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Creative Practice and Practice which Fosters Creativity

Anna Craft and Bob Jeffrey

Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss some distinctions between creative practice and practice which fosters creativity. In doing so we draw on case study data from empirical work carried out in English nursery and first schools since the mid 1990s. Throughout the chapter we use the term 'practice' to encompass all early years activity. We suggest that these terms may be relevant across all early years settings, although in this chapter the research we draw on, was done with teachers in school and nursery settings.

What do *you* think of, when you imagine creativity in early years practice? The following event took place near the start of the school year, in a class of five to six year olds, where one of the authors was working as a researcher, alongside the teacher.

Possibilities and thinking thumbs

A small group of five-year-olds are working with a disparate selection of materials that their teacher has introduced to them. The materials include bread, glue, tissue paper, scissors water and card. During the discussion before they start on their own individual projects, their teacher encourages them to explore the properties of each resource, showing that they are thinking by waggling their 'thinking thumbs'. She talks both gently but purposively with the children, trying to maintain a relationship with each as an individual. As the children come up with ideas of how the materials could be used, she uses language carefully to hint that each person will make up their own mind about how to use these materials. '**You** might be going to do that' she mentions several times in response to ideas.

Is this acting creatively to embrace effective learning or is it a practice which fosters creativity? Or is it both? And what do we mean by these terms?

If we look at education policy documents, we find a distinction made in 1999 by the report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999). It defined creative teaching as ‘teaching creatively’ (using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting and effective) and ‘teaching for creativity’ (forms of teaching that are intended to develop children’s own creative thinking or behaviour). In this chapter, we use the terms ‘creative practice’ and ‘practice which fosters creativity’ to encompass the same ground as that intended by the NACCCE report, but in a way which is relevant for all early years practitioners, not simply those who are teachers or teaching assistants in schools. The chapter explores ways in which children can be offered access to decision making, control over some of their activities and acknowledgement for their ideas.

Creative Practice

What does creative practice mean for practitioners? Studies of practice have established that practitioners feel creative when they control and take ownership of their practice, are innovative and ensure that learning is relevant to learners.

Woods and Jeffrey (1996) suggest that creative practitioners are flexible about how they apply their philosophies and methodologies to the varied and highly complex situations they meet in the classroom. They find inventive ways into children's learning.

In the example given at the start of this chapter, the teacher invited the children to take control and ownership of what they hoped to do with the materials she had provided them with. She emphasised the need for them to make their own meaning and to develop their own

personal plans, by acknowledging that each of them may do it differently. In this way she aimed to make the learning experience relevant to each child. She was, we suggest, inviting them to be innovative in their constructions, by emphasising the individuality of each person's suggestion. She was, of course, the teacher, however there will be equivalent situations for other early years practitioners, in which children can be encouraged, through task and language, to take on control and ownership.

Creative practitioners, suggests Jeffrey (1997), are skilled at drawing on a repertoire of approaches to enable children's learning: they "devise, organize, vary, mix whatever teaching methods and strategies they feel will most effectively advance their aims" (Jeffrey, 1997 p74). The creative practitioner can envisage possibilities and differences, and see these through. The teacher at the start of this chapter had decided to initiate a series of creative thinking activities. She embedded these activities into the curriculum plans made with the parallel class teacher.

But in order to be creative in her practice, she needed the opportunity to do so. Teaching assistants and others in support roles in the classroom, as well as practitioners in other early years settings, are not always in the position to initiate activities and experiences in the same way. However, where a practitioner is carrying out the ideas of someone else, there is always room for interpretation, and for using professional discretion where appropriate. The following case study, from fieldnotes written about an observation in a nursery and reception classroom, in a Hertfordshire primary school, illustrates this point.

Beverley, a classroom assistant is leading a cake-making activity with six children, aged three and four. The activity has been suggested by the teacher and Beverley has taken the group to

work in an area just outside the classroom, near to the portable oven. Instead of passing around one big bowl with the children taking it in turns to mix its contents, she has decided to give each child their own bowl. Each child experiences the whole process from measuring out the ingredients to mixing them up and putting their mixture into a paper case.

In this example it seemed to us that Beverley took ownership of the planned work and adapted it to suit the situation. She was creative by taking control and transforming the context into an effective learning experience. She encouraged children's creativity by offering them each the opportunity to engage more actively with, and to explore for themselves more fully, each part of the learning activity. What she is doing is more than 'starting with where the child is', which is sometimes described as another feature of 'good teaching'. She was offering children an opportunity to engage individually and in parallel with others, with the process of cake mixing, from start to finish, thus giving each child more space to ask their own questions and make their own discoveries. The example also shows how, even where the framework of a practitioner's work is defined by someone else, it is possible to act creatively within this.

