Not Those Seven Annoying Dwarfs – Again!
Collective Creativity in Children's Artistic Production

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Abstract

In 2008, as I conducted my first art education project with 6-year-olds, I was disappointed with their lack of creativeness, which for me back then represented solely individual originality. The seven annoyingly familiar dwarfs that were mining did not fit into my understanding of children's visionary imagination. Since then, and largely because of Christen Marmé Thompson's work and writings, I now understand the value of cultural influences in children's collective creativity and social imagination. The communal meaning-making, collective process of producing art, and children's unofficial interests now seem scientifically and artistically interesting, even when the source material for children's artistic production might be found from a demonized popular culture. This article examines the paradigm of collective creativity and the assemblage of influences in children's artistic production.

Introduction

In 2008, as a novice researcher of childhood, I conducted a theatre production with my colleague Lea Pennanen and a group of Finnish preschoolers. As the children started to produce manuscripts for the theatre performances, I dreamed of creativeness, which for me at that time, represented individual originality (Renner, 2011; Runco, 2004). My disappointment was substantial as the manuscripts mostly included everyday episodes and characters of popular culture. There were the seven dwarfs mining (see Figure 1), and the most creative aspect seemed to be that after a hard day at work they travelled to England.
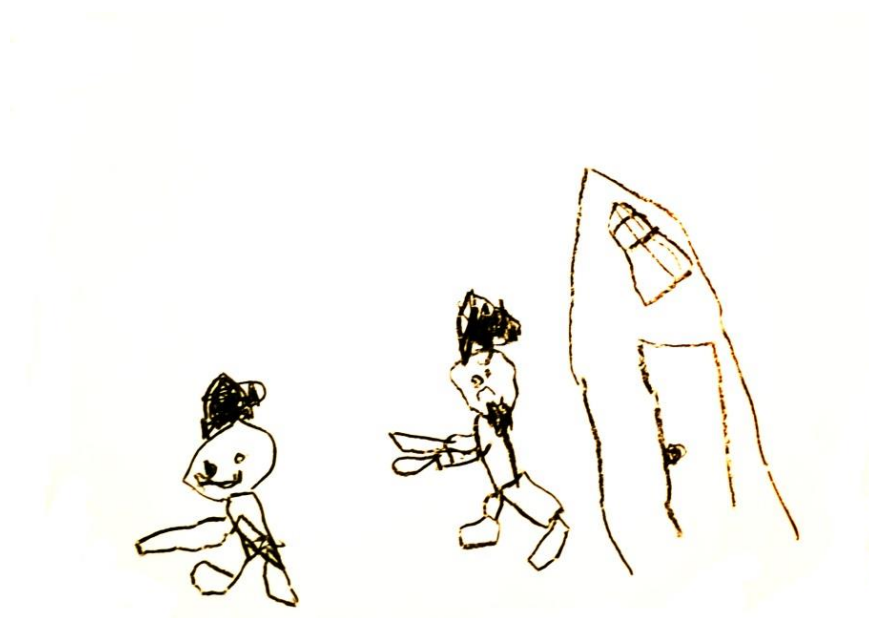

Figure 1. Finnish preschooler has drawn the dwarf characters, Grumpy and Dopey, he is going to act as in the theatre performance.

Little did I understand of children's culture and of creativity back then. I did not realize that when children are given a chance to create whatever they want, they often choose to copy one another or to reshape the imagery of commercial culture (Thompson, 2003). That is to say, peer culture and popular culture are great influences in children's artistic productions, and there is not much point in assessing value based on "individuality" or the lack of it. Peer and popular imagery do not only repeat themselves in children's work, but are also interpreted and reshaped.

Once I began to view children's creativity as collaborative and collective processes, my mindset towards the seven dwarfs started to change. The dwarfs began to represent the popular culture that inspires children, feeds their hungry imagination, and enables them to

collectively reshape cultural material that is familiar for them all.[1] In retrospect, the theatre manuscript that included the dwarfs no longer seemed a dull reproduction, but instead a revelation of how characters in popular culture may be re-imagined and re-interpreted by children.

