Containers, Creativity and Quilt-making: an exploration of teachers’ conceptualisations of creative spaces for teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

“At the outset of our collective ‘journey into creativity’ we were asked to bring with us a symbol to represent creativity. Having only an empty coffee cup at my disposal I attempted to argue that creativity needed a container, a holding space, a structure, a limited, clearly defined, real and tangible space in which to develop.”

This excerpt from a student’s assignment is an example of one of the responses to the theme of creative spaces which was the focus of the module, Creativity in Practice for Educators, on the Masters in Educational Studies programme at Queen’s University Belfast in 2008. This is a four-day experiential module, followed by a group exhibition three months later when students reflect on the course and present their final assignments. This paper explores the symbolisations and conceptualisations of creative spaces by the eleven teachers who participated in the module. These conceptualisations were developed through the participants’ engagement in arts-based activities on the course, the creative artefacts with which they responded to the module themes, their evaluations of the experience, and the reflections on creative spaces by three of the teachers who took part in interviews three months after the module.

The module design synthesises ideas about creativity and creative spaces, in particular Boden’s notion (2004) of creativity as a process of transforming conceptual spaces and Jankowska and Atlay’s (2008) development of purposely-designed spaces to enhance creativity in learning. The delivery of the module makes use of arts-based methods to explore the spaces in which creativity develops, including storytelling, artwork, collage making, psychodrama, and digital technologies. These methods are informed by Eisner’s notion (2002) of the artistry involved in teaching, and Sullivan’s conceptualisation of art as a method of inquiry (2005). Tracey’s framework of creative reflection (2007) adapts the classical model of the creative process of preparation-play-exploration-synthesis in order to provide a supportive framework for engagement in creative inquiry. The first stage of this model includes “threshold activities” which facilitate engagement in the creative process for participants to address their uncertainties about the process as well as their own creative abilities. The paper presents examples of these activities on the module and teachers’ responses to them. The final course assignment offers a creative space in itself, requiring participants to present an arts-based response to the course themes. The conceptualisations of space as manifested in the teachers’ assignments included the physical spaces such as puppet theatre and a playhouse, explorations of image and film through the use of Windows Moviemaker, and interactive charts to support learning in science.

The paper engages with the issues involved in presenting the diverse range of data which emerged from this inquiry, suggesting that the notion of containment as expressed in the quotation at the start of this abstract may be applied not only in the creative learning environment, but also in the development of a framework for representing the data and containing the complexities. The metaphor of quilt-making is used to describe this framework; this metaphor originates from the artwork which one of the participants brought to first session of the course to symbolise her creativity.
The findings suggest that the participants expanded their conceptualisations of creative space, as well as their confidence to engage in these spaces through the use of arts-based methods, supporting Eisner's concept of art as a form of knowledge and meaning making (2008). The teachers' conceptualisations of creative space appear to be informed by the nature of the art form, the ages and developmental stages of the pupils, their own personal definitions of pupil creativity, and the degree of freedom of movement which they perceived for themselves and their pupils in the physical learning environment as well as in imaginal spaces. The notion of the school as a supportive container for creativity was juxtaposed against the limitations imposed by time, curricular and institutional constraints. These findings raise the issues involved in displaying and exhibiting creative work produced in the classroom. The discussion develops the notion of the teacher as "responsible curators" of pupils' creative work, synthesising ideas from diverse fields of literature, building on recent literature on curating (O'Neill et al., 2007; Prendergast, 2003). The paper ends with an exploration of the implications for the design of and engagement in creative spaces in learning and teacher education.

References:
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http://www.creativityconference07.org/tabled_papers/Tracey_Creative.doc Accessed 21/01/09
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“At the outset of our collective ‘journey into creativity’ we were asked to bring with us a symbol to represent creativity. Having only an empty coffee cup at my disposal I attempted to argue that creativity needed a container, a holding space, a structure, a limited, clearly defined, real and tangible space in which to develop.”

This excerpt from a course assignment is an example of one of the responses to the themes of creativity and creative spaces by the eleven teachers who participated in the Masters in Education module, Creativity in Practice for Educators, at Queen’s University Belfast between August and November 2008.

The quotation above raises some of the questions explored in this study: about the spaces in which creativity occurs, the role of the educator in facilitating these spaces and the relationship between creativity and learning. This paper explores the teachers’ symbolisations and conceptualisations of creative spaces through describing and analysing the structured opportunities for exploring the theme on the module, the creative artefacts with which the teachers responded to this theme, the module assignments, module evaluations and reflections on creative space from interviews with three of the teachers three months after the end of the module.

