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Creativity in Teaching

It is heartening to see that creativity is making a comeback in teaching. The Royal Society for the Arts (RSA) draws our attention to this in its recent focus on classroom creativity. Andy Hargreaves' (2016) research into building a sustainable and creative culture for teachers around the globe is very encouraging:

A new narrative of educational change is emerging. This narrative embraces a vision of a large-scale system for learning that is more creative, inclusive and sustainable. It also envisions a different kind of teaching profession that is collaborative rather than individualistic, and that has its own needs for creativity too. (p.37)

It struck me that once again creativity, when considered on any large, systemic scale, is associated with collaboration; explicitly here in Hargreaves work as a rejection of individualism. I have discussed collaboration in relation to education as a rejection of gratuitous competition on a number of occasions in these pages (e.g. 2015), and it seems to me that collaboration between schools and teachers is a primary condition for creativity to flourish. Hargreaves argues that teachers who are given the opportunity to contribute to well-organised collaborative groups are more confident and well informed, provided they are empowered to put their new ideas into effect in the classroom. These factors, combined with significant reductions in oppressive top-down authority and largely arbitrary bureaucracy, produced conditions conducive to creative practice in teaching.

I would like to take this further by turning to the teaching of the arts education. Whilst Hargreaves is principally concerned with teaching across all educational domains, is worth pointing out that educators within the arts have been pursuing similar goals for decades, often with little acknowledgement and against the grain of traditional

pedagogical practices. The arts lend themselves to collaborative practices, and creativity is their *raison d'être*. For instance, the art studio/classroom in a school is often distinguished by the presence of pedagogical practices that are distinct from those that surround them. Art rooms are often the site of children moving freely, teachers and children demonstrating their skills as artists, producing artwork that is openly referenced by others, contributing new ideas that are welcomed and respected, and discussing practice as it's happening. The art teacher often encourages these practices where others might suppress them. Like artistic practices outside of the classroom, which are often characterised by networks with fellow artists, the participants recognise that creativity is much more likely to be achieved through interactions with others, especially their practitioner peers.

As Hargreaves remarks, engaging in collaborative professional learning 'increases teachers' confidence in their own abilities' (p.39). I would go further and say that the most fruitful kind of professional learning is discipline related; in other words practising a discipline alongside fellow practitioners is the most fruitful engagement. Moreover, this is something that art teachers/practitioners often willingly do. The integration of practice with pedagogy means that their forms are synonymous. When pedagogy is determined by a practice in this way teaching can become much more intuitive, dynamic and exploratory. Of course, not all of the content of art as a discipline is amenable to the kind of practice led pedagogy I am advocating here, and not all arts disciplines lend themselves to these open-ended, collaborative strategies. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that creative approaches to pedagogy are intrinsic to the arts, and by definition open up new realms of possibility for the learner.

I noted in the RSA advocacy of creativity in the classroom that the success or otherwise of such strategies are measured by test or examination outcomes, often in other subjects areas deemed to be significant in league tables i.e. maths or language acquisition. Whilst the case can, and often is, made and justified on this basis, I'm not sure that it's commensurate with arts practices, and I worry that the relationship between test results and creative practice can be arbitrary. The success of creativity and classroom needs to be measured in more sophisticated ways, which take account of the specificities of the discipline and its *modus operandi*. Otherwise it's like judging the quality of a loaf of bread by its adherence to a recipe.

I realise this is slightly disingenuous, since it implies the much more difficult question of how one assesses creative practice to produce results that can be used and compared, which in turn exposes the underlying question if it's possible to assess creativity at all in any usable or standardised way. None of these questions are new, and have been wrestled with by educators around the world for many years. My reason for reviving it here, prompted by the RSA debate, is that the trend towards standardisation and conformity which is in the ascendancy in many Western education systems (as evidenced by the dominance of the PISA league tables, for instance) seems to have resulted in a kind of enforced amnesia, where we forget that these big questions about the foundations of education itself: its purpose, its value, and how we judge it, are as pertinent now as they've ever been, and constantly need addressing as our society and culture changes and transforms. Creative approaches to teaching and learning, and the unique role that the creative arts play in this, should be returned centre stage. Just as the question of creativity is never settled, nor is the question of education; living with this ambiguity should be embraced, rather than disguised.

References

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