



Deferred creativity: Exploring the impact of an undergraduate learning experience on professional practice

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Creative educators need to develop a deeper understanding of their own creativity.
- Creative undergraduate experiences had a positive impact on professional practice.
- Teaching for creativity involves rigorous, structured intellectual processes.
- Former students' reflections on creativity are used to inform course development.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on creativity in ITE courses and CPD in schools.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of an art-based learning experience on former Education students' professional practice. Feedback from trainee teachers indicated that the true value of the creative process was only realised after they had graduated – what I have come to term 'deferred creativity'. The findings suggest that focusing on the development of their own creative characteristics, skills and attitudes helped students to become more creative practitioners. By drawing on the reflections of our alumni, we can help future students to develop the key creative competencies and skills required for 21st century life.

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1. Introduction

Primary school teachers in England are encouraged to embrace and promote creative pedagogical approaches in their classrooms (Craft, 2006; Turner, 2013); however, it could be argued that the standards driven curriculum, and lack of creative opportunities in Higher Education (HE), restrict or even prevent this from happening (Groce, 2014; Jackson, Oliver, Shaw, & Wisdom, 2006; Kleiman, 2005). Much has been written about the value placed on creativity, culture and innovation in relation to society and the economy (Craft, 2005; Cunningham, 2005, pp. 282–298), as educators help to prepare children, young people and adults for a very uncertain future. However, it is also important to consider ways in which creativity impacts on personal and professional identities; as

Jackson (2010) points out, HE has a responsibility to help students understand their own creativities as they develop an awareness of who they are. If trainee teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) are to encourage pupils to become more creative, they need to develop an understanding of what creativity means to them. As Biggs and Tang (2007) point out, the move away from traditional lecture-centred delivery modes to more interactive, engaging approaches in HE is not new, but more attention needs to be given to the development of students' creativity (Nygaard, Courtney, & Holtham, 2010). As teaching is acknowledged as a creative activity, there is an expectation that creativity is addressed in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes but, as noted by Craft (2006), there is a tendency for it to be neglected in undergraduate education courses. I would argue that having access to course modules that include a practical creative element would help aspiring teachers to prepare for their initial training year and beyond. As evidenced by the findings of earlier stages of this study (Watson,

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2012, 2014a), the majority of students did not regard themselves as creative individuals, or even have the potential to be creative, at the start of the course. It is clear that there is a great deal of work to be done if future teachers (and other educators) are to “address issues of individual and collective creativity” (Wilson, 2015, p. 1) with confidence.

1.1. The wider context

In order to position this study in the wider, national context, it is important to consider some of the different, often conflicting, discourses at play in HE and ITE, with reference to creative pedagogy and practice. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the numerous definitions and interpretations of creativity; this complex, elusive concept has been debated at length by experts in the field (Craft, 2001, 2005; Cropley, 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 2003), in relation to the ever-changing education agenda. As Jackson (2010) points out, it is difficult to understand what we mean by the term creativity without having some appreciation of the contexts in which it is constructed. Coate and Boulos (2012, p. 129) highlight that “Universities are called upon to become centres for creativity and innovation at the heart of the knowledge economy”; they are encouraged to produce graduates with creative and problem-solving skills required in the twenty-first century. However, the rigid education system within which teachers and teacher educators work makes it difficult, if not impossible, to introduce elements of creativity into their practice. “The institutional structures ... put in place within higher education constrain the emergence of creativity, based as they are on a culture of surveillance, performativity and individualisation” (Coate & Boulos, 2012, p. 130).

Steers (2009) notes that the inflexibility of the Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2011) that underpin the ITE curriculum restricts the development of reflective, autonomous practitioners. According to Carter (2015), these ‘standards’, which set a common expectation across the system about the knowledge, understanding and skills new teachers should have, tend to be viewed as finite checklists rather than as a basis for ongoing development. Although they acknowledge the importance of developing subject knowledge and professional skills, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Major (2014) feel that some training courses reinforce the idea that effective teaching, resulting in enhanced pupil outcomes, is limited to academic achievement. In a climate of increasing accountability and focus on league-tables, there are few opportunities for trainees to develop their own knowledge in order to become co-creators of new meaning making when they enter the teaching profession (McWilliam, 2007).