The complex nature of creativity and creative spaces and the challenges involved in capturing the processes of creative exploration raised questions about an appropriate design for this study, and for the presentation of the diverse range of data which might emerge from an arts-based study. The study required a framework which synthesised its theoretical constructs, and at the same time contained and displayed the multiple forms of meaning making which emerged from the research. An arts-based metaphor seemed suitable, particularly one which could bring together the notions of gathering ideas and evidence as well as deliberative crafting. The image of quilt-making was used to represent the notion of containing the processes and outcomes of creativity. These processes include the gathering of ideas, the identification of patterns, the layering of meaning, of deliberative crafting and of artful display. The structural features common to most types of quilts are the backing and
the central insulating layer, which form the foundation for the top one. These layers may be understood in this study as the conceptualisations of creativity and the invisible processes underpinning the participants’ explorations of creative spaces. The top layer displays the results of the processes, which are artfully arranged to foreground the main themes and patterns. The stitching which binds all the layers of the quilt together are always visible, further evidence of the process and the skill of the quilter.

This paper explores each of the layers of the quilt, beginning with the theoretical frameworks and proceeding with "showing the stitching", or how the ideas and explorations manifested in the study. Images of participants’ creative artefacts generated on the course, their reflections on the module and their final assignments are woven into the paper. The final section of the paper takes forward the idea of a quilt as a work of art, examining the ethical dimensions of displaying the creative work which emerges from engagement in creative spaces for teaching and learning.

The nature of creativity

The backing layer of the quilt establishes the conceptualizations of creativity and creative spaces on which the study is based. These conceptualizations are not easily articulated; it needs to be acknowledged that creativity is a complex and elusive concept. The processes of creativity are both intriguing and difficult to explain; it is perhaps this tantalising ambiguity which has led to widespread curiosity about it and a range of attempts to explain it. While the literature about creativity is diverse, this study focused on the theme of creativity in learning and the role of educators in supporting this process. This theme is particularly relevant in Northern Ireland; creativity is an integral part of the Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland (CEA, 2007), now known as the Northern Ireland Curriculum. The focus of this curriculum, which spans both primary and secondary school, is on the development of personal and interpersonal skills and capabilities, incorporating the dimensions of moral character, ethical awareness, citizenship, cultural understanding, employability and environmental responsibility. The curriculum areas include managing information, thinking skills, problem solving, working with others, self management, developing ICT skills and “being creative”, which is defined as follows: "Children should be able to use creative approaches to be imaginative and
inventive, to explore possibilities and take risks in their learning." (op. cit, p. 5) Other aspects of creativity included in the curriculum are free play, problem solving, developing ideas collaboratively and responding to others' creative work. The notion of the curriculum as a creative space for teaching and learning is developed in this paper.

One of the main themes in the literature about creativity in learning is the crucial role of the educator in facilitating this. Over three decades ago, the idea of teachers' responsibility for their pupils' creativity was embodied in Chambers' large-scale study of the impact of teacher behaviour on student's creativity; the teachers were identified through an evaluation of the research of those doctoral students who had studied under them and who nominated them as having either a profound negative or positive impact on their creative development. (Chambers, 1973). The key characteristics which facilitated creativity were the enthusiasm and encouragement of pupils beyond the classroom. More recent research analyses the behaviours and teaching styles of "creativity-fostering teachers", (Cropley, 2001, p. 138), and their strategies in dealing with attitudinal factors which impact on pupils' engagement in art classes (Pettersson et. al., 2004). The study described in this paper acknowledged the need to explore methods for facilitating pupils' access to creative spaces. This study develops Tracey's model of creative reflection (2007), which provides a framework for engagement in creative inquiry in learning. In the current study, this framework has been articulated as a matrix of creative spaces for learning and teaching; this is elaborated in the next part of this paper.

Another theme in the literature across the last three decades about creativity in learning has been the relationship between the facilitation of creativity in the classroom and teacher autonomy; a number of studies contain examples as to how the latter constrained by the demands of the system and standardization (Gorton, 1971; Huddle 1985; Nalin, 2002; and Evans, 2002, provide just a few examples).

