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A creative cocktail: creative teaching in Initial Teacher Education

Grainger, T. Barnes, J. and Scoffman, S. (2004)

Introduction

In recent years, UK governments have taken an increasingly active and prescriptive approach to education, both through the introduction of the national curriculum for schools and teacher training and the nationally imposed literacy and numeracy strategies. As a result the UK and England in particular, now has one of the most highly politicised and rigidly controlled education systems in the Western world. Inspection and monitoring at all levels of education, the setting of national targets and the publication of results all help to ensure accountability. Like the school teachers they support, many tutors working in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) currently feel dominated by external regulatory pressures. The Teacher Training Agency standards, the Office for Standards in Education inspection regime, the requirements of Local Education Authorities and the demands of partnership schools, themselves under surveillance and pressured to reach imposed targets, have also acted as constraints on creative and innovative approaches to teaching. Teachers have, it is argued, become de-motivated and unable to halt the gradual erosion of their professional autonomy. Concerns about the demise of creativity in both teaching and learning have been widely voiced (Sedgwick, 2001; Prentice, 2000; Jeffrey and Woods, 2003). Even some of the UK government's own reports have expressed concern that constant change and increased pressure has prevented the development of creative education (DfEE, 1999). As one agency observes:

The more prescriptive the curriculum, the greater the need to be explicit about creativity and not leave it to chance

(Design Council cited in DfEE, 1999, p.83.)

In the current climate the three R's dominate classroom time and creative tasks are often perceived to be of less importance than work in reading, writing and number. In particular, work in early years education is in danger of becoming both limited and limiting, preventing the achievement of the government's long term aim: the development of a creative society of lifelong learners. Children quickly learn how the school system works and as they move through school their spontaneous creativity diminishes. Sternberg (1997, p.203) observes that 'it's not that older individuals lack creative intelligence, but rather that they have suppressed it'. Today's learners know that to achieve the targets they have been set they must stay on the straight and narrow paths of conditioned and measurable conformity, whilst today's teachers are beset with contradictory messages regarding the breadth and balance of the curriculum.

If teachers and lecturers are to adopt innovative ways forward, they need to recognise the tension between the incessant drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creative teaching on the other. Finding the energy and enterprise to respond flexibly to this working reality is a considerable challenge and teachers need to be convinced that creativity is a critical component in a world dominated by technological innovations. Human skills and people's powers of creativity and imagination are, Robinson (2001) argues, a key resource in a knowledge driven economy and in order to move forward we need a fresh understanding of intelligence,

of human capacity and of the nature of creativity. Furthermore if creativity is, ‘imaginative activity which leads to new and meaningful outcomes’ (DfEE, 1999, p.29) then it is inclusive of all curriculum subjects and all people. Making original connections in thought, movement and language need to be recognised as creative acts just as much as the production of a finished book or work of art. The small-scale research project reported here was undertaken in this context, it sought to investigate the nature of creative teaching in various ITE disciplines and to enhance its status with the students involved. Planning and delivering teaching is in some ways like planning and hosting a successful cocktail party, so this metaphor has been used as a framing device for this paper.

1. Exploring creative teaching

Creative teaching has received considerably less attention than creativity itself, yet without an understanding of both terms productive ways forward cannot be generated (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003). In order for teacher education students to be able to adopt genuinely creative approaches to their subject, they need to observe tutors teaching creatively and take part in creative learning experiences. Explicit advice on creative teaching is offered by the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in their publication *Creativity: Find it, Promote It*, (QCA, 2003 website) but this document conflates creative teaching with teaching for creativity. A clearer understanding of the creative teacher or ITE tutor can be construed from the QCA description of the creative pupil, whom they describe as:

- Questioning and challenging
- Making connections and seeing relationships
- Envisaging what might be
- Playing with ideas, keeping options open
- Representing ideas in a variety of ways
- Evaluating effects of ideas and actions

(QCA, 2003.)

This description has many parallels with Prentice's (2000,p.15) concept of the creative teachers; those who display 'cultural curiosity...[and]... continue to be self-motivated learners, value the creative dimensions of their own lives and understand how creative connections can be made between their personal responses to experience and their teaching.' The work of others has also highlighted how creative teachers tend to place the learners above the curriculum and that the combination of a positive disposition towards creativity and person-centred teaching actively promotes pupils who learn and think for themselves(e.g. Craft, 2000; Beetlestone, 1998; Fryer,1996). However recent research has tended to focus on teachers' perceptions of creative teaching rather than specific observations of and reflections upon the art of teaching itself, it is also mostly based in the primary classroom. Such work is not directly applicable to the ITE tutor, teaching on longer programmes with older students. So this study was devised to explore elements of creative teaching through the careful examination of taught ITE sessions in three different curriculum areas – geography, music and English.

