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Creativity and identity

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between creativity through the arts in education and considers the development of a grounded and positive sense of identity. It acknowledges that creativity in itself does not have any particular moral value, and seeks to problematise the assumed relationship between creativity and positive development. It then examines, through four cases studies, ways in which drama has been used creatively to construct positive and effective, albeit particular, understandings of identity. Working through ways of interacting cross-culturally, and addressing personal and social issues in a colonised society, it offers a challenge for education. Through discussion and analysis of the case studies and the values they expose, it examines the implications of creativity and the value laden nature of concepts of identity for classroom teaching.

Introduction and focus of this article

In an educational climate that seems to increasingly value quantitative measures of performativity and achievement, it is important to assert the importance of learning outcomes that are less easily quantifiable but significant for personal and social development. Those of us who are artists and educators in the arts know the ways the processes of art making involve a range of learnings, both planned and unexpected, and the way they lead to valuable new understandings, not all of which can be verbalised, far less measured. Our advocacy for the value of arts in education might tempt us to make sweeping claims for the importance of creativity and for the ways engagement with creative processes leads to discovery, growth and wellbeing. This article supports the argument that creativity through the arts does provide a valuable medium for learning and for developing a grounded and useful sense of identity. It does, however, seek to problematise the link between creativity and positive development.

Like others in this issue, this article grows out of the 2008 *World Creativity Summit* in Taipei, which brought together researchers and leading practitioners in arts education and forged a new World Alliance of Arts Educators. One of the several tasks of the summit was to examine the role of arts education in confronting important social and environmental problems. In particular the summit had nominated four themes: water, home, identity and employment. In a series of keynotes practitioners from each of the four art fields represented in the new alliance (visual arts, music, drama and dance) examined how the creativity involved in the art forms of their field, and its teaching, contributes to finding solutions to issues in the four guiding themes. It was my role to explore the relationship between creativity, drama/theatre education, and identity.

The following discussion develops from that original presentation and from consequent dialogues that took place during and after the summit. It presents four case studies of how creativity through the arts, and particularly in drama, has been used in education to construct concepts of identity. In the process it examines the relationship, or lack of relationship, between creativity *per se* and desirable outcomes, the complexity of constructs of identity, the intricate inter-relations between concepts, art and artist, and implications some of these issues have for teachers.

Situating this discussion: context and authorial position

Before addressing the case studies it is useful to begin a discussion of identity with an acknowledgement of my own position (multifaceted and open to contestation as well as explicitly owned) as teacher and researcher.

A recent photograph in our local newspaper foregrounded a space station with suited astronauts floating as they worked around its platform. Below them were wisps of clouds, and through their finely carded white strands one can see the curving shore of the South Island of New Zealand and the peninsula, which nestles Christchurch, the city where my university and current home are located. The image speaks of the relationship between local and global. The space station invokes a sense of large-scale international enterprise, but the mountains and sea it hovers over are not geographically neutral; they are the familiar landscape of home. The juxtaposition highlights the grounding of the global in the local. This discussion is embedded in the local context of Aotearoa[1] New Zealand, where each of the case studies has taken place and where I work as an arts educator and researcher. The view from the satellite station constructs New Zealand as part of something bigger, part of our blue-green planet earth. So too this discussion is seen as having a relevance that reaches beyond the local, in part because I believe that these case studies will strike resonances with other local contexts in different parts of the world, and in part because the changes of awareness, of heart perhaps, that might be needed to ensure our blue-green planet survives, and provides a home for us in the coming years, will need to occur at local contextualised levels, as well as what might be planned and agreed globally.

The four case studies that inform this discussion have been reported in various degrees of detail elsewhere (Sutherlin & Greenwood, 2008; Greenwood & Wilson, 2006; Greenwood, 2009; Te Aika & Greenwood, 2009). In each case the methodological approach to the investigation was a qualitative one, using methods of reflective practice (Taylor, 1996), learning space ethnography (Donelan, 2005) and co-construction of narratives (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) to record, analyse and report the decisions concerning teaching design, the critical episodes in the development of an interactive and engaged learning situation, and the progression of engagement in the learning. This discussion does not re-present the original data. Rather it follows a model of re-analysis of earlier case studies (Handelman, 1990) in order to further tease out their implications for the current theme.