In the last decade, creativity has been foregrounded in educational policy in the United Kingdom. An influential document was the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999), which fed into the review of the National Curriculum. The document contains an all-embracing definition of creativity:

*Creativity is imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.*
In their review of this document, Jeffrey and Craft (2004) explore the “fashioning” of creative activities, maintaining that the report makes a false distinction between the creative practices of teachers and the intention to teach for creativity. They postulate the need to recognise that teaching for creativity can occur spontaneously, and suggest that the focus should be on creative learning rather than on creative teaching. An implication for this study is the need to provide opportunities to engage teachers in creative learning themselves so that they might understand the processes involved.

Craft calls for the exploration of the notion of the “value” of creative outcomes (Craft, 2006, 2008), arguing for a critical perspective on the impact of creativity and innovation. In the earlier paper, she calls into question a “market-driven” model of creativity and motivates for the development of a framework which incorporates responsibility for the consequences of creativity as well as the right to creative expression.

While Craft explores creativity in the wider contexts of culture and policy, Boden focuses on the conceptual aspects. Boden’s conceptualisation (2004) of creativity as a process of engaging with conceptual spaces is central to this study. Boden differentiates between three types of creativity: combinational, which involves the juxtaposition of dissimilar concepts, exploratory, which refers to conceptual explorations of the thinking styles and frameworks of fields of knowledge and enquiry, and transformative creativity, which results when the process of exploration generates new ways of thinking and ideas. This study builds on Boden’s model, examining the idea that teachers’ own conceptual frameworks about creativity can be expanded by their own explorations of creativity. Eisner’s conception of the innate “artistry” involved in the craft of teaching (2002, 382-383) suggests that arts-based methods might be appropriate for supporting teachers in these explorations. Green (1995) and Eisner (2008) both argue that arts-based learning offers opportunities for expanding ways of knowing and meaning making. This is in accordance with the thinking of arts practitioners such as Higgs, who suggests (2008, p. 552) that engaging with the arts has the potential to facilitate transformative learning. “Arts encourage a transcendental capacity. They allow the creator and the viewer to imagine possible ways of being, encourage the individual to move personal boundaries, and challenge resistance to change and growth.” The conceptualisation
of creative spaces in this study builds on the notion of the opportunism which the arts offer to extend both personal and imaginal boundaries.

Context for the study

This study was located in the Creativity in Practice for Educators course, which is an optional module on a part-time Masters in Education programme. This is an experiential module which offers opportunities for participants to engage in a variety of arts-based activities to develop their understanding of their own creativity as well as that in education. The group which forms the focus of this study was the third cohort on this module. The delivery and duration of the module were amended following feedback from the first two cohorts to make it longer (thirty hours instead of twenty), and offered as an intensive four-day programme followed up by the presentation of coursework in a group exhibition three months afterwards. Most of the modules on the Masters in Educational Studies run in the evenings and on the weekend; the one under discussion piloted a day-time August delivery to offer teachers opportunities to study during the summer holiday, instead of in the evening and at weekends during the school term. The popularity of this option was evident in the enrolment: there were eleven participants, in contrast with seven in the first year and five in the second. Their comments on the intensive delivery are discussed later in the paper.

Participants

All of the participants were female, and in their second year of study, and aged between 24 and 55 years. Their teaching experience varied from one year to 28 years (mean=7 years). Of the two who were outside the school sector, one was an Education Officer at an interactive discovery centre for children aged 3-19; the other was an adult literacy and numeracy teacher in further education. Of the remainder, seven were primary school teachers, one working with pupils with special educational needs. The others were distributed evenly between Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The remaining two participants were secondary school teachers, one specializing in science and the other in English.

Three participants volunteered for interview three months after the course: Mary is a Foundation Stage teacher, Julie has a Key Stage 1 class, and Roberta is an English
teacher in a secondary school. Excerpts from the interviews are threaded through the paper.

**Creative spaces for teaching and learning framework**

The matrix of creative spaces which forms the basis for this study includes the categories of physical, imaginal, digital and conceptual spaces. The criteria for regarding them as creative spaces are: their accessibility to all learners, their capacity to offer opportunities for individual and collaborative meaning making and exploration, and their potential to expand conceptual frameworks and facilitate boundary crossings. The distinctions between the types of spaces are not precise, as there are overlaps. The Creativity in Practice module offers teachers arts-based opportunities to engage in these and reflect on the implications for their practice.

This part of the paper quilts together a discussion on the nature of each kind of space, some examples of activities on the course which explore the spaces, and responses to these activities from group reflections, the course evaluations and the interviews.

1. **Physical spaces**

This category refers to the classroom environment, the equipment which might be used to engage in creative activities, the layout of the room, students’ capacity to move around the room, and the availability of resources for engaging in creativity, as well as opportunities for the display of creative work.

