critical than skill to success. The focus on engagement more than skill was particularly important in the context of their professed non-interventionist approach. It implied that playwriting talent was innate and that passion for the topic and a desire to do well was enough for the students to be able write a play, or they would learn to write 'by doing it' (Ms Bell, Int. 1). It implied a preference of expression over craft development, reinforcing the belief in intrinsic creativity and intrinsic engagement. There appeared an assumption that engagement was an internal quality, like creativity, that they needed to possess or demonstrate at the beginning of the process. They saw it as a pre-requisite for perseverance and completion, rather than part of the teaching and learning experience that can be impacted by pedagogy.

The students similarly regarded engagement as vital to success in the project, but saw it as part of what motivated them to develop craft proficiency. Phillipa considered playwriting was so much fun as to be 'unschool' (Int. 1). Sam indicated that he 'loved' the project, which motivated him to meet the deadlines and juggle his other commitments. Lucy indicated that her enjoyment was based on the personal creativity inherent in the task (Int. 2). Sarah expressed that it was enjoyment or engagement that would encourage the writer to persevere and persist with the difficult task:

Sarah: Some people don't enjoy [writing a play] and therefore don't work to be good at it, but I think it's like anything in life, any skill, if you enjoy it and you want to do it, you have to work to be better at it. (Int. 2)

Playwriting was engaging because it involved students to expressing themselves. They felt they had 'complete control over what happens' (Sarah Int. 1), representing a level of freedom they had not experienced before in their school career. Mr Bovell indicated that Patricia really enjoyed scriptwriting and that she had a 'glee in her writing'. Ms Bates, explaining the initial productive and positive student-teacher dynamic essential to engagement (Martin, 2008), described Sam as a 'sponge' who was open to different ideas and whose enthusiasm affirmed her process (Int. 1). The focus on the initial high levels of engagement should be considered in light of the students' lack of experience with actual playwriting. The engagement may be better understood as students being positively inclined toward the potential playwriting

offered them to convey their ideas or views of the world⁴. In terms of ‘flow’, the initial high levels of engagement suggested students began with confidence that they could accomplish the task: that skill and challenge were in balance. This may be due to *their* belief in intrinsic creativity and their expectation that they only had to release the play that was in them.

However, the research revealed that, in the playwriting process, moments of intensifying engagement were linked to students’ perceptions of their developing playwriting craft. Expressing an implicit understanding of the link between proficiency and engagement, the students indicated the experienced high levels of engagement when they felt they were mastering the playwriting craft, such as telling their story well or creating engaging characters. Lucy reflected that a significant part of her engagement with the project was her feeling of accomplishment in gaining playwriting skills:

Lucy: I think I love telling the story, and I also think I love getting to know my characters a lot and watching them, kinda, almost growing up a little bit, as the script [goes on]...that’s nice. (Int. 1)

Sarah, similarly, indicated she was most proud of the playwriting proficiency she demonstrated in developing her main character who ‘encapsulates mental illness essentially in 16 pages, which is very hard to do’ (Int. 2). Patricia, too, was proud of her perceived manipulation of the techniques of playwriting:

Patricia: I like the strong characterisation, which I didn’t always have. ...I like the humour of it. I like the tone of it. And...I like the way it ends up. (Int. 2)

Students reflected that engagement was connected to developing playwriting skills and to feelings of proficiency.

Contrary to the belief in the solitary angst ridden playwright, students said that the collaborative nature of the playwriting workshop was a significant contributor to their engagement. Phillipa felt the play reading was the most enjoyable and ‘entertaining’ part of the whole process (Int. 1 and 2) because having her words read by others created a sense of importance and reinforced the reality of writing a play because ‘people are saying it’ (Int. 1). Patricia indicated that when you ‘hand [your play] to someone to read and hear them laugh and just go ‘that worked’...that’s the best thing’ (Int. 1). The students saw the play reading as very important to their ability to judge the effectiveness and of their play: ‘if it works in your

⁴ For a more detailed discussion see Gardiner, P. and Anderson, M. *Why Playwriting? Dealing with the ‘big issues’ and empowering student voices*, NJ: Drama Australia Journal
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head it has to work out loud' (Sarah, Int. 2) allowing them to see the need to improve structure (Lucy, Int. 1) and the clarity of stage directions (Patricia, Int. 2). In terms of 'flow', this feedback created feelings of control and achievement for the student, affirming that they were demonstrating sufficient playwriting skill to meet this particular part of the challenge or highlighting where they needed to improve. This teaching and learning strategy contributed to students' positive disposition toward the task and provided an opportunity to increase engagement.

