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**Notes on Contributors.**

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**Transforming creative classroom contradictions through activity theory analysis.**

**Abstract.**

This chapter documents a study involving four art and design departments in England, engaged in re-imaging and re-conceptualising creativity and its assessment within the classroom. Throughout the investigation it was identified that the development of creativity was complex. We had to account for the interconnected elements of the culture and structure of the classroom, a range of interactions and modes of learning. These impacted pedagogic practice and identity construction.

Activity Theory (Engeström, 1999) was employed which acknowledged this multifaceted reality, as it embraced individuality but also ascribed interconnections between people. The findings suggest that using AT enabled teachers to “plug into” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) the socio-cultural-political structures of the classroom, alongside the exploration of ontology.

**Introduction.**

In the last twenty years in England, education policy initiatives have positioned creativity as a core aspect of knowledge creation. These include the commissioning of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education Report(NACCCE, 1999), the identification of creative thinking skills (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2005) and the development and delivery of the Creative Partnerships program from 2002 to 2011. Current discourse continues to highlight the importance of creativity in education and the significance of the arts for developing cultural understanding. In the independent review of Cultural Education in England, Henley (2012) recognised that creativity and the arts were a fundamental aspect of young people’s education and cultural understanding asserting “…no education can be complete, indeed no program of education can even begin, without making the arts and creativity central to a child’s life”. This support for creativity as an important aspect of children and young people’s education was further acknowledged by the governments Department for Culture, Media and Sport response to the Henley Review (DCMS, 2012). In this document, a quote from Sophocles emphasised the democratic right of a cultural education, stating: “Whoever neglects the arts when he is young has lost the past and is dead to the future” (ibid, p. 2).

Participating in cultural activities and offering children and young people the opportunity to develop creativity both in school and the wider community is increasingly important in the current climate in England. The Henley review and the DCMS response maintains the importance of the arts and creativity for offering young people vital cultural experiences, as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. However, this is not necessarily the norm in current English classroom practices. Challenges are continually being posed such as the omission of the arts in school timetables and the continued emphasis on performative measures and assessments, all of which can be seen as indicative of discrimination against cultural and creative forms of knowledge.

**Dilemmas of creativity in the English education context**

Although current policy documents identify creativity and the arts as central elements to learning, this has contrasted significantly with enforced performativity measures in English schools which have impacted the take up of arts subjects (music, art and design, dance and drama) at examination levels for young people aged 14-18. A pertinent example was revealed in November 2010, when the new conservative-liberal coalition government released the Schools White Paper ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (Department for Education, 2010). Within this report the government set out its intentions for the future of the English education system, stating it would reform performance tables and set high expectations. This became the main feature of the government’s drive to support the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).

The EBacc features as a measure in school league tables, which quantify whether a learner has secured good General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes (examinations taken in all secondary schools in England form the ages of 14-16) grade C and above, in English, Mathematics, the Sciences, a Modern Foreign Language and a Humanities subject such as History or Geography. These specific EBacc subjects were identified as facilitating subjects for future entry into higher education and for employment (Russell International Excellence Group, 2011). The exclusion of the arts from these options devalue their position as academic subjects. According to Adams (2013, p.2) the government’s “philistinism approach of excluding arts education from the EBacc” has had, and will continue to have, negative consequences for the subject in English schools. This was evident in the Cultural Learning Alliance report (2017) which stated a 9% drop in schools uptake of arts GCSE examinations in secondary schools from 2016 to 2017, and a 28% drop from 2010 to 2017. This standardisation and regulation of education has had detrimental effects on the arts and the development of creativity in the classroom. These policy measures send a message to schools, learners, and parents that “creative and cultural education is of little importance in the twenty first century curriculum” (Steers 2010, p.14). This has created contested classroom spaces where creativity in arts education has been marginalised in secondary schools.

