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Creative Learning Identities

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Submission to Education 3-13 Special Edition 2008 - Teaching and Learning as Sociocultural Processes

Introduction

A number of empirical studies have developed the theory of creative teaching and provided many examples of its practice (Woods 1995; Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Beetlestone 1998; Craft 2000; Jeffrey 2003; Jeffrey and Woods 2003). Creative teaching involves: making learning relevant to learners and students; enabling them to take ownership of learning experiences; the passing back of control (Best, Craft et al. 2004) and the encouragement of innovatory action (Woods 1990). Our recent research has developed a focus on creative learning - creative practices engaged by students and seen from their perspectives for even young children are able to talk about strategies for learning and are able to discuss their own thinking processes (McCallum, Hargreaves et al. 2000; Pollard, Triggs et al. 2000) as well as evaluate learning situations (Jeffrey 2001); (Wragg 1993; Jeffrey 1999); (Osborn, McNess et al. 2000).

Our recent research into Creative Learning and Student Perspectives (CLASP) project was part of a European collaborative project (Jeffrey 2005, 2007) focusing on how creative teaching was experienced, adapted, appropriated or rejected by students and what kinds of creative agency was released through creative teaching contexts. Creative learning's key characteristics are the same as applied to creative teaching—relevance, control, ownership and innovation.

- relevance. Learning that is meaningful to the immediate needs and interests of pupils and to the group as a whole
- control of learning processes. The pupil is self-motivated, not governed by extrinsic factors, or purely task-oriented exercises.
- ownership of knowledge. The pupil internalizes her relationship with knowledge assigning a personal identity to it and so she learns for herself, it becomes meaningful to her.

- innovation. Something new is created. A major change has taken place - a new skill mastered, new insight gained, new understanding realised, new, meaningful knowledge acquired. A radical shift is indicated, as opposed to more gradual, cumulative learning, with which it is complementary.

We conclude that

the higher the relevance of teaching to children's lives, worlds, cultures and interests, the more likelihood there is that pupils will have control of their own learning processes. Relevance aids identification, motivation, excitement and enthusiasm.

Control, in turn, leads to ownership of the knowledge that results. If relevance, control and ownership apply, the greater the chance of creative learning resulting – something new is created; there is significant change or ‘transformation’ in the pupil – i.e. innovation (Boyle and Woods 1999; Woods 2002).

Our CLASP project carried out in nine European countries (Jeffrey 2005) examined in more detail the nature of creative learning. We wished to develop the research and add value to it by addressing specific questions relating to student experiences of creative pedagogies.

- What actually is learned, and how?
- What difference does it make to the learner?
- What feelings, as well as cognition, are involved, and what is the relationship between feelings and cognition?
- What is to be gained by bringing student perspectives into a creative pedagogy?
- How do students act creatively to make their learning meaningful

This paper focuses on the last of these objectives, the meanings attached by learners to their experience or the creative learning identities developed using the English partner’s research in the CLASP project. Learning of any kind influences identities, those constructions of self that have meaning in a social context, that define the self to the self and to others (Woods and Jeffrey 2002).

Personal identities refer to the ‘meanings attributed to the self by the actor,’ and are ‘self-designations and self-attributions brought into play during the course of interaction’ (Ball 1972 p. 1348). They may be consistent or inconsistent with social identities. The self-concept is the ‘overarching view of oneself as a physical, social, spiritual, or moral being’, and is ‘a

kind of working compromise between idealized images and imputed social identities' (Woods and Jeffrey 2002).

