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The Australia Council for the Arts

Creativity in Schools

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Creativity in Schools

Abstract

This session reports on a creativity initiative in Victoria which included strategies that aimed to raise the issue of creativity in education and community circles, test out ideas in schools and produce a clear message as to the importance and rationale for a higher profile for creativity in schools. The initiative also aimed to identify a future research agenda.

A guiding concept of creativity was identified by an expert advisory group to assist educators and parents to better understand what creativity entailed:

When we are creative we see the world in new ways, we ask new questions, we imagine new possibilities and we seek to act in such a way that makes a difference.

A pilot program with four schools engaged teachers in awareness-raising about the concept of creativity and the implications for day to day practice in classrooms. After examining their existing practice and understandings, teachers were provided with the opportunity to work in partnership with a creative practitioner to create new learning opportunities for students around matters of significance to their community. This paper reports on the learning from the pilot, particularly the challenges of working in partnership with practitioners, the effectiveness of the professional learning strategies trialled and the learning and insight demonstrated by students. Links to other international initiatives and the challenges for assessment and reporting will also be addressed.

Introduction

The Victorian Schools Innovation Commission (VSIC) Creativity Initiative was established with the support from a private foundation to explore how a stronger focus on creativity in public schools could better enable children and young people to engage with the demands of 21st century learning. This was in response to local and international research that highlighted the importance of creative education¹ and a need for this kind of learning to be associated with core curriculum. Local research also called for creative endeavours to be more consistently valued as important areas of learning.

¹ National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education. (1999). *All our futures: Creativity, culture and education* (Report). London: Secretary of State for Education and Employment and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.
<http://www.artssmarts.ca/docs/pdfs/allourfutures.pdf>

In order to begin raising awareness about creativity in schools, it was necessary to clarify what we understood by creativity and to craft a clear message as to why creativity should be considered as core curriculum. A multi-sector Advisory Group developed a statement to further this understanding. Secondly, a small pilot program with four schools was implemented, with a focus on teacher and student learning and community partnerships.

Developing a shared understanding of creativity

VSIC established an Advisory Group which drew members from the different sectors of education, business, government and community. Each of these members agreed to advocate the importance of creativity through their own networks and raise awareness of the work of the pilot. Members of the Advisory group also nominated creative practitioners who could assist the project and several of these were shadowed by teachers early in the project.

The following guiding concept of creativity was developed by the Advisory Group:

When we are creative we see the world in new ways, we ask new questions, we imagine new possibilities and we seek to act in such a way that makes a difference.

The Advisory group also determined that concepts of creativity generally entail:

- use of imagination, intuitive and logical thinking
- a fashioning process where ideas are shaped, refined and managed
- pursuing purpose to produce tangible outcomes from goals
- disciplined application of knowledge and skills to make new connections
- originality or production of new ideas, perspectives or products
- expression influenced by values
- the value of what is produced is open to the judgement of others
- collaboration, evaluation, review and feedback

(See References for list of source reports)

Several significant reports published in the UK highlighted the important of creativity in a broad sense e.g.:

Creativity will increasingly be the key to a country's cultural identity, to its economic success and to individuals' well-being and sense of fulfilment.

(Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001)

Education worldwide faces unprecedented challenges: economic, technical, social and personal. Policymakers stress the urgent need to develop 'human resources' – in particular creativity, adaptability, and better powers of communication.

(All Our Futures, NACCCE, 2000).

The VSIC Advisory group crafted four statements in an attempt to encapsulate the major reasons why enabling creativity should be a priority in the education of our young people:

1. Creativity enables individuals to structure rewarding and fulfilling lives.

The world that our children face will be complex, ambiguous and uncertain. They need to be equipped with curiosity and confidence in order to exercise choice and respond positively to opportunities, challenges and responsibilities, to manage risk and cope with change and adversity. A creative life generates excitement and personal delight. Creativity also emerges from the struggle to deal with what is dark about ourselves and the surrounding world.