In this article, I begin with a story of my earlier understanding of children's creative work before explaining how paradigms of individual creativity and collective creativity have been, and are present, within philosophy. This contextualizes the shift in my thoughts from creativity's individual originality towards its communal nature. Then, I will extend the theme of collective creativity by reflecting on the role of peers in children's collaborative artmaking (Thompson 1990; 2003; 2006; 2009; 2015). I demonstrate ideas with photographs from two different research data. The first visual data was gathered from theatre production in Finnish preschool in 2008 and another one from Saturday Art School in State College (PA), the US, in 2015. I conclude with implications for fostering individual and collective creativity.

Memories of the Seven Dwarfs

In 2008, two years before I met Dr. Christine Marmé Thompson and became familiar with her work, my fellow researcher and I organized a theatre production with a Finnish kindergarten group. Our goal was to make children's culture public and visible instead of it remaining hidden within childhood institutions. For this reason, the 6-week project culminated in a public and advertised performance. Two groups of children created manuscripts, rehearsed, and finally acted on a public stage. Adults helped the children along the way: they transcribed children's storytelling into manuscripts, organized rehearsals, helped children to choose and create music and props, and acted as directors. Children named one theatre piece "Three Million Lions", and the other "Crazyball". The seven dwarfs I mentioned in the introduction of this paper were part of the latter. From my adult point of view, the manuscript creation, with the group of children, seemed full of challenges. At first, the children did not agree on what their theatre piece was supposed to be about: two boys wanted it to deal with a worm that had a potato head and a table made of potatoes, all the girls wanted it to include lynxes, and one boy wanted it to involve Disney's version of the seven dwarfs. As they started to create the story plot, the children were stuck with their own favorite characters and ignored the others. The result seemed like an unintelligent mishmash. I was most frustrated with the

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[1] Of course, not all children do have equal access to popular culture: for social inequalities of gender, generation and socioeconomic status among children, see Bühler-Niederberger & van Krieken (2008); for family habitus as a cultural context for childhood, see Tomanović (2004); and for how institutional practices of child culture intertwine with class and age, see Sparrman, Samuelsson, Lindgren & Cardell (2016).

seven dwarfs, because, at the time, that part of the story seemed like a poor, unoriginal repetition of Disney's version of the fairy tale Snow White.[2]

The seven dwarfs I was disappointed with are related to what Thompson (2006) referred to as "ket aesthetics" (p. 32–33; 2003, p. 143) and children's "unofficial interests" (2003, p.14; 2006, p. 35). Extending the work of James (1998), who considered the distance between child and adult culture, Thompson (2003; 2006) suggests that children draw characters and events that are, for adults, unsettling, bizarre, rubbish, junk, and discomforting. Sometimes the drawings children make are also shockingly hideous and extremely violent (Thompson, 2015). The concepts of child culture and children's culture are loaded with paradoxical assumptions: on one hand, children's culture seems inherently good and helps to solve social problems, but on the other hand, children's culture is seen as dangerous and something children should be protected from (Sparrman, Samuelsson, Lindgren & Cardell, 2016). It may also be perceived by adults as commercial, superficial, and foolish. Therefore, adults often dismiss children's cultural interests, as I did in 2008, when considering children's manuscript of the seven familiar dwarfs as commercial and clichéd.

I now understand that the influences of popular culture should be taken into consideration as we try to understand contemporary childhoods and children's life experiences (Thompson, 2006). Thompson's body of work demonstrates that instead of trying to read children's drawings as if they are "psychic electrocardiograms" (Thompson, 2015, p. 554), it is more interesting and beneficial to observe the actual process of drawing, to comprehend how the image is created, and how the influences of peers and popular culture are intertwined in the activity of drawing. The dwarfs that were mining, as I now see it, do not represent merely the "junk"[3] of commercial culture but also the mediums of communal self-expression and meaning making. The researchers of children's popular culture, Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2002), have stated, that the status and construction of popular culture is linked with the status of childhood. What Thompson (1990; 2003; 2006; 2009; 2015) does in her research, as I see it, is critically discusses both of those entities, childhood and popular culture, in a way that gives them unembellished value.