In this article we refer to the personal identities the young participants construct in the light of their creative learning experiences. Pollard and Filer (1999) identified three contributing groups of factors to a learner identity – relationship of self and others, potential and resources. Potential is the biological endowment, resources are the role of material, cultural and linguistic factors and relationship of self and others, upon which we focus in this paper, is based on a symbolic interactionist conception of self which emphasizes the development of self awareness, and the construction of interpersonal relationships. Social identity, denoting definitions by self or others are based in membership or identification with a social group or social position within a particular social-cultural context. Our social context was creative learning in school classes and the learners' relationships were with their learning experience, the development of their identity and the awareness of the status of that learning identity. Pollard and Filer (1999) go on to describe young children's learning career as 'a continuous spiral' in which identity is seen as a representation of the self-belief and self-confidence which learners bring to new learning challenges and contexts. They also identified an aspect of self and identity that is concerned with:

what they *become* through interaction with significant others, their experience of new learning opportunities and their engagement with dominant social representations within their culture. (Pollard and Filer 1999 p. 22, authors italics)

It is the actual experience of *becoming* that is the subject of this paper, of what meaning learners are assigning to their experiences and what kind of identities are evolving. Meaning is how the experiences are felt emotionally, interpreted, acted upon, how they contribute to the play on self and the development of identity.

The research methods were ethnographic with the aim of accumulating rich data pertaining to the issues under examination, and to produce 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) and although we are unable to claim empirical generalizability the research was strongly grounded in a wealth of detail concerning teacher strategies, characteristics of creative learning and the meaning of creative learning for the young participants. Over a period of time the researcher was able to select in an intermittent fashion (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) relevant events to observe as and when it became clear that they would assist the research. Ensuring flexibility with the researcher's time as in an ethnographic approach enabled the researcher to immerse himself in the activity and engage in debates with students concerning their experience. The characterization (Jeffrey Forthcoming) of creative learning reflects the efforts made by young

participants in the CLASP research to be innovative as they crafted their work, to strive to develop their identity in relation to projects over time and the feeling of personal worth seen through the construction of a learner identity.

The three key sites for the research were primary schools specifically involved in creativity projects. The first – Suburbia – was reconstructing its curriculum planning to ensure that creative teaching and learning took a more central role. They planned a series of curriculum weeks over two years in which designated curriculum co-coordinators were allocated £700 to design a week of learning experiences focusing on their specific curriculum area involving all the staff and with many external local contributions. The researcher spent two terms there averaging one day a week and recording conversations with all the teachers and over fifty young participants as he also did at the second site, Tunnel School.

It was a new school built on reclaimed land and in an urban development near a major river crossing that had put creativity at its core by appointing a coordinator to develop the area across the school. She had gained over £10,000 of government funded Creative Partnership money to develop the school grounds with the involvement of the whole school. This national £40 million programme was to encourage relations with the arts and especially community arts projects to assist the education of students in deprived areas. The Tunnel school funds were used to employ a project arts facilitator and a sculptor over two terms to develop the project with all the classes in the school. The school also generated two other relevant projects during the CLASP project's research. The first involved a six week collaborative project with one Year 4 class and an artist specializing in Sounds in the Environment and the second was the continuation of a four year project with the National Theatre, which at the time of the CLASP project, a Year 5 class was involved in a ten week project investigating the Marlow play of Faustus. A musician/actor/educator carried out weekly workshops at the school, over two terms for half a day a week and the final week consisted a presentation of a short play at a local arts centre as well as a visit to the National Theatre to see a public performance of the play. The class tied the experience to a class project on the Tudors.

The third site was a dance project funded by specially designated government funds known as Education Action Zones (EAZ). These major initiatives in inner cities or areas of deprivation focused on raising achievement and one of the methods was to make use of arts initiatives to develop individual participation, well being and confidence. The EAZ project funded a coordinator and dance teachers. The CLASP project focused on two groups of Year 5 and 6 classes in two schools in a high density urban environment – Victoria and Highways school. The dance project lasted ten weeks in each school with a weekly half day session organized

and led by a professional dancer and teacher and the researcher attended half the sessions in each school and recorded conversations with the dance teacher and over thirty young participants.