While the feedback gained from moved readings was beneficial, perhaps even necessary, to writing a good play, it was not sufficient to improve the play and the enjoyment and the insights did not immediately result in improved writing. Ms Bell noted that the reading led to 'very good realisations' about where further improvement could be made in Sarah's play. However, despite the moved reading showing Sarah that she needed to increase the dramatic action, Ms Bell noted that 'I don't think it is fully evident in the final version'. Ms Murray observed that, despite input from several sources on a number of occasions, Lucy was unable to effectively act on the realisations. The students needed increased skill to capitalise on the engagement provided by the workshops.

Patricia reported a key moment of 'flow' that demonstrated the connection between engagement and subsequent skill development. Patricia indicated that she experienced intense engagement when she was writing her first draft:

Patricia: Writing, that moment of flurried activity...just like flying over the keyboard going 'I know where I am going with this, and it looks cool, and it's good, ...and I'm like dancing on an avalanche, it's awesome fun.... then I had a period where I had none of that, and I fixed it, but I didn't really feel excited. Then when I did the mentoring thing⁵... he would say [try this] (*loud clap*) 'I hadn't considered that, right. I know that doesn't work. Who cares? Write!' And then when I stopped doing it with him, I sort of did that myself, 'That doesn't click, let's make that click', so that's a good feeling. (Int. 2)

Patricia's experience of the flow of writing reinforced the importance of developing proficiency to meet the changing challenges of the task. She was invigorated while writing a 'stream of consciousness' first draft, but when she didn't know what to do, engagement diminished. She only returned to 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) through increased skill and/or knowledge.

⁵ Patricia was part of a short young playwright's program that provided her with a mentor and an opportunity for a reading.

Phillipa experienced a similar dynamic. She explained that her engagement was most tested when she was unsure of what to do, when the task became too difficult:

Phillipa: I think it [became less enjoyable] towards the middle when I sort of didn't know what to do with the characters. I didn't know where the story was going, I got a bit stressed with that, but once I knew where it was going, and once I knew how it would end, and how I would get there, all I had to do was fix up the script, I had fun with that. (Int. 2)

Phillipa was able to regain her enjoyment by improving her skills. Phillipa attended a playwright's workshop that included creative writing exercises that helped her overcome the block. Like Patricia, developing creativity relevant processes (Amabile, 1996) increased her writing skills, and confidence, enabling her to regain the application needed to make progress with her play. Student engagement was affected by the perception of their ability to complete the task. Patricia described her engagement as a 'rollercoaster' ride, with moments of lull followed by moments of excitement (Int. 2). Her roller-coaster image is apt, and reflects that flow is not as simple as being 'in' or 'out' but is a journey of success and obstacles where the complications the students face comprise instances of pedagogical need. These findings challenged assumptions of fixed or pre-existing notions of engagement.

The rollercoaster of engagement was common across all sites, as student enthusiasm and application waned during the course of the project. Sarah reflected this trend when she indicated that while she had enjoyed the process, there were moments of lost engagement (Int. 1). Ms Bell referred to Sarah's disengagement, suggesting many causes:

Ms Bell: [It] waned, and it was largely to do with stress and requirements across a number of levels ... She had other things to hand in and I think she thinks 'I've still got a week'. And it might be mulling over in your head, but the actual process of putting it on the page happened very late, the final, you know, draft. (Int. 2)

Ms Bates indicated that Sam's initial engagement diminished:

Ms Bates: I think ... he was very excited at the beginning. I can really remember the excitement... and he was *so* into the idea. Mind you, there was always quite a bit of prodding from me, going 'you need to really go and research these characters, you really need to think about the setting, need to' ... I definitely think his enthusiasm, motivation, level of engagement definitely dropped off throughout... (Int. 2)

While diminishing engagement was acknowledged in interview by all of the teachers, it was described, as these comments suggest, as either procrastination (Ms Bates) or stubbornness (Ms Bell).

The engagement journey was complex and reflected the importance of seeing engagement as fluctuating and contextual. Sam indicated that, despite his initial enthusiasm, the start was the most difficult:

Sam: I think the hardest point of the process was the first draft ever. (Int. 2).

