

Nurturing Creativity: Whose Wisdom Is of Most Worth?

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Researchers and practitioners interested in creativity have explored the concept at length. Wehner, Csikszentmihalyi and Magyari-Beck (1991) examined 100 doctoral dissertations on creativity and found a “parochial isolation” of various studies concerning creativity. There were relevant dissertations from psychology, education, business, history, sociology and other fields. However, different fields tended to use different terms and to focus on different aspects of what seemed to be a basic phenomenon. As instances of creativity are located in multiple domains and homes, one of the learning outcomes in ‘The Malaysian Curriculum Specification for English language’ requires that students be able to express themselves creatively and imaginatively. A discussion about what we might call *real creativity*, and how we might develop pedagogies in fostering this, is long overdue. In this presentation, the researcher will also highlight on how creativity might be conceptualized and how creativity within education in particular might respond to this rapidly shifting world. I hope then to problematize creativity, and to propose ways in which pedagogies may be meaningfully developed or resurrected in the twenty-first century education

Keywords: Creativity; Risk-Taking; Motivation; Imagination; Problem-Solving

Introduction

Creativity has become a major concern in recent years. Scholars in the arts, psychology, business, education, and science are all working to gain a deeper understanding of this abstract concept. In the literature, there has been an unusual amount of interest in the genesis of creativity in individuals and in the characteristics of the creative people. According to Cole et al. (1999), as our society grows increasingly complex and the amount of information generated continues to evolve, society’s problems require more creative solutions. Hence, creativity is an important component of this additional skill set that our students need in relation to education and societal growth.

Indeed, creativity is emerging and being recognized as invaluable to an organization; and, in some cases, may be critical to long-term business survival (Driver, 2001). Therefore, creativity is a skill set that should become important to society, in action, not merely lip service. If creativity is not valued, the chances of it being encouraged or nurtured are bleak, at best. However, the common mode of teaching in Malaysia currently is not one that supports or encourages thinking (Ahmad, 1998). Students are mainly taught through the traditional didactic method. In this method of teaching, information is deemed to have transferred from teacher to students through lectures: the mind is considered passive and absorbs everything (Paul, 1993). According to Mohd Dom (2008), memorization and taking orders are part of the culture in the east. There is absolute obedience on teachers’ words, therefore most teachers will not respond positively to constructive arguments.

Being aware of the alarming trend, The Ministry of Education (MOE) is making efforts on changing the local teaching scene to undo the phenomena that have developed over the years. The change in the school curriculum, called the Integrated Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) for the primary school level

and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) for the secondary school level, aims at holistic learning and claims to be more student-centered. It is also activity-based so that students’ creativity is tapped and critical thinking is developed (Integrated Secondary School Curriculum: p. 3). In 2001, The KBSM revised syllabus was introduced by MOE with the same objectives in mind; that is to produce a workforce that is not only technologically competent but also possessing higher order thinking skills in order to meet challenges in the new millennium. The infusion of CCTS (Critical and Creative Thinking Skills) was introduced in KBSM (Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools) with the aim of producing individuals who are intellectually capable of rational, critical and creative thinking.

The emphasis on creativity in Malaysia is also clearly outlined in the curriculum specification for English language. It is stated in the document that students should be able to express themselves creatively and imaginatively. Thus, teachers are encouraged to use various stimuli in order to develop learners’ imagination and creativity (Curriculum Specification for English Form 4: p. 21). However, there seems to be a gap between policy and implementation. The whole focus of teaching and learning practices is on examinations and grades, with added emphasis on covering a large amount of the syllabus; teaching is mostly done to deliver rather than to derive meaning. The scenario occurs due to several reasons involving the societal, economic and the political issues. Assuming that language educational policy has its roles in promoting creativity in the ESL classroom, it seems appropriate to mention briefly Malaysia’s language educational policy which has undergone some major transformation since Malaysia became independent.

Definitions of Creativity

Many attempts have been made to define creativity. Accord-

ing to Amabile (1996), creativity includes the willingness to take risks, maintain a high level of self-initiation and to be task-oriented in striving for excellence. Gardner (1997) has described it as “the ability to solve problems and fashion products and to raise new questions”. The UK National Advisory Committee’s Report (1999), states that firstly, creativity always involves thinking and behaving imaginatively. Second, overall this imagination activity is purposeful: that is, it is directed to achieve an objective. Third, these processes must generate something original. Fourth, the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective.