Unofficial interests and ket aesthetics are quite often linked with the popular culture and viewed as unacceptable to adults. Thompson (2003; 2006; 2015) observed that the art produced by children participating in preschool and kindergarten included influences of

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[2] Originally "Snow White" appeared in Grimm's fairy tales (1812). Disney's version is called "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937).

[3] Quite often the reception for (children's) popular culture is critical, see Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002.

Pokemon characters, evil witches, and even incidents from the serial killer series *Dexter*. These intertextual references reveal how essential popular culture is for children as they try to make sense of the world, of others, and of themselves. Furthermore, the global transaction of images, imaginary characters, and other creative goods expose how fantasy, capitalism, and globalism are linked (Allison, 2006). Shani Orgad (2012) explaines, for example, how images and other cultural products constantly feed the ways in which we imagine the world. We could speak of "the social imaginary" (Orgad, 2012, pp. 41–42), which as a concept, could be easily linked with the paradigm of collective creativity.

Individual and Collective Creativity

In philosophical discourse, the paradigms of individual creativity and collective creativity have varied (see Renner, 2011). At first, the focus was not in the individual, but on other actors involved. Aristotle's mimesis valued the imitation of nature, and during the Christian Middle Age the god was the creator through craftspeople. The idea of individual, creative artists rose not until during the late Renaissance. Creativity as a concept was recorded in print in English as late as 1875 (Fischer & Vassen 2011). In contemporary art practices, two paradigms of creativity still exist: the autonomous artist with individual artistic process and the collective artist with the acts of participation, interaction, and collaboration (Gyotte, Sochacka, Costantino, Kellam & Walther, 2015). However, outside of the context of individual subjects, creativity is less frequently discussed and addressed (Bedetti, 2015).

Some contemporary concepts related to the idea of creativity take into account both individual and collective qualities. Such concepts humanize creativity, which refers to the process of change and development of ideas through shared and negotiated values (Chappell, Craft, Rolfe & Jobbins, 2012). Indeed, creativity should not be seen simplistically as individual nor collective – the question is not either/or. Creativity does not unfold "solely individually or collectively, but only in a mutual interplay" (Renner, 2011, p. 13). What Renner's (2011) historical analysis also reveals, is that the paradigms of individual and collective creativity have varied, as mutually dependent, so that the paradigm of individuality is followed by its self-annihilation and paradigm of collectivity by a repressive system of censorship.

The idea of collaborative creativity places emphasis on intersubjectivity and components of process rather than final product (Guyotte et al., 2015). It is also related to the study of creativity as social phenomenon. Katherine Giuffre (2009) noticed, how creativity happens at many levels: at macro levels such as at the level of culture or subculture and at micro levels such as at the level of a group or an individual. Even the individual level offers opportunity to analyze social features. For instance, the researcher could ask, how the creative individual is embedded in social relationships that enhance or constrict creativity (Giuffre, 2009).

While Thompson does not name collective creativity as a concept, she none-less describes children's culture and artmaking from this perspective. In her work, Thompson (1990; 2003; 2006; 2009; 2015) describes collective production through vivid examples of children drawing together in preschool classrooms. There she describes how the immediate influence of peers affects the content, styles, and skills of their drawings. When drawing together, children exchange roles in order to collaborate with one another (Thompson, 2003) and create meaning in dialogue with peers and adults (Thompson, 2006).

Collective Creativity in Children's Art-making

For more than a decade, Thompson coordinated and studied (2003; 2006) children's art activities in Saturday School, a community based program and advanced practicum for pre-service art teachers, sponsored by the School of Visual Arts at the Pennsylvania State University. The 9-weeks of art classes, taught by advanced practicum art education students, are offered every autumn and spring for children ages 4 to 18 who "explore ideas and materials with advanced art education majors" (Saturday School, 2017). In Saturday Art School, every class begins with 20 minutes of sketchbook time when children are free to draw whatever they want to in their sketchbooks.[4] In the midst of carefully pedagogically planned, imaginative, and inspiring activities, Thompson (2003; 2006) focused research attention on this aspect. Rather than concentrating on the products of children's drawing, Thompson (2015) is "fascinated by the life of the classroom" and her interest lie in "the process of drawing as a gerund, a performance" and "the intensities of social interaction that belied accounts of drawing in childhood as a solitary and silent activity (p. 554).