This perhaps explains the need for Ms Bates to prod him, but also suggests his initial enthusiasm was with the 'idea' of writing a play and he needed skill development to proceed beyond the initial 'vision'. Lucy, too, suggested that it was at the beginning that she needed direction:

Lucy: The hardest part is the starting off and being like 'wow I don't really know what I am doing, I am having so much trouble figuring things out'. (Workshop Discussion, St Ingrid's)

This feeling of not knowing what *to do* was common:

Sarah: It's the first script [that I have written] and I am enjoying it, but at the same time it has made me aware that I have no idea what I am doing. (Int. 1)

When faced with doubts about her ability to meet the challenge of the task, Lucy attempted to simplify her play. Lucy momentarily, but significantly, modified her idea in the later stages of the process, choosing to abandon her theatrical concept and adopt a more realistic, and safe, approach. She had initially chosen to use puppetry as a feature of her piece but, in response to input from her teacher, felt she was unable to control the device. She decided to abandon puppetry and create a realistic character journey, focusing on themes of suicide and depression. Lucy suggested that 'it wasn't working' and her repeated inability to achieve the clarity demanded by Ms Murray, based on her teacher's application of the marking guidelines, saw her try to complete a less challenging task. When not accompanied by skill development, the anxiety caused by the increasing difficulty encouraged Lucy to lower her expectations and to relinquish ownership. This lowering of expectations was interpreted by her teacher as an attempt to make the task easier:

Ms Murray: So, the next time I saw her she actually said to me 'Don't worry,

Miss... I have actually rewritten it, and it's not the puppet show anymore, it is just characters...I've realised it's too much work. It's too hard to... I've realised I haven't really got enough justification for them [the puppets], so I've just decided it's easier to do it this way.' That, to me, was a point where I saw in her that she had thought, 'Ok, I'll just play the game, I'm tired, I have a lot of assessments going on. I haven't got time to put into this for it to be what I want it to be, so I'll just give in and make it whatever Ms Murray or whatever people are telling me' ... She didn't come across as being really depressed about it, she was just saying 'This is the solution I have come up with'. (Int. 2.2)

The link between Lucy's lack of perceived proficiency and her disengagement was clear. Lucy was unable to solve the problems that Ms Murray identified and decided to decrease the challenge to meet her level of skill. Ms Murray indicated that while she liked the idea she felt it was beyond her ability:

Ms Murray: I don't know if she was capable of pulling it off without a lot of help.
(Int. 1)

In responding to Lucy's decision to simplify, Ms Murray reminded her of the passion she had for the idea in the beginning and encouraged her to pursue her more sophisticated concept as 'you'd end up with an ordinary mark making your play more ordinary'. However, despite the student indicating that the obstacle was embedded in the difficulty of the task, Ms Murray interpreted Lucy's dilemma as being partly one of application: that the more difficult idea was 'too much work'. The pedagogical response did not address the student's skill base but encouraged her to persevere, to increase her application.

The flow theory and its explanation of paralysis and anxiety may help us understand Lucy's experience. She felt that the task was too hard; that although her idea was engaging and unique, the challenge of the task appeared insurmountable. It tempted her to relinquish the personal engagement and creativity of her original idea and, as Ms Murray indicated, aim for something less challenging and more achievable. This represented substantive disengagement that may be a result of pedagogical disengagement (Martin, 2008). The absence of input addressing skill development may have contributed to this feeling of lack of efficacy. The disengagement was increased by Lucy's realisation that the skills she needed could not be acquired at this late stage, providing further evidence of the need for early attention to skills development. Further, the teacher's advice reflected the belief that regaining her passion was implicitly sufficient to address the crisis of confidence. Instead of the problem being a case of skill deficit or the absence of playwriting literacy, it was seen as an issue of application. This

was perhaps because a decline in application was seen to be the cause, rather than a symptom, of disengagement.