This is not to say that there is not some excellent examples of localised creative teaching, and some excellent art and design teachers whose work should be celebrated. However, this is not necessarily the norm, and orthodoxies of approaches can vary and be the antithesis of creativity (Downing & Watson, 2004). Unfortunately, the regime of accountability has coerced art and design teachers into adopting a series of examination-safe procedures that have culminated into reproductive practices, acknowledge by Efland (1976 REF) as the “School Art Style” and similarly noted as “school art” by Hughes (1998). Unless such practices and policies are challenged, they are likely to continue to dominate educational thinking.

**The Research**

This chapter reports on one aspect of the results from a study in England, which aimed to address the marginalisation of creative knowledge and understanding within the secondary art and design classroom. The action phase of this research was based in four case study schools. The participants included one teacher from each school and one key stage three class, with on average 28 learners. Key stage three in England (KS3) refers to years of schooling normally known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14 years old. The teachers’ experiences varied from; two heads of department with over 10-year experience, a mid-career and newly qualified teacher. Their art and design backgrounds also varied from theatre design, graphic design to illustration and fine art.

The school contexts were also diverse, in order to try to capture a wider understanding of the differing contexts in which art and design secondary education exists. This included a specialist art status school, two academies, and a faith school. The schools had diverse populations of students and ranged in socio-economic status.

**Understanding and exploring creative processes in the Art and Design classroom**

Informed by relevant theories of fostering and developing creativity in the classroom (Craft 2001; Claxton 2002; Jeffery and Woods 2003; Craft et al., 2007; Burnard 2007), the research sought to explore creative teaching and learning practices within the KS3 art and design classroom. Existing literature on creativity in education from a range of phases of schooling; the early years foundation stage (0 – 5 years old), primary (5-11 years old) and secondary (11-16 years old), highlighted six specific creativity process components; play, exploration, experimentation, risk-taking, critical reflection and analysis (Wallas 1926; Guildford 1967; Sternberg and Lubart 1999; The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education 1999; Amabile 1996; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 2007 and 2009). These were identified as being integral to creative pedagogical development. Over a six-week period, one or a combination of the creativity components, became the objective of the lesson. The teachers and learners explored their subjectivity within the classroom as well as how social, cultural and political elements impacted upon creative teaching and learning. Within the lessons, teachers and learners considered methods that developed creative thinking and behaviours, approaches that made learning more interesting and effective, opportunities for imaginative activity as well as the development of new knowledge. This culminated in an exploration of creativities assessment, with a focus on creative process instead of product. The aim being to explore whether the identification of the six specific components of creativity would help teachers and learners recognise creative teaching and learning, in conjunction with attributing creative process as well as product.

The choices of methods for this research were selected on the basis of trying to understand the complexity of the secondary classroom space and account for creative diversity. This included observation of lessons, post lesson reflections and semi-structured interviews with the teachers. For the observations, field notes were taken and then shared via a critical reflection discussion with the teacher after the lesson. Although observations allowed the exploration of behaviours and pedagogical approaches, the post lesson reflections and semi-structured interviews, probed that which could not be observed. Together we “plugged in” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:4) and critiqued the creative components of play, experimentation, exploration, risk-taking, critical reflection and analysis. The plugging in allowed us to be in a “continuous process of making and unmaking” (Jackson & Mazzei 2013, p. 262) our knowledge and understanding of creativity within KS3, allowing us to disassemble and reassemble the creative classroom narratives.

**But what lens could be applied to explore creativity in the art and design classroom?**

As this research was concerned with developing and plugging into creative teaching and learning, an analytical tool that investigated the culture of the classroom and its relationship to the formation of mind and action was needed (Engeström, 2001). The art and design classroom as a site of learning is multifaceted and has to account for different identities, intelligences, modes of learning, and pedagogical processes. It is a complex, shared space, with a range of practices, dispositions that frame beliefs, values, and discourses. Activity Theory (AT), which allows the exploration of the socio-cultural-political structures and processes surrounding the classroom, was chosen as a lens. AT is particularly useful as it embraces individuality but also credits interconnections between people, making visible the multidimensional environment of the art and design classroom and the micro and macro perspectives.

**Choosing Activity Theory**

Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Bourdieu’s (1984) field theory share a resemblance with AT. They have a similar interest in learning and the progressive development of social practices. The notion of the social self is key, this is described by Bakhurst as:

…the idea that individuals are essentially social beings; that the very nature and possibility of our minds depends in some deep sense on our community, or on our participation in culture (Bakhurst, 2009, p.197).

