Widening our understanding of creative pedagogy: a North-South dialogue

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Published online: 13 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Vlad Petre Glăveanu, Zayda Sierra & Lene Tanggaard (2015): Widening our understanding of creative pedagogy: a North-South dialogue, Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2015.1020634

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.1020634
Widening our understanding of creative pedagogy: a North–South dialogue

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(Received 21 July 2014; accepted 18 November 2014)

The present article offers a reflection on creativity and creative pedagogy emerging out of an ongoing dialogue between three authors placed in two very different sociocultural contexts – Denmark and Colombia. Despite obvious geographical, economic, and cultural differences, similar concerns animate our practice when it comes to the question of creativity and creative pedagogy. The article opens with a brief presentation of the two cultural settings considered here and, based on it, continues with a discussion of paradigmatic foundations of creativity within education in general and within school in particular. These reflections inform our approach to creative pedagogy and suggest a reformulation of this concept in the light of sociocultural and decolonial theoretical perspectives. In the end, we question today’s global ethos in formal educational environments of striving towards accountability and standardisation in ways that minimise, if not outright exclude, difference, diversity, and, consequently, creativity itself.

Keywords: creativity paradigms; decolonial and cultural theory; creative pedagogy; Denmark; Colombia

Introduction

‘School kills creativity’ – a conclusion that often echoes in today’s discussions of education in both scientific forums and public debates. A concern that has been on the mind of researchers and educators for a long time, at least since Torrance gave evidence of multiple ‘creativity slumps’ in school (Torrance 1967). At the same time, several educational reforms in countries around the world contributed to what Craft (2008, 1) defined as ‘the beginning of a tsunami of opportunities for creativity in terms of pedagogy, curriculum and learning’. The present article, and this special issue, contributes to this general movement towards imagining schools and forms of pedagogy that foster rather than ‘annihilate’ creativity.

Our starting point in this debate is that the meanings we give to creativity in school, and in education more generally, are deeply related to how we understand children, the processes of teaching and learning, and the role of society and socialisation in these processes. For a long time, developmental theory has been dominated by a reductionist conception of

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the child as a more or less passive recipient of external influences, a being whose knowledge of self and world is initially limited and biased. The child as essentially reactive is gradually replaced by a view of children as both active and creative. But, even in this context, what kind of creativity do we think children are capable of? Some keep a very residual notion of creativity in the case of children (Sawyer et al. 2003, 240), others celebrate children’s creative expression in the form of ‘little c’ or mundane creativity (Craft 2001). And yet, a critical reflection on this topic would need to start from a more basic definitional question: why do we need to associate creativity with societal value and, more than this, who decides what is of value for society? A modern tradition of aligning creativity to the needs of capitalist societies makes us value most of all the (over)production of ‘goods’ and their incessant consumption. Should children be expected to participate in this cycle with their creativity?

The above-mentioned reflections, concerning the meaning and value of creativity in education and schooling, are born out of an ongoing dialogue between researchers located in Denmark and Colombia. Despite great cultural and socio-economic differences between these two contexts or, rather, because of them, the three authors of this article found themselves confronted with a similar question: from which paradigms are we theorising creativity in school, for what purposes, and with what consequences? This question stems from both our long-term engagement with theories of creativity and their paradigmatic underpinnings on one hand and, on the other, from our experiences of working with teachers and students within various educational contexts. In our dialogue, we share a sociocultural understanding of creativity as a distributed process that connects people, objects, and symbolic systems (Glăveanu 2014). This relational ontology makes us, first of all, wary of theories and practices that reify creativity and consider it a more or less ‘objective’ quality some people possess more than others (the psychometric model). Second, the symbolic and normative constraints placed on the definition of creativity bear the mark of relations of power between different groups and are often used to marginalise or discriminate. It is our aim to build a critical cultural approach to creative pedagogy that engages with paradigmatic discourses and notices how they are embodied in a series of everyday practices inside and outside the classroom. Such an exercise not only makes us aware of the cultural and political make-up of our theories but also, above all, can help us construct better, more fair and equitable perspectives.