1. The study

The study was conducted with students who had enrolled on various ITE courses at primary school level in a UK institution in the autumn term 2002. Three different sessions were observed - a team-taught seminar, a workshop and a large lecture. The sessions which were selected on the basis of convenience or 'opportunity' sampling, involved around 240 students.

Geography: This session was taught by two tutors working as a team and was part of a longer unit on environmental issues and international development. Seventy-seven third year Bachelor of Arts with Qualified Teacher Status (BA QTS) students were introduced to a variety of world map projections. They were invited to make visual comparisons between the shape and area of the continents and to discuss hidden messages and subtexts in the different maps. This led to practical activities comparing global living standards using both Gross National Product and the more sophisticated 'human development index' pioneered by the United Nations over the past decade.

Music: In this workshop, twenty-four non specialist students studying for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course were introduced to composition. Simple clapping rhythms led to an African song that the students sung first as a group and then as a round. The session was developed through the use of xylophones and other instruments and paintings were used as a source of ideas for group interpretation using the scales and notation introduced earlier. The emotive power of music was

illustrated by discussing the different the associations evoked by accompanying a short video sequence with three contrasting musical backgrounds: silence, Gregorian chant and modern rock music.

English: This session consisted of a lecture which considered the power of narrative and the role of imagined experience in literacy learning, with one hundred and forty final year BA QTS undergraduates. The tutor began by reading a picture book using colour transparencies to magnify the illustrations and invited students to consider their response. The significance of oral stories and the tradition of storytelling were also explored and examples of classroom drama were described to illuminate the argument. The lecture concluded with an improvised story about conflict resolution, presented orally with full audience involvement.

Evidence about the teaching in all these sessions was collected through:

- Peer observation and field notes made by the other tutors in the study
- Peer discussion to ascertain the aims, content and value of the session as seen through the eyes of the tutor
- Student questionnaires about creative teaching in the sessions
- Follow up interviews with a group of students from each of the sessions

In adopting this method of triangulation, the tutors sought to gain a more objective understanding of their teaching and to identify common issues in creative teaching.

The themes that emerged from these multiple perspectives were categorised into three main areas which were connected to the cocktail metaphor as follows:

- (a) the session content represents the cocktail ingredients
- (b) the teaching style parallels the act of mixing the ingredients in a cocktail shaker
- (c) the learning experience stands for the party itself.

Within these categories, which overlap and interface, key themes were identified through careful analysis of the data. In all cases, these themes were noted by at least 65% of the respondents, both students and tutors, and were connected to the research literature. The session content included placing current trends in a wider context and the extensive use of metaphor and analogy to make connections. In the category of teaching style, multi modal pedagogic practices, pace, tutor's confidence and the ability to inspire and value students were identified as core themes. In relation to the learning experience, the emerging themes included, involving the students affectively and physically and challenging them to engage and reflect. Taken together, it is argued these represent some of the critical features of creative teaching which combine to support new thinking.

1. Session Content: the cocktail ingredients

2a) Placing current trends and practice in a wider context

Meaningful creativity only exists against a social or cultural background, which implies that both teachers and students need to view their activities in terms of their

human, physical, spiritual setting and consider their impact on the community at large. In all the sessions observed, the tutors emphasised the importance of contextualising new knowledge and learning, however, the context for each session varied. In the geography seminar, for example, case-study techniques were used to take students from the particular to the general and one approach illustrated how different areas and spaces in a classroom are replicated by land use patterns on a national and international scale. Similarly, the human demand for food and water was used to establish the notion of man's 'environmental footprint' which raised far-reaching ethical and political questions about access to resources. This session also used a variety of world map projections to portray concepts of sustainability, relativism and differences in world welfare. It was clear to the students that the examples, illustrations and cited research were all held in a wider and value-laden context. The two tutors argued, for example, that teachers of geography should work towards the goal of 'a just, sustainable and pleasant world for us all' as advocated by the International Geographical Union.