The investigation into individual learning, which is mediated by cultural artefacts (both physical and of the mind) and membership of a group within a wider community, began through the work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky, established a triangular model of action, which explored the idea of human behaviour and mediation (Engeström and Miettinen, 1999). The model explores the process through which “human behaviour is mediated by artefacts, which prompt action” (Bakhurst, 2009, p.199). These can be either physical or psychological artefacts that facilitate action such as, tangible artist tools like paintbrushes and cameras, or less obviously in forms such as language, via questioning and discussion (Burnard, 2007). These artefacts become the stimulus between the individual and an outcome which could be a painting or an idea formulated from discussion (Fautley and Savage, 2007, p.45).

**Figure 1 – Vygotsky’s Model of Action (1978, p. 40)**

Although Engeström sees the study of artefacts as an important aspect to human functioning (Engeström, 1999) he argues that the focus of mediation should be on its wider relationships to other aspects of an activity. This was important for this research, as the context of the classroom includes wider cultural and political positions. Engeström therefore looked at the process of activity further and developed an activity system that allowed both individual learning processes and social interaction to be viewed simultaneously.

**Figure 2 – Engeström’s structure of human activity system (2001, p. 136)**

Figure 2 represents Engeström’s model of activity which has an additional layer to Vygotsky’s model which places an activity within a social context. In the upper part of figure, Engeström presents a Vygotskian conception that the ‘object’ of an action by (or on) a ‘subject’ is culturally ‘mediated’ by some form of ‘artefact’. This model is extended in the lower part the figure, to encompass both individual and group actions in a collective, interactive activity system in which ‘rules’, a sense of ‘community’ and ‘division of labour’ are evidenced. By opening up the model to explorations of the social and cultural, we could “better understand what is being done and how” (Burnard & Younker, 2008, p. 63). This is similar to Bourdieu’s (1992) notion of practice being situated within a field, where meaning is not independent form the social, historical and cultural milieu but is a:

Configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions.

(ibid, 1992, pg. 72-73)

Moreover, Engeström highlighted that activity systems take shape and are transformed over lengthy periods of time, suggesting a concept of ‘historicity’ (p.7). An art and design teacher therefore needs to consider the learners’ and their own educational histories, and the effects these have on actions in the classroom. In order to understand this further, I shall explore some of the key components of the activity system, their interconnections and relation to art and design classroom practice.

**Deciphering the Activity Theory System: The Subject**

Teachers and learners are pedagogised within educational practices and discourses. Central to these parameters is the acknowledgment of the cultural-historical character of subjectivity. Although the social world of the classroom plays a critical role in the formation of identity, the subject is still an individual (Gonzalez Rey, 2002). Being aware of the factors that have an impact on teacher and learner subjectivity assists the illumination of the culture of the classroom. Factors associated with the self, including socio-cultural norms and values, are influenced by individual and collective histories, and power relations. Therefore, both the subject’s previous experiences, and the socio-cultural field in which this is situated binds the activity system.

**The rules, community and divisions of labour**

In Engeström’s activity theory diagram, the socio-cultural aspect of activity is conceptualised through associations between rules, division of labour and community. Both rules and division labour determine the character of the relationships created within the activity system. These can either positively or negatively affect the creation of a community.

Jackson et al., (1993) defines rules as the dos and don’ts of the classroom, providing the teacher with guidelines for activity. The classroom operates under specific rules, which shapes activity (Burnard, 2007, p. 45). These rules are not just teacher directed but externally determined by the English National Curriculum NC, education and school policy, performative and assessment regimes. Schimmel (1997) argues that school rules can damage good teaching where rules become restrictive, authoritarian, formally distributed and legalistic. Exchanges within the activity system play a crucial role in its development. Factors such as hierarchical roles and power distribution impact activity. Power relations are also inherent in classroom situations but are exemplified further in classrooms today due to status attributed to the rules of the classroom such as the performative and assessment regimes. This can often lead to practices which are teacher dominated, instead of collaborative approaches where both teacher and learner knowledge is conjoined.

