Commentary

Studying collaborative creativity: Implications for education

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1. Introduction

The five papers in this collection of this Special Issue of *Thinking Skills and Creativity* offer varied, in-depth explorations of collaborative creativity, in educational contexts. Across each paper, expressed in differing ways, is a common focus: that of learning and pedagogy involved in planning, composing and revising within collaborative learning educational contexts in England, Finland Mexico and the United States of America. The contexts under exploration range across the investigation of how long-term collaborative communities develop and are sustained (as in the paper by Eteläpelto & Lahti and, to a lesser degree, Wix & John-Steiner), to shorter-term exploration of classroom work (as in the papers by Fernandez-Cardenas, Rojas-Drummond et al. and Vass et al.). The levels of investigation range across school-level learning (for example in the elementary or primary stages of education, as in the work by Fernandez-Cardenas and Vass et al. – both drawing on data from England – and Rojas-Drummond et al. – drawing on data from Mexico) to tertiary level (i.e. in working with a postgraduate programme for teachers in Finland, in the case of Eteläpelto & Lahti, and in working with postgraduate students in the United States of America in the case of Wix & John-Steiner).

It is notable that all five papers focus on the nurturing of creativity within an educational context, reflecting the increasing value attributed to creativity in education in recent years (Craft, in review).

2. Paradigmatic, domain and individual-collective principles

As discussant, reading these carefully constructed papers as a whole, a number of issues seem especially worthy of highlighting. Three in particular concern the nature of the field of enquiry investigating creativity in education at this early stage of the twenty-first century. They concern the shifting research paradigm itself, changes in the extent to which creativity is seen as domain-specific or domain-free, and shift of emphasis in the balance between the role of the individual and the collective in creativity.

First, the papers reflect the increasing volume of work being undertaken in the qualitative paradigm and thus epistemological and ontological foundations which recognise specificity, the role of situatedness and context, and the multiplicity of meanings. The high value placed on interpretive approaches plays in to the whole debate around what constitutes quality research, with qualitative researchers highlighting the credibility and complexity of insight offered by qualitative studies (need a reference for this). The expansion of studies which adopt interpretive methodology, documented at the turn of the century by Jeffrey and Craft (2001) perhaps reflects the geographical and cultural location of current studies, which are now much more diverse than the twentieth-century North America-dominated greater tendency toward quantitative, 'objectifiable' perspectives. There has been a shift in emphasis in the last decade toward characterising, recognising complexity, focusing increasingly on the collective and collaborative, and increasingly recognising the situatedness of activity rather than seeing creativity as 'universalized' (Craft, 2008a). All of the five papers in this collection reflect these principles, whether conceptually oriented (as in the Wix & John-Steiner piece which offers evidence-based reflection on approaches to nurturing creativity at postgraduate level) or more focused on emergence of theory through empirical work (as in all of the other four papers).

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Secondly, these five papers imply a mix of perspectives on the extent to which creativity in one domain is seen as being the same as it is in another. Whilst some argue that creativity can be understood as a 'transferable skill' across domains (Woods & Jeffrey, 1996; Mardell, Otami, & Turner, 2008), others argue that creativity cannot be understood without reference purely to the disciplinary area in which it occurs whether this be within or beyond schools (Miell & Littleton, 2008; Wallace & Gruber, 1989). Still others argue that the creative impulse is identical across domains, in that it ultimately involves asking 'what if?' in appropriate ways (Craft, 2001; Burnard et al., 2006; Chappell, Craft, Burnard, & Cremin, 2008; Cremin, Burnard, & Craft, 2006; Craft, 2008a,b, in press) – and yet its manifestation is diverse according to the domain of application (Craft, Chappell, Cremin, Burnard, & Dragovic, 2008). The tension made visible on this continuum, between the disciplinary-root and the generalisable view, may be an incommensurable one. It raises the question of how, in assessing creativity in education, both process and product are evaluated (Cochrane & Cockett, 2007); these five papers shed useful light on aspects of collaborative processes in this regard (discussed in Section 3). But the five papers also appear to occupy distinctive places on the spectrum of 'creativity in relation to the domain' and 'creativity as generalised'. Some papers emphasise the domain-specificity of the research (i.e. Fernandez-Cardenas, focusing on use of web-pages in History, Rojas-Drummond et al., focusing on oral and written texts, Vass et al. focusing on creative writing as a context). Others (Eteläpelto & Lahti, Wix & John-Steiner) focus more on generalisable characteristics albeit that they emerge from a specific domain context.