In the English session, students were made aware of the need to develop a critically informed attitude towards literacy, literature and learning. As one student remarked 'the tutor reminded us that requirements will change, therefore our 'professional knowledge and understanding' is central.' Others spoke of realizing they needed to re-consider their principles, philosophy and values and profile critical literacy in the classroom, enabling children to read both the word and the world (Freire, 1985). Students in all sessions noted a number of other framing issues including; the child's developing sense of self, the lifelong learner, the global citizen, and the problematic nature of knowledge in geography, literacy and music.

2. b)Using metaphor and analogy to make connections

The ability to use metaphor, analogy and mental models is claimed to be one of the distinguishing features of *homo sapiens* (Mithin, 1996) and all languages and cultures use both metaphor and metonym. Brain scans suggest that the metaphorical use of language uses similar parts of the brain to imagination, emotion, the artistic, the musical and the spatial, all of which are significant ingredients of creativity. Students recognised such metaphors and commented upon them, for example in the music session they remarked on the new meanings which were created from setting music alongside art. Music itself was also used as a metaphor; standing as it did for certain emotions provoked in the film/music sequences. Metaphors were seen to illuminate less familiar topics in more familiar terms, for example the English tutor used a metaphor of a dog's body to illustrate structure in story writing. In this, the dog's head represents the seeing start of a story, its torso the strong middle and its wagging tail the powerful last sentence, proffering coherence and connections.

Creativity has commonly been seen as making connections between two previously unconnected frames of reference and there were several instances of this noted in the sessions observed, when tutors illustrated a concept from one domain with an example from another. The tutors also voiced creative insights and made use of metaphor in their asides and in the spontaneous exemplification of their arguments. Students frequently drew attention to these and commented in particular on the value of tutor anecdotes, which were often used to illustrate analogous issues. The work of

other has also shown that mental models and analogies aid our understanding (e.g. Jensen, 1995; Adey, 2001). In this study students went further and linked these aides to understanding with creativity itself. Many specifically commented that their tutor's personal touch and use of metaphoric connections made a real difference to their ability to grasp ideas and concepts.

1. Teaching Styles: mixing the cocktail

2. a) Switching between styles and varying pace

All three tutors employed multi-modal teaching approaches and frequently switched between pedagogic styles, which was recognised by the students whom noted that this felt play like and spontaneous. The diversity of styles encompassed: exposition, including classroom examples and theoretical perspectives, discussion; questioning, practical activities (even in the lecture) and student enquiry. In the team taught geography session, cognitive conflict was evident when tutors deliberately contradicted one another, prompting group discussion about whose values were being used to make judgements. Such provocations may help promote creative responses in students (Adey and Shayer, 1994). In interview many again highlighted this issue and commented on the importance of teachers giving both sides of an argument, regardless of their own opinions and beliefs.

The diversity of pattern, rhythm and pace used in the sessions was particularly marked and consciously noted by both tutors and students. This was seen to be linked to the multi-modal engagement of the students as they cut and pasted versions of world

maps in geography, improvised music to evoke the sense of a painting in music and joined in with the paralinguistic gestures and repetitive actions of a story in English. The tutors were, it appears, consciously seeking to offer different entry points, in line with Gardner's (1999) view that aesthetic, practical and hands on experiences are just as valid as those which are narrational, quantitative or logical.

The use of open questions was also identified as a particular feature of the tutors teaching styles. Such framing questions were used extensively in music; for example after a group's brief improvisation, the tutor asked 'What was distinctive about the sound they made?' On another occasion, groups were asked 'Can you think of different ways of accompanying this tune?' Such questions demonstrate that the formulation of a problem may be just as important as solving it. In the context of creative teaching, it is argued that both tutors and students need to be involved in the process of imaginative thinking, encompassing the generation of questions and possible responses (Cremin, 2003).

The breadth of audio-visual and other resources that were employed to develop and illustrate arguments were also mentioned as important aides to the tutors' teaching styles. These included video clips, maps, picture books, diagrams, children's work and oral stories. Students perceived that the variety of learning styles made a noticeable difference to their engagement, even in the conventionally one-sided forum of the lecture theatre, and as a result the sessions felt the sessions were more inclusive. All three tutors actively re-created and transformed ideas spontaneously, both in front of students and in collaboration with them. 'Poetry is dead on the page and alive on the tongue, so it's our responsibility to bring it life,' one tutor declared.

The same could perhaps be said about creative teaching itself, in so far as it is a collaborative enterprise which variously involves engagement, reflection and transformation, patterned at such a rate as to invite and encourage learning and the transfer of understanding from one context to another.