Other definitions of creativity that placed importance on outcomes are by Prentice (2000) who claimed that the productive outcomes of creative activity should be originality, value, risk taking and the capability to cope with uncertainty in situations. On the other hand, Fawcett (2000) asserted that creativity is a complicated and broad concept because there is no standard principle by which we can precisely define it. He also stated that some people may think creativity is only for arts and it is the gift or innate ability that cannot be taught.

However, creating means putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; organizing elements into a new pattern or structure generating, planning, or producing (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Lucas (2001) says that it is “a state of mind in which all intelligences are working together.”

There are many definitions of creativity. As researchers from various fields focus on different angles, creativity may be described from different views and perspectives although it may refer to the same thing. Wehner, Csikszentmihalyi and Magyari-Beck (1991) examined 100 doctoral dissertations on creativity and found a “parochial isolation” of various studies concerning creativity. There were relevant dissertations from psychology, education, business, history, sociology and other fields. However, different fields tended to use different terms and to focus on different aspects of what seemed to be a basic phenomenon. Fisher and Williams (2004) claim that part of the reason for this diversity of definitions is that creativity can be seen as a property of people (who we are), processes (what we do) or products (what we make).

In the words of many other researchers, the meaning of creativity can also be examined by looking at the conceptions given in different fields of research.

The Study

The aims of this study include examining the various stakeholders’ (teachers, students, parents, administrators and policy makers) definition of creativity; examining the similarities and differences in the stakeholders’ definitions; and examining the contextual factors which impact the definition and understanding of creativity in the ESL curriculum. The aims suggest that qualitative research is needed to understand the phenomenon under investigation.

Another source of information invaluable to this study is analysis of documents. Such documents may include official curriculum documents, as well as the published data used in the literature review. Since qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding, the product of this research is richly descriptive. Data in the form of the participants’ own words, direct citations from documents, excerpts from videotapes, and so on are likely to be included in order to amplify the findings of the study (Mirriam, 1998). Other sources of data

were from: survey form, lesson plans, students’ worksheets and exercises, textbook, workbooks, school yearly plan, and the school yearly magazine.

Findings and Discussions

In many ways the teachers are the key stakeholder group as they have the ultimate responsibility for interpreting and delivering the policy on creativity. They are the policy enactors. Additionally, most teachers strive to teach creatively and to inspire creativity in their pupils as a part of their normal teaching role.

Data from Teachers

The Survey Form

In general there was no clear consistent shared definition of creativity, rather, for all three questions, the teachers seemed to take a multiple definition of creativity. There was slightly more consistent agreement when the potential definition(s) of creativity were linked to the context of the student or of teachers rather than in a more general, open and abstract way.

The teachers’ choices to question one, which asked them for a general personal definition of creativity were consistent with them all viewing creativity as concerning the “person” and or the “process” rather than being about “product” when considered through the lens of Fisher and William’s (2004) definition of creativity. The wording of questions two and three precluded this type of consideration as the possible choices were all presented as attributes or behaviours and therefore could only be seen as being about “person” or “process”. None of these basic questions provided data that could be considered in terms of big “C” (BCC) or little “c” (LCC) (Craft, 2005) creativity.

The Interviews

In summary, the interviews with the teachers were much more revealing than the survey questionnaires in terms of the teachers’ personal definitions of creativity. The teachers as a group were fairly clear and confident in their answers and each teacher tended to express answers that suggested a fairly consistent view. In general, as a group, the definition of creativity they presented was of a practical and pragmatic LCC-type of process focused creativity. The teachers tended to link creativity with novel ideas and an ability to use this to solve “real-world” problems. This seemed very well aligned with the creativity presented in the CCTS part of the syllabus. Only two of the nine teachers differed in any significant way from this view. All of the teachers saw obstacles to creativity, particularly a lack of time in the face of large numbers of students, lack of resource and often conflicting administrative and other “non-teaching” duties. The very full and rigid syllabus and the pressure to be exam focused and strategic was also identified as an important limiting factor.

Teachers’ Lesson Plans

Given the superficial approach taken by the teachers and the very short-hand, formulaic nature of the content the language used to describe the activities and expected learning, the plans revealed nothing about creativity or the opportunities for creativity in the classes. Nowhere in any of the plans was creativity

mentioned or even indirectly referred to. All of the plans were written from a very teacher-centred approach and listed activities that the students would do rather than the learning the students might achieve or the experience they might gain. In the text relating to the lessons several phrases seemed connected to possible opportunities for creativity on the part of the students. Given the analysis framework was not useful for the lesson plans, the only potential indicator of possible creativity was the intended learning activities that the students might undertake. The text in the plans that referred to teaching and/or learning activities was examined to look at the levels of intended learning as described in the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The key verbs from the six levels of learning posited in the taxonomy were identified in the lesson plans and used to indicate the intended level of thought processes as defined in Bloom's revised taxonomy. While the level of learning and thought process does not translate absolutely into creativity or how the class was taught, it is perhaps in a simple sense an indicator of the potential for creativity in an academic sense and may provide a link between creativity as defined in policy and the curriculum and how this is interpreted and "delivered" by the teachers.