Practice which fosters creativity

The NACCCE Report emphasises, as have other Government Reports such as the Roberts Review (DCMS, 2006), House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2007) and Government response to this (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2008) that creativity is relevant across the curriculum and not purely in the creative and performing arts. This principle is echoed by researchers (Craft, 2000, Beetlestone, 1998) and embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (DfES, 2008) which links creativity with critical thinking and sees the two as core to early years

provision, encouraging children to make connections, supporting transformation of understanding and engaging children in sustained, shared thinking with adults and with other children. Studying these processes among young children in early years settings, Craft, Cremin, Burnard & Chappell (2008) demonstrate how children can be encouraged to be inventive, to generate possibilities, to ask ‘what if?’ and to suggest approaches to problems and opportunities in any aspect of their learning. We are all ‘naturally’ creative in this way, to some degree.

But what exactly does ‘practice which fosters creativity’ involve? Our recent research in English nursery and key stage one classrooms has highlighted an important approach in practices which foster creativity. We have called this approach ‘learner inclusive’ (i.e. involving the children and trying to ‘hear’ their perspectives on their learning, to the extent they have some control over it) (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003). This can be seen as a ‘child-in-context’ practice, in other words an approach to supporting learning in which practitioners observe, reflect and support individual children’s learning, as well as giving children many choices and a great deal of control over what they explore and how. Some might argue that it is simply ‘good teaching’ to adopt a learner inclusive approach. But over time, the dominant views of what has been seen to be ‘good teaching’ has shifted. The child-centred movement came under much criticism in the 1980s and 1990s for many reasons, one central one being that letting children have too much control led to adults having a lack of overview and direction in terms of children’s learning. In schools in particular, a child-centred approach has been continuously threatened at policy level since that time. We would suggest that, given the current curriculum frameworks for young children, and our obligations to provide learning opportunities within these, it is possible and, in the case of creativity in particular, necessary, to re-introduce and reconstruct child-centred education (Sugrue 1997).

The learner inclusive environment

Writing in the late 1990s, Duffy (1998) discusses the creation of conditions which inspire children, and ways of intervening with sensitivity, to enable children's thinking to be valued. Based on recent empirical work, we suggest (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003) that practices which foster learner creativity involve the construction of a learning environment appropriate to the children in it. In this approach, the learner is, as the term suggests, often included in the process of what knowledge is investigated, discovered and valued. As discussed earlier, it could be argued that this is what lies at the heart of 'good teaching'. This contrasts with a more outcomes-based definition of good teaching, where the quality of teaching is judged by the outcomes, often achievement-based. The two approaches are not incompatible; it is possible for children to achieve highly within a learning environment where they have a strong input into the process and content of their learning (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). We prefer not to draw a distinction, therefore, between the construction of an inclusive learning environment, and the notion of 'good teaching'. We suggest that in a learner inclusive learning environment, the children's creativity is nurtured and developed through the use of 'possibility thinking' and co-participation in particular.

Possibility thinking can be seen as being a major feature of a learner inclusive environment (Craft, 2001, 2002) and involves posing questions such as 'what if?' Possibility thinking includes problem solving as in a puzzle, finding alternative routes round a barrier, the posing of questions and the identification of problems and issues. It thus involves imagination and speculation, as children and adults move from what exists, to what might be. Co-participation (Reggio 1996) is one way in which learners can be included in the sharing of and creation of knowledge (Woods and Jeffrey 1996; Jeffrey and Woods 2003) countering negative feelings

of being individually tested and having to compete with peers (Pollard and Triggs 2001, Jeffrey 2003). In another sense, all creative thinking involves engagement with the thinking of others - or some form of dialogue as Wegerif (2003) has argued. In these ways, creativity can be seen as always involving some sort of collaboration or thinking together - even if the other person is not physically there (as, for example, when a child builds on an idea they have come across in a story – or when they are remembering some ideas from the day before in their play).

Being learner inclusive is important because as the child contributes to the uncovering of knowledge they take ownership of it and if control over the investigation of knowledge is handed back to the learner (Jeffrey and Craft, 2003) they have the opportunity and authority to be innovative.

Inclusive learning case study of fostering creativity

Sarah introduces work on the body from two big books to her Year 2 learners. She invites them to tell the group about stories of personal accidents and then she asks the children to imagine what would happen if their bones did or did not grow in relation to the rest of their body. The children use their imagination to create a fuller understanding of their knowledge of the body (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). Some of their comments were as follows:

I'd be all floppy if my bones didn't grow.

My skin would be hanging down off the end of my fingers.

My nose would be dangling down there.

My earrings will be down touching the floor.

If my bones grew when my body didn't I would be all skinny.

I would have extra lumps all-over me.

My bones would be stretching my body so that's why I would be very thin.

I'd be like a skinny soldier and bones would be sticking out of my skin.

My brain would be getting squashed.

Young children like experimenting and problem solving, 'I look forward to doing experiments like the lights and batteries. It is like testing things. I don't care if it goes wrong. If I was a witch and I had to make a new potion in my cauldron I would experiment' (Craig, Year 2).