The design of the learning space for the Creativity in practice for Educators module was based on Jankowska and Atlay’s (2008) model of purposely-designed spaces for enhancing creativity in learning and student engagement at the University of Bedfordshire. This model is underpinned by a recognition of the significance of the relationship between learning and the space in which it takes place. The “C-space” (creative space) was deliberately designed not to resemble a traditional classroom. It provided a range of equipment and spaces which allowed learners to manipulate ideas and brainstorm together; this freedom to use all of the resources and to change the layout of the learning space was incorporated into the Creativity in Practice module. The classroom in which all of the course sessions took place,
with the exception of the time in the computer laboratory using Windows Moviemaker, was a large ground floor room with rows of traditional chairs, an area with a comfortable seating area to one side and sufficient surfaces for art material to be spread throughout the room and used both individually and collectively. Most of the participants commented positively on the space; Julie, however noted that “the shape of the room was fine and the size was fine but to be honest with you it was very frustrating I mean …I tell you what, the windows were behind my back and it was very frustrating and I felt very concrete and limited. I needed sky – it would have been a whole lot better for me.”

Mary took her experience of the learning space on the course back into her classroom: “Because of how you structured the module because we as adults came into your space and were able to use it in a variety of different ways … it was great ... we could go and move things around and use the things how we wanted and also have a quiet space. I brought that back and me and the classroom assistant we realised how important it was to have a quiet area – we didn’t have a true quiet area – but because of this we’ve set up a little quiet area and we call it the thinking area … it would be good it if you could have a quiet area more for the practitioners, but you couldn’t do that, the classroom is too busy.”

At the same time, Mary has reservations about her capacity to change the physical learning environment: “I wouldn’t feel comfortable going into someone else’s classroom and moving the tables and chairs around like I do in my own; having said that, it would be acceptable in my school, but I wouldn’t feel happy doing that.” This contrasts the autonomy which teachers have in their own classrooms with that in the wider learning environment.

Other participants’ comments on the learning space on the module suggest that they recognised the potential for the physical environment to enhance the learning process:

“The course was very enjoyable – different. Will make me think more about how I prepare, arrange, organise my classroom.”

“Teachers need to be creative within all aspects of their teaching. When they are setting out tasks, deciding where these tasks are to take place. When using props, drama, art, etc. I didn’t understand this until I completed this module.”
2. Imaginal Spaces

These were spaces for playing with ideas in which the focus is on accessing and using the imagination. These activities incorporated creative thinking exercises and the use of art materials and props. Three instances of these spaces on the course are explored below.

Choosing images and quotations about creativity

In this activity, which took place on the first day of the course, participants were asked to choose a few images and quotations which conveyed their ideas about creativity from approximately a hundred art postcards and photographs, and about fifty quotations about creativity and learning. The quotations were printed separately on a piece of coloured card, approximately half the size of a postcard. This is an example of one of Tracey’s “threshold activities”, aimed at supporting learners in engaging the imagination and accessing creative spaces (Tracey, 2007). This activity also builds on two facets of Boden’s model of creativity: while it begins with the first stage, combinational creativity (juxtaposing image and words), it develops opportunities for participants to exploring and enhance their understandings of creativity and thus links into the second, exploratory, stage.

A participant commented on the way in which this activity had acted as a source of inspiration and encouragement for her:

“During the first session, we had opportunities to explore the quotations, artwork and the extensive array of art resources. It was during this time I found a quotation which acted as motivation for me to utilise this experience to the best of my ability. ‘There came a time when the risk to remain tight in bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom’. – Anais Nin. I could then acknowledge that it was futile to allow myself to become consumed by negative thoughts, instead I embraced possibility.”

In her interview, Roberta commented on how she adapted this activity to teaching creative writing.

After the course I have come up with the idea of putting up pictures on to the interactive screen, of people, of landscapes, mountains, discussing the weather relating to that picture, relating to the setting. I didn’t think pictures would be so useful but they give them (the pupils) something to build on, they lead into their writing and
they really enjoy it. We use them to build up a character, a landscape, to share ideas … it gives them a lot to write about whereas they might have been stuck before.

The importance of imaginal spaces for facilitating creativity was underlined by a comment from a course evaluation:

“During this module, I received the opportunity to reflect upon the nature of creative spaces. Following discussion on the nature of how we create and access these spaces, I was drawn to recalling W.B Yeats’ poem, ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’. Yeats’ s ability to ‘arise and go’ to the space which exudes creativity through the medium of imagination and poetic inspiration is to be admired.”