This paper seeks to examine the impact of an art-based learning experience on former Education students' professional practice. The following overview of the *Creativity and Learning* module, presented in published papers (Watson, 2012, 2014a), has been included to provide readers with contextual information.

1.2. Creativity and learning

The three-year BA Education degree course at the University of East Anglia aims to introduce students to educational practices in a range of settings, with reference to contemporary ideas about pedagogy, practice and knowledge creation. The focus on reflective, critical, creative and conceptual ways of thinking means that students attain some of the key skills and attributes favoured by employers, as well as develop their subject knowledge. Although not marketed as a route into ITE, a high proportion of our undergraduates aspire to a career in teaching. The degree, which draws widely on sociology, philosophy, psychology and history, consists of compulsory and optional self-contained modules that

enable students to personalise elements of their studies.

Specifically designed to provide Year 3 students with alternative, creative learning experiences, the optional *Creativity and Learning* module reflects the view that everyone has the potential to be creative (Amabile, 1996; Craft, 2003; Steers, 2009) and supports the idea that creativity can be taught and developed. It is underpinned by a broad, cross-curricular view of creativity (Craft, 2003; Cropley, 2001), which draws on some of the personal creative characteristics identified by Treffinger, Young, Selby, and Shepardson (2002) but reflects studies that focus on collaborative approaches to creative work in education (Jeffrey & Woods, 2003).

The three-tier delivery model consists of traditional lectures, designed to introduce theoretical ideas and concepts of relevance to creativity in education; interactive sessions, led by local practitioners and practical workshops run by artists in the campus-based Visual Arts Centre (VAC) studio. For assessment purposes, students submit a written assignment at the end of the module; the aim is to demonstrate their understanding of the role played by creativity in the current English education system, with reference to a topic of their choice. In addition to exploring and gaining insight into the theory and practice, philosophy and policy of creativity in education, they are required to engage in practical, self-reflective creative learning activities and explore their own creative processes through the planning, creation, and presentation of an art piece. The creative portfolio, which includes the documentation of the process, is assessed on the last day of the module, when the students present their work as a peer group exhibition in the studio. Having different types of assessment supports the view that HE students should have access to creative methods and strategies that enhance, rather than replace, existing practices (Watson, 2014a).

Although “creativity is not the sole prerogative of the arts” (Steers, 2009), the decision to focus on art making was based on the idea that this would provide students with opportunities to experiment with ideas and materials and take creative risks. It was also considered beneficial for them to work in an unfamiliar, less formal, creative learning space, located within a renowned Art Centre, where they could draw inspiration from practising artists and works of art displayed in the galleries. Hirsch (2014, p. 403) talks of the value of incorporating “works of art alongside the lived experiences of preservice teachers” and Greene (2001) advocates the integration of arts into training courses as an antidote to the national obsession with data and measurable outcomes.

1.3. Research study

The current research builds on an on-going action research study of Education undergraduates' experiences of working in the VAC. The preliminary investigation reinforced the view that they benefited from having access to creative learning activities that involved self-examination and risk-taking in a supportive, collaborative space. The findings suggested that “engaging in creative exploration and thoughtful reflection, in the final year of their undergraduate studies, encouraged them to challenge the habitual ways in which they approached their learning” (Watson, 2012). The next stage of the study looked at how students negotiated the demands of an assessment method that took into account both the reflective process and the finished product (Watson, 2014a); the findings indicated that having access to alternative, creative assessment opportunities increased motivation and engagement. The third stage of the investigation addressed how students used the art-based learning experience to interrogate their self-knowledge, construct new meanings and explore personal and professional identities (Watson, 2014b). Informal focus group interviews with students who had just embarked on the university's Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course

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