There is no activity planned that falls under these "higher level" thinking skills in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. The absence of the higher level of thought processes in the lesson plans do not suggest that teachers do not encourage creativity in their lessons as the teachers claimed in their interviews that they do a lot of activities that encourage thinking and that they recognize, value and encourage creativity in their classrooms. Rather, it seems that the teachers view completing the lesson plans as daily administrative routine that needs to be accomplished' is a requirement for all teachers and may actually be part of the workload that limits creativity.

Students' Worksheets

The students' learning activities were examined by looking at learning activities and comparing them to the levels of learning as described in the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The key verbs from the six levels of learning posited in the taxonomy were identified in the example worksheets and used to indicate the intended level of thought processes as defined in Bloom's revised taxonomy. As with the lesson plans, while the level of learning and thought process expressed in the worksheets does not translate absolutely into creativity or how the class was taught, it may be a useful indicator of the potential for creativity in an academic sense and may provide a link between creativity as defined in policy and the curriculum and how this is interpreted and "delivered" by the teachers.

The worksheets, like the lesson plans they were related to, reflected no attempt to promote thinking at the highest level (which is creativity) in the questions and tasks given to the students in their lessons. While definitive answers to these questions are not possible the questions are all worth considering and are derived from the teachers' comments in the interviews. While the teachers do mention the linguistic ability of the students as a potential limiter for creativity, not all teachers see things this way. The fact that all the student examples, from all teachers were all completely correct suggests that, at least for these students and these tasks, academic ability was not a limit. Perhaps therefore there could have been some "extra"

tasks that could have been aimed at creativity. Although it should be remembered that the perception of an academic limiting factor in most or all but the exceptional students may still discourage teachers from preparing for this "extra" work if time and resource is an issue. As the students are of different levels of proficiency and come from various backgrounds, it is not easy to tap their creativity with a standardized curriculum which is prescribed for all.

Findings from Other Stakeholders

Overall the groups of students interviewed were remarkably similar in their definition of creativity. They all associated creativity with something new and individual and tended to talk about creativity as a personalized process. That is to say they seemed to define creativity as a process but often associated that process with something they or their friends did. There was no evidence from any of the interviews that anybody in this stakeholder group defined creativity as an individual trait ("person") or as a product. Also the stakeholder group shared an association between creativity and the arts, particularly art, music and dance. They certainly tended towards a BCC-type definition of creativity rather than the more pragmatic LCC-type. Although this was less clear than their definition of creativity as a process.

Parents on the other hand associated creativity with something new and individual and tended to talk about creativity as a personalized process. That is to say they seemed to define creativity mostly as a process but often associated that process with something practical. This was very consistent with the views of their children who were interviewed separately. There were some differences however, the parents also to some extent saw creativity as being associated with "being talented" and also to do with standing out from others in terms of being "better" or more noticeable. There was a definite sense that they saw this as being a good thing or at least to have the potential to lead to good things. In this sense perhaps they were showing their concern that their children would be successful in life in terms of having good jobs and being able to accept everyday challenges in life.

The administrators viewed creativity as the ability to innovate, to create and to develop something new and original. One needs to have a lot of ideas in order to be creative. At times creativity can be seen as something abnormal people do. The policy-makers tend to give definition that is more "formal" and frequently referred to the curriculum document. Similarly, the administrators follow the policy-maker trait where they regularly associate the word "thinking out of the box" to creativity.

Conclusion

While teachers have multiple definitions to represent creativity, other stakeholders seemed to have restricted view and focused on certain area when describing it. Teachers' views may be influenced by the curriculum document prescribed to them as well as their own knowledge of creativity. To make the definitions more complicated, the contextual factors and work burden lead teachers to promote creativity their own way in order to suit the situation. On the other hand, other stakeholders are more focused in their views. Although the discussion is only on one particular word "creativity" it is interesting to see that various stakeholders define it differently. This scenario evidenced

the difficulty to define “creativity”, thus could we identify whose wisdom is of most worth?

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