As the end of the process approached, disengagement was evident across the sites and manifested itself in diminished application and students' disconnection with their teachers. At the time when, intuitively, students would be increasing their focus, they became less active and produced less work. Ms Bell indicated that in the final weeks Sarah disengaged from the pedagogical relationship (Martin, 2008):

Ms Bell: Between then (the Trials)⁶ and the final submission of the script, I saw no other drafts [from Sarah], ... there was discussion but nothing else concrete happened and, in fact, I didn't read the final draft until the day it was due. (Int. 2)

Ms Bates indicated that Sam disengaged from the process and did not make significant changes to his script post Trial assessment:

Ms Bates: Yeah, I think he got disappointed (with his mark) and...from Trial to end product [Sam] had done nothing. (Int. 2)

Sam agreed that his application declined but remembered it slightly differently:

Sam: I didn't do much work after the actual (Drama) Trial because of other Trials, in other subjects – and once that was done we had two or three weeks before final hand in, so really all I did was try to incorporate what the markers said and fix up the script and send in lots of drafts to Ms Bates... (Int. 2)

Sam's disengagement affected his ownership of the project and the only post-Trial work he did was to incorporate the comments and advice provided by the trial markers. Sam's explanation resonates with the insights provided by the flow theory.

Sam: Before Trials it was all kind of fun and nice except after Trials it was all right, but the week before the inevitable ...having a deadline did freak me out a little, but I go – you know – I've got to sit down and finish my IP now blah, blah, blah, um...

Sam's inaction seemed to be his response to a task he perceived as insurmountable. Ms Bates reported that she perceived his ownership to have suffered due to the challenge of improving

⁶ In the school's internal assessment schedule, the plays were marked at the school level, called Trial HSC, which occurred 2-3 weeks before they were sent away for external assessment.

his play surpassing his skill, which in turn caused anxiety and paralysis. Ms Bates explained that his disengagement was caused by the increasing difficulty of the task:

Ms Bates: I think he found it hard to find solutions and got lazy, you know, and it was like, 'Can you just tell me what to do?'

This lack of ownership was the common expression of anxiety and paralysis and was due in part to the students not feeling able to solve the problems presented by the task. In the context of conflicting assessments, the paralysis meant that the return from investing more time on the play was not sufficient to warrant time away from other, perhaps more manageable tasks.

This disengagement resulted in a number of the teachers abandoning the 'non-interventionist' approach choosing to find solutions to the problems they had identified (Ms Bates, Ms Bell, Mr Sewell). In the context of the play forming part of an HSC examination, the disengagement and paralysis placed greater pressure on the teachers and students, resulting in over-detailed feedback. In some sites the teacher was compelled to suggest plot solutions (Ms Bell) and direct the student to include specific devices (Mr Sewell). Ironically, the pedagogical approach based on the belief in the intrinsic nature of creativity aimed at avoiding this level of intervention.

In two of the teacher-student feedback sessions I witnessed significant moments of strained communication that reflected that students were paralysed (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Their disengagement with the task impacted their engagement with the pedagogy and the teacher (Martin, 2008). The observation of the feedback session between Ms Bell and Sarah revealed a tense relationship. The level of disengagement was significant, with Sarah reporting that she had not done any work on the play since her last 'monitoring', approximately 3 months. The disengagement appeared deeper than procrastination as she admitted the project had suffered due to a lack of focus, claiming 'I haven't had the energy or the time really'. Sarah's negative body language during the session (poor eye contact, doodling) as well as the silences and monosyllabic responses reflected disengagement with the teacher-student relationship as well as the task. The conversation was distinctly one sided and the input from Ms Bell became increasingly prescriptive. The lack of Sarah's intrinsic motivation saw Ms Bell provide solutions to the problems she had previously and presently identified:

Ms Bell: ...but what about in the little sub plot between the policemen? You know how...

Sarah: You mean the power struggle?

Ms Bell: Yeah, ... remember how I said it would be good if the two strands crossed? So, could we not find out later on that he was suspended because he didn't take action early enough? Or that the other policeman has been, you know, is divorced or something that makes the two stories have relevance together maybe? *[Pause]* Write that down.

Sarah: I've got some/...

Ms Bell: /What do you think about that? I am not saying that has to happen but what do you think about that idea? (Obs. St Joan's)

Due to Sarah's disengagement, Ms Bell abandoned her commitment to a non-interventionist approach and the input became directed and theory heavy, with an urgency that created stress. Sarah's response reflected a diminished investment in ownership and a passive acceptance that "it fits, I think". This observation suggested that the lack of teaching and learning in the early part of the process had not sufficiently prepared the student and Ms Bell's response was to be more prescriptive than either of them would ordinarily accept. Sarah began with enthusiasm and passion and received positive feedback in the early stage as her teacher responded to the 'adult sophistication' of the topic. In terms of 'flow', Sarah's skill level was sufficient to meet this early part of the challenge but as the challenge outstripped Sarah's skill level, she became paralysed and anxious.