Story telling

In this activity, participants worked in three small groups. Their brief was to combine a set of four images and the two props they had been given into a story, and then present it to the whole group. This activity involved combinational creativity, negotiating and sharing ideas, and presenting the results of the process. The activity was both playful and serious, and was identified as “very enjoyable” and “a great idea for my class (of children aged 7-8 years old). This activity was a lead–in to the use of digital storytelling techniques, which will be discussed in the next part of this paper.

Roberta, who is an English teacher, reflected in her interview on her learning from this activity:

“I thought while we were doing the story telling activity and we were just discussing things and ideas and I thought about teaching creative writing and … and I have to acknowledge that I hadn’t thought about the time you need to think before you actually put something down on paper.”

3. Digital and virtual spaces

The incorporation of digital literacies and technologies into learning in general and in the Northern Ireland Curriculum in particular raises questions of inclusion not only for students but of teachers. It was decided to provide opportunities for teachers on the course to explore creativity and technology through the use of easy-to-use free software, Windows Moviemaker. One of the participants, an education officer in an
interactive education centre, was familiar with this as well as more complex packages. Another had used Moviemaker in her personal life; however, none of them had incorporated this into their practice. A ten-minute demonstration of this software by the course tutor was followed by a two-hour session in a computer laboratory, in the course of which all of the participants made their own films and showed them to each other.

A response to Moviemaker from a module evaluation form notes that:
I hadn’t used this before, but it was easy to use and you see the results very quickly.”

Five out of the eleven participants used Moviemaker for their course assignments, as will be explained in the next part of this paper.

4. Conceptual spaces

These are spaces in which the focus is on the exploration of concepts and ideas, such as the nature of creativity itself, on a curriculum area, or on the curriculum itself.

Participants explored their creative identities and autobiographies individually through the use of art materials, producing collages which incorporated images of their families, arts practices, and life histories. Only one participant represented her ideas symbolically, creating a box without a base, with piper cleaners and feathers and other decorations spilling out of it. She reflects about it as follows in her interview:

“…the box – it was anything goes, it could be anything you wanted it to be. All the things that were coming out of the box, the things that were coming out of it was where your creativity was leading you to. .. some of the things were coming from your heart, and from your head, and from different experiences, and different things that you’ve seen, and heard, all through your life and through every day and every year, and it all comes together in some shape or form to be your creative side”.

In their final course evaluations, two of the participants provided lists of words symbolising different aspects of creative space:

Giving space garden facilitator co-creator? Structures midwife CREATOR giving birth opening doors
Spaces boundaries confines freedom structures

In a small group activity, participants worked in two groups to reflect on the theme of creative spaces. The duration of the activity was twenty minutes, followed by a report back to the whole group. The results of this process are presented in the two images below.

![Image 1](image1.png) ![Image 2](image2.png)

Image 1 is at first glance less complex than image 2. It is a simple spider diagram which incorporates some of the dichotomies of creative space: chaos/order, individual and collaboration. The presentation of this image to the group explored the wider dimensions of creative spaces and revealed how creative spaces exist in a number of dimensions: in nature, in interaction, as well as in the individual mind. Some of the ideas contained in this image were referred to in a reflection on creative spaces on the final course evaluation:

“It is all about the comfort zone. We have to foster positive comfort zones for creative concentration. You can be creative anywhere.”

Image 2, a collage of quotations about creativity, images and props, presents a very different picture of creative spaces and creativity, with its title; “The jungle of creativity”, the image of the wild cat, and the postcard with the words; “I think, therefore I am dangerous!” This image focuses on the risk-taking aspects of creativity and potential for chaos. The ideas embodied in this image point to the responsibility
of the teacher for simultaneously facilitating and containing the risk-taking aspects of creativity, and for holding individual responses to creativity.

A comment on this activity was: “It made me think about how different everyone is when they were describing what their idea of creative space would be like. Very good way of reflecting on your own work and deciding if you would do anything differently.” To support the exploration of conceptual spaces, opportunities were provided on the course for participants to engage in reflection time. As the course handbook states:

You will be encouraged in the course of the module to make spaces for reflection, on your own or with your peers. Reflection is an important part of the creative process; it allows for ideas to incubate and illumination to take place. These reflections may take space in the sessions themselves, as well as in tea breaks and at lunch time. Your reflections may take any form you choose, such as quiet time on your own, using the art materials or music or books in the room, or socializing with others. It’s also appropriate to use reflection time to do nothing.

