Creative Teacher, Creative Teaching: Identifying Indicators and Inspiration for Professional Innovation in the Teaching Environment

Jody Lawrence
College of Design, University of Minnesota

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Abstract

This research was designed to reveal elements of the teaching environment that support creative teaching by asking creative teachers to share experiences of professional innovation. The study used the Abbreviated Torrance Test for Adults (Goff, 2002) to measure the creativity of teachers at an urban, private school revered for quality teaching. Participants were interviewed to learn about their experiences of professional innovation and the places that inspired or dissuaded them to be creatively engaged. The findings suggest that proactive behavior and constructivist thinking are indicators of creative teachers, and that creative teachers are inspired by a culture that values teacher expertise, collaboration, and the unique delivery of curricula. The findings also suggest that symbolic attributes of the teaching environment are a source of inspiration for creative instruction. Building off of existing knowledge about creative teaching and creative teachers, this work provides directions for future research.

Introduction

Creativity is an exciting research area in education. Creative teaching has been linked to effective teaching (Sawyer, 2011; Reilly et al, 2011) that enhances learning (Rinkevich, 2011). Research indicates that when teachers model creative thinking, it promotes creative thinking among learners (Nickerson, 2010; Horng et al, 2005). Creative teaching is an important component of nurturing creativity (Grainger, Barnes & Scoffham, 2004; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010; Cheng et al, 2010; Sternberg, 2015).

Current research is broadening our understanding about creativity in education, but it is predominantly examined through the lens of the learner. The National Advisory Committee on Creative Cultural Education (1999) proposed that creative teaching warrants distinction. Creative teaching should be distinguished from teaching for creativity. Distinguishing creative teaching in this way calls for new ways of investigating educational environments. What contextual elements of the teaching environment activate or discourage teachers to be creative and professionally innovative? What measures drive the expression of this creative behavior? These inquiries are the foundation of this research.

Literature

Creative teaching is defined as educational exchanges facilitated by the teacher that are “unique, customized and meaningful” (Rinkevich, 2011), and that are exciting, engaging and innovative (Craft, 2011). Creative teaching is complex, involving a broad range of skills, experience, and perspectives (Ambrose, 2005). Sawyer (2010) suggests that this act of creative teaching emerges as a form of “disciplined improvisation,” intimately tied to teacher experience.

Rubenstein, McCoach, and Siegle (2013) suggest that the teaching environment can inhibit teacher creativity. They emphasize the role of teacher perceptions and the sense a professional may have about the creative opportunities within their environment. Though professionals may be fit to be creative, their environment may encourage reluctance to do so. They present the teaching environment as an area of creative teaching that needs to be further developed.

A number of physical attributes of the learning environment have been attributed to learning outcomes and creative production. In their literature review of learning environments and creativity, Warner & Myers (2009) compiled the known variables that influence creative behavior, including: technology, color, lighting, furniture, decoration, elements that engage senses, resources, class size, and physical configurations within and between physical rooms. Jankowska & Atlay (2008) suggest that aesthetic, visual, and flexible attributes of spaces enhance learning, and support the generation of creative spaces.
Other research that has contributed to identifying these and other environmental qualities that foster creativity include those by Kristensen (2004), Cropley & Cropley (2008), and Jindal-Snape et al. (2013). These studies are focused on learners, yet they compile an important collection of known elements that contextualize a creative climate in an educational setting. The state of knowledge suggests why researching creativity in education is a complicated task, compounded by the intersection of dynamic variables, including: environment, interpersonal relationships, personal interests, and personal skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Understanding the factors that engage the creative expression of teachers is essential to understanding how to optimize any educational environment. Most educators would agree that the elements present in an educational environment that inspire creativity among teachers and inspire professional innovation are not necessarily the same elements that support creativity among learners. The elements that define a teaching environment often extend far beyond the tangible attributes of the environment itself. This research is designed to reveal these elements, and to identify the indicators of and inspiration for professional innovation in the teaching environment.

**Research Design**

This mixed-methods study investigates teacher experiences of professional innovation by employing two approaches; assessing the creative index (Goff, 2002) of participants, and conducting semi-structured, responsive interviews. An urban, private school distinguished for high-quality teaching was selected as the sample school. 18 teachers volunteered to participate in the first phase, and were given the Abbreviated Torrance Test for Adults (Goff, 2002), or ATTA. Participants were sorted by their creativity scores to identify the least and the most creative participants from the sample. Two more were selected as the mean. The four participants were invited to engage in one-on-one, hour-long interviews.