Being encouraged to pose questions, identify problems and issues together with the opportunity to debate and discuss their 'thinking' brought the learners into the process of possibility thinking as a co-participant (Emilia, 1996 p206), Sarah wanted to engage her mixed 5-7 year old children in a discussion about learning. She started with an investigation of how babies learn by asking them how they would fill up an alien's empty brain and the children not only used their imagination but they confronted each other's contributions.

I would do it in a laboratory.

I would do it by telling.

You can't. Because it hasn't got anything in its brain to think with.

He wouldn't be able to remember anything.

You could make him go to sleep and then open his head a little to put the right information on his brain.

The process of discussion opened up avenues for learning, which included a philosophical debate:

The following question came out of the blue and was taken on by the others. 'This question is a hard one because how did the first person in the world know all the

things about the world'. 'God taught them' 'But he was a little baby'. 'How did the world get made'? 'How did the first person get made'. 'How did the whole universe get made'. 'How did life grow'? There followed lots of chatter permeated with questions and assertions and answers (Field Note).

These knowledge discussions and investigations opened the possibility of an analysis of the processes of learning:

The answers not only contribute to knowledge but the contributory climate encourages them to share their knowledge. 'I listen and you teach us'. 'You need to use your ears to listen, your nose to smell and your eyes to see'. 'You need to listen most of the time and to be quiet'. 'It is like you have dots in your brain and they are all joined up'. 'You think about it and stuff like that as well'. 'Your brain is telling you how to use your eyes'. 'The college tells you what to tell us and you tell us and we get the answer' (Field Note).

A learner-inclusive approach includes children in what is being investigated, values their experiences, imagination and their evaluation of the learning experience (Jeffrey 2001).

We have found that practitioners who at first intend only to use creative practice to enhance their effectiveness respond creatively to the potential in situations they meet.

Justine, a teacher, commented on how the topic had taken off, having fired the children's imaginations.

I have been caught up in this. It has encompassed the children's imaginations and sustained the interest of all the children from five to seven, from new children to experienced ones. It has been more successful than I had ever dreamt it was going to be. They ran with it. Children were sneaking off behind me to start instead of waiting for me to say, 'Come on, now let's sit, and let me talk you through it'. I would turn

round and there would be children behind me doing it, and doing it correctly. It was a project where children didn't need stimulating. One of the things that I enjoyed about it was sitting with the children and talking about what they were doing, and listening to them enjoying this session. It is very relaxing and I also think they genuinely had a very strong sense of achievement.

Justine provided an environment which led unintentionally to learner creativity, as children came up with their own ideas and put them into practice; for children naturally experiment with imaginative constructions and play with ideas when given the opportunity to do so (Craft, 2002).

The topic became learner inclusive, as the children became more interested and involved in the project. For example, this is an extract from an interview with Abigail, who is six years old and who has been involved in a topic in her classroom on the art and craft of William Morris. This project had originally been a light touch look at designs in materials but developed into a major project with children constructing their own designs from materials in the environment. In discussion with the researcher, Abigail said:

We did our own designs on a piece of paper. They were photocopied at lunchtime to make lots of copies. In the afternoon we stuck them on to a piece of paper how we wanted them. This is the design I chose. I have repeated it. We need to do each section the same colour to make it look like a design. If I did them all different colours it would not look much like a design. It is all the leaves and flowers on a theme. We brought these things in from outside. There is a fir cone, this is a catkin. I often see this sort of design being done on a computer. You can see designs on walls, cushions, bedclothes, wrapping paper, jars, and clothes.

Abigail shows us how included she felt in this theme of work; her teacher had provided her with an experience of practice which fostered creativity, and a learner inclusive environment. But to return to the ideas of creative practice and practice which fosters creativity, how far do these occur together?

Do creative practice and practice which fosters creativity always occur together?

Creative practice does not necessarily lead to learner creativity, although it may provide suitable contexts for both teacher and learner to be creative as teachers use their own creativity and learners use the spaces provided to maintain and develop their own creative learning. It may also actually encourage children's creativity as teachers model the expression of their own ideas.

A practice which fosters creativity depends on practitioners being creative in providing an ethos which enables children's creativity, in other words, an ethos that is relevant to them and in which they can take ownership of the knowledge, skills and understanding to be learnt. A practice, which fosters creativity, goes further in actively involving the child in the determination of what knowledge is to be investigated and acquired and ensuring children a significant amount of control and opportunities to be innovative.

What does this mean for practitioners?

Creative practice may, but does not necessarily, lead to learner creativity. Practice which fosters creativity is more likely to succeed where learners are included; i.e. where the approach is a learner-inclusive one. Including the learner in the learning process is a risk for practitioners because once having offered this option a loss of trust will ensue if they then

withdraw it for fear of loss of control. Practitioners interested in teaching for creativity have to accept risk taking as one of their pedagogic tools and to some considerable extent be willing to go wherever the investigation takes the class or group. One strategy for ensuring that control is shared and kept within the boundaries and constraints of the setting is to involve learners in a risk assessment or evaluation of each step in the investigative process and to involve the whole group in that process. In this way a learner inclusive approach can become part of normal practice and of a creative pedagogy.

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