These teachers created contexts which were relevant to learners, allowed a considerable amount of ownership, control and valued innovation. This ensured a meaningful engagement that was not strategic or instrumental but intense and related closely to the developing identities and interests of the young participants. The meaningfulness or value attached to the experiences were seen through focusing on the quality of their personal relationship to creative learning, the development of a learning identity and their identity status as pedagogic participants.

Personal Relationship to Creative Learning

Their personal relationship to learning is the way the learner acts towards their social situation, in this case a teaching and learning situation, in which they were encouraged to engage emotionally, physically and intellectually. The establishment of the identity of a creative learner meant a relevant engagement – the first of our four characteristics of creative teaching and learning ensuring emotional connections, engaging interest, maintaining individuality and encouraging pupil's critical faculties (Jeffrey and Woods 1997).

However, any control, ownership or innovative transformation – the other characteristics of creative learning - were embodied in their engagement in the situation. They experienced joy, dynamism, collective delight, and they welcomed the toil of creative learning. They exhibited a joy from the practice and a commitment to a form of authentic labour that was relevant to their interests at hand (Pollard 1987) and to their desires. Their joy was observed in the construction of large geo-domes; the making and marketing of pizzas (Surburbia School); designing adventure playgrounds in a design and technology week; work on the moral aspects of temptation through the Faustus drama project; the design and construction of seating for a school playground, of 3D Maths games for the same playground and the exploration of sounds in the environment (Tunnel School). In the dance project (Highways and Victoria Schools) meaningfulness for the young participants was a visceral and emotional engagement. Although the participants were being guided by teachers there was a feeling that 'you can do real body movement dancing, you can really free your body. You feel you're having a good time' (V-Jordon-Yr.6) in the dance project in particular. They were freed from being a pupil, free to 'Be outrageous and working with partners and friends without the teacher putting you in a group and at the same time you never had to be left out' (V-Abibola-Yr.5). They experienced and celebrated how to 'free your body when you put your arms out and stretch

your finger tips' (V-Kalvin-Yr.5), 'a kind of floating. They relished the opportunities to 'experiment with your body, to do things that you've never done before' (V-Yan-Yr.6). These freedoms led to avenues for new emotional expression with peers, 'I like doing different shapes because if you're angry with someone but you don't want to express it in a way that's obvious, you can express it differently (V-Lottie-Yr.6) and for oneself, 'letting yourself go out, like if you're angry you can just do it and let out how you're feeling inside' (V-Shimona-Yr.5), 'I like it because if you're angry all you have to do is put your anger out, through dancing' (V-Sheera-Yr.5).

Their engagements were sharp intensive, risky and joyous, but also emotional, physical and intellectual as this fantasy reconstruction of a friend showed in an IT session at Surburbia.

The Yr 4 children had taken pictures of themselves on a digital camera and put it onto a Dazzle computer file. They then worked on reconstructing their friend's picture, 'making her weird and making her crazy and putting weird clothes on her. I put a beard on her and big cracked yellow ears and purple hair with blue spots and I put a crown on her big hair do. She thinks it's disgusting. She'll say "Tara, you're going crazy" as I put on a funny blue nose and weird black eyes.

Hannah - Tara made it crazy. It's funny. If I did look like that I would freak out.

Tara - I like being horrible. It's really fun making people weird. It's funny when you print it out. You say 'What have I done to Hannah. Look at her. Look you're weird'.

Tara - Hannah, I think you have made me absolutely disgusting. I hate it.

Hannah. - I made it disgusting. I made the scriggly bogies go on her silky dress. The eyes are in different places. That's why there are three. It's turning into a monster and her hands are creaky and freaking. (S-Hannah+Tarah-Yr.4)

The participants toiled and laboured to improve and perfect their authentic labour (Hochschild 1983) a labour that was imbued with integrity. It expressed their determination to produce expressions of quality and value, similar to the Aristotelean notion of *arête*, the moral goodness contained within a craft (Macintyre 1985) as this Year 5 group showed as they constructed maths games for the playground for the younger learners in the Tunnel CP project.