2. Creativity stimulates learning and enhances literacy.

With creativity, children are more likely to make full use of the information and experiences available to them and extend beyond habitual or expected responses. When children are encouraged to think independently and creatively, they become more interested in discovering things for themselves, more open to new ideas, and keen to work with others to explore ideas. As a result, their motivation, pace of learning, levels of achievement and self-esteem increase. By developing the capacity of teachers to teach creatively, we also increase the opportunity for students to develop their ideas in disciplined and creative learning environments. The capacity to transfer, transform, create and innovate is an important dimension of 21st century literacy practice.

3. Creativity is a driving force of economic growth.

Today's global economy increasingly runs on knowledge, creativity and innovation and the ability of nations to attract, retain and develop creative people. Knowledge, imagination and individual creativity are the wellspring of innovation, and the ability to innovate is increasingly acknowledged as *the* critical corporate asset of the 21st century – supplanting land, labour and capital – and a major source of individual, corporate and national competitive advantage. Creativity, innovation, inventiveness, entrepreneurship and enterprise are valued social capital.

4. Creativity is essential to tackle the social, cultural and environmental issues facing communities in the future.

Creative approaches are required if society is to respond positively to the challenges and responsibilities associated with rapid change, uncertainty and adversity. Schools and communities that equip students to be creative will generate individuals capable of fuelling a vibrant and innovative cultural, social and economic life. Individuals acting together transform society. Social cohesion, environmental sustainability, economic prosperity and effective governance will depend on people's ability to unlock their creative potential and form new connections and interactions.

School systems cannot afford to ignore the mandate to transform the way we educate young people so that their creativity is enabled. The following pilot program tackled this challenge in two primary and two secondary schools.

The pilot program

The intention of the pilot was to raise teachers' awareness about creativity, test ideas about how best to promote children's creativity and embed creative learning across the curriculum.

1. Teacher awareness of creativity

The first cycle of the program focused on teacher professional learning, with an assumption that this would lead to new learning opportunities for students. There were three dimensions to the professional learning:

- A workshop program conducted each term
- A four week action research cycle
- Partnerships and engagement with creative practitioners

The workshop program provided teachers with opportunities to work with creative practitioners, develop their ideas for the classroom, and discuss their experiences as they tried new approaches with their students. Working with creative practitioners proved to be both stimulating and challenging and also brought to the surface some interesting challenges and issues associated with being creative.

A session with a film maker/photographer was well received by the teachers. The program encouraged the group to deal with ambiguity and possibility, as well as take a risk.

A second session with a dancer/choreographer was more challenging. This session highlighted personal attributes and resilience necessary to successfully engage in unfamiliar practices and significant new learning.

One particularly successful mid-year workshop activity involved teachers in observing the practice of acknowledged creative teachers and engaging in discussion and reflection (*The Creative Classroom Series*). Not only did this cause teachers to reflect upon the creative possibilities in these classes, it also challenged them to think about why they were drawn to particular teachers and more dismissive of others. The 'lens' of creativity therefore proved very useful in enabling teachers to see their practice differently and break out of taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching.

Teachers also went out into sectors other than education to shadow a creative individual for a morning and conduct an interview with them. This activity also led to some surprise findings, particularly in relation to some of the common attributes that teachers identified in their creative practitioners, e.g. resourcefulness, networking, drive and passion, risk-taking, professionalism and precision, high organisation and skills, flexibility, adaptability and communication skills. They were able to make a link between creativity and leadership.

The action research cycle led teachers to identify a tension between risk taking and trying something different and the assumption that as teachers it is necessary to get it 'right' all the time. This raised the question of how we view failure, particularly when something doesn't work the first time. Teachers wondered about the extent that the culture of teaching limited opportunities to work through an idea, refine it and test it enough so that it generated a successful outcome. In teaching, there can be a tendency not to try something a second time if there is not an immediate successful experience, particularly if others are likely to witness such an experience.