Further, Sarah's disengagement was specific to the playwriting project. Her experience of the group performance, another core component of the subject, was much more positive and she remained engaged:

Ms Bell: Mind you, she was fantastic in the lead up to the group [performance] and really took everything on board. It was if none of it had ever happened. (Int. 1)

Ms Bell further reflected that Sarah's performance in the group task was of a much higher level than her playwriting script, again reinforcing the link between engagement and proficiency. As both the Group Performance and Individual Projects are marked externally, it also suggested that the pressure of external assessment was not sufficient to explain the disengagement.

In the playwriting workshop I observed with her teacher Mr Sewell, Phillipa demonstrated comparable disengagement. Phillipa's body language and passive reception of ideas meant that Mr Sewell was doing most of the talking. He was frustrated by Phillipa's disengagement

in the process and her single word responses, often non-verbal ‘mmmmm’s, accompanied by frequent long silences. There were multiple instances where her inaction prompted Mr Sewell to suggest she write something down:

Mr Sewell: Ok, so you need some basic staging – the play takes place on a bare stage, on a largely bare stage with minimal set and props.

Phillipa: Now, I’d have to say that?

Mr Sewell: Yeah... [Pause] Do you want to type that sort of thing in to remind yourself?

Phillipa: Yep [15 seconds of silence](Obs. St Anne’s)

Mr Sewell, like Ms Bell with Sarah, was perplexed by Phillipa’s unenthusiastic reaction to his feedback. Her reactions to his rudimentary input, in discussing basic staging for example, indicated that Phillipa’s playwriting literacy was still undeveloped. The disengagement, however, was not ‘with’ Mr Sewell as she was keen to receive a copy of the handwritten edits to incorporate into her piece. Her inaction reflected her inability to solve the problems he was identifying, rather than an unwillingness or lack of application. Her disengagement had become paralysis. The solutions to the problems identified by Mr Sewell were beyond her skill level and the suggestions regarding spelling etc. would not substantially improve the play. As reported by Mr Sewell (Int. 2), the paralysis continued and Phillipa’s post-session application was not as intense as he had anticipated.

Despite disengagement increasing as the project continued, many students considered the external deadlines as a positive influence on their work. Sarah indicated that it gave her process an urgency that enabled creativity:

Sarah: ...it certainly made me work faster...and really focus. ...I think that’s one big thing, for me, was the deadline actually just made me work harder and I achieved so much in a few hours that it was quite interesting really the pressure it puts on you...for me the pressure definitely was a positive thing, because I sat there and said ‘Right I’ve got to get this done’ and I sit and I focus and work harder than I normally would if I go, ‘I’ve got time, I’ve got time’. (Int. 2)

Sarah admitted that, without the deadline, the play would probably not have been completed:

Sarah: ...it’s forcing yourself to sit down and write and that links back to the hard

work I was talking about earlier. One of the things about the fact that I had a deadline and that it was actually a project that I had to hand in, whereas if I had just sort of done it of my own bat, it probably would never have been finished ...I think being forced to finish it has been really good for me because I am proud of it. I'm happy with it and I think that's really good essentially. (Int. 2)

Lucy also indicates that the deadline heightened her focus and creativity (Int. 2):

Lucy: I am so much more productive when I work to deadlines. Yeah, I think it made me want to take action... When...the deadline is two months away, three months away, I can take my time. I don't need to do anything now. I can do something else. When it's right there, I have to do something. (Int. 1)

For Lucy, the deadline caused stress at the times when she felt unsure of how to proceed. When asked had the approaching deadline caused her to feel paralysed or enlivened she responded:

Lucy: Moments of both. There were times when I was really anxious and I felt helpless to do anything, but there would also be times where I would go, 'You have to do stuff, you can do this, you know, put more things in my logbook and change things' and then – 'I don't think I can get it done in time, and I don't think it's good enough' or whatever. (Int. 2)

Lucy's experience indicated her self-doubt was associated with the way the impending deadline emphasised her perceptions of her inability to complete the task. Phillipa similarly indicated that while the deadline caused stress, her engagement was more challenged when she 'didn't know what to do with [her] characters, and didn't know where [her] story was going' (Int. 2). Patricia's experience reinforced the way deadlines can increase motivation. As part of the Playwright's Workshop, Patricia had to meet a much earlier deadline and needed to submit a full play ready for a public workshop and performance. When she had completed this full draft she 'stopped panicking' (Int. 2). Sam, while he felt that the final deadline caused the work to become a bit of a chore, thought it 'still better than studying for an exam' (Int. 2).