The children sit in groups colouring in the designs, discussing the appropriate colours and trying out some of the maths attached to their games. They are working on the fine detail of the game, 'they will have to roll it once, and remember the number, and roll it again'. They practice the figures on scraps of paper asking each other's permission, 'shall I put a number in here', measuring accurately the position of signs, evaluating each indecision before continuing. 'If it's too full you won't be out to see the numbers

from below', shooing away those who disturbs them or interfere, 'go away, we know what we've doing'; sometimes arguing over central aspect; and measuring themselves to decide on the appropriate height for the game, colour coding numbers, science and texts; borrowing, sharing and problem solving, 'we could put the numbers in a container', 'how are you going to hang up the numbers'; asking others for advice; arguing, 'it would be too difficult to make it like that', 'no it won't', 'how will you open the doors'; offering opinions and cracking relevant jokes. (T-Yr.5)

They were not averse to arduous activity for some of the joy comes from the effort as these dancers acknowledged, 'I don't mind being pushed. Sometimes you have to put in a lot of effort into things that you haven't done before and I think it's really good actually' (V- Will-Yr.5). They were, 'trying to show that we are capable of trying to do something hard, testing our balancing skills. We wanted to do our best' (V-Marianne-Yr.6).

These intense, joyful experiences of collective delight, toil, labour and peak perfection constructed a personal identity of creative learning, in which emotions and social pleasure were enhanced. This personal identity was stored by them, perhaps for future reference or better still as an identity they wished to develop as they incorporated it into a more established self-identity. Their engagement through the visceral, emotional and intellectual become identified with a creative learning identity.

Developing a creative learning identity

The construction of learning identities is an inevitable event, particularly if attending an educational institution for more than fifteen years but the shape of that identity is determined by a continual dialectical relationship between the learner and the social situation. Creative learning contributed to the construction and development of learners' social identities but the young participants interpreted and shaped their personal identity.

...children do not act passively in response to changing circumstances and different social contexts, enacting ascribed roles or accommodating to structural imperatives.

Rather they respond actively and dynamically in protecting, shaping and maintaining their sense of self and identity as pupils (Pollard and Filer 1999 p.301)

The creative learning contexts of the research sites allowed the possibility of *redefinition* (Pollard and Filer 1999) for young participants, a risk taking action by teachers that gave the young participants the chance to push the boundaries even further and challenge and lead their peers. However, it also provided young participants with an opportunity to play with the relationship between self and identity; 'I am also less shy in life, for example, if I think

something is wrong like I don't want to play a game, I go into a character and don't walk off' (T-Frankie-Yr.5).

The Faustus project over ten weeks culminated in a performance at a local theatre and added to the opportunity for play 'It makes me happy after it because it's filled up a space in my body and they cheered and that feels nice. You get to understand more about each other. We worked together and sometimes we talked together and you understand each other better' (T-Mickey-Yr.5). The situation allowed an opportunity for reflection and redefinition of their spiral identity career, 'I liked it because I can be another person because I don't really like my own character my own self (Mickey-T). Playing with identities involved seeing oneself as a social actor in the situation as these dancers discussed

They might learn something from the other person if they're not so good. If you share ideas you are being helpful and you are making them feel proud of themselves you're making them happy and you are proud of what you have taught them (H-Maryanne-Yr6).

They were developing moral and ethical criteria for the establishment of their identities through the curriculum, 'You reap what you sew. The more effort you put in to something like the Tudor portraits the more pleasure and proudness you get out' (T-Amandeep-Yr.5). The development of the learning identity develops in the situation but becomes established over time as a learner experiences more creative pedagogies.

'Learning involves planning like experimenting and being briefed first'.