Julie, reflecting on the impact of these opportunities for reflection in her interview, muses: “I think the biggest thing I took from the module was to allow the time for creative spaces to emerge at that age really. In half an hour you might not get it all done … with a little bit of time given every day to getting something done you get to see the creative flow. I give the children time to come back to things and I can see them consciously thinking about it and the next time when they come back to it you can see more happening. I think it’s incubation – you know what I mean, from the course, a little bit of time to let the idea come forward, take some shape.”

The importance of adequate time for developing creative ideas and exploring conceptual spaces emerged as a recurrent theme. Roberta returns to the theme of time constraints on several occasions during her interview. She declares: “I teach (English) in a high school and although I would like to develop creativity through poetry and writing it feels as if these are somewhat sidelined by our need – we have to prepare for examination and there are time constraints, and obviously in a regimented timetable there’s a bell goes off and you sort of have to pick it up again which means with some classes you have to go back to the beginning.”

The themes of teacher autonomy and power in the learning process are developed later in the paper.
Conceptualisations of creative spaces in course assignments

The course assessment required students to respond to the main themes of the course, the nature of creativity and creative spaces. The format of the assignment offered a choice between a reflective learning journal, with an entry relating to each of the course sessions, or an original creative piece which synthesised the themes of the course. This piece required a rationale.

On the previous two occasions on which the module was delivered, fifty percent of the twelve students produced reflective learning journals, and five presented creative pieces reflecting their own experiences and understandings of creativity. Only one student created an object designed for use in the classroom, an interactive display board based on the theme of the seasons. In contrast, the final pieces of seven (64%) of the participants in the current study were created with the specific purpose of using them in the classroom. No reflective learning journals were submitted: the focus of the assignments appeared to be on the application of the teachers’ learning to their practice, rather than on their own processes.

The course assignments are categorized according to the primary type of creative space which they foregrounded, although on most occasions there were overlaps with other types of spaces.

1. Physical Spaces

- A puppet theatre, with handmade puppets, which the Foundation Stage teacher has subsequently been using in her classroom, to offer her pupils the opportunity to engage in storytelling and imaginative play.

- A playhouse and a film illustrating children acting out a story about pirates, using the playhouse. This except from the rationale for the assignment explains its purpose:

   Following recent completion of Revised Curriculum training, I examined the different aspects of the aims and the principles underpinning the Foundation Stage and decided to adjust my setting and teaching accordingly. I realised quite quickly that the
children in my class were quite restricted in their access to physical play. Apart from timetabled PE lessons and free play in the playground during break and lunchtime, my class were quite limited in access to developing their gross motor skills. For this assignment, I decided to channel my own creativity into tackling this problem.

‘The Foundation Stage aims to provide a learning programme which will enable children to develop physical confidence and competence and to encourage creativity and imagination’. The Northern Ireland Curriculum Primary (NIC) 2007

By combining these aims as a sole objective I intended to create a creative space for children where they could express their own creativity whilst simultaneously exercising their physical confidence.

2. Imaginal spaces

- A box with textured sides and stimulus material for creative writing. The idea for this assignment emerged from the activity of choosing images and quotations to represent ideas about creativity.

3. Digital Spaces

Three students presented films as their main assignments: one explored the theme of creativity, another produced an animation, and the third was a story about the teacher’s cat, which included images and text to support the teaching of reading.

Mary, who made the last film, comments: “The moviemaker possibilities were endless. You could also have a maths lesson going through it. That’s what appealed to me, because it was so versatile. I can see the potential for using it so many times for so many different things. The film brought in my life --- it was my cat and there were pictures of inside and outside my house - it makes the children realise that I don’t just live the space that is their classroom.” This suggests the capacity of film to allow students to make connections between the spaces of home, learning and the outside world.

Two other students presented films as supporting material, using Moviemaker: one recorded the process of developing the creative writing box, and the other was a film
which showed a group of children acting out a story about pirates, using the playhouse which the teacher had created.

This comment in a course assignment suggests an enhanced understanding of the collective as well as individual aspects of creativity:

“I believe that the collaborative approach to this module – infusing the thoughts, work and creations of the module tutor, guest speakers, past pupils and the group participants, enabled creativity to occur in a sporadic, spontaneous way. By combining our creative thoughts and ideas in answer to questions, queries or activities, people were amalgamating their individual talents in such a way that the results were unique and rather splendidly different (than) if it were just an individual effort.”