That many of the students saw deadlines as increasing productivity suggested that, in the absence of intrinsic motivation, the process required an extrinsic motivator. While this is common in many students' approach to HSC tasks and examinations, the playwriting project was initially spoken about as being 'rejuvenating' and so enjoyable it was 'unschool'. The playwriting pedagogy experienced students did not capitalise on the initial autotelic, self-

motivated engagement and when the impending deadline caused students to regain motivation, it was too late to really improve their project.

The lack of intrinsic motivation in the students posed a puzzling problem for the teachers responding to student disengagement. Ms Bell had a process she called ‘monitoring’ to introduce stages to chunk the process for the students. Ms Bell suggested that Sarah didn’t have the required discipline to finish the play, and the assessment schedule, the monitoring process, could force the student to keep writing and submit a number of drafts, ‘to avoid the ‘whole sitting down at the last minute’ idea’ (Ms Bell, Int. 1). Sarah’s experience, however, suggested that scaffolding in the form of dates was not sufficient either. Her log reflected that she failed to meet the deadlines and did not make significant progress from one monitoring to the next.

Unfortunately, as engagement and ownership decreased, students became results focused and were more likely to ask the teacher to ‘Tell me what to do to get the best mark’. Similarly, near the end of the process, the teachers were finding themselves providing more precise and detailed suggestions to offer solutions to the problems they had identified. This tension between the identified problems and student paralysis and between the impending deadline and the unfinished product had a significant impact on the teacher-student dynamic. The final wave of intense input, in the form of problematisation and suggested solutions, was met with further opposition. The reluctance to intervene was not maintained, but was delayed until pedagogical input was no longer effective.

Reflection

The opportunities for self-expression offered by playwriting meant that the students began the process with high levels of engagement. The interest and enthusiasm inherent in the process also saw the students begin with a level of creative risk taking. However, this initial engagement was not maintained. While it may have reflected a belief in intrinsic creativity – that they ‘naturally’ had the skills to meet the task – the students’ experience suggested that as the task became harder, their motivation and engagement was inexorably linked to their perceived and actual ability to meet the challenge of the task. The students disengaged from the process, and their teacher, as their perceived (and actual) ability to complete the increasingly difficult task of writing a play diminished. The experience of playwriting and the fluctuating engagement that emerged can be understood through flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) and how the increasing challenge of the playwriting task, when not being met by a corresponding increase in skill level, caused students to fall or fly out of the ‘flow’ channel. This disengagement resulted in diminished student application and ownership, feelings of anxiety and paralysis and diminished autotelic motivation. The initial potential of playwriting as an expression of freedom was not realised and students began to

treat the project as a chore to be avoided or an ordinary 'exam' that saw students ask for the 'answers' necessary to get the best mark.

Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) concept of flow, and the conditions associated with its occurrence, challenge the idealist belief in intrinsic creativity and provide evidence for the value of teaching and skill acquisition in creative tasks. The findings of the research suggest that a key factor in student success in this creative task was the teacher's view of creativity. Despite the teacher's best intentions, the professed belief in intrinsic creativity accelerated, rather than remedied, disengagement. In the idealist approach, teachers considered passion to be more critical than skill, implying a tacit focus on expression rather than craft development. Subscribing to a view that 'inspiration not education' was the key to creative output, there was a lack of theoretical or dramaturgical input in the pedagogical process. Rather than allowing the student 'room to work' this acted to diminish the students' ability to meet the increasing challenge of the task. As flow theory predicts, this adversely affected the student's motivation and undermined their initial commitment and enthusiasm. Similarly, engagement was seen as a pre-existing attribute that would drive the play toward completion. As the teachers viewed creativity as innate, the student's inability to 'create' was defined as a product of a lack of application, rather than a lack of skill, resulting in the teachers imposing more stringent deadlines and encouraging the students to work harder. Flow theory suggests that the disengagement originated in, or was exacerbated by, a skill deficit and a feeling that the challenge was too great. Thus, the focus on 'cracking the whip' did not address the core issue.

