

Owens, A. and Adams, J. (2016). Collectively Creative, *Youth Hong Kong Journal*, December, Vol8 No 4 pages 35-38.

1. Do you think that all children are equally creative and/or that creativity can be taught?

Allan: The most popular current line of thinking is that we are all naturally creative, that creativity can be systematically be developed, but at the moment most school systems in the world are educating us out of creativity rather than in to it. We suggest that there are pedagogies that are conducive to creative work in the sense that they can provide the ground for an environment in which creativity can flourish. Traditional transmission-reproduction pedagogies tend to close this down in that they do not allow for the time or space to move away from the knowledge that is being conveyed and needs digesting. If we take care to create a resourced environment then creativity begins to flourish through unplanned activity in a way that it will never do in a highly regulated environment focusing on individual attainment rather than collective investigation.

Jeff: There is also an assumption in the question that creativity is singular, rooted in the notion of the individual genius, the 18th century development of the concept, where it begins to encompass creativity as an individual practice and as an intellectual faculty and its subsequent association with the arts and philosophy. We are more interested in the creativity that results form interaction. Collective creativity.

2. How would you define 'creative learning'?ⁱ

Allan: There are a wide variety of definitions of the terms creativity and creative learning, and the differing purposes to which these have been used, remind us of the dangers of loosely using these terms; creativity signifies many things, and has done so with great variety in many cultures and contexts around the world, from the psychological powers of the individual 'genius' to the problem-solving capacities of young children.

Jeff: Like most useful concepts that of creativity is contested. While referring in our book to some of the most commonly used we deliberately do not to try to establish more definitive or enduring meanings of creativity, nor even a model with distinctive features that we could coin as our own. We are more concerned with the practices we engage with which take many different forms and models of creativity; the similarities between them are more to do with the specific social relations that are established in each case, and the cultural and political contexts within which the practices occur

Allan: One important distinction that has frequently been identified (e.g. Vygotsky,1930; Craft, 2001; Jones 2011) is that between high and democratic creativity. This is important for us because the former is associated with elitism and notions of the exceptional and the gifted, notions that we reject and have no place in our conception of democracy or education. Democratic creativity, on the other hand, is clearly the domain that we wish to explore; this is the concept of creativity that includes the imaginative events and productions of all pupils and all ordinary people outside the classroom. If creativity is detached from the concepts of equality and criticality then it is more easily absorbed in to instead technical and instrumental conceptions of the idea, more easily assimilated into a performance-based curriculum.

Jeff: Given this expansion of use, it is necessary to conceptualise creativity as a heterogeneous term, plural and multivalent, with many varieties contingent upon an infinite number of specific and local contexts.

3. Do you think that creativity in students can be measured or assessed by schools? ⁱⁱ

Allan: There has been quite a lot of work done on this and there has been a growth in creative assessment and evaluation methods. Our position is that there are ways in which creative practices can be not fixed in order to assess them; it is more a question of realizing that it is always necessary to evaluate the creative process. For example most artists want to know if their ideas are connecting and working, like all those involved in creative practices in all fields we need a response and to gauge understanding of what we are trying to do. Fixing the criteria whereby something is to be judged creative or not is not in the interest of the practitioner whether it be an artist, a scientist or child or young person.

Jeff: For example, to walk around Royal Academy looking at paintings with fixed criteria would be absurd if absurd, and if this is the case in the world outside schools why should it be acceptable in schools. It is much more legitimate to talk for example of colours working particularly well in a particular situation. In enabling creativity to develop supportive statements about practice are more likely to ensure success than fixed, remote, pre-determined criteria which are not simply unhelpful or pointless but corrosive, doing more damage than anything else I can think of.

4. You wrote, "An impossible tension is said to exist [...] in which teachers ...are encouraged, on the one hand, to innovate, take risks and foster creativity, and on the other, are subject to heavy duty accountability..." Can you see feasible ways of resolving this tension?

Allan: The tension is one we have to live with as teachers at this point in time, but this is not to be despondent as we share the challenges, uncertainties and questions that emerge when we engage in creative practices and learning. We believe that the force of creativity is generated from little accomplishments and momentary events, in the belief that greater social changes are constituted from numerous small ways of doing things. The wider social and political context we operate in can be viewed through the idiosyncrasies of everyday, localised creative practices. One of the premises of our thinking is the contention that creativity has played, and continues to play, a fundamental role in conceptions of progressive and democratic education, and that if creative learning is impoverished, then the concept of education itself may be fundamentally diminished.