Creativity, ethics, and some implications for teachers in the arts

The UNESCO *Road Map for Arts Education* declares that "universal education, of good quality, is essential" but stipulates that "this education, however, can only be good quality if, through Arts Education, it promotes the insights and perspectives, the creativity and initiative, and the critical reflection and occupational capacities which are so necessary for life in the new century" (UNESCO, 2006). It does not further define creativity or the processes through which it might operate.

Creativity is variously construed in the literature. For instance, Fisher (2004) focuses on aspects of generation, variation, originality. Mooney (1963) identifies four primary factors in the operation of creativity. Csikszentmihaly (1990) focuses on the 'flow' that characterises creativity. O'Farrell, Sæbø, McCammon and Heap (2009) invite us to scrutinise "romantic, elitist and mystifying" concepts of creativity in relation to theories of learning and educational policy. Their research is motivated by

the way a number of European and global education systems are hailing 'creativity' in classroom teaching as a means to improve international rankings and they set out to investigate how teachers in classrooms interpret creativity and the extent to which they are enabled in their school settings to be creative.

For the purposes of beginning this discussion a working definition of creativity might be made in terms of 'thinking new' and 'making new'. These are processes that are often lauded as means for saving our society and perhaps our planet from a range of ills. However, it is important to acknowledge that creativity in itself is not necessarily a 'good' thing. History tells us that processes of new thinking and making do not necessarily solve global problems: in fact it may cause many of them.

For example the internet, that great act of creativity that is not yet two decades old, generates a suffocating amount of email that devours several hours of each working day, for me and most other academics. At a still more serious level, the creation of a process to derive fuel from corn is already increasing the price and decreasing the availability of food; it may over time cause wide global famine. The development of nuclear and biological weaponry, the manipulation of markets and trading of financial futures, the creation of artificial needs through advertising are all familiar demonstrations of how creative processes have served greed and desire for power.

In terms of identity, current affairs and our histories record a number of creative conceptualisations that have lead to significant harm, such as identifying the "Great Satan", naming the "war on terror", constructing "the final solution", and, at the basis of colonisation, identifying huge portions of our planet as "terra nullius." We find that creativity has been used to instigate racial hatred, construct colonialism, and to exploit people for profit. Creativity in itself has no moral value.

However, given the problems in our world, non-creativity, in the classroom or in the wider world, is not an option. Non-creativity implies an acceptance of the status quo, a conformity in thinking and in action; and conformity is a form of complicity. We need to be creative in order to challenge the uses of creativity for profit or for harm, to construct concepts of identity that lead to personal and social wellbeing, and interpersonal and global collaboration.

The challenge for us as teachers is to be creative in forging ways for our young people to be creative. In this context, a model of the teacher as facilitator is not enough—it is perhaps too passive a role. I will argue that receiving and guiding students' ideas is a valuable element in developing a creative learning context, but teachers need to develop strategies, and have the underlying awareness and knowledge, to influence the direction of the creative undertaking. At this stage I am not sure of a better word for the role.

In the examples that follow I will examine a number of different ways in which drama has been used creatively to construct positive and effective, albeit particular, understandings of identity. I will then further explore the value loaded nature of concepts of identity and its implications for teaching.

Case Study 1: breaking the socio-economic barrier

The first example is a performance, *A Child is Born,* devised by Maran Sutherlin with her students. Maran works in a school that is located in a low socio-economic community in New Zealand. In some parts of the community there is a backdrop of gang prospecting, unemployment, violence, and academic indifference.

At a particular time Maran's students came to drama class shocked by a recent story of an infant's death from family violence, wanting to work with it. Maran agreed to make it the theme of production work that would be assessed for NCEA, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement that constitutes New Zealand's examination system at senior high school levels. The task became the devising and public performance of a play.

At the risk of oversimplification, Maran's task as teacher involved developing strategies that allowed students to explore the complexities of the problem, and introducing dramatic forms that would avoid 'a shock-horror' approach. She needed to create a safe space that would allow students to take on and again shed potentially disturbing roles. She sought to structure/co-structure processes that would allow students to see differently and be differently. She brought in community agencies who deal with the risk of family violence to work with the students in problem analysis, and the community as a whole to respond to the performed work. The project as a whole is described elsewhere (Sutherlin & Greenwood, 2008); here I will address the relationship of the work to concepts of identity.