Thirdly, these five papers offer a view of creativity which recognises both the individual and the collective. To this degree they perhaps open up new ground, in field which has tended to polarise the study of creativity as exploring either individual *or* collaborative or collective effort (Craft, 2008b). Recent studies of creativity in education have attempted to explore creativity in relationship (eg Chappell, Craft, Burnard, et al. 2008) however these five articles seem to take the field a long way further, in offering holistic means of exploring and interpreting collaborative creativity, acknowledging cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions and in offering ways of understanding 'co-construction' as a new consciousness, understanding better the role of emotions in particular in developing trust at emotional, social and cognitive levels. Situated firmly in a socio-cultural theoretical stance the papers offer powerful insights into the development of co-constructive learning by surfacing a range of characteristics and processes involved in collaborative creativity; whilst two papers (Eteläpelto & Lahti and Vass et al.) acknowledge the overlapping relationships between creative and critical engagement.

3. Insights into characteristics and processes

The authors of these papers make visible a number of characteristics of collaborative creativity. Each author or group of authors approaches collaborative creativity from a stance of acknowledging multiplicity, in the building of inter-subjectivity. The focus on this inter-subjective engagement is explored by each team in differing ways, for example it is approached through the tool of Exploratory Talk (Barnes & Todd, 1995) in the paper by Rojas-Drummond et al., and through the 'window' of the communicative event (Hymes, 1972) as an ethnographic tool which illustrates the in-depth detailed co-construction, in the paper by Fernandez-Cardenaz, and through the concept of the 'collaborative floor' (Coates, 1996) in the paper by Vass et al. Wix & John-Steiner focus on dialogical peer enquiry in their paper, and it is this emphasis on dialogic engagement which each paper shares in common to some degree, seeking to document and discuss the shift between the individual and the social and vice-versa. The papers offer useful contributions to the existing literature on classroom discourse and the relationships between language and thinking. They build on studies which demonstrate the powerful impact of exploratory talk on the quality of learning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), the inter-leaving of creative and critical thinking (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004), and the dynamic between the social and the individual. This last principle is, as Wix & John-Steiner note in their paper, informed by the perspective adopted by both Bakhtin and Vygotsky, and recognised by Alexander (2005), that thinking can be seen as a shift from the social to the individual, thus suggesting primacy of social engagement in generative (creative) activity.

To understand social engagement as a (or, perhaps, the) primary site for creative activity, raises a range of issues, including peer to peer equality, and how this is established and maintained in such a way that social engagement is productive for all participants. This dynamic is explored directly by three of the papers (Eteläpelto & Lahti, Rojas-Drummond et al. and Vass et al.), with Eteläpelto & Lahti and Rojas-Drummond et al. documenting the significance of the 'culture' of the classroom and of the group, the extent to which inclusion or domination are pervasive, with Eteläpelto & Lahti suggesting that the history of the group itself may also be a significant issue. There are stories of power relations in the group and in the classroom to tell—particularly stark in the work of Eteläpelto & Lahti, whose study of long-term collaborative creativity shows how the power and participation balance can be upset by dynamics between participants themselves and how pedagogy may contribute to or ameliorate this.

Classroom culture can of course seen as both situating and also being a product of pupil engagement, and the stance of the teacher has been demonstrated to play a significant role in this interaction (Craft, Cremin, Burnard, & Chappell, 2007). Eteläpelto & Lahti suggest that teacher expertise in sensitive, thoughtful pedagogy, has a significant role to play in nurturing productive collaborative creativity over time. For teachers, finding ways of recognising differences between people whilst also building trust is one of a number of tensions they identify; also discussed by Wix & John-Steiner, and Vass et al.

A significant challenge for educators in particular, forms around how to effectively nurture and manifest multiple voices. The paper by Rojas-Drummond et al. in particular documents how the continual and dynamic shifts between macro and micro, between group and individual, require an open and exploratory classroom culture. Indeed each of these rich papers offers insights into the dynamic functioning of learning communities, which not only encourage 'interthinking' (Mercer &