'Experimenting, testing, and finding out for ourselves'. 'Making it fun for we are more likely to listen.' 'Becoming your own teacher, teaching yourself', 'Choosing the way you want to do it'. 'Choosing is important because you choose the best way of doing it. You know yourself better than others'. 'You can choose your own level, less challenging and more challenging. Some of us want harder things.' (S-Yr6)

Achievement was a central element in developing a sense of worthwhile learning which contributed to the development of a worthwhile learner. The design and construction of a covered playground seat, which was actually built with the help of the young participants by the project art facilitator from the girls' designs, enhanced their learning identities.

I like working hard because at the end you or someone else is going to be proud of me and I think it's a nice feeling to have someone say 'that's really nice, you tackled that really well, you found that hard but you still did it' and that someone is going to praise you for it (T-Yr.5-Freya).

The feeling of achievement was a crucial element in both the establishment of the personal identity and the social one as these learners indicate while constructing a pizza for a business enterprise project.

‘Its exciting and it tests our colouring expertise’. ‘We don’t often do design and technology and tests to do with cooking’. ‘We work as a group so if we get confused you can get others to help and to get more ideas and you can combine them’. We get to make it and to be messy without getting told off’. ‘We are learning from our work and learning how to design and we can look back’. ‘We are achieving things we have never done before for example cooking’. ‘It feels like we are in charge and like an adult because we are making it and eating it and we have more responsibility. It proves that we can do things on our own when we need to and we can work together’. ‘It’s a challenge. (S-Yr4)

The third element that made creative learning meaningful was the experience of belonging. The Year 5 young participant’s analysis of why the school had instituted the Grounded in Colour playground project was astute but it also indicated how a sense of place and belonging contributed to a meaningful experience.

It’s a bit like you’re being an artist, you have an idea that someone else enjoys, and you’re making and helping others. We’re not just thinking about ourselves we’re thinking about the whole school, how they can learn inside it not only just play (T-Amandip-Yr.5).

A sense of belonging was also engendered through the collaborative work that marked much of this creative learning as in the dance project,

What’s enjoyable about it is being together, looking at their expressions at what is going on. They’re learning to co-operate. It makes it funny when they put your ideas together like when Nancy and I were working together and we were trying to do a forward slash and Peter was doing a cartwheel and John couldn’t do a handstand and kept on messing up the dance and it made it funnier. It’s good because at the end you feel happy about the dance and you feel like you want to show it to people and you’re happy about them (H-Yr.6-Della).

Pollard and Filer (Pollard and Filer 1999 p.21) use Berger and Luckman’s (1976) description of identity as:

appropriated by the individual through a process of interaction with others. Only if an identity is confirmed by others is it possible for that identity to be real to the individual

holding it. In other words, identity is the product of an interplay of identification and self-identification (Berger and Luckman 1976 p. 73).

This social context for identity development happens in a particular social place that creates a sense of identity, achievement and belonging.

Identity Status

The roles young participants play in teaching and learning settings are related to the social role of the school in society and the community and the parts played in a primary classroom between learners and teachers and between peers. Roles such as child, pupil, learner, and participant are socially constructed by social and institutional structures, determined by established power positions and relations and interpreted, conformed to and resisted and reconstructed in situations within the processes of power and familial relations. Our research showed how the role of learnician contributed meaningfulness to their identity as a creative learner, acting as redefiner (Pollard and Filer 1999).

As they crafted their learning experiences and laboured to make them meaningful they built up a knowledge of teaching and learning. They developed knowledge of its defining features, its technology and its uses. They learnt how to analyze and evaluate it and when given the opportunity they offered advice and were willing to become pedagogic participants reflecting upon teaching and learning strategies and developing pedagogic practices. They were going through a process of becoming a learnician as well as identifying themselves as participants in the learning process through meaningful engagement and the effects on the self-identity.