Through the play making process students explored identity at a number of levels. Initially, in choosing the theme of family violence to children, the students made it clear that they positioned themselves well aside from such acts and the mindsets that lead to them. Some parts of the final performed play reflect the authorial stance that allowed them to place themselves outside the problem and critique and condemn the recurring instances of violence to children. As their work progressed, however, they began to explore how the socio-economic community in which they live is constructed by society. This lead to scenes that portrayed patterns of learned violence within a family and others that showed how a parent's frustration at work and final loss of his job led to increasing aggression at home as his sense of self worth was eroded. They began to understand the wider implications and triggers of violence, and that it occurs not only in the overt acts in which it breaks out physically, but also in the latent injustices and disenfranchisements that occur at a daily level. They began to understand that identity is forged as well as being to some degree inherent.

One of the final decisions the students made was to create a split stage set: the larger section looked like a living room of an average family in their community, frugal but clean and tidy with family photos on the wall; the other part was covered with strongly blocked street graffiti. Both elements suggest a semiotic that places the actors/ writers right inside the problem: this is a community of which they are a part. At the same time it allowed them to show how they wanted to play out their own future roles within the community. The work shows the father figure trapped within a cycle of abuse that he has not initiated and that he only dimly understands. On the one hand the work as a whole denounces the abuse; on the other it looks for ways to help the father struggle out of his trap. When the lights finally focus on the graffiti and allow the audience to read it, it was seen to read: *break the cycle*.

At another level, the process of making the play, allowed the students to experiment with the roles they take in the classroom, with sharing power and its consequences. Maran reported how the students' attitudes to attendance and their engagement in class changed as they developed their passion for creating their work: "they achieved because they cared about the work they were producing, they saw its relevance to themselves and to their community. They were passionate about their own performance and resolute in keeping each other up to the mark" (Sutherlin & Greenwood, 2008). They had begun to explore their personal identity as makers of ideas, rather than simply as recipients.

On the second night by pre-arrangement the community workers opened a forum where the audience shared their opinions and spoke with the actors. "It was amazing," Maran wrote in a report later, "people stood up and spoke with their hearts. The parents of the students on stage talked about how they experienced the pressures of life and parenthood and used the work the students had offered as an important part of their discussion about the issues" (Sutherlin & Greenwood, 2008). The theatre was being used as forum where issues of importance to the community were being debated, and the students' voices were being treated as serious contributions to the debate. The students were re-inscribing their identity as engaged and respected participants in the community, with real opinions, concerns and hopes to contribute.

Case Study 2: rediscovering cultural identity

The second example addresses identity in a different context. It is an earlier long-term project directed by Arnold Wilson: *Te Mauri Pakeaka* (Greenwood & Wilson, 2006). The project began in 1975 at a time when New Zealand, while still projecting a public identity in which different races worked together harmoniously towards western ideals of progress, was beginning to be shocked into awareness of the needs and expectations of its Indigenous people, Māori. The education system, like other institutions, was predominantly monocultural in its philosophy and methods of operating. Over a number of years Arnold Wilson developed the project as a creative learning situation in which different groups within the wider education system, teachers, departmental administrators, students, families, elders, artists, members of the community, could work together to discover more about their own and each other's identity, and in the process allow their sense of identity to evolve with their new understandings.

After colonisation, the impact on the Indigenous people in New Zealand, Māori, was to make them marginalised in their own space, with a loss of language, of history, and of constructs of self-worth. The impact on immigrants was to permit them to be ignorant of pre-colonial history and of Māori values. *Te Mauri Pakeaka* brought schools, elders and artists together into Māori communal spaces to explore local history in order to create visual or performance artworks. For a week they worked, ate, relaxed and slept together on a marae, a Māori communal building, with each day unfolding according to Māori protocols of social encounter. The task for the week was for each of the involved schools to collaborate with the elders, artists and other members of the community to research a local history and to develop an artwork. The artwork was designed as a catalyst for a range of other learnings about values, history, aspirations, protocols, language and place to occur.