For this purpose, we begin this article with a discussion of the two cultural contexts that inspire our work; then, we discuss three main paradigmatic views of creativity and their educational consequences, primarily in relation to current models of creative pedagogy. At the end, we consider the role of diversity for creative pedagogy worldwide and question the present-day ‘cultures of standardisation’ in school striving towards sameness and, to a great extent, conformity and uniformity rather than creativity.

**Contrasting cases: creativity and schooling in Denmark and Colombia**

In recent years, the Danish educational system at large has been undergoing extensive reforms under the neo-liberal regime increasingly governing public institutions. New, large schools and colleges are under construction, and fusions between institutions are seen everywhere. At the same time, institutions for teachers’ education have moved away from focusing on teaching particular subject matters to emphasising competences and results (Rasmussen and Rasch-Christensen 2014). Overall, output-oriented education is fashionable in Denmark, in particular in the light of the PISA discourse, measuring
what can be measured to ensure that learning interventions are effective and controlled by outputs (Rasmussen and Rasch-Christensen 2014, 16).

Part of the new rhetoric in education, both in Denmark and in Europe more generally, focuses on the need to develop both functional skills in traditional subjects and meta-competences such as creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The latter are considered important vehicles for translating knowledge into action, for the creation of economic growth and social welfare. Creativity is perceived as central for the development of local and national economies. What remains largely unquestioned is how exactly creativity in school helps the economy and, most of all, what teachers can do to foster it; and yet, considering the long tradition of innovation in the country, many would place creativity at the core of how Danes think about themselves and their history. It is indeed hard to tell the story of the Danish educational system without mentioning creativity. The roots of creativity-enhancing reforms go back to the romantic movements of the 1800s and Rousseau’s innovative ideas about education (Appel and Fink-Jensen 2014). Up to this day, the Danish law regarding public schools (Folkeskoleloven) explicitly mentions the necessity for school teachers to develop students’ imagination (fantasi), desire for learning and doing (virkelyst), and democratic values.

However, in recent years, the usual high confidence in the capacity of the Danish educational model to ensure the development of creative competences among pupils (a combination between fantasi and virkelyst) is being questioned. The high weight placed on international competition and the trust in global measures of performance embodied by PISA are now forcing Denmark’s policy-makers to change the system. For example, in the new reform of public schools (Folkeskolen), students are to receive more teaching within subjects such as language and mathematics which lead to measurable functional skills. Moreover, new teaching materials are preparing students directly for national test items, leading to misguided forms of ‘teaching to the test’ and disregarding any other educational processes or outcomes not included in the assessment. Responses to such changes are mixed to say the least. Teachers rightfully worry about their role in shaping activities in the classroom and, more than this, about the fact that their own evaluation might be guided by criteria towards which they have little input.

Overall, these macro-level changes invite more and more teachers to reflect on the general role of education and the way in which creativity is understood and enacted in the educational system (Lene Tanggaard, the third author of this article, has been repeatedly invited in this context to offer creativity workshops to Danish teachers in different municipalities). What teachers are mostly concerned about is whether the creative expression of children can or should be ‘assessed’ just as any other competence. Moreover, the exact position of the teacher is questioned: either to adopt a coaching role and let the environment create, in a broad sense, the space for creativity or, on the contrary, to adopt a more directive role and model the creative activity of students. This is particular important since, in Danish schools, creativity is considered vital to the culture of schooling. It is something teachers often praise and value to a high extent. Accordingly, and as an alternative to output-driven schooling, researchers have argued that one way forward is to develop a ‘muddy’, ‘impure’ pedagogy that is meant to materialise the potential of students to change and create things, also those not illuminated by present learning goals (for details see Tanggaard 2013; Tanggaard, Rømer, and Brinkmann 2014).