Dissecting the rules and divisions of labour within the AT system can facilitate explorations into the community. At the heart of a successful and creative learning community is the concept that human activity is not the action of the individual human mind alone, but groups of minds interacting with one another. Reflection on the rules, divisions of labour and community posits learning and teaching from a perspective of questioning and challenging, where dominant forms of practice and beliefs that control practice are critiqued (Shor 1992). It is through exploring each of the differing facets of the AT system that the exploration of the object of activity can be explored. This can lead to changes in practice, adaptations in pedagogical approaches and reconfiguration towards more creative outcomes.

**The use of Activity Theory for identifying contradictions within the art and design classroom**

An important feature of AT is its suitability for examining and analysing individual and collective art and design pedagogic practices. By looking at each component of the activity system, exploring their interconnections and relations, the teachers and I, examined, reflected, questioned and plugged into notions and practices of creativity in the art and design classroom. Critically, it helped us think with theory and depict core contradictions present within the system. These contradictions were characteristics that disrupted creative teaching and learning.

Contradictions are present in every activity system and help to indicate emergent opportunity for development in practice. However, as activity within the art and design classroom was historically accumulated, contradictions became embedded in teacher and learner practice and remained unchanged. It was important within this research to begin to uncover these contradictions and explore the tensions that were affecting creative teaching and learning. We needed to question, challenge and reflect in and on them. Engeström (2001) classified this as a process of “aggravation” (Pg. 136), where existing norms and conditions are probed in order to develop a new collaborative viewpoints. This interrogation through thinking with theory was also as Jackson and Mazzei (2013, p.263) state “positioned our project as a production of knowledge that might emerge as a creation out chaos”.

Within this research there were many aspects causing disruptions and contradictions, which affected the creative nature of the activity system. The complexity of the multifaceted interactions within the classroom meant that pedagogy and identity were uncertain. The analysis of the teacher’s responses therefore began with us engaging in explorations of their personal narratives and classroom cultures. To explore the teacher’s creative practice, we engaged in critical conversations and reflections together, with the aim of re-connecting artistic histories and classroom experiences. It was hoped that by doing so, the teachers might be able to begin to re-imagine creativity within the classroom. The AT system structured these reflections through considering the relationship between the subject (the teacher and the learner) and object (creative teaching and learning). Through this joint process and analytical exploration of their responses, three core contradictions were illuminated: identity, the rules of the classroom and the object of learning as the product.

**Identity Contradictions**

The first of these contradictions regarded the teachers’ own personalised perspectives of their identity as both teachers and artists. The duality of these positions caused tensions within the classroom, affecting their outlook on secondary art and design education, curriculum development and practice. For two of the teachers, their identity was characterised as both teacher and artist. Although their teacher identity was more present within the classroom, they both recognised the concept of the artist as being central to their pedagogic practices. The discourses and characteristics of being an artist remained strong within the transition into the classroom. One of them noted:

“I feel like my artist practice is my teaching practice”.

On the other hand, the other two teachers both grieved their artist identities. They described forced limitations via cultural and measureable school expectations as mechanistic devises which downplayed their artist identities. Their identities were characterised by philosophies of being a teacher, which restrained their previous experiences of being an artist. In the interviews with them they both noted their frustrations:

“I feel cheated. I spent my time going home shading spheres and colouring in the colour wheel, thinking gosh, that’s what you have got to do”.

“You don’t get a chance to do your own artwork, due to time constraints and workload”.

**Rule contradictions**

Although the teachers perceived their identities as either teachers or artist-teachers school cultural expectations and rules shaped practice within the classroom. All the teachers accepted the norms set out through their schools performativity and accountability cultures, curriculum documents and education policies. They adapted their personal notions of creativity in order to fit into these rules, where a performative pedagogic discourse underpinned pedagogic practice. The teachers acknowledged that failure to perform successfully according to these rules could have profound negative consequences on their professional status and interlinked with this, learner success, one of the teachers discussed this:

“We are under a lot of pressure to get results. We only see the pupils every two weeks in key stage three so this is tough. I think because of that there is the tendency to just stick to things you know that work and get results”.