I participated in Saturday School activities as a researcher and co-learner in the spring semester 2015, during my time as a visiting scholar at Penn State. In 2015, the 9-week curriculum and activities for 6-year-old classroom were composed around the big idea (see Walker, 2001) of superheroes. During the art school, children for example invented a secret superhero identity for themselves, decorated masks and capes, created architectural structures representing hidden lairs of superheroes, and learned how to create a superhero comic. In the end of the curriculum, children created a superhero movie[5] - with a little the help of adults, who filmed, edited, and acted along.

In Saturday School, it was common to observe the collaborative art making made familiar from Thompson's (2003; 2006; 2015) writings. Not only did children voluntarily negotiate

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[4] Thompson (2006) speaks of children's "voluntary" drawings: the structures are made by adults but the children have as much freedom as possible as it comes to the decision of medium, scale elaboration, and subject matter.
[5] The movie is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPuSUPW7p0U.

and produce works of art together, the ownership of final products was not essential and no one seemed to be interested in discussing property rights. What seemed important, instead, was the process of creating something unpredictable and adventurous together. Following the curricular task to design a superhero cartoon, for example Luna and Mackenzie abandoned their individual work to create a storyline together (see Figure 2). Together they drew storms and villain attack as their new, mutual storyline proceeded in their talk. They took turns to tell the story and to draw simultaneously. One continued another's ideas. Occasionally the girls drew together – usually when something visually messy, such as storm, was happening in the plot. The imaginary chaos lured Luna and Mackenzie to unite their drawing capacities and to create a dramatic, vibrant comic panel.

Figure 2. Girls are drawing a collaborative cartoon at Saturday School.

After observing and analyzing free drawing situations, Thompson (2003) noticed how children felt pride after a peer copied their work and how intensively they engaged in collaborative art making processes. Thompson's approach to children's drawings does not fit into a historically popular paradigm which views children's drawings in object-oriented ways (see Ivashkevich, 2009), nor does it reinforce the myth of children's inherent creativity (see McClure, 2011), but instead notices the sociocultural aspects of a drawing event. Thompson observed how talk is intimately bound to the creation of art (1990) and how an assemblage of influences became visible in a drawing event (2015). This makes the social and cultural contexts of children's creative processes visible. Like the superheroes of the Saturday School

classroom, creation does not happen in an artificial void but in the middle of complex social relations and multiple peer and popular culture influences.

Conclusion

I have indicated here, how Christine Marmé Thompson's writings (1990; 2003; 2006; 2009; 2015) helped me to understand the value of any kind of dwarf in children's artistic production. Thompson (2015) has repeatedly demonstrated in her work how drawing events can be seen as "an assemblage of influences coming together in particular moments" (p. 554). This kind of perspective emphasizes the paradigm of collective creativity, which stresses collaboration, process, and sociocultural aspects instead of underlining the significance of a creative, original individual.

In our neoliberal society and global economy, the demand for creative thinkers is increasing and the business of creativity flourishes (Bühler-Niederberger, 2015; Fischer & Vassen, 2011). There is demand for both creative individuals and for those who can flourish in creative social processes. However, creativity, collective and individual, does not flourish in all kinds of pedagogical settings. The voluntary drawing sessions that Thompson (2003; 2006; 2009; 2015) attends to in her research, emerge from pedagogical settings that cherish collective creativity and freedom of choices. The settings also celebrate and treasure children's peer and popular culture as children are allowed to switch places, to collaborate with whom they want in the classroom, to discuss, and to freely use their social contexts. Cultures are understood as open resources grounded in children's interests that support children in their collective negotiations and expressions. While artistic products might be violent, kitsch, and unsettling for adults, they represent genuine connections to children's real, everyday lives. Thus, creating pedagogical spaces where individual and collective creativity can flourish requires that we welcome children's unofficial interests, including ket aesthetics, as part of pedagogy and curriculum (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Christine Marmé Thompson, a.k.a. Tina, reads with the children during Saturday School.

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