The purpose of engaging teachers in an action research cycle over a four week period was to develop a stronger evidentiary base for the creativity pilot and to provide teachers with an effective, ongoing professional learning experience. In summary, the learning that resulted from the action research cycle included the following:

1. Increased understanding of the creative process;
2. Identification of a need to foster a creative learning environments in a physical, social and cultural sense;

3. Beginning understandings of creative capacity indicators and how they might assist assessment of learning and development;
4. Observation that teachers' ideas were being developed more often than students;
5. The challenges involved in motivating and inspiring students;
6. The changing role of the teacher – relinquishing control and tolerating initial disorder;
7. The need for authenticity of tasks;
8. The challenges in achieving quality work as opposed to presenting work creatively;
9. The importance of networking and relationships as a way of increasing resources.

Using creativity as a lens to examine practice caused some teachers to see themselves in a new light, not always favourable to them, which in turn motivated them to change the way they related to students and relinquish some of their control. In particular, teachers' roles in creating the foundation and scaffolding learning was still seen to include preparation, organisation, getting ready to explore, teaching of skills and assisting with research.

There was a tension between providing students with enough structure so their learning was scaffolded and knowing when to enable students to take a lead. An approach where teachers initially led (ensuring students went beyond what they already knew to acquire new knowledge, skills and insights) then fell into a support role as students led out on developing their ideas and using their acquired knowledge and skills was not only promising but linked well with what teachers' already understood about student learning. Teachers noted however, that some students did not utilise new 'freedoms' well. The issue of what constitutes quality was a challenging aspect of the work that arose. A rigorous approach, both in an intellectual sense and in the duration and outcome of the creative process was an area identified as needing more sustained focus.

Teachers were clear that creativity in schools required a reaching out and forming of new relationships that in turn provided new resources for their students:

Creativity involves networking, interacting with others and drawing upon the expertise of the local and wider community – 'step outside your classroom and look around'. Schools communities are not the only educators – we need to put more time into networking, gaining community input and identifying the resources in the local area. Identify who else can help and what community members are willing to share.

Being creative involves working with your resources and developing a good contact base. Work is not insular – you need to be able to work with a broad range of people – communication is vital. Ideas or vision come to fruition through collective efforts - creativity needs to be collaborative.

2. Promoting Students' Creativity

Two broad strategies were tested during the project to foster students' creativity. The first was through the teacher professional learning program that has been previously described. The second involved matching each school with a creative practitioner who worked directly with the students and teachers.

The teacher strategy resulted in some changes for students, but the degree of change was quite variable in each school. Most significant changes were in one secondary school where teachers engaged in genuine negotiation of work with students. Rather than preparing for every minute of their lessons, teachers shifted into a support and facilitation role as students developed their ideas about the issue of bullying. A primary school also had a range of positive outcomes for both students and their community through a photography project, which fostered a range of intercultural understandings and parental involvement.

In the other two schools, teachers were often being more creative than their students as they came up with ideas and designed open ended tasks for their classes. Students' opportunities to make choices increased, but they were choices that related to teacher initiated ideas.

The creative practitioner strategy resulted in high achievement and engagement of students across all four schools. In particular, they were clearly much more comfortable working with student initiated ideas. They saw themselves in quite a different relationship with students to the 'traditional teacher' view. The creative practitioners worked *with* their group of students to explore particular ideas, sharing their craft and skills incidentally as appropriate. They did lead the process and provide structure, but consciously allowed the student ideas to bubble up and be explored. All four creative practitioners reported a high tolerance for initial 'chaotic' activity but were able to relate this to their real world experiences. For example, after a session with secondary students all vying for their ideas to be included in a script, the film maker noted 'it's just like an ABC script writing session with competing egos and personal experiences.' This real world experience differs from the world of teachers who are in a culture where 'classroom control' is valued and often used as a measure of professional competence.