The notion of collaboration points to the need for spaces for teachers to engage in creativity and to have opportunities to reflect on the individual and collaborative processes of creativity in learning.

4. Conceptual spaces

Two of the assignments were interactive resources which supported engaging with an area of learning: one consisted of four display boards focusing on the theme of the colour wheel. The other was a board with a diagram of a flower on it, with a set of labels which the children were able to stick onto the board.

Two installations on the theme of creativity were presented. One was made of fabric and represented the flow of creativity. The other was a six-foot high representation of a tree with props around it and quotes on it about the role of creativity in the participant’s past, present and future.

The final assignment was a chart depicting creativity in science in the revised curriculum; it played with the notion that the new curriculum offers spaces for pupils to develop their knowledge about science and to play with ideas which the learning of science generates.

Discussion and implications
“The power of space is great, and it is always active for creation and destruction. It is the basis of the desire of any group of human beings to have a place of their own, a place which gives them reality, presence, power of living, which feeds them, body and soul.”


The findings of this study suggest that the participants expanded their conceptualisations of creativity and creative space, as well as their confidence to engage in these spaces through the use of arts-based methods. Responses to the final evaluation of the module indicate that it enhanced awareness about planning and preparation for creative activities as well as the organisation and use of the physical learning environment. The responses also reveal a recognition of the need to set aside time and space for the development of creativity.

The positive responses to the use of Windows Moviemaker affirms the benefits espoused by Mirrer (2006) of using the readily available “low tech” approaches to digital storytelling, and suggests that time needs to be provided on teacher education programmes for students to explore relevant software for use in their practice; this should be extended to the exploration of arts-based materials in general.

This study explored and contrasted individual responses to creative engagement, and also identified some of the external factors affecting the development of creative spaces for learning and teaching. A significant response to the final course evaluation was that “There are many aspects of physical space (and time) that cannot be changed within the school/work place so the metaphorical ideas of creative space play an important part in school life/education.

The notion of the school as a supportive container for creativity was juxtaposed against the limitations imposed by time, curricular and institutional constraints. Julie asserts that her school is “a creative environment sometimes, but not always. It’s more creative (now) because of the revised curriculum and the school is moving towards that.” This suggests the possible impact of the Northern Ireland Curriculum on the development of creative spaces for learning: this is an area for further research. As Roberta points out:
“Creativity is particularly defined by the Revised Curriculum coming in; being creative is one of the key factors, and it would be interesting to see how we are able to bring it in fully and whether or not it will be little snapshots when it comes in.”

The eleven participants in this study were all female; the issues about gender which this raises require exploration. In the two previous courses there were two men out of a total of twelve participants, one on each of the courses. This imbalance may be reflective of the predominance of female teachers in the education system in Northern Ireland, particularly the primary school sector. There is a more even balance between male and female students on the Queen’s Masters in Education programmes, so the dearth of male students on the optional creativity module suggests that creativity at the moment may be seen as a “soft” subject, even though creative thinking is foregrounded in the new curriculum.

While this study did not focus on the gendered aspects of facilitating and exploring creative spaces, some issues arose which are worthy of further consideration. There were a few explicit references to gender on the course: after the activity in which the group produced a shape poem on the theme of summer, the reflections included, “It’s very girly, isn’t it?” On the final day, when one of the participants invited others to join in a dance session to help her express her learning from the course, there was speculation as to whether male participants would have participated in this, had they been present. An implicit aspect of gender was the fact that the principals of the school of eight out of the nine working in the mainstream school system are male. In their interviews, both Mary and Julie refer to the influence of the principal and his decision-making about the extent to which the school is a “creative space” or not, with regard to the display of pupils’ creative work and the layout and furniture in the classrooms.

Mary comments, “I think schools have to be creative spaces. Having said that, ours is a small school and maybe that lends itself to be creative more … I don’t know – there’s a new principal and he’s putting things in place to make things more creative, you know, for example, he’s got a new play area outside and it’s beautiful and it’s colourful and it’s lovely and he promotes the children’s work – we always did beautiful display boards – he promotes changing them more often – so he’s greatly into displaying the children’s work. that’s what a school’s all about.”
This introduces the theme of power and the dimensions of creative spaces which are external to the classroom, but which have a significant impact on the implementation of creativity or otherwise.

With regard to the policy context, Craft (2003) questions the deification of creativity in policy discourse, suggesting that this may lead to its overprizing and a lack of critique. She challenges the positivist discourse about creativity in education, exploring the limitations for educators inherent in the tensions between policy and practice and the restrictions which arise from a centrally controlled pedagogy.