A related observation was that the diminishing engagement affected their creative resilience. As flow suggests, feelings of efficacy are dependent upon continued progress and skill development. As the process continued, increased difficulty diminished their perceptions of the quality of their work (Munns, 2007) and their ability to meet the challenge of the task, resulting in paralysis and cynicism (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). This created further challenges to engagement. The students waning confidence and diminished belief in their efficacy resulted in a decreased ability to 'persist in the face of obstacles' (Starko, 2005). The teachers' response, focusing on editing, correcting minutia, identifying problems and/or offering over detailed solutions, increased the perception of the difficulty of the task rather than its manageability or achievability. In the context of the students' limited playwriting literacy, the feedback reminded the students that the challenge was greater than their skill. This reinforced the relationship between skill and creative achievement, and emphasised the important role played by pedagogy in creative processes.

The research also found that the students' initial engagement, while waning under the pressure of the increased level of difficulty, returned when they felt able to meet the challenge. The

students re-engaged when they felt able to accomplish the task and when they considered, realistically or not, that they were producing work of quality. The students' desire to produce good work and demonstrate playwriting proficiency, reinforces Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) observation that achievement and proficiency are key to intrinsic motivation and that flow encourages complexity (1993).

The need for a paradigm shift in the practice of playwriting pedagogy was reinforced by the teachers' feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction at the end of the process. Upon reflection, the teachers realised the importance of scaffolding (Mr Bates) and greater engagement with theoretical concepts. Ms Bates thought the best way to improve her process was through developing her own playwriting knowledge. They saw the need to focus on idea development (Ms Murray), to use workshops earlier in the writing process (Mr Bovell) and to engage with resources that deconstructed how meaning was made in a range of plays across genres (Ms Bell and Mr Sewell). This study suggested that greater input early in the process, such as semiotic and genre knowledge and playwriting skills activities, would empower the students to envision and then write their best play. Their increased proficiency would then sustain the autotelic motivation.

These realisations suggest the belief in intrinsic creativity had not been a sound basis for pedagogical practice, either for proficiency or engagement. The benefits to student engagement offered by playwriting will be maintained through greater awareness of teaching and learning strategies that address creativity skills as well as dramaturgical knowledge. This reinforces the need for greater teacher professional learning that focusses on creativity and creative pedagogies, as well as the skills of playwriting. The teachers in this study underestimated their impact on the creative process. The lessons from 'flow' theory encourage greater involvement in content pedagogy as well as teachers engaging actively in developing their students' creativity skills. There is still more research required to gather information on best practice for playwriting pedagogy in each stage of learning - from preschool to pre-service teachers. There is similarly further scope for focused studies on creativity processes and pedagogies to enhance engagement and proficiency across the arts, and beyond.

Conclusion

Rethinking the teachers' role in managing creativity needs to begin with a challenge to our assumptions about what creativity is – and to abandon the belief in intrinsic creativity that understates the role of learning and collaboration. The 'flow' theory provides an effective lens to examine creative processes and the link between skill (and knowledge) development and intrinsic motivation to ensure students remain engaged in creative tasks. Further, the insights are significant for all teaching for, with and about creativity. It is not only students

who will benefit from an awareness of the need to increase skills to meet increasingly difficult challenges. Teacher professional learning that specifically addresses creativity will increase teacher efficacy, confidence and, ultimately, enjoyment in teaching and managing creative tasks.

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Paul Gardiner is a Ewing Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney where he is researching playwriting pedagogy and creativity. His PhD research investigated the practice of playwriting pedagogy in NSW Secondary schools and he is particularly interested in the interconnected concepts of knowledge, creativity, agency and engagement. His current postdoctoral research is interested in the impact of creativity theory on teaching and learning in the arts. He currently teaches Drama Education and Creativity in the Faculty. Paul is Chief Examiner for HSC Drama and has been Director of Research on the Drama Australia Board. He is an experienced Secondary Drama and English teacher, and established and led successful Drama departments in the schools in which he taught. He is currently writing a book on teaching playwriting to be published by Methuen Drama in 2018.

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