2. b) Confidence and ability to inspire

Despite the varied nature of the sessions, the students were almost unanimous in commenting upon their tutors' self confidence and ability to inspire. Many described their passion for their subject, the extent of their knowledge and their deep sense of conviction. Several students perceived that such passion and commitment was conveyed not only through the evidence of a secure knowledge base, but also through their tutors' ability to reflect upon this base critically and publicly. In doing so, tutors demonstrated that they were still learners and therefore genuinely interested to understand more fully. Other students felt that the tutors' enthusiasm was communicated through paralinguistic features, tone of voice and their often experimental approach to their material, echoing Craft's notion (2000) that creativity can be viewed as 'possibility thinking'. In the geography session, the tutor openly expressed doubts and recognised the ambiguity of factual knowledge. The ability to tolerate ambiguity is perhaps an example of the 'confident uncertainty' to which Claxton (1998) refers when discussing creative teachers, who combine subject and pedagogical knowledge, but also leave space for uncertainty and the unknown. Tutors also demonstrated the flexibility that arises from confidence; this was particularly

evident in the music workshop, since the plan was constantly adapted in response to the student's emerging needs.

Perhaps the most telling responses in this sub theme were the remarks about professionalism and interpersonal relationships. A representative sample of such comments include: 'He is himself, 'Her personality shines through,' 'He doesn't put up professional barriers,' 'We were allowed to see his mistakes,' 'She lives it for real and is honest and personal, modelling a kind of human professionalism'. Such qualities depend on individual experience and reflection, extensive professional understanding and a deep academic knowledge. Teachers who are insecure are not likely to want to reveal their mistakes, will not have sufficient confidence to take risks or be willing to tolerate ambiguity in action. By contrast, teachers who have a strong knowledge base will adopt a more flexible and creative stance that is open to children's ideas, questions and responses.

2.c)Making students feel valued

It was clear through tutor field notes, student response sheets and the follow up interviews that students felt valued and were motivated during the sessions. Opportunities were provided for them to participate and they were given both explicit praise and evaluative feedback. The significance of regular feedback in quality teaching is highlighted by Stones (1992) who demonstrates its power to involve and motivate learners. In the music workshop for example, when students made tentative forays forward, they were encouraged by comments such as 'Some of you have got beautiful voices,' 'I can hear some really playful pieces,' or 'You are taking risks with

the sounds- good'. These remarks were typical of the focused and supportive responses offered. Such encouragement may help protect students from the pressure to avoid risks and the possible ridicule of their peers when they are nurturing new and unusual ideas and may feel vulnerable. Clear feedback was also noted in English when the tutor reflected upon the students' lively engagement in voice, action and ideas, having earlier critiqued their initial forays into physical involvement with the story. Being able and willing to have a go at expressing oneself and take a risk is an integral element of creativity. But such risks need to be modelled and fostered in a safe and affirmative environment, in which individuals feel supported and do not expect to be judged.

Even when the students proffered ideas and answers which were factually inaccurate, the tutors showed patience and openness and frequently reinforced their creative behaviour, celebrating difference and diversity. The learner-centred orientation which all three lecturers' adopted, may have shaped the students' sense of self as learners in these subjects, and enhanced their intrinsic motivation, since as the interviews indicated, many felt surprised at their own geographical competence and musical or linguistic potential and were encouraged to take further steps forward in these domains.

C. The Learning Experience: the cocktail party

Engaging students on an affective and emotional level

A key theme in this category, which relates to the learning experience itself, was the extent to which the sessions engaged the students on an affective and emotional level.

Being creative is not purely an intellectual activity; feelings, intuitions and a playful imagination are an equally important part of the process.

‘The sources of creativity are not always conscious or rational. The intuitive, spiritual and emotional also feed creativity – fed themselves by the bedrock of impulse’.

(Craft, 2000p.31)

Through humorous asides, personal anecdotes, the use of potent narratives, provocative music and video footage, all three lecturers involved the students aesthetically, emotionally and physically in their sessions. Recent findings in neurology confirm that effective brain activity involves a combination of thought and feeling and that intellectual learning and emotional involvement are linked together in the fabric of the brain (Schoffham, 2003). The affective involvement of the learner is central to creative learning, encouraging openness and fostering the ability to make personal connections and insights. This was evident in the geography and music sessions for example, where tutors established a sense of what Csikszentmihalyi (2000) has called ‘flow’, by ensuring students felt relaxed through considerable humour, informality, differentiated questioning, collaboration and supportive feedback.

