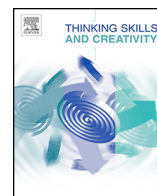




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## Passion: Engine of creative teaching in an English university?



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### ABSTRACT

Literature suggests that whilst creativity is frequently seen as ubiquitous and taken for granted (Dawson, Tan, & McWilliam, 2011; Livingston, 2010) there is evidence that creative approaches in higher education can be seen as unnecessary work (Chao, 2009; Clouder et al., 2008; Gibson, 2010; McWilliam et al., 2008), and creative teaching is not always recognised or valued (Clouder et al., 2008; Dawson et al., 2011; Gibson, 2010). Forming part of a cross-cultural study of creative teaching (although reporting on only one part of it), the research explored student and lecturer perspectives in four universities in England, Malaysia and Thailand, using mixed methods within an interpretive frame. This paper reports on findings from the English University site. Key elements of creative teaching in this site were having a passion for the subject and for using sensitised pedagogical strategies, driven by an awareness of student perspective and relationship. Crucial goals were fostering independent thinking; striving for equality through conversation and collaboration; and orchestrating for knowledge-building. The lecturers' passion for the subject was a powerful engine for creative teaching across all academic disciplines spanning the arts, the humanities, and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects.

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### 1. Introduction

Frequently positioned in relation to economic productivity and competitiveness, nurturing student creativity from school into higher education is increasingly prioritised by policy makers as vital to building successful future work forces (Dawson, Tan & McWilliam, 2011; Gibson, 2010; Livingston, 2010; McWilliam & Dawson, 2008; McWilliam & Haukka, 2008; McWilliam, Hearn, & Haseman, 2008). McWilliam et al. (2008) refer to 'the call to creativity' in higher education and many universities include 'creativity' in their mission statement (Dale, 2008). Knowledge-acquisition in itself is no longer sufficient and instead universities place increasing emphasis on 'creative human capital' (EUA, 2007; Livingston, 2010). Thus, modern-day graduates are expected to be able to forge new relationships, take on new challenges and condense and simplify 'big-picture scenarios' (McWilliam & Dawson, 2008). Yet, many university lecturers hesitate in this regard because they have succeeded in an education system that praised conformity (Gibson, 2010). The counter argument is that educators must move forward from fear of the unknown to teach new generations differently, as creativity is possible in any activity that involves human intellect (Robinson, 2001).

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During the twentieth century a number of traditions emerged (Craft, 2001a; Ryhammar & Brolin, 1999; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999); three of which have been perhaps particularly influential: the cognitive (concerned with modelling the nature of human creativity), humanistic (concerned with human potential) and the psychometric (focussing on the measurement of human creativity). However, from the start of the 21st century a greater emphasis has been placed on understanding the everyday creativity of people (rather than genius), and on the social context and dynamics of the phenomenon. Creativity has thus been increasingly understood by many current researchers as a social phenomenon with emotional dimensions as well as cognitive ones (Craft, 2001a; Sawyer, 2006). For example, intrinsic motivation is considered to be a crucial prerequisite for creativity (Amabile, 1998; Moran, 2010), along with positive mood (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Vosberg, 1998) and perceived importance of the problem being solved (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). Creativity in the classroom is increasingly studied (e.g., Starko, 2010).

Most definitions of creativity include a focus on imaginative, novel or original outcomes that have purpose or value, and there is general agreement that creativity involves framing new questions, generating a wide spectrum of ideas, and reflecting on the problem-solving process itself. Additionally, research sets out a spectrum of activity from paradigm shifting to everyday, key examples being as follows. Boden (2004) refers to novelty at a personal level as being 'psychological' and therefore refers to such creativity as P-creative. Ideas that are new to the society in general are those that have never existed before, and thus these are historical or H-creative. Similar distinctions have been made across disciplines; for example, little c creativity, which Craft (2001b) conceptualises as personal effectiveness and life-wide resourcefulness, middle-c or mastery-level creativity as affects a community (Moran, 2011), and big-C or paradigm-shifting creativity which changes the world (Simonton, 1994). Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) focus on everyday creativity, distinguishing mini-c creativity (personal meaning-making) and little-c creativity (everyday creativity shared with others). They also identify professional creativity or "pro-c" reflecting the construction of professional knowledge and understanding. Within the context of this study, there is a particular focus on little-c creativity and professional creativity.

Creativity in higher education is thus influenced by parent paradigms and stances on the kinds of creativity that it is valuable to foster. In general the neo-liberal call for a creative workforce perhaps demands a focus on both little and middle-c creativity in higher education. Yet models of creativity or of creative teaching in universities are sparse. This paper reports on a study of the lived experience of creative teaching according to both students and teachers, in a range of disciplinary areas, within one English University. Part of a wider, cross-cultural, study of creative teaching its focus touches on but does not foreground student creativity.

### 1.1. *Creative teaching in higher education*

In higher education, despite the argument that the ordered structures found in universities often act as a barrier to creativity (Gibson, 2010; McWilliam et al., 2008), other researchers document the emergence of creative teaching through a number of approaches including work-based learning (e.g., Little & Brennan, 1996), problem-based learning (e.g., Livingston, 2010), the use of technology (e.g., Chao, 2009; Dale, 2008; Livingston, 2010), and the arts as a vehicle for creative teaching (Belluigi, 2009; Karakelle, 2009). It is noteworthy that a distinction can be made between teaching *creatively* and teaching *for* creativity: teaching *creatively* focuses on imaginative approaches in teaching, whereas teaching *for* creativity is concerned with teaching practices that inspire and nurture students' own creative abilities (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004). However, it is possible to understand creative teaching as encompassing both teaching *creatively* and teaching *for* creativity (Fautley & Savage, 2007; Jeffrey & Craft, 2004) and this encompassing definition is adopted within this study. It is argued that creative teaching should be oriented to building a two way communication of co-learning between teacher and student.

As indicated above, there is very little focused research in terms of what actually characterises creative teaching in higher education although its importance has been emphasised. For example, although the European University Association (2007) study explored the role and potential development of creativity in 32 European Universities acknowledging the economic and also wider transformational arguments for nurturing creativity, creative teaching was not scrutinised. Yet, in the same year Sousa (2007), in line with Jeffrey and Craft (2004), found that the traits, characteristics and behaviours that have been used to identify creative teaching are often similar to effective teaching. Sousa's study in Portugal invited students to nominate lecturers who they considered to be creative and these nominated lecturers were then interviewed. It was found that, in contrast to the un-creative teacher, creative teachers could be described as either an "innovative-type" – i.e., interested in igniting a passion for the subject, or a "facilitator-type" – i.e., interested in students' ideas, and listening to student voice (Gibson, 2010). The findings of this research suggests that creativity lies in the interaction between teachers and students, as communicating effectively with students was deemed more important than creative ways to deliver subject matter. Interestingly, the creative teachers nominated by the students appeared to conform to the expected teaching role, rather than being highly unconventional in their practice.

At least three tensions exist amongst studies on creativity and creative teaching in higher education. The first concerns the relationship between creativity and performativity in approaches to work-based learning (McWilliam et al., 2008). Work-based learning as a means to make universities more flexibly and creatively responsible to the needs of the workplace, brings with it concerns about parity between traditional and vocational higher education (e.g., McDonald, 2011). It can be difficult for academics to make course content accessible beyond the classroom, such that this is relevant to an individual student's workplace and ensuring the resulting qualification is recognised both inside academia and within wider society (Boud & Solomon, 2001). In addition, how University lecturers conceive of their roles can involve conflicting values; having both

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