To some extent, the same concern for the effects of outcome-driven schooling and the growing emphasis on testing are also present in Colombia. However, unlike Denmark, which shares the Western cultural legacy of thinking about creativity, the Colombian case forces us to start from a more basic interrogation. How to conceptualise creativity
(and creative pedagogy) within one of the most culturally and biologically diverse countries in the world, one that, at the same time, has been dealing with a long-lasting armed conflict and deep economic inequalities? Considering creativity in this context means understanding, first of all, a formal education system that does not promote critical thinking and problem-solving but the mere transmission of information, not connected with students’ lives and current world changes (Zubiria 2014).

In Colombia, recent results of the PISA tests reveal a grim picture. Students from different social classes not only study separately, but also receive an education of different quality. The country ranked 62 among the 65 who participated in the 2013 study and fell 10 places compared to the last assessment in 2009 (El Espectador 2013). These are the overall results, but the interpretation changes if we distinguish students by social class, type of school, and the city they live in. The Colombian educational system separates people based on class: in general, the rich study with the rich in private schools, and the poor with the poor in public schools, which account for 72.7% of the population. The public sector, particularly in rural and ethnic areas, is the one who faces daily the problem of smoothing the functioning of schools in these different social, cultural, and economic contexts while their students are having, at the same time, the poorest resources in terms of quality of teachers, didactic materials, and infrastructure (Pereyra 2006).

According to García et al. (2013), if we look at skin colour or ethnicity, standardised evaluations also show a serious case of segregation and inequality. The poor results are primarily of students from economically deprived families, who are the majority. The upper-class students, however, do better, although their performance is still mediocre compared to European countries, as Gentili observes (2014). For this author, what makes students from the Latin American elites more competitive is a historically existing model of accumulation and exploitation of the poor, which makes rich families so rich, and not their school virtues.

Colombian educational policies have been oriented in the last decade to the inclusion of all children into the school system. However, these policies have tended to confuse equality, the universal access to schooling (without reviewing critically its Eurocentric objectives and contents), with equity, the recognition of the adverse impact of an oppressive colonialis history on many diverse cultures and the need for an intercultural knowledge dialogue with them. Although the constitutional reform of 1991 recognised the pluricultural character of the nation – a result of decades of resistance by Indigenous and Afro-descendent people – an assimilative official curriculum is still compulsory, which continues ignoring differences and reproducing the status quo (López and y Sourrouille 2012).

Several initiatives in the field of ethno-education and popular education have emerged in Colombia in the last two decades as an effort from Indigenous, Afro-descendent, rural, and other economically disadvantaged groups to better serve their children’s needs towards building a more democratic and pluralistic society (Castillo and Caicedo 2008; Cendales, Mejía y, and Muñoz 2013). These initiatives require another type of qualitative assessment (i.e. students’ participation in identifying and solving problems in their communities; creative leadership towards participative actions to reduce poverty; equity in gender, interracial, and intergenerational relationships; political incidence, among others). However, government educational policies permeate or co-opt these efforts by centralised administrative decision-making based on individualistic standardised measurements designed in places far away from these communities. Thus, government policies and curricula continue to contribute to the violence that has characterised Latin American history since the European conquest. It is, in particular, an epistemological violence that, according to Castro-Gómez (2000), occurs when certain ways of being, thinking and living in the world are
ignored, made invisible or denied, while knowledge and practices from the elites who hold political, economic and social power are legitimised as superior.

**Understanding creative pedagogy: from which paradigm?**

There are many differences between the educational system in Denmark and Colombia. And yet, teachers in both geographical and cultural locations are striving to incorporate creativity into the curriculum and their educational practice. Interestingly, in both cases, school reforms are largely considered to come ‘from the outside’, imposed in a top-down manner by governments who look towards standardised testing and international rankings as golden measures of achievement in education. What is at stake here, however, goes beyond common challenges. It concerns the very central question of how we theorise creativity in education and for what purposes. In other words, our North–South dialogue is largely centred on understanding what paradigmatic views of creativity underpin existing models of school and society, what is the origin of such views, and how they are reinforced in models of education, of schooling, and current discussions of creative pedagogy. In this regard, the following three paradigmatic views have been previously outlined: the He-paradigm, the paradigm of the creative genius; the I-paradigm, the paradigm of the creative individual; and the We-paradigm, the paradigm of creative collaboration (see Glăveanu 2010).