It was clear from many conversations with the young participants that they were able to discuss what constituted learning. During a maths week at Surburbia school, we discussed learning while some Year 6 learners were constructing 3D shapes during an Aztec project. We discussed the difference between ‘natural’/unintentional learning – how to be untidy and school/intentional learning:

‘You just do it.’; ‘Learning at school is learning how’; ‘Natural learning is easy, this learning is also easy’; ‘It includes failure and practice and thinking’; ‘It includes strategies, different skills and different ways of doing things’; ‘We need to think about what we are trying to do’; ‘We are conscious of something in our minds’; ‘Learning is a step towards something. I am learning that you make mistakes and then practice’; Learning involves planning like experimenting and being briefed first’ (S-Yr6).

Creative learning is,

Trying different things, instead of sticking to one thing you’re trying different things you’re opening your mind, being more creative. It lets your thoughts run wild (Abdul).

It opens up your mind, so you're using the whole brain instead of half of it, you're not sticking to one thing, you're going to the other thing and it gives you better understanding' (Lara).

It's quite easy to do, you do it at playtime when you've done all your work, you just let your mind run wild (Daisy). Being artistic means that you're mind is running wild' (Daisy).

I think that Creative Partnerships are making us creative because you have to think of opening your mind like the winner of the recent sculpture competition was a bowl of fruit in the playground for sitting on, (Lara) (T-Yr5).

They had knowledge of what it meant to be a consumer of education, 'I think we like to learn different things. We've got different minds and we like to learn different things' (V-Mazie-Yr5) and how learning could be more effective,

The dance project helped because the teacher didn't actually show us the working of the planets through their movement but when we used dance we understood what the teacher was telling us about it. You remember because you think of the movements and you remember that the earth goes round slowly (V Vicky-Yr.6).

They were sensitive to the necessity for pedagogic balance, a recommendation of the PACE project (Pollard, Triggs et al. 2000) and the QCA literature (Lord and John 2000) survey of pupil perspectives,

It's good because it ain't the teacher telling you what to do; you're making up your own movements and dances. It gets kind of boring if the teacher is always telling you what to do. It makes you independent. It's good to make up your own dance although sometimes it's good for the teacher to tell you what to do. That can be fun too (V-Ronnie-Yr5)

They were aware of the techniques and strategies of teaching and learning and they were able to make contributions to the understanding of the experience of learning and to evaluate those experiences, developing a sense of status and worth, even if it was not necessarily acknowledged by their teachers, it was recognized amongst their peers as they discussed their daily work experiences.

Conclusion

Ensuring that creative learning was meaningful meant ensuring that young participants took part in an engagement with learning that generated joy and opportunities for authentic labour. It meant ensuring that their experiences were meaningful in terms of their self-identity

characterized by identity play, a sense of achievement, of place and belonging. Lastly, it meant taking on a meaningful role as a learner. This was developed through acting as analysts and evaluators of creative learning.

Creative learning assists the development of a meaningful learning identity in contrast to those who experience more constrained and conforming teaching programmes, 'The children we interviewed over the six-year period were consistently pragmatic and instrumental about their schooling and poorly informed and non reflexive about their learning. (Pollard, Triggs et al. 2000, p.290). The meaningfulness of creative learning involved a reflective development of their personal identity which they incorporate into their self-identity (Ball 1972).

Pollard and Triggs (2000) argue that the development of knowledge, learning skills and self confidence of a learner is built on the entire accumulation of a child's previous experiences. Each of these characteristics is subtle and multi-faceted, requiring empathy, understanding and judgment from teachers. The child in the classroom is working through a pupil career, is developing physically as well as personally, is engaged in a process of *becoming*. While this is much less tangible to assess than standardized scores, it is no less important. Indeed, the reality is that these two major sets of factors interact together to produce both educational and personal outcomes. Sustained attention to curricular instruction should be complemented by a provision for the development of pupils learning skills and self confidence (ibid: p.305). Appreciation and identification of their *becoming* identities in creative learning situations is one way to develop a meaningful educational identity.

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