Schimmel (1997) argues that school and classroom rules damage good teaching through restrictive and authoritarian modes. Often they are not developed with the learners, but distributed in formal and legalistic modes which define learner and teacher behaviours. Because of these factors, the teachers resented the rules and their implication on creative practice within the classroom:

“I always have in the back of my mind that there is teaching art and there is teaching to the exam. I don’t think the things are mutually exclusive. At the back of my mind, although I try to teach creatively and teach creative independence, there is a point where I contradict myself and say to pupils you do this like this and this is how you do it”.

**Object as product contradictions**

Because of the rule focused activity, teaching and learning was prescribed and rigidly set against standards. The development and exploration of creative classroom rhetoric was redundant from classroom practice. Classroom activity ignored the creative process, focusing instead on products and outcomes.

The teachers and learners became fearful of activity which diverged from these practices, especially creative practices that sought to disrupt and encourage risk-taking. They continually questioned practice as noted by one of the teacher’s:

“You get tied into what they (the learners) are meant to have achieved by the end of the week and that’s in the back of your head. And you think should I try this? Should I try that?”

The products of learning therefore became the basis for judgment of both teacher and learner achievements, often in formalised and ritualised forms such as assessment of final outcomes most often via school art approaches such as drawing and painting.

**Transforming the creative contradictions**

It was evident that the teachers’ pedagogical practices, beliefs, theories, epistemologies, practices and agency were all being threatened by these contradictions. The only way that they could be changed was through aggravation, where we probed existing norms and conditions. As the teachers’ contradictions were historically accumulating they would not be easily investigated. Pedagogy had been conditioned into ritualistic behaviours which were structured and sequential. They had negated their creative practice and personal philosophies and because of this, the teachers had no knowledge of the lack of creativity and the dominance of performativity and assessment within their classrooms. The first step in order to aggravate the AT system, was to engage and explore the historicity of the classroom and its impact on identity and the socio-cultural outlook.

**Aggravating identity**

As it is the teachers who plan activity, they needed to contest their implicit knowledge and understanding. This was stimulated by the mediating tool, the six creativity components, which began to change dialogue in the classroom. The focus on the six creative processes (play, experimentation, exploration, risk-taking, critical reflection and analysis) encouraged reflection on pedagogy and outcomes of learning. The creativity components became a means through which meaningful dialogue and analysis occurred, alongside discursive reflection.

In order for the teachers to develop creative teaching approaches they needed to interrogate their sense of self and reaffirm creativity as a central component. This began with the teachers aggravating the self and challenging their conceptions of teaching within the art and design classroom. Through discussing their histories during post lesson reflections and interviews the teachers uncovered their perceptions of teaching, reasons for entering the teaching profession and how experience shaped philosophy. Through talking, critiquing and aggravating these notions the teachers began to re-consider their narratives in light of their teaching practices:

“It is important to re-engage with creativity and creative processes, so that they are considered in equal measure to the outcomes”.

Discussions surrounding the creativity components provided the means through which the teachers could begin to navigate and investigate new creative pedagogies and stimulate creative knowledge:

“It was really good to identify or just be aware of the fact of when creative teaching and learning is taking place. Breaking it down into play, experimentation, exploration, risk-taking, critical reflection and analysis was useful and allowed me to think not only about learning but the ways in which I teach. I think that’s what could be lost within teaching”.

**Aggravating the Rules**

A main factor contributing to teacher pedagogical disruption was the change in power as the subject. Through considering notions of power and its implications to divisions of labour and the community within the AT system, the teachers gave learners a greater role in the learning process. The new division of labour from teacher-led controls, to more collaborative approaches, created a mutual meaning-making classroom. For the teachers, this also included an attitudinal transformation where school cultural agents, including policy and school management, became less of a focus for achievement with creative learning processes becoming the focus. One teacher called this “closing the door on performative factors”.

This is not to say that the teachers did not consider school policy, just that performance and assessment measures were no longer the focus of activity. Through this, shifts occurred in the types of interactions within the classroom.

