



# Rethinking feedback: Playwriting pedagogy as teaching and learning for creativity



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Playwriting pedagogy has been impacted by assumptions about creativity that encouraged a passive reactive teacher position.
- Inspired by the role of dramaturg and a systems model of creativity, this article offers a new paradigm for feedback.
- It describes a spiral of learning that results in increased creative and playwriting proficiency and pedagogical efficacy.

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## ABSTRACT

Reporting on a study of school based playwriting pedagogy, this article explores the teaching and learning experience created by teachers for students writing a play for external assessment. It explores teachers' views of their role in teaching a creative task and their views on the form and content of input and feedback. It argues that the teachers' belief in intrinsic creativity encouraged passivity in pedagogy and a focus on reactive feedback and problematisation, which paradoxically hindered student progress and proficiency. This article suggests the need for a paradigm shift, repositioning the teacher from passive facilitator to an interventionist dramaturg.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding, encouraging and developing creativity in the classroom is an international priority (Craft, 2011). The US National Education Association (NEA) has listed creativity as one of four 'super skills' necessary for success in the 21st century (NEA, n.d.). Similarly, an emphasis on creative thinking is found in a number of national curriculum documents, paired with critical thinking as a general capability in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015) and included as a cross curricular key skill in the UK (Craft, 2005). As Jeffery and Craft (2004) explore, the emphasis in these western countries' education policy is, to an extent, economically driven. Recognising that as the "fundamental source of creativity, people are the critical resource of the new age" (Florida, 2012, p. 7), the push for creativity

in education aims to prepare young people for the rapidly changing global economy. However, the potential for creativity to thrive in schools is yet to be actualised (Pang, 2015). As Ingold and Hallam (2007) argue, the current focus on innovation leads to an emphasis on marketable product that can limit access to the full benefits of creative processes.

Creativity in schools is also a cultural imperative (Craft, Cremin, Burnard, Dragovic, & Chappell, 2013). As the skills of narrative, symbolic and analogical thinking are crucial to creativity (Sawyer, 2012), there is evidence of the rich potential for Arts based pedagogies and subject areas<sup>1</sup> to develop student creativity and creativity relevant skills (Anderson, 2012; Bailin, 2011; Davis, 2010; Odena & Welch, 2012). Isaksen and Ekvall (2010) suggest that empathy and collaboration are necessary for effective creative

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<sup>1</sup> Arts based pedagogies refers to the five art forms included in Australia's National Curriculum, namely Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts.

enterprise, supporting the significant evidence that participation in Drama activities develops the skills for creativity (Bailin, 2011; Courtney, 1968; Haseman, 2012).

In the context of the continuing commitment to nurturing creativity in education, the role of the educator in providing the teaching and learning environment conducive to creativity, one that offers opportunities for, encourages and effectively rewards, creative activity (Sternberg, 2010, p. 394) is worth examining. As Lucas argues “creativity is too important to be left to the happenstance of the spectacularly creative ... teacher” (2001, p. 42).

This article explores playwriting pedagogy as an example of teaching for creativity to understand how teaching and learning experiences can develop students’ creative confidence and creative capacity. The article focuses on the teachers’ role in maximising the benefits of creativity in the classroom. Reporting on the findings of a four-year research project in secondary schools, this article explores the pedagogical position teachers adopt to provide input and feedback in the context of teaching for playwriting proficiency in the drama classroom. To illuminate the strategies that teach for creativity (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004) in the Arts, I consider the implications of teacher positioning for teaching for creativity in general.

### 1.1. Creative teaching and teaching for creativity

Appreciating the role of the teacher in a creative task is particularly important for educators embarking on creative writing pedagogy and playwriting pedagogy in particular. Further, it is worth interrogating what impact the drama educator’s conception of creativity has on their views on teaching and learning best practice. The research found that the Romantic view of creativity, that talent is inherent and essential, is an assumption underpinning contemporary writing programs: that “inspiration not education drives creativity” (Swander, Leahy, & Cantrell, 2007, p. 15). This belief in an individualistic intrinsic creativity suggests that creativity is both unknowable and unteachable, thus minimising the teacher’s role in the creative process. The legacy of Romantic myths and the belief in intrinsic creativity has impacted playwriting pedagogy, resulting in debates which question the place of instruction (See Napoleon, 2010; Norden, 2007). As discussed more fully in Gardiner (2016), the belief in intrinsic creativity has had a negative impact on creative writing pedagogy.

