



Challenging institutional conventions and forming a voice through creativity



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ABSTRACT

This article explores and discusses examples of students' everyday creativity that seem to be overlooked by teachers but are acknowledged by 'peers' in a 9th Grade (age 15–16) at a Danish free school. Creativity emerged as part of the everyday student interactions at school in 'in-between' social spaces, outside the formal teaching zones. Creative activities took place in the *interstitial zones* of time and space, where they gave voice to those students whose voice is not always heard in the formal teaching context. Creativity occurred also among students as a way to challenge institutional conditions and this practice gave them recognition by their peers. The argument is being made that students' interactions in these zones draw on other forms of knowledge and ways of performing than those used in structured teaching zones. The creativity expressed in interstitial zones contributes to forming a diversity of expressive modes, and allows diverse students to explore their contributions by experimenting and deliberately positioning themselves to be evaluated by 'socially important others'. Obtaining these experiences as a shared sense making requires spaces in the school context and a recognition of value of the interstitial zones in time, place, and relations.

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1. Introduction

It is past noon at the Jutland Project School. I have just arrived and met the teacher Finn,¹ who told me that I could find the 9th grade making preparations for their project work the following week. I find six students who are talking together around sofas in the common space outside their classroom. Christoffer and Otto have been to the local bakery and are now joining the group. They place themselves behind the sofas, which are occupied by four boys, two girls and myself.

Christoffer: 'Will someone give me a hug? It was me who made sure that we got off today.'

(The other students do not react; they do not seem to hear Christoffer's remarks).

Otto: 'Will someone give us a hug. It was because of us that we got off today.'

One of the students asks: 'What?'

Otto: 'Well, Christoffer and I sat talking and then I said loudly: couldn't we just be free instead of doing this?'

Otto: 'Well, and then' (he bows and shouts loudly) 'would you shut up!' (He is imitating his teacher Frede, a mimicking that all of the students recognise).

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¹ A Danish 'free school' is a private school which operates on a specific religious or pedagogical philosophy. The 'Jutland Project School' has a philosophy of working with thematic projects and including the students in decisions.

(The other 9th grade students laugh at first, as if surprised, and then show their identification and recognition. They comment on Otto's performance.)

Tobias: 'You are right, Frede has a short fuse' (this is said with irony which the others in their slightly scornful way of laughing show that they agree with and find humorous.)

Charlotte comments that it isn't fair that Frede always reacts when the three boys talk during lessons. Charlotte explains that she and another girl, Vibeke, often talk during class but that Frede does not try to bring them to order.

Two of the boys nod and express uh-hmmm in agreement. Then it is quiet for a while.

In this example, the students are exploring the convention of teacher-student positions in the school. It even seems to be the first time they share this experience of injustice. In their performance and as an audience to it, they are questioning the experienced discrimination. Creativity is relying on challenging conventions in a sociocultural context, which in this example gives the student a sense of shared experience and expressing this experience in their 'own language'. The boys shared experiences of being students and of knowing the teachers' various styles, form a shared knowledge. This shared knowledge leads to improvisations, such as parodies and underplayed statements.

In this article, I will argue that creativity, as related to sociocultural spaces, can be explored in relation to how recognition of creativity takes place among students in a Danish school.

It is a recognition of interstitial creativity, as something else than what is expected during a teaching context at school. Outside the classroom zones, the students acknowledged other types of expressions which I identify as creative processes.

The examples in this article are meant as a point of departure to discuss how interstitial creativity can challenge the traditional structure in its ways of working and its authority recognise 'voices' of importance. On the other hand, this discussion can lead to an investigation of what interstitial creativity means for the students: if the creative expression is aimed at changing the school or 'merely' to create and express a space of their own.

I consider creativity as a sociocultural phenomenon based on recognition of what is acknowledged as important in the actual context. Creative processes emerge in social interaction. Hence, creativity can be considered an everyday production and expression that depends on recognition by others. My approach is inspired by Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) definition of creative performances or 'products' that (in their widest sense) have an element of novelty which must be recognised as of value by 'important others' in the sociocultural domain, others to whom the individuals relates in the sociocultural community into which the performance or product is being shown.

Barth's concept of knowledge (Barth, 2002) is used as an analytical framework in discussing the students' dispositions and interactions in interstitial-zones. I analyse these interactions not solely as an occurrence in time and place, but also as a means of positioning in school contexts and socio-cultural student communities.

2. The field study

The empirical examples stem from my field notes formed in a field study in a Danish 9th grade. The presented empirical data is based on a 4 month field work at the Jutland Project School. The focus of the research was on creativity in relation to inter-disciplinary project work (Saltofte, 2010). During this period, the 9th grade students carried out two interdisciplinary projects which I observed. I also observed ordinary teaching activities. I approached and gained access to the Jutland Project School², which used project work as a main activity. This choice was done deliberately because I expected intense socially mediated practices that would further creativity.

At the Jutland Project School, I carried out participant observation mostly in a 9th grade class, and towards the end of the 4-month field research, and chose eight students for interviews about their experiences with project work and creative forms of expression. In this fieldwork I largely followed the students, becoming gradually aware that many of them performed creatively outside or on the margins of the formal teaching setting.³ While creative expressions occurred also during the formal teaching sessions by concentrating on the margins, I discovered that there were other types of knowledge used, communicated and performed. Interestingly this happened regularly between those boys, who were considered as 'lazy' by the teachers.

The interest in activities not related to structured school work was created by being present as a participant observer in both teaching, during the pauses and in-betweens. It lead to an exploration, of what especially the boys were engaged in, which turned out also to derive from the teachers' remarks about some of the boys 'doing nothing' while they were supposed to be doing project work or other types of schoolwork.

The empirical approach to how creativity was expressed in the school context, leads to a search for novelty in expression and value added to a social community.

I will argue that creativity is indeed occurring in school contexts, both in the teaching situation and in the interstitial zones, but that the type of creativity depends on structures in teaching and an including social environment.

² The name of the school, teachers, and pupils are pseudonyms.

³ The school and all names of teachers and students in this article are pseudonyms.

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