**Aggravating outcomes through the exploration of the creative process**

Prior to the research, the objects of activity for all of the teachers were outcome based. The teachers needed to renegotiate objectives leading to formal assessments. The idea of “rebalancing pedagogy”, by Burnard and White (2008, p. 676), suggests that teachers need to navigate and be supported through opposing demands between the contradictions of performativity and creativity. However, to challenge contradictions, teachers needed to develop confidence to transform their own practice and that of their learners. Through exploration of what a creative outcome looks like, the teachers redefined their own notions of creative exploration leading to a creative outcome. Some findings across the three art and design teachers included:

* accepting that the process is as important as an outcome,
* to be less prescriptive on the outcome allowing learners to make decisions even if it means failure;
* to re-evaluate the classroom space and set up environments for collaboration and critical reflection between the community of the classroom
* to be a creative teacher by modelling the creativity components through creative teaching approaches.

**The potential space of the creative classroom**

AT was adopted so that attention could be paid to the systems of activity that occurred in the classroom, which either supported and nourished creative practice or restricted it. It became a vital analytical process, highlighting contradictions that needed aggravation. As the contradictions were historically accumulative, they were not easy to probe. Power had a profound effect on the experience of teachers where their identity, in conjunction with the identity of their learners, were put to question. A consequence of a marketised approach to education via performative and accountability regimes was the construction of identity dominated by boundaries (Atkinson, 2003). To explore creative teaching and learning processes, the teachers needed to develop the confidence to question these contradictions, be willing to take risks and reflect on practice. Through the exploration of creative teaching and learning the outcome of an activity was reconceptualised and the classroom became a space of creative potential.

I use the word potential here to signify that, although AT allowed the participant teachers to reconsider, diffract and dissect the classroom, they were not always able to be creative in their practice. Importantly though, through AT, they were poised to consider~~ed~~ key elements of a creative classroom in a sustainable way. Through analysis of each teacher’s response the research found that they were more aware of socially distributed knowledge, socio-cultural structures surrounding the classroom and its impact on the construction of a creative community. They were also more about to think with theory, enabling them to “shake out of the complacency of seeing/hearing/thinking as they always have, or might have, or will have” (Jackson &Mazzei, 2013, p. 269). Finally there is a temporal element as becoming and transforming practice towards more creative approaches requires ongoing and continual analysis.

**Activity theory as a transformational lens**

As discussed in the opening of this chapter, the current status of arts education in England and creative teacher and learner practice are in a state of flux. I hope that throughout this chapter you will have come to understand the complexity of the multifaceted interactions within the art and design classroom and the impact they have on pedagogic practices and identity construction. This however is not only systemic for art and design, but many teachers working within a wide range of jurisdictions and levels of education.

For each individual teacher engaged in this research the process of change via the AT system created moments of unease, practical and emotional dilemmas and disquiet. This caused a sense of chaos at the local level. I classify this as chaos to emphasise the discomfort and turmoil that this sort of plugging in can cause. One teacher explained how working with the creativity components was “difficult at times as I also had to take risks and sometimes it didn’t work”. However, through reflection, challenge and criticality the teachers recognised the contradictions posed within the classroom and the chaotic effect on both their own and the learners’ creative behaviour and thinking. Transformation could not occur until the teachers were made aware of creativity contradictions and ways of working with these dilemmas of practice were uncovered. The teachers had to engage and explore their implicit and explicit understandings as well as their educational values. Chaos is therefore a process of re-negotiation, which resulted, for these teachers and learners in a less restrained classroom space and the development of newly conceived creative teaching and learning approaches. This work provided significant individual and classroom transformational change against the backdrop of ongoing funding cuts and government devaluing of creative arts education subjects in the UK.

I hope that this chapter will not only speak to those working within the arts in schools but beyond into informal educational settings and practices, in whatever jurisdiction creative activity is taking place. What this research shows isthat thinking with and through practice with an analytical tool like AT, acknowledges and allows us to critique knowledge production, that by “plugging in” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.4) to the process of analysis, habitual practices can be aggravated.

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