Direct interviews followed a casual, responsive discussion format. The semi-structured protocols focused on open-ended inquiries about the participants’ profession, and to share experiences of feeling innovative and creative. The interviews included a participant-led tour, prompting participants to share the places they relate to creative teaching, and the places they feel creatively restricted. The places, spaces and things the participants identified as important to the context of the prompts were tagged using pre-numbered stickers. As each sticker was placed, the numbers were read aloud so they could be sequenced with the interview transcript. After the interview was complete, each sticker was retrieved and its context was photographed and noted.

**Analysis**

The descriptive data was analyzed using a thematic approach aimed to identify broad concepts. The concepts provided a framework to organize what the participants perceived as important for creative teaching and professional innovation. A deeper analysis focused on defining categories within each concept, and expanding the properties of each. This involved implementing an open coding approach, reviewing the data line by line while also referencing the contexts evident in the photographs and field notes obtained during the building tour. The responses were interpreted for contextual importance to the research question. The importance of each category was proportionate to the frequency of responses, and the degree of commonality among participants. This process continued until thematic saturation was reached, and no new concepts, categories, or properties emerged as relevant. The data from all four participants was analyzed non-discriminately during the complete coding process. As a last phase of analysis, the origins of data were reviewed within the clusters to identify the relationship of the responses to participant CI measures.

**Findings**

Creativity is proportionate to proactive behavior. Creative teachers tend to reject conditions they view as incongruous to a professional ethos. They associate professional innovation with responding to these conditions in distinct ways. Some of these include; expressing disagreement, suggesting solutions, and devising ways to effectively change or navigate the condition(s). Creative teachers are comfortable breaking the rules, and justify doing so out of professional obligation, professional authenticity, acting on intuition and by acting “for the better good.” Participants illustrated experiences of being proactive when they said:

*I will always break the rules. See, what's funny about that is that I don't think I'm somebody who questions authority - very responsive to authority. I think that that's just a professional obligation. [...] I'm not someone who will do things just because that's the way it's always been done.*
I didn't go to graduate school to be a teacher just so I could come in and teach somebody else's program... I unintentionally broke the rules in the sense that I just had a different way of thinking. And I'm not restrained enough to always know when to keep my mouth shut.

You have to just give yourself permission to say, "Well, this is what I'm going to do," because there aren't enough hours in wee for us to talk about every single darn thing that needs to be done. Sometimes we've gotten in trouble for it, but I also don't think that there's-- I don't see myself as-- I can't say that I have ever intentionally not communicated something. Was it intentional, or did we just not get to it? Who knows. The world is not going to come crumbling down.

My first teaching position... it's not like I was really excited. I go to a new school and I'm like, "Hey, I bought an Apple TV, and I want to hook it up so I can wirelessly sync to wherever I am in the room- like teach, and not be stuck in any spot. Can I get it on the network? It's brand new!" "We'll see." And then it doesn't happen all year. So, it's just like that -- step by step, the stuff I would want to do, but the red tape stopped me. And that's maybe where rule breaking would take place. Like, they're not going to know if I just go and do this anyway. I just learned not to ask about certain things!

Creative teachers share constructivist values; they do not limit creative teaching as a means of teaching for creativity. They believe that teaching that emphasizes process rather than outcomes and lends relevant experiential learning is creative teaching, and is both ideal and quintessential to quality instruction. Constructivist teaching often leads to improvisational teaching moments that creative teachers associate with professional innovation. Creative teachers strive to facilitate experiences that are meaningful, memorable, and engage both teacher and learner. Participants described this when they said:

The act of messiness, the act of making. Collaboration. Finding out... like, even if something doesn’t work, the whole notion of “Well, we are going to keep trying!” And like, we just found out a bunch of ways that it doesn’t work. But, getting the experience. Failure... [pauses]. But, you're just not going to give up because of it.

I could not have learned the little, silly - the toolbox that most experienced teachers have about, "All right, class is going nuts. What'll we do now." Or, "Oh, I notice the energy sagging. What do we need to do to get the motivation up?" Or just an on the spot, in the middle of the lesson, maybe you feel it going [inaudible]. How do I shift my gears and think on my feet? [...] It's interesting how much of teaching can’t be taught or can't be trained.

[The students] help set up our classroom expectations. We start by identifying children's hopes and dreams, and after identifying their hopes and dreams for the year, then we get kids thinking about, ‘How does our classroom need to look, sound, and feel in order for everyone to achieve these hopes and dreams over the course of the year?’ [...] And you ask them first, “So, during quiet reading time, how should our classroom look?” And they'll say -- they'll give you their ideas. “How should it sound? How should it feel to be in our room during reading?”

One participant described how embracing a process-oriented style of teaching result organic learning opportunities, and discoveries that enhance both teacher and learner when they said:

...Part of that for me, though, and why I felt so innovative, is that, like, I don’t know what they are going to come to me with... like, “Okay, can we do this? And, I’ll be like, “I don’t know! But let's try!”