This article explores the role of the teacher in *teaching for creativity*. Jeffrey and Craft (2004, p. 81) argue that teaching for creativity asks the teacher to identify students’ creative abilities, foster creative capacities and sensitivities and encourage students to see themselves as creative. However, *teaching creatively*, i.e. using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, is also considered. As Craft (2005, p. 46) suggests, the link between creative teaching and teaching for creativity is such that the dichotomy is perhaps erroneous. Jeffrey and Craft (2004, p. 84) argue that “teaching for creativity is more likely to emerge [when] teachers are teaching creatively”.

This article works on the definition that creativity is a “state of mind ... a capacity to live with uncertainty” (Lucas, 2001, p. 42). For Craft et al. (2013, p. 539), the core of creativity is possibility thinking, “a shift from what is to what might be” achieved through imagination, posing questions and play (Craft, 2000, p. 7). Creativity is a process with recursive stages that involve interactions and collaborations (Sawyer, 2012), that leads to a product that is original and appropriate (Starko, 2005). It is not a quality that is found only in geniuses, as “everyone is capable of being creative, given the right environment” (Craft, 2000, p. 7). This idea that creativity as a universal quality available to all (McIntyre, 2012; Sawyer, 2012; Starko, 2005; Weisberg, 1993) impacts our understanding of teaching for creativity, teaching with creativity and

teaching about creativity.

Further to being universal, systems theorists see creativity as a social rather than individual process. Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p.6) argues that creativity occurs within “a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation”. This is a cyclical model where “each of the three main systems - person, field and domain - affects the others and is affected by them in turn and the three systems represent three ‘moments’ of the same creative process” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 329). The systems approach explores the link between creativity and knowledge as Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p.29) argues that creativity is only possible when an individual has extensive domain knowledge. As Craft (2005, p. 6) suggests, creativity involves two types of thinking – imaginative-generative and critical evaluative, with the latter necessary to assess the work for originality and value. That is, to determine how the work adds to a domain and whether it will be accepted by the field. For students to create in the domain of playwriting they need semiotic understanding of stage language (Aston & Savona, 1991; Elam, 1980), skill in manipulating verbal, visual and acoustic codes (Pfister, 1988) and knowledge of dramatic techniques, styles and conventions (Burton, 2001). As Bailin (2011, p. 211) argues, “new ground is broken through critical judgment, but this judgment is itself based upon a repertoire of acquired and assimilated skills and knowledge”.

A teachers’ ability and willingness to teach for creativity is strongly influenced by their domain knowledge. Odena and Welch (2012) found that there was a correlation between the teacher’s domain knowledge and the effectiveness of pedagogy for creativity. Their study of music teachers found that those with greater content knowledge, especially formal training, were more flexible and more able to recognize creative products offered by the students and then provide advice that would aid its development (Odena & Welch, 2012, p. 40). Those with less training “were more inclined to offer predetermined activities and expect creativity to grow” (Odena & Welch, 2012, p. 40). Chappell’s (2007) study of expert dance teachers found that teaching for creativity involved teachers navigating across a spectra of pedagogical approaches to create the appropriate balance between developing a student’s individual voice and their craft/compositional knowledge. The range of skills needed, paralleling Odena and Welch’s findings, suggested more experienced teachers approached the complex task of teaching for creativity through responsive shifting within three spectra: sources of creativity (from within the child or from teacher provided stimuli), teacher proximity (from reactive to proactive intervention), and task structures (purposeful play or tight apprenticeship) (Chappell, 2007, p. 40). Chappell (2007, p. 49) concluded that, despite the dialogic reactive end of the spectrum being more commonly cited in the creativity literature, close proximity and proactive intervention, within a context of reflective practice, may well be “unnecessarily overlooked”. Challenging the efficacy of “invisible pedagogy”, her research illustrated the positive use of teacher control within a wider spectrum of intervention. Chappell found that working in conventional school situations encouraged more teacher intervention and closer proximity of pedagogy. Similarly, in the context of reflexive practice, Chappell (2007, p. 49) argues that acknowledging that power relationships are always evident in teacher student dynamics “allows [teachers] to become aware of how they play out and [to] use this to develop the most helpful pedagogy”. Webster (2012, p. 95) observed that, while students in music composition were given opportunities for creativity, there were often “no real pedagogies at play”. In response, he argues that effective pedagogy requires “giving [teachers] permission to lead compositional activities and to teach formal properties

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