The creative spaces matrix developed for this study proved useful for reviewing the course assignment and for identifying and distinguishing between some of the processes of engagement in learning and creativity. However, the notion of boundary crossings between the different types of spaces needs to be developed. The matrix needs to be extended to encompass the interactions between the learning spaces in the classroom and the external spaces which impact on this learning – the school and the social, cultural, political and policy environments. The teacher’s awareness of this impact is crucial; Craft suggests “the need to surface a moral and ethical framework—and with this the recognition of multiple perspectives—into the fostering of creativity in classrooms. It has suggested that fundamentally we might seek in classrooms to ask ourselves as adults and encourage children to ask, what ends their (and our) creativity serves; and thus to foster creativity with wisdom. Writing wisdom into the framing of creative teaching and learning (and, perhaps, the researching of it) will naturally involve the recognition and exploration of multiple approaches to wisdom itself.” (2006, p.347).

The teacher’s pedagogical, ethical and moral responsibilities for developing creative spaces for learning might be as conceptualized as the notion of “responsible curating”. As “the curator accepts the role of liaison between the object and the audience” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 395), so the teacher negotiates between the spaces and meanings of learning, her learners, the parents of these learners, her colleagues and the school environment in which pupils’ creative work is displayed. The literature on curating identifies the power of the curator to engage artists and audience in the exhibition space; it also articulates the relationships with the context of the gallery, the sponsors, and the worlds of art and culture (O’Neill, 2007; Bruce et al, 2007; Prendergast, 2003). The curator’s responsibilities might be likened to those of the teacher, with her power inside the classroom and her need to negotiate...
those networks of power which lie beyond it. Woods and Jeffrey (1996) suggest that creative learning involves the key aspects of innovation, ownership of knowledge and control of learning processes. The complex concepts inherent in these terms imply a high level of teacher expertise in facilitating this learning. The notion of teacher responsibility for creativity raises the issue of autonomy and awareness the complexities of creativity.

Curating is linked to the idea of quilt-making, which was explored at the start of this paper. According to Prendergast (2003, p. 395): “In the course of evaluating candidates for display, the curator will uncover contextual meanings and links between objects that will help provide a frame of reference for the viewers and shape the emergent story line.” This paper has quilted together some of these meanings and shaped a story about teachers’ use of creative spaces.

Conclusions

*Dynamic creativity channels energy through images, sounds, thinking, doing and having fun. It is the freedom to unravel problems and arrive at a solution. Breathe life into learning through imagination, possibility, variety and experiences that engage the senses.*

| Participant’s reflection in assignment rationale |

This paper began with a comment by one of the participants in the study about the need for a containing space for creativity. The study explored the nature of this containment through the development of a matrix of creative spaces. The participants’ explorations of these spaces revealed the complex relationships between containment and boundary crossings and their implications for teachers in their practice.

This small-scale study focused on teachers’ conceptualisations of creative spaces for learning and teaching through the use of arts-based method on a module on a Masters in Education Programme. The participants’ responses suggest that their explorations of creativity and learning enhanced their awareness of these processes; this raises the possibility that opportunities for these explorations should be considered in mainstream teacher education. This is supported by Troman et. al.’s
reflection (2007) on the relationship between the current cultures of performativity in primary schools and the implementation of creativity policies. They suggest that these relationships are complex and their demands on teachers need to be acknowledged. There is a need for spaces for teachers in which they can rethink their identities and ways they see their teaching in the policy context.

This study raises questions about the roles and responsibility of teachers in designing and supporting engagement in creative spaces for learning, recognizing that this work takes place in a wider policy context which impacts on teacher autonomy and on understandings of the nature and purpose of creativity. Craft’s call for “creativity with wisdom” is a reminder of the wider implications of creativity and innovation.

Teachers, like curators of exhibitions, require deliberative spaces for reflecting on creative engagement and developing connoisseurship (Eisner, 1985) in the field of creativity in learning, as well as an awareness of the social and cultural contexts in which creative works are developed.

These comments by participants on the Creativity in Practice for Educators module underline the importance of creative spaces for learning:

“Creative spaces are an excellent idea for pupils – it gives them time to reflect, think of new ideas under no pressure and be in control of a piece of their work."

“Creative spaces do exist, it’s finding them and letting you dissolve in them is the hard part. Once you’re there it becomes the art of living.”

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