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The affectively constituted dimensions of creative interthinking



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ABSTRACT

The work presented here is situated within the field of collaborative learning research, which aims to conceptualise and promote effective ways of thinking and talking together in the classroom. Much of the existing literature on shared meaning-making places an emphasis on collective argumentation or joint reasoning through Exploratory or Accountable talk as the main discursive tools implicated in the learning process (e.g. Mercer, 2000; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Resnick, 1999). We argue that there is a need to combine such explanations with explorations of the affective dimensions of collaborative learning, especially in creative contexts. Whilst an expansion of focus to incorporate the affective is well-documented in cognitive science research on individual thinking (e.g. Clark, 2008; Damasio, 1994; Gelernter, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Niedenthal, Barsalau, Winkelman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Niedenthal, 2007; Phelps, 2005, just to name a few), and is also evident in research on artistic collaborations in music and theatre (Clayton, 2007; Sawyer, 2007, among others), there is a paucity of work exploring the salience of affect for the processes of collective 'interthinking' (how we use 'language for thinking together, for collectively making sense of experience and solving problems' (Mercer, 2000)).

The work reported here offers a distinctive and timely contribution to the contemporary literature in the field of collaborative learning. It explores the nature of children's creative interthinking in vivo, as it unfolds during carefully scaffolded ongoing classroom activities. Working with observational data of collaborative creative writing sessions in UK primary schools, the research centres around the qualitative, contextualised analysis of collaborative discourse. The research revealed the sparsity and limited use of overt reasoning in talk and, in turn, the centrality of affect in the observed dialogues, reported elsewhere (Vass, 2004, 2007; Vass, Littleton, Miell & Jones, 2008). This paper looks at various affectively constituted strategies for shared ideation and reflection which were found characteristic of the observed collaborations, instantiated in the dialogues. It explores the ways in which these strategies reflect emotional connectivity (or affect linking) and evidences how such affect-based interthinking permeates the joint creative process. Our analytic work validates conceptualisations of the affect-based nature of creativity and also highlights the urgent need to reformulate our expectations concerning what creative intersubjectivity entails and how it is achieved.

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1. Recovering from the ‘Cartesian Catastrophe’

In *Actual minds possible worlds*, Bruner (1986) reminds us that the classification of cognition and emotion as ‘two forms of knowing’ can be traced back to the ancient theological debates around faith and reason. However, it is only in the period of the Enlightenment that the emergent positivist emphasis on detachment and rationality became the accepted model of scientific inquiry, clearly linked to the values and social practices of the modern secular state (Burman, 1998). As Koestler (1964, p. 148) describes it, the “Cartesian Catastrophe... consisted in splitting up the world into the realms of matter and mind, and the identification of ‘mind’ with conscious thinking”. As a result, conscious thinking (as opposed to unconscious thinking) logic (as opposed to intuition) and rational thinking (separated from the harmful effects of emotion) have become equated with the ultimate functions of the human mind (Donaldson, 1996).

Although the undue devaluing of emotions, and contemporaneous separation of the mind from the body, has been challenged by many philosophers, scientists and artists (see Koestler, 1964 for a comprehensive historical overview), it has become deeply ingrained in mainstream Western philosophy. Crucially, however, this is no longer a purely philosophical issue. Powerful challenges to the Cartesian dichotomies have been put forward by the cognitive sciences in recent decades (e.g. Clark, 2008; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber & Ric, 2005; Niedenthal 2007 among others), with systematic efforts to generate an ‘empirically responsible philosophy’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: p. 14). As Gelernter (1994, p. 15) remarks, “A thought theory that never comes to grips with intuition, hallucination, spirituality or dreaming cannot possibly be a serious account of cognition.”

Two interwoven themes in this fascinating array of research are the ‘embodied’ nature of the mind and the centrality of emotions in perception, learning and understanding. A comprehensive overview of this rapidly expanding research field is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is essential to identify those central, closely interrelated themes which have direct relevance to our work. First, we need to note research in cognitive science on the role and significance of unconscious mentation in general (e.g. Dijksterhuis & Meurs, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and for creative solutions and new discoveries in particular (Dijksterhuis & Meurs, 2006; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006, among others). Second, we need to mention the exploratory work of cognitive scientists on the links and connections between emotion and cognition (e.g. Phelps, 2005) or affect and creativity (see Baas, De Dreu & Nijstad, 2008, for a review).

Contemporaneous with the revolution in cognitive science, some educationally oriented conceptualisations of emotion and cognition (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Donaldson, 1996) have also challenged the overemphasis on logical and *systematic thought* over *intuitive thought*. Significantly, these models describe emotion and reason as two equally important and inseparable aspects of cognition. This reconceptualised relationship between emotion and cognition has served as the philosophical basis for the reported work.

Although cognitive science has provided convincing evidence for the imperative to re-envision thought, there is a strong need to complement the experimental design of cognitive science with a different empirical approach in order to fully capture the ‘place’ of affect in everyday meaning making and knowledge building (Littleton & Howe, 2010). One major critique of the methodological orientation characteristic of cognitive science is that the observed activities are bounded in time and space (*self-contained*), without the possibility to link the observed phenomena to the wide range of social interactions they were embedded in Crook (2000). The methodological contribution of the current research is the quasi-ethnographic approach we have adopted to study ongoing learning activities in their own context. Our methodological approach resonates with recent efforts to study creative processes in performing arts especially (see Section 3 for details). In the following section we move on to a discussion of affect and creativity.

2. Creativity and affect

Although creativity is a fundamental human endeavour, in Western society we tend to regard some people as more creative than others (Sawyer, 2012). Csikszentmihalyi describes exceptionally creative individuals as sharing the experience of *flow*: “the automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness when engaged in activities, often painful, risky or difficult, which stretch a person’s capacity whilst involving an element of novelty or discovery” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, as cited in Loveless, 2002: pp. 8–9). Thus, he sees this quasi-hypnotic state as the fountain of creativity and of peak performance in general. The person’s focus is centred single-mindedly on a task or a problem, with everything else ‘falling into darkness’ (Koestler, 1964) and awareness of surroundings is almost completely lost.

On the other hand, there has been a lot of discussion in the literature about the role of the unconscious in leading to new discoveries. For instance, Gelernter (1994) distinguishes *high focus thinking* (the manipulation and construction of ideas or analytic thought) and *low focus thinking* (stream of consciousness or daydreaming). Gelernter (1994) argues that *low focus thinking* is the foundation of creativity, by which unique analogies are formulated as emotion surfaces and binds thoughts in the dream-like associative process.

We see no contradiction here. Trance-like concentration and day-dreaming may be different in many ways, but in both cases the mind is liberated from the constraints of conscious controls (Koestler, 1964). As Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describes, key characteristics of the autotelic flow experience, somewhat paradoxically, include the merging of the self with the environment, the “merging of action and awareness” (p. 38) and the loss of self-consciousness to a transcendental extent. Thus, both the extreme centering of attention and the self-abandonment of day-dreaming can potentially lead to a loss of control over self-reflecting capacities, and an altered sense of reality. Simply, we cannot be both ‘in the zone’ and thinking about ‘being in the zone’ at the same time. The result is a state of consciousness where the mind simply ‘takes over’.

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