The Western conception of creativity has been dominated since its beginnings by the image of geniuses – highly eminent creators who are capable, almost singlehandedly, to shape their society and culture. Defined by uniqueness and rarity, these people stand out and often struggle against the society and culture of their time. Moreover, the ideological construction of the genius has traditionally favoured male creativity (hence the term ‘He’ paradigm) and disregarded both the contributions of women and children, as well as other marginalised groups such as the poor or the mentally ill. The consequences of this paradigm for education are plain to see. Not only was the schooling of males (especially from the dominant classes) given priority in Western Europe and, later, its colonies, but the role of education was for a long time considered to be that of cultivating the skills and types of knowledge validated as important by church and state. In this view, there is virtually no place for creativity in the school, or at least for ‘real’, genius-level creative achievement. Children are considered ‘inferior’ to adults, and the role of teachers is to socialise them into cultural systems considered beyond questioning. Being creative and taking leadership were roles reserved for the few, not the many. Despite the radical social and educational transformations that came to challenge such conceptions, the He-paradigm resonates today in those conceptions that deny children’s creativity on the ground of them not making visible contributions to the society (Csikszentmihalyi in Sawyer et al. 2003, 220) and, more generally, in teacher-oriented and curriculum-based education.

Of course very few educators around the world would support this model today (although we need to acknowledge differences particularly in rural or underdeveloped areas) and the shift in creativity theory towards the I-paradigm is largely concurring with a general transition towards student-focused approaches and the emergence of creativity as a major topic on the agenda of teachers. In fact, it is interesting to locate this shift in Guilford’s (1950) American Psychological Association address in which he explicitly encouraged psychologists and educators to cultivate the creativity of their students. This paradigmatic change was prompted by both scientific and social developments taking place in the USA. On one hand, the development of psychometric measures of creativity, including Guilford’s own conception of divergent thinking (Guilford 1957), started to
give educators the practical means to evaluate creative expression. On the other hand, the context of the Cold War and the initial slower progress of the USA compared to the Soviet Union were making the capacity to innovate a societal priority. What followed were decades of research into children’s capacity of divergent thinking (with the help of well-known measures such as the Torrance Tests for Creative Thinking; Cramond et al. 1999) and, at the same time, the beginning of placing the assessment of creativity in the driver’s seat when it comes to educational practice. The I-paradigm did make educators much more sensitive to the issue of cultivating the creativity of their students and, to some extent, their own creativity in teaching, but it also encouraged them to consider it an individual quality. In other words, the ‘democratisation’ of creative expression in education was not matched by a ‘socialisation’ of this phenomenon (Glăveanu 2010).

Starting largely from the 1980s, both psychologists and educators became much more sensitive to the systemic and social nature of creativity inside and outside the classroom (Hennessey 2003). The recovery in the West of the writings of Lev Vygotsky (among others), and their impact on educational practices, played a major role in the construction of new forms of teaching and new types of curricula. Vygotsky’s ideas about the zone of proximal development, as well as his work on creativity and imagination (Vygotsky 1978, 2004), emphasise the fact that creativity is only expressed and developed in relationships. At the core of the We-paradigm in education is a view of creativity not as a mental process but as a form of (inter)action in and with the world. Any creative pedagogy elaborated within this paradigm needs therefore to account for the simultaneously social, material, and temporal distribution of creative acts. This means that, instead of individual activities that stimulate thinking skills, what comes to the fore is the creation of opportunities for collaboration and interaction with material, cultural artefacts. In line with Dewey’s (1902) seminal work, this view emphasises teacher–student collaboration and the grounding of education in everyday life practices that allow students to relate new knowledge to prior experiences and make use of it in practice, in ways that deepen their understanding of the world and possibilities of acting within it.