Jeff: The point we are making here is that for us, the discussion about the roles that creativity plays in education practices involves keeping sight of the overarching context in which our practices occur – how the huge themes of creativity, education and democracy are playing out, but through the perspectives that the liberating beauty of small things permits: the momentary events and long term relationships, the belief that greater social changes are constituted from numerous minor steps into action.

5. Have you found that teachers are generally receptive or not to the concept of integrating creative ways of learning with the mainstream curriculum? If one teacher in a school were an outstanding example of being a creative teacher, is it likely that more follow suit?

Jeff: Yes teachers are receptive in this way, but the issues are more perplexed than simply spreading creativity through the work of one teacher allows for. Having said this the importance of that teacher working creatively should not be underestimated particularly if they are backed

by supportive head and governing body which does make a difference at institutional level as they can begin to create an environment for creativity.

Allan: The notion of scaling-up creativity has created problems in this regard. The nature of creativity varies according to context and can't simply be transferred or transported from one school to another or one country to another. For example the horrible notion that you can have schools that are 'beacons of excellence' which is dreadful in the sense that someone labeled as being 'excellent' is often to do with being conformist the next step away being to state that only certain practices are acceptable. Once this sets in then learners emulate a model and what results is a hermetically sealed re-iteration of a practice, the very antithesis of creative practice.

6. What response has there been in British schools to recommendations (eg Ofsted's report: Learning: creative approaches that raise standards; 2010) for the introduction of creative learning? Are the schools in the report isolated examples?

Allan: It is hard to answer this question as the survey was from a small sample of the total number of schools, it evaluated and illustrated how 44 schools – two nursery, 22 primary, 19 secondary and a special school – used creative approaches to learning and considered evidence from an additional 180 schools. What we could point to as being hopeful in terms of creative learning is emphasis in the report was placed on practice in the schools that encouraged young people to make connections between ideas, think creatively, challenge and participate effectively, and reflect on their learning. There was no mention of criticality but at least the discussion was framed more critically than for example the OECD – reports from which impact on education policy in systems around the world.

Jeff: When it turns to creativity and arts education, the discussion is usually framed uncritically in relation to innovation and economic growth. For example in *Art for arts sake: the impact of arts education* (Winner, Goldstein & Vincent–Lacrin, 2013) the OECD Centre for Educational Research reports on a systematic overview undertaken of all extant empirical research since 1980 in arts education concerned with 'skills for innovation', which are defined as 'technical', 'thinking and creative', 'behavioural and social', and are presented as being 'beyond and above artistic skills and cultural sensitivity'; these are taken to be the traditional ground of arts education unquestioningly conceptualised in consensual, domesticated terms as means of valuing the 'human experience'. The focus is on 'transfer' from the arts fostering individual skills in other subjects and domains that contribute to innovation and economic growth, the endgame being better performance in a competitive world market. The proposed agenda for future research and policy with regard to the impact of arts education continues to centre around transfer but with increased emphasis on the measurement of its contribution to individual skills for innovation.

7. You have written, "Our state education systems are globally far from putting creative thinking first, written work and written tests dominate." Do you think there are any remarkable exceptions?

Jeff: Perhaps it is worth looking to Scotland and Ireland where the school curriculum and teacher training is very different that that in England. Creative practices appear to be much more visible in Scotland and Ireland and the correlation between this and the absence of a draconian inspection regime such as Ofsted means that schools and university education department are not policed and environments for creativity can be established.

Allan: Even here though it should come as no surprise that creative subjects and creative acts are commonly marginalised in state schools throughout the industrialised world. Teachers associated with creativity accrue less funds, and frequently have less power. The hierarchical managers within schools put creativity low down in their priorities, and they are normally vigilant to ensure that the ethos of the institution remains conformist and obedient. This reflects the wider global interface between local communities and global capitalism, where the latter is in the ascendancy at the cost of democracy.

Jeff: Nevertheless, new emerging themes of creativity can be identified, some of which have distinctive political features. Most significantly, one can detect forms of creative practice that have an antithetical relationship to global capitalism, and neoliberalism in particular. For example, in the Republic of Korea, the intense and competitive curriculum has many casualties manifest in the very high teenage suicide rate (Al Jazeera, 2011); in this case opportunities to be creative in education are seen as a possible panacea for these ills of intense competition, as a protection from the excesses of extreme performativity in education.