Creative teachers are inspired to be creative in a culture that values the professional accolades of its teachers; to be respected as a skilled, knowledgeable and experienced, and trusted to make didactic decisions. To teach in a creative way, creative teachers require encouragement to craft the unique delivery of curricula and also opportunities to work collaboratively as a team. Participants described the importance of individual trust and colloquial rigor to their professional innovation when they said:

I think the big part is that I get inspired when other teachers are getting excited with me, and then it makes me want to uphold to what their excitement is and help get there and help get it done. I mean, when I'm
going solo I get excited too, but I think it brings me up to a whole different level when there is someone else
with me collaborating.

Being allow to have the flexibility to collaborate with others and go off of an idea and not have to stick to,
like, “Okay, we’ve got to teach this math concept all at the same time,” which I know is the case with some
of my other colleagues that teach elsewhere. So, being allowed the flexibility... Being able to take off with
something. Like, it really domino-ed into cool projects.

The ethos of the school is this collaboration. We really work in teams. For example, last year four of the
[teachers] spent -- we were approved for three days to update and refine some of our [units]. We also
created two new ones and did something thinking about how we were going to restructure our two-year
curriculum. So we spent three days doing that. One day we spent all together. The rest of the time we were
working independently and we would always come back for a little show and tell with our teammates.

Symbolic attributes of the teaching environment inspire creative instruction. These abstract attributes
stimulate thinking about exciting and engaging delivery of content, and trigger memories that recall creative
teaching moments. On the tour, one participant clarified the power of these intangible attributes when asked to
show places they felt professionally innovative. Stopping outside of a room and prompted to talk about it, they said,
“It’s symbolic. More than just a place.” The places creative teachers relate to professional innovation are important
because of what happened there. The participants generally identified places based on their memories of feeling
professionally connected and personally successful, and expressed being creatively driven by that nostalgia.

Finally, creative teachers reference the physical attributes of the space to less enjoyable experiences;
disliking their job and feeling creatively challenged or limited. One participant illustrated the complex role of the
physical environment to professional innovation this when they identified a large multi-purpose room as a place they
associate with feeling creatively uninspired. They said:

Natural light has a lot to do with it for me and I don’t know, this looks more institutional. This piece feels
like they’ve done great things in terms of cheering it up, but the other spaces...again, are still kind of
quirky and sort of light-filled and kind of personal and you can see aspects of workmanship – and so here,
it just doesn’t have the sense of... it’s not polished. It’s not warm. [...] Sometimes we use creativity to
like... How do you make the best out of a bad situation? Get creative. Make Lemonade out of lemons. So,
there is that element of creativity, and there’s the element of when you say innovative... It seems to me
more like the kind of pure creativity. Like, given anything, what would you do? [...] You’re just trying to
figure out what’s the best way to do this under these circumstances. And it’s not always negative, but it’s
not usually like a blank palette. It’s usually more like, these are the constraints, and so what can I do?

Discussion

Building off of existing knowledge about creative teaching and teachers, this research synthesizes the
experiences of creative teachers and their perceptions of professional innovation. The findings of this study are
important to understanding the relationship between the creative teacher, creative praxis, and the teaching
environment. They suggest indicators of creative teachers, and elements in the teaching environment that matter for
teaching to happen.

Creative teachers share similarities when asked to talk about professional innovation; they share a
constructivist style of approaching their work, and assume a proactive role within their professional community.
They associate professional innovation with grabbing opportunities to synthesize learning, teaching, and knowledge
acquisition as a unified, symbiotic experience. This study suggests that while creative teachers have the aptitude to
be creatively expressive in practice, the actuality of teaching in a creative way is informed and sometimes thwarted
by the environment. This study highlights the complexities of the teaching environment, and suggests the
multivariate degree of attributes that relate to creative action. The findings contribute new knowledge about creative
teaching and the teaching environment that address the gap identified by Rubenstein, McCoach, and Siegle (2013)
Conclusion

Knowledge about creative teachers and their experiences putting creative instruction into practice can be used to identify and value the traits of creative teachers, and the decisions they make as professionals. This study provides evidence that creative teachers share similar perspectives about the structured aspects of their teaching environment. The anecdotes of preserving constructivist values while navigating organizational constraints are comparable among the creative participants of this study. The experiences suggest that the teaching environment plays an important role in negotiating creative expression.

The aim of this work is to learn what aspects of the teaching environment activate or discourage them to teach in a creative way, and to use this knowledge to develop more extensive investigations. This work can be expanded to learn more about what substantiates a professional ethos where teachers feel autonomous to exercise creative practice. This work can also inspire future studies to learn more about the physical and abstract attributes of the teaching environment, and the contributions of place and space to inspiring professional innovation.

Although this study focuses on the experiences of measurably creative teachers, the longitudinal goal of this work is to understand what inspires all teachers to be creative teachers.

References