To these reflections on education rooted largely within a European and North American model, we need to add other perspectives that take into account the experience and knowledge of people living within what Santos (2012) termed ‘the global South’. The Colombian case sheds new light on models of creative pedagogy emerging out of the We-paradigm and adds to them a necessary critical perspective that engages with issues of colonialism, domination, racism, and marginalisation (Sierra and Romero 2002; Sierra 2010). Our North–South dialogue has convinced us that a more comprehensive understanding of creativity in school, and in education more generally, can only start from a redefinition of existing paradigms and their implicit models of individual and social development (Sierra and Fallon 2013). The South American context has many important lessons to teach us regarding new forms of pedagogy that account for and strive to transcend colonialism and oppressive relations embedded even within seemingly collaborative classroom interactions. Most of all, it allows us to de-centre (and re-centre) our models from an Anglo-Eurocentric perspective on education for creativity, still very much rooted in the belief that creative action originates from brilliant minds (Gallagher 1991), towards a critical and cultural account of what it means to create in schools and communities, towards more equitable, collaborative, and just societies (Walsh 2013).

What these reflections encourage us to do is not only promote a We-paradigm in education but consider how inclusive this ‘We’ actually is. Are we truly recognising the creative potential of each and every child in the classroom? Are we making efforts to enhance the creative expression of all? What about in contexts (within each country, not exclusively
in Colombia) of exclusion, where, to begin with, not every child, based on ethnic and economic grounds, has equal opportunities for education? This example, and many others, including from places like Denmark, should make us reflect on what we come to recognise as creative and valuable, who we recognise as creative, and, above all, whose creativity we legitimise and encourage.

What solutions are there? Are we simply to denounce power relations while considering them intrinsic to past and present societies and forms of education in ways that end up justifying them? Are there real alternatives to building society and, for our discussion here, pedagogy? We contend there are and, in the limited space of this article, will point only to one such alternative represented by the notion of Buen Vivir. Roughly translated as ‘living well’ or ‘collective well-being’, this concept emerges out of the cosmovision of Indigenous people from Abya Yala (the name of the Americas before European colonisation). Currently, this notion is also placed at the centre of the new Constitution of Ecuador, passed in a popular referendum in September 2008. In the words of Walsh:

In its most general sense, buen vivir denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, [based] on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. (Walsh 2010, 18)

What is the creativity paradigm that incorporates such ideas (or, rather, ideals)? How is nature integrated into creative pedagogies across the world? Or should it be? These are all open questions to the community of researchers and educators invested into the study and application of new pedagogies aimed at fostering classroom creativity. At least since the emergence of collaborative, We-paradigm perspectives on creativity and education, there has been a surge in interest towards creative pedagogies. This is reflected in practical efforts to suggest creative approaches to teaching (e.g. in computer learning, Hamza, Alhalabi, and Marcovitz 2000, in drama education, Toivanen, Halkilahti, and Ruismäki 2013), the detailed description of case studies (e.g. Das, Dewhurst, and Gray 2011), and applications of theory in different cultures (Lin 2010).

Much theorising, both in the West and East, went into the conceptualisation of creative pedagogy and these processes are ongoing. One of the most visible efforts in this regard, by Lin (2011), proposes the interrelation in creative pedagogy of three key components: creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and creative learning. As such, there is increased recognition of the fact that creative pedagogies cannot focus exclusively on either teachers or students but on their relation; this is very much in line with the We-paradigm within creativity and education briefly described earlier. Of course, the understanding of creative pedagogies does vary, and there are authors who emphasise one side of this relationship, particularly the teacher side. For instance, Kuntz et al. (2013) focus on the way in which creative pedagogies enable ‘a teacher’s sense of agency by addressing his/her own pedagogical goals, as well as those dictated by state and local standards’ (43) but remain relatively silent regarding the contribution of students and their cultural context. Equally, Hamza, Alhalabi, and Marcovitz (2000) focus almost exclusively on teaching creatively and offer practical advice for teachers in their article on ‘creative pedagogy for computer learning’.

