

Creativity in the Hong Kong classroom: What is the contextual practice?

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Abstract

A review is offered of Hong Kong's current education reform that sites a key role for *creativity*. This key role leads us to ask "Creativity in the Hong Kong Classroom: what is the contextual practice?" To address this question 27 Primary classroom teachers across three subject areas were observed and rated using the Classroom Observation Form [Furman, A. (1998). Teacher and pupil characteristics in the perception of the creativity of classroom climate. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 32(4), 258–277]. The creativity potential of these teachers was then measured against the Creativity Fostering Teacher Index [Soh, K. C. (2000). Indexing creativity fostering teacher behavior: A preliminary validation study. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 34(2), 118–134] and the Creative Personality Scale [Gough, H. G. (1978). A creative personality scale for the adjective check list. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(8), 1398–1405]. Their class students then completed the Chinese Creativity Tests [Wu, J. J., & Chen, F. X. (1998). *A study on the new creativity test*. Taiwan: Education Bureau and Foundation for Scholarly Exchange]. Findings support and extend current understandings of both system and componential theory [Csikzentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper Collins; Amabile, T. M. (1996). *The social psychology of creativity*. New York: Springer-Verlag; Amabile, T. M. (1996). *Creativity in context*. Boulder: Westview Press]. Instrument limitations and a need for interpretative cautions are discussed and their significance for further research indicated.

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1. Introduction: 'creativity' and Hong Kong's education reform

It is perhaps readily forgotten that our understanding of 'creativity' is still evolving—common usage of the term 'creativity' is only a recent feature of the 20th century (Weiner, 2000) while current understandings of 'creativity' are diverse and multi-faceted (e.g. Sternberg, 1988, 1999). In Hong Kong education, the use and understanding of 'creativity' has recently been defined by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (CDC) as "the ability to generate original ideas and solve problems appropriate to the contexts" (CDC, 2001)—a definition that echoes both Guilford's (1950) idea of *originality* as a factor of creativity and Amabile's (1983) idea of *appropriateness*. Together, this definition and pedigree highlight the thrust of substantial systemic and curriculum reforms to Hong Kong's education system (<http://www.e-c.edu.hk/>).

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One example serves to illustrate how ‘creativity’ in Hong Kong’s education reform is defined as a combination of *originality* and *appropriateness*. In 2001, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) introduced Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development followed by teachers’ curriculum guides (CDC, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e) for the five key-learning areas of Chinese and English Language, Arts, Mathematics and Science. These guides provide both extensive and detailed suggestions of how teachers’ can reform class-time to develop both students’ specific creative abilities, attitudes, attributes and to apply the Creative Problem Solving model and creative thinking strategies. Elsewhere, such reforms have been shown to empower teachers both as decision makers (Sternberg, 2000) and to modify their classroom behavior—providing more instructions to pupils, less frequent use of disciplining, raising more questions and providing more convergent and divergent tasks as reported both by Fryer (1996) in English speaking classrooms, Furman (1998) in Slovak speaking classrooms, and Zhang (1993) in Chinese speaking classrooms. By seeking to empower decision making (*originality*) and to modify classroom behavior (*appropriateness*) the CDC’s teachers’ curriculum guides may be seen as grooming teachers to become defining role models for Hong Kong’s current definition of ‘creativity’.

2. Creativity in Hong Kong: what does it replace?

Prior to the current education reforms, studies of Hong Kong school-based creativity reflected the traditional view that ‘education’ is compartmentalized and subject-based—examples of such compartmentalized studies of student creativity include in design (Siu, 2000, 2002), English reading and writing (Kwan, 1995; Lin, 2001), information technology (Wong, 1998), mathematics and science subjects (Cheung, 2002; Yip, 1998). Other studies recognized that, for academically weaker students, ‘education’ may also be skill-oriented—for example, the use of various creativity strategies, such as brainstorming in problem identification (Lung, 1996) or creative and critical thinking in computer problems (Hung, 2002). However, the current education reforms seek to move education away from the polarity of learning that is either subject or skills-based and to breakdown the compartmentalizing of knowledge. This new vision for education is in part articulated in the CDC’s Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development (2001):

‘In a knowledge based society everyone must be equipped with a basic level of learning capacity in order that they can learn throughout their lives and constantly upgrade themselves’ (para 6.8, p. 37)

To equip students with this ‘learning capacity’ requires a more comprehensive view of education reflected in valuing creativity as a generic skill—such as in the activity-based learning approach (Yuen, 1983) and as expressed in the school-based embedded approach (Cheng, 2002; Cheng & Hui, 2002; Cheng & Lee, 2002; Hui & Lau, 2003). Providing teachers with a comprehensive and explicit guidance that encompasses abilities, attitudes, attributes and observable behavioral outcomes, is therefore a reflection of the current reforms in Hong Kong that seek to transform education (and classroom practice) from the traditional teaching of compartmentalized subjects to a pedagogy that empowers all students’ life-long engagement with Learning to Learn.

3. Why is creativity in Hong Kong teacher-based and integral to systemic change?

The CDC guidance – encompassing abilities, attitudes, attributes and observable behavioral outcomes – is both comprehensive and rooted in the creativity literature that emphasizes a key role both for the classroom teacher and also as being integral to systemic change.

Its comprehensive nature owes something to the work of Sternberg’s (2000) identification of an array of ‘creative teacher’ characteristics; the work of Furman (1998) who related creativity to teachers’ specific classroom behavior and Soh (2000) who indexed creativity to nine teacher-based actions. Combining the ideas of Sternberg, Furman and Soh in this way clearly locates creativity not within the printed documentation of a set curriculum, but within the classroom behavioral choices of the individual teacher. For example, to empower all students’ life-long engagement with *Learning to Learn* individual teachers now need to think beyond the traditional boundaries of promoting ‘subject-knowledge’ towards identifying how their choice of pedagogy enhances each individual student’s abilities, attitudes, attributes and observable behavior. In effect, this transition involves moving from being a traditional ‘subject teacher’ to becoming an effective ‘facilitator of learning’—a transition that highlights both each classroom’s contextual variations and that responses to such variations may empower teachers’ creativity.

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