2. b)Challenging students to engage and reflect

In all sessions, the students were aware that they were being challenged to engage and reflect on their experience, to take part and then to reassess their ideas and attitudes. They were frequently invited to participate physically in making meaning and make use of their bodies in the process of learning. Examples include the use of body percussion and corporate movements to accompany chanting in music, and their gestural and bodily involvement in retelling personal tales in English. Through inhabiting the imaginative world of literary and musical texts, the students were also able to take part psychically and were given frequent opportunities to consider their learning through: reflective pair discussions, written resumes of key learning points and small group presentations. All tutors invited students to share their thinking at regular intervals and to engage in discussion. It was clear from the student responses that they appreciated the chances to consolidate their ideas through reflection. In geography, they commented that the practical activities helped to deepen their understanding and that the opportunities to explore their own opinions had contributed to the development of their ideas. In English, students remarked on how their involvement in the session and the reflective discussions had challenged their thinking and pushed their boundaries and expectations. Several also commented that they now had the confidence to 'be themselves' and give greater scope to their individuality.

The constant oscillation between engagement and reflection that was so noticeable in the sessions is also a central feature of drama teaching, which tends towards the creative end of the teaching spectrum. This oscillation may have been partly responsible for the transformation of understanding to which many of the students referred. Other comments included 'the session gave me a much wider perception of

the teaching of music and the possibilities available' and 'my perspective about issues/countries and peoples in geography has changed.' Such learning may have been achieved in part by the dialogue between the 'here and now' of the session in which the students were fully involved, and their own lived experience of life in and out of the classroom. In exploring and developing various possibilities with the students, for example when finding out how to use their feet as musical notation or innovate in story creation, the tutors were both playful and artistically involved themselves. Working alongside their students, they were both participants and spectators in the process of meaning construction demonstrating their independence from more traditional patterns of classroom discourse.

1. Conclusions

On the basis of this small-scale study, it is argued that if teachers are to be creative practitioners they need much more than a working knowledge of prescribed curriculum requirements. They need a secure pedagogical understanding and strong subject knowledge, supported by a passionate belief in the potential of creative teaching to engage and inspire hearts and minds. Such teaching depends upon the human interaction between teacher and student and cannot therefore be easily replicated in a distance-learning package. While the playful, the multi-modal, the metaphorical and the reflective would appear to be important markers of the creative ITE teacher, the fundamental importance of the values dimension needs to be recognised. The affective and emotional element in creativity is just as vital for adults as it is for children. Fair-mindedness, openness to evidence, a desire for clarity, respect for others and their opinions are among the attitudinal qualities embedded in

creative teaching. So too are a commitment to inclusion, a belief in human rights and equality. Such attitudes and values have a critical role in creative teaching and are perhaps best taught by example.

Greater creative assurance will enable teachers to offer their students stronger scaffolds and spaces for emotional and intellectual growth. This work suggests that the creative teacher makes use of their own creativity, not just to interest and engage the learners, but also to promote new thinking and learning. Such a teacher however, is not necessarily a flamboyant performer, but a professional who uses a range of approaches to create the conditions in which the creativity of others can flourish. In interaction with their students and each other, the three tutors in this study were empowered to reflect in depth on different aspects of creative teaching. This work has proved highly rewarding and has helped to affirm the value of personal anecdote, humour and cognitive conflict in teaching creatively. As well as influencing their own practice, the process has reminded those involved – both students and tutors - that teaching is a complex art form, a veritable ‘cocktail party’. The host harnesses the ingredients, (the session content) and mixes them playfully and skilfully, (the teaching style), in order to run a creative party that is enjoyable and worthwhile, (the learning experience). Whilst no formula was, or could be established for creative teaching, some of the ingredients for personally mixing a creative cocktail have been identified, albeit tentatively, from cross-curricular contexts. It is clear however, that the elements identified are not in themselves necessarily creative, but that the action of creatively shaking and stirring the ingredients is critical if the cocktail party is to be a success. The challenge now is to explore the extent to which these dynamics can be usefully applied to teaching in other subject areas and socio-cultural contexts, to document

‘creative moments’ in the process of teaching, and to examine how ITE courses can enable students to plan and host their own affective and creative cocktail parties.

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