Student development when working directly with both the creative practitioners and their teachers was dramatically accelerated. In particular, there was clear evidence of:

- Increased self-confidence (demonstrated through speaking, performance and body movements)
- Skill development that related to the craft of the creative practitioner
- Self-understanding about personal learning and what worked
- Engagement and persistence – a willingness to revisit, review and repeat
- Quality work, with all products being judged by outsiders as of a high standard
- Increased ability and willingness to express their ideas imaginatively
- Willingness to try something new
- Reflection and learning about teamwork, co-operation, negotiation, communication, problem-solving and organisation

The program challenged teachers to think through the implications of creativity in relation to their students. They identified that if students were increasing their creative capacity they would:

- Be more willing to take risks
- Be comfortable making mistakes that often led to new learning
- See themselves as problems solvers and problem posers
- Have the ability to work individually and with others to apply the skills they have developed in a creative application
- Be able to carry out their own projects
- Delight in deep thinking
- Have a clear sense of purpose and mission
- Have an acceptance of being different
- Pursue their interest with intensity and passion
- Work to strengths and self-evaluate
- Demonstrate self esteem and self confidence

3. Embedding creativity in the curriculum

This aspect of the work is still problematic. Although more profound outcomes for students were achieved by enabling them to work directly with creative practitioners, there was a reduction in ownership and engagement by teachers, who were in a more secondary role during this phase. The challenge ahead is to structure the learning approach as a genuine partnership between teachers, creative practitioners and students,

while at the same time making the necessary timetable and organisational changes to enable such partnerships to flourish as a 'normal' aspect of the curriculum.

Future Directions

The creativity pilot went part way to providing a springboard for understanding effective practices that will better prepare students to live and work in creative communities and workplaces/industries of the future. In particular, after initial readings and shadowing of creative practitioners, teachers were able to articulate strong, common themes such as vision, risk-taking, communication, networking, resourcefulness, flexibility and adaptability as characteristics of creative practice. Networking and the importance of reaching out to others was a surprise insight and teachers reflected that they this was not done enough in a school environment and possibly they were wasting resources available to them in their local community. Teachers probed the issue of motivation and its sources and identified the importance of self-belief, resilience, persistence, and relevance to others as affecting creative capacity.

The pilot initially aimed to provide teachers with an opportunity to systematically explore the effects of creative learning experiences on students' overall engagement and academic achievement. This proved to be too large an expectation for such a short time frame, although some teachers were able to report anecdotally on engagement and achievement. The project also aimed to explore creativity in the context of the core curriculum rather than through fringe or extracurricular activities. This aim created challenges, as existing curriculum and ways of working and organising for learning can just as easily be a constraint as an enabler of creativity. Consequently, the possibilities for action identified by teachers were influenced by existing curriculum, culture, organisation and priorities in the schools.

In order to develop this work further, the following strategies are recommended:

1. Engage creative practitioners centrally and facilitate a partnership between them and schools to both inject new specialised skills and knowledge and provide models of alternative approaches to working with students and engaging them in learning.
2. Provide centralised support to the team of creative practitioners and encourage them to see each other as a resource.
3. Provide teachers with opportunities to consolidate their learning and apply to new situations. Continue to provide teachers with 'triggers' and opportunities to be inspired.

4. Maintain a focus on teacher learning but expand to focus more strongly on student learning and high achievement.
5. Work more systematically with principals to identify how to embed and sustain creative pedagogy and learning.
6. Continue to develop a framework with teachers that enables them to plan for and make judgements about creativity in a more informed way.

We have to develop an education paradigm that gives children the right to express their own feelings, to give their point of view of events, to explain themselves, to reflect upon their behaviour, to have their fears and their hopes taken seriously, to ask questions. To seek explanations to their natural world, to love and be loved, to have their inner world of dreams and fantasies and imaginings taken seriously so they can make their own engagements with life. Creativity takes time, especially the building of confidence necessary to 'have a go' at an idea – needs encouragement and support. Choice can be a constraint and can also be a contributor to creativity.

(Teacher reflection)

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About the Author

Maureen O'Rourke is Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Effective Partnerships. She works strategically with key educational reform and innovation organisations both in Australia and internationally. Four major areas of her work are partnership leadership and management (local, national and international); research (with an emphasis on collaborative and participatory research practices); professional learning programs for teachers (particularly long-term programs that broaden from classroom change to whole school change); and specialist consultancy (multiliteracies, social ecology approaches to reform, ICT and educational change, new learning and pedagogical change). For the past three years she has worked in partnership with the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission to scope a major initiative focusing on developing creativity and subsequently implemented a pilot program. She has also facilitated the formation of a unique partnership to address educational issues and provision for refugee students.