A critical cultural approach to this notion, building on insights gathered from both the Denmark and Colombia, supports an understanding of creative pedagogy as a ‘dialogical and improvisational process’ (Lin 2011, 153) but questions some of the analytical components considered above to constitute this process. Similar to the critical reflection of Jeffrey and Craft (2004), we wonder if the common distinction between teaching creatively...
and teaching for creativity does not in fact dichotomise what is an integrated practice and should be replaced by a focus on creative teaching and learning (for research on how to enhance particularly the latter, see Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006). Going even further, sociocultural and decolonial pedagogies invite us to start by problematising the very distinction between ‘teachers’ and ‘learners’ in any educational situation. If creative action builds indeed a zone of proximal development for those involved in creative collaborations, this should equally apply to teachers and students. Such a remark is not meant to dismiss the differences between these two roles. On the contrary, if we are to recognise power differences in the classroom, the one between teachers and students is certainly among the first to consider. And yet, the transformational power of rethinking pedagogy from a new paradigm encourages us to transcend authoritarian models of schooling and focus on dialogical interactions, playful engagement with educational content, and a reconsideration of nature and materiality.

A creative pedagogy, in both North and South, in West and East, is meant to strengthen and restore the right of people to participate in those forms of cultural expression that give meaning to their lives. It thus becomes all the more important to emphasise in school curricula the need for a dialogue between school and community, for the co-creation of projects that draw on and reinvent local traditions, foster intercultural dialogue, and transform oppressive situations. In sum, a creative pedagogy should restore imaginary play and curiosity, joy and laughter, as part of peacefully weaving communitarian ties, participative interaction, and awareness.

Epilogue on standardisation and diversity in education

The corollary to our discussion can only be represented by a final reflection on the importance of diversity for creativity and, by extension, for creative pedagogy. Although rarely acknowledged as such (for an exception, see Glăveanu and Gillespie 2014), difference represents the very condition of creative expression. Beyond individualistic definitions of creativity as divergent thinking, other ways of conceptualising this phenomenon emphasise our capacity to consider reality from different positions. This ability to de-centre one’s perspective in the world is a deeply social and cultural act (Mead 1964) and creativity, from this standpoint, not only involves but actually requires the interaction between self and other, as well as active engagement with the symbolic and material forms of culture. A diversity of life experiences was considered by Vygotsky to be the very foundation of creative and imaginative action (Smolucha 1992). Moreover, current discussions of possibility thinking and its role in creative learning and education as a whole (see Burnard, Craft and Cremin 2006; Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006; Craft et al. 2012; Cremin, Chappell, and Craft 2013) rely on a similar principle. The ‘what if?’ question, central for possibility thinking, can only be formulated and answered by adopting new positions towards the problem at hand, by noticing not only how things ‘are’ but also how they ‘can’ or ‘should be’. To value such diversity of views should be commonplace in educational practice. One would think it should also be the norm in dealing with cultures around the world, particularly in countries as ethnically and linguistically diverse as Colombia. In this sense, Article 7 on ‘Cultural heritage as the wellspring of creativity’, from UNESCO’s (2001) Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, notes:

Creation draws on the roots of cultural tradition, but flourishes in contact with other cultures. For this reason, heritage in all its forms must be preserved, enhanced and handed on to future
generations as a record of human experience and aspirations, so as to foster creativity in all its
diversity and to inspire genuine dialogue among cultures. (63)

How does this ethos sit alongside current, global tendencies towards standardisation and
uniformity? How well can we apply a unitary, psychometric definition of creativity in
diverse cultural contexts around the world? What does creativity assessment divorced
from intervention accomplish? How can we develop creative pedagogies that respect diver-
sity and place it at the core of efforts to enhance creative expression in the classroom and,
more than this, in the community at large? How does creative pedagogy contribute towards
changing oppressive local/global relations? There are no easy answers for such questions.
What we, as researchers and educators, can do is to continue raising these issues and, in
collaborations that bridge cultures and continents, to illustrate the value of diversity, includ-
ing for our own thinking.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the Qualitative Studies knowledge group and the Niels Bohr Centre of
Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark, as well as the Faculty of Education at the Uni-
versity of Antioquia, Colombia, for support that facilitated meetings in both Denmark and Colombia.

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