Researching Creative Learning:
A Review Essay

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Introduction

The publication of *Researching Creative Learning: Methods and Issues*, edited by Pat Thomson and Julian Sefton-Green, is timely considering the increased international interest in creativity in education. Governments around the globe are looking to schools to educate the creative individuals needed for the 21st century knowledge economies that will keep each nation competitive in the global marketplace. This is despite the apparent contradiction of an emphasis on standardized curriculum, especially in the United States and Great Britain. In the US, the recent report from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, *Re-Investing in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools* (2011),

puts creativity in the spotlight with arts education as a primary vehicle for American economic success. This goal is stated clearly in the executive summary:

> In order to effectively compete in the global economy, business leaders are increasingly looking for employees who are creative, collaborative and innovative thinkers. A greater investment in the arts is an effective way to equip today's students with the skills they will need to succeed in the jobs of tomorrow. (p. 1)

The report advocates for increased arts integrated curriculum in schools and a greater role for teaching-artists among its recommendations. Whether this report will have an actual impact on federal and state education policy remains to be seen. The UK, however, has been a forerunner in instituting creativity in education with its national organization, Creativity, Culture & Education, which funds the Creative Partnerships program. It is fitting, then, that this edited volume focuses on creative learning especially as documented in England. The emphasis of the book, however, is not on describing creative learning programs, but on methods and issues related to researching creative learning. As the editors explain, "This book aims to offer researchers with aspirations to work in this field access to both a range of methods and ways of making sense of findings in order to help cement the integrity of creative learning as a research field" (p. 2). With this focus the book makes a needed contribution to the literature in creativity studies as well as research methodology, and gives the book international relevance. It complements the *International Handbook of Creative Learning* to be published by Routledge in 2011 (also edited by Thomson and Sefton-Green as well as Ken Jones and Liora Bresler), which includes a comprehensive exploration of models of creative learning and its assessment across subjects.

Another important contribution of the book is the definition of creative learning put forth and the assertion that creative learning occurs not only in arts education, but across the curriculum. In the first chapter, the Introduction, the editors define creative learning as:

> …teaching that allows students to use their imaginations, have ideas, generate multiple possible solutions to problems, communicate in a variety of media and in general 'think outside the box'. They [educators] may also mean practices in which children and young people show that they have the capacities to assess and improve work, sustain effort on a project for a long period of time, exceed what they thought was possible and work well with others to combine ideas and approaches that allow young people to apply their creativity through making choices about what and how they will learn, negotiating about curriculum and involvement in generating possibilities for and making decisions about school priorities and directions. (p. 2)

With this definition, one can see how the arts can provide fertile ground for creative learning, but the use of the imagination, multimodal communication, project-based work, self-assessment, collaboration, and student self-direction may occur in any school subject, and, importantly, through the experience of creative learning students can gain the intellectual and emotional maturity to contribute to designing the kind of education they need and desire.

Since the book focuses on research, it is appropriate and quite useful that the editors outline historical views of childhood, creativity and related epistemologies in the Introduction. This chapter also provides a clear description of the evolution of creative learning as a part of the national curriculum in Great Britain, especially the work of Creative Partnerships, which facilitates partnerships between arts professionals, architects, scientists and schools (The final chapter of the book, Chapter 17, discusses the research and evaluation program of Creative Partnerships.).

After the Introduction, the book is divided into three parts. Part 1 explores the question "What are the practices of creative learning?" with an emphasis on practitioner and participatory research methodologies. This section includes multiple perspectives on practitioner research, from a principal who was also the researcher of creative learning in his school and utilized students as co-researchers (Chapter 2 by John Churchley) to the challenges of facilitating action research with teachers (Chapter 5 interview with Pat Cochrane and Pete McGuigan) and artists (Chapter 4 by Emily Pringle).

Part 2 asks the question "Can researchers 'see' creative learning and can their research help others to 'see' it?" This section centers on innovative uses of visual research methods, such as the method of asking students to create scrapbooks in a media education project (Chapter 9 by Sara Bragg). The visual methods, however, are also metaphorical, meaning not only using photography, video, drawing, or collage, but also creating verbal portraits and snapshots of case studies (Chapter 12 by Christine Hall, Ken Jones and Pat Thomson), as well as creating visual models of statistical data and "seeing" creativity in systems and networks (Chapter 11 by Erica McWilliam, Shane Dawson and Jennifer Pei-Ling Tan).

Part 3 implicitly addresses the relationship of research and evaluation to policy and advocacy. It asks the question "Can creative learning be measured and evaluated?" In this section, the methodologies addressed in the book further expand, for example in the thorough review of quantitative research presented in Chapter 14 (by Mark Runco, Nur Çayirdağ and Selçuk Acar) which looks at descriptive, correlational, causal-comparative, experimental, historiometric, and psychometric studies of creativity. This section also documents mixed methods approaches to conducting evaluation, so as to address funders' needs for documenting impact and the researchers' and participants' concern for studying the processes

of meaningful engagement in creative learning (e.g., see Chapter 15 by Tony Cotton and Chapter 17 by David Parker and Naranee Ruthra-Rajan).

These three sections are interspersed with chapters that present interviews with various stakeholders in the creative learning field. The interviews shed light on the experience of researching creative learning, whether in terms of a specific methodology, such as the interview with Kathleen Gallagher discussing her use of ethnography (Chapter 7), or being on the other side of the research relationship as in the interview with a principal about the experience of his school being the focus of a major research study (Chapter 3). In this way, the book presents a holistic consideration of the issues involved in researching creative learning.

By way of concluding, I return to the Introduction, and the historical overview of the representation of creativity and creative learning, in which the editors identify two dominant views in contemporary discourses, what they call key drivers for the interest in creativity in education: instrumental uses of the arts (e.g., for improved academic achievement) and the demands of the creative (or knowledge) economy (p. 5). These drivers reflect particular aims for education (e.g., jobs training), which the editors acknowledge without making judgments. Also in this first chapter, in discussing constructivism as a common denominator in the epistemological stance of researchers of creative learning, the editors acknowledge the presence of varying degrees of criticality and poststructuralist epistemology as well. I appreciated the editors' even discussion of the varying paradigms researchers may operate under, as ontological and epistemological stances influence the kinds of questions a researcher might ask.

In addition to the two main drivers identified in this chapter, there is a third driver that is emerging from within arts and general education that operates under a social reconstructionist paradigm, and encourages creative learning for the potentially ameliorative social outcomes of creativity (e.g., Craft, 2008; Freedman, 2007; Zimmerman, 2009). This reflects an educational aim focused on the cultivation of democratic citizens of the world, what Banks called global citizenship (2004), who may seek to work not primarily for economic competition, but for pressing social and environmental issues.

The questions addressed in this book "…what counts as evidence of creative learning, how effective initiatives might be and what difference the concept makes both in practice and in terms of what it makes possible in education" (p. 1) leave open the possibility of studying creative learning from this third viewpoint. This book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on research methodology, providing insightful and productive guidance on how creative learning might be studied and documented with diverse educational aims in mind.

References

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About the Author

Tracie Costantino is an Associate Professor of Art Education at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on the nature of cognition in the arts, creativity, and the transformative potential of aesthetic experience as an educative event. Her interest in interdisciplinary curriculum and creative learning has been supported by funding from the National Science Foundation for a collaborative project integrating art and engineering at the undergraduate level. In addition to numerous published articles and book chapters, recent work related to the transformative potential of aesthetic experience was published in the book Costantino co-edited with Boyd White, *Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century* (Sense Publishers, 2010).

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