8. Could you give us some examples of the effective practice of creative teaching and learning in schools in the countries where you have worked?

Allan: We give a series of case studies in chapters of the book to illustrate this in countries where we have worked including Scotland, Palestine, Japan, Finland and Korea.

Jeff: The most relevant here is perhaps Room 13's creative practices provide us with evidence of many of Dewey's conceptions of democratic education in action. Room 13 originated in Scotland in the 1990s through an artist in residence scheme in Caol Primary School (Fort William), and since then has developed into an international network of young people engaged in creative activities, either as an adjunct to their traditional school studies, or through independent workgroups. Through media exposure and substantial grants from both the private sector and the state, Room 13 has established itself as a collaborative entity synonymous with contemporary creative practices. At its most democratic, Room 13 is a dynamic model of participative education adhering closely to Dewey's principles. Each Room 13 has developed its own character according to the nature of the institution or organisations to which it is attached. This is true even in Scotland, where the original Room 13s in two schools barely a mile apart are quite distinct and have their own procedures and regulations, although as far as their working ethos is concerned they have more in common than they have differences.

A striking feature of Room 13 practices are its independent learning strategies, whereby children are allowed to organise their participation in the group during school time according to their own independent timetabling; this means that children are able to leave their timetabled lessons in order to engage in Room 13 activities. The children understand that they must not fall behind with their normal timetabled curriculum work, and so the responsibility for maintaining their work schedule rests with the child, rather than the teacher. Similarly, the Folk High Schools for young adults in Denmark, which model their learning on democratic principles, provide a precedent for Room 13. What is remarkable about Room 13's practices is the underpinning principle that a child may organize their curriculum around the desires and needs of their creative practice, should they wish to do so. In doing this they establish the primacy of creativity at the heart of education.

9. You also write, "There are more similarities in the challenges of embedding creative learning and teaching approaches in schools and the training of teachers, than differences." What similarities and differences would you say there are in receptiveness to creative learning and teaching approaches in countries such as Korea and Japan compared to Finland?

Allan: The desire of all the teachers we have worked with to be creative in 16 countries including Korea, Japan and Finland is almost synonymous with their desire to be autonomous, to have the possibility of being creative.

Jeff: The response has been much the same in all saying that creativity is a good thing and they can not do enough of it. The restriction comes in every case from the pressures of external inspection, the need to conform in order to support the school organization in the face of a punitive regime.

10. What are the main limits to creative learning in the school context?

Allan: Belief in data as a route to quality in education. Reducing the concept of assessment to metrics to be forced in to be accountable for pre-determined learning outcomes, and forcing teachers to conform and so removing professional judgement force teachers in to ways of teaching and learning that they do not agree with, that are not good for the or the children and young people and students they teach. (Gillian- the last quote you cite below answers this question best)

iNotes

There are differences in definitions when it comes to creative learning/teaching. I am attaching a sample lesson plan from the NSW, Australia curriculum. Is this an example of what you would consider good 'creative teaching/learning'? This sample lesson plan reads as one we could have taught when we started teaching 35 + years ago. All that has changed is the use of digital media within it. The pedagogy is not apparent in such lesson plan nor can it be. This details content and basic pedagogic methods as one would expect, 'small group playmaking' for example. There have been many developments in drama education in Australia but it is not possible to present the richness of pedagogic approach particularly with the interactive nature of group creativity in the cultural context of Australia. Again this is part of the impossible search to scale-up and transfer creative practice which is a misconception when it comes creative learning.

ii In reply, I would like to quote the last paragraph of the extract you sent from Chap 1 but may not have the space to do so: "...the assumption that all that is meaningful and important in education is amenable to measurement, or that the translation of experience and performance into data is unproblematic, or that such a process will have nothing but positive effects upon its subjects, all these are commonly recurring features of the neoliberal mindset that have been successfully established as 'common sense', despite their obvious and blatant shortcomings. The dominance of measuring and auditing in education is a good example of the ideological legitimation and the naturalisation of a formerly subsidiary concept and its rehabilitation as a central and indispensable core of education. Its effects on people in education are striking, and are everywhere to be seen, despite its destructiveness and pointlessness being equally apparent; it is difficult to have a conversation with a serving educator who is not likely at some point to complain about the time, thought and energy that used to be devoted to teaching and care that now have to be diverted to bureaucratic tasks, most of which are orientated towards the metrics of performance, of both student and teacher..."