The creativity involved in this project might be considered from two points of view. Firstly, there is the creativity of the project's creation: the teacher's (in the broader sense of the word) creativity. Arnold Wilson had wanted to find a way of shifting the monocultural orientation of schooling that would be preferable to an approach of didactic teaching about Māori culture; he looked for the kind of experience that would involve the whole feeling, living person rather than just the mind. He was also aware that many different groups needed to learn simultaneously. Previous departmental courses with school principals had appeared successful at their completion, but the impetus generated had died when the participants went back into their schools. It was too hard to begin to shift teachers, students and parents all at once, and those in the Māori community who might have given support had often been alienated from the education system or had lost confidence in their power to influence what schools did. Many of the elders and parents too had been conceptually colonised and needed to reconnect with tribal lore. So the objective was to create a situation where Māori could explore and develop their Māori-ness, at the same time as non-Māori were feeling their way into living within a framework of Māori values and finding new ways of interacting. The live-in environment on a marae, temporarily assimilated into a Māori community with the support of Māori artists, elders and traditional scholars, allowed all the participants to learn at the same time, and to learn in ways that involved actions, interactions and emotions as well as intellectual discussion.

The creativity of the participants is the second consideration. The process of collaborative cross-cultural exploration provided strategies for the disruption of old ideas and for integration of apparently opposed ways of thinking. It gave permission for the participants to 'play'. They did indeed make art works (described in Greenwood & Wilson, 2006). In the process of making these they researched, listened, argued, experimented, moved out of their intellectual and emotional comfort zones, became vulnerable, became enthusiastic, discovered new ways of conceptualising the world and their own identity and, for the most part, began the process of re-forging themselves into a different sense of identity than they had come with.

Some of the new constructs of identity involved a sense of role: what it might mean to be a New Zealander within a country that defined itself in indigenous as well as in western terms; what it meant to be Māori and be confident that Māori knowledge and values were relevant within

education; how a school might see itself and the knowledge it sought to advance in terms of service to Māori as well as to European New Zealanders; what role Māori elders and community might play within mainstream education.

They also involved the development of new understandings of what a sense of identity could involve, informed by Māori perspectives. Identity was becoming construed as something that did indeed involve a sense of self, of 'me'; it also involved a sense of relationship to others, and particularly to history and family connections, of engagement with land and language, of alignment with shared values, and of an active role as a maker, an active agent of change.

Case Study 3: learning our story within history

The third example is also concerned with cultural identity, but here the context is a more intensive and recent workshop with one particular community in the far north of New Zealand. The workshop took place within a summer holiday project organised by a northern tribal social welfare agency and developed by Mariao Hohaia. Its broad objective was community development. Six rural, Northland, Māori communities committed their time to working with their young people and children to develop a drama that would be performed at the end of the project at the annual Tai Tokerau Festival. The play was to be about a history that was of key significance to the local people. The creative theatre impetus was to come from theatre practitioners who were allocated to each community, but the content and the wairua, or spiritual energy, were to be in the hands of the local elders. The plan was to involve Māori artists, but because there was a shortfall in numbers and because I had once taught the organiser, I was asked to work with the community at Takou Bay and to bring my own helpers. So we turned out to be the only non-Māori group in the project. An account of how we engaged with the cross-cultural challenges is recorded elsewhere (Greenwood & Wilson, 2006; Greenwood, 2009).

The children of Takou Bay came back to the beach each summer from homes in the local township, from Auckland and from overseas in Australia, for the most part from schools which were mainstream and western in their orientation. English was their language, although they all had a range of significant vocabulary in Māori. They did not know their tribal histories. The project was an opportunity to teach some of that history, and to teach it in a way that would be exciting, relevant to the children, and truthful to the value systems that give life to the story. It was seen as an opportunity to develop the children's sense of identity as descendants of that community and as the inheritors of the place, the values and history that the community held in trust for them.

Once again, engagement with creativity was multi-faceted. The overall project was a new way of approaching restorative justice. The different participants had to create ways of understanding and relating to each other. In particular they had to find ways of ensuring they understood each other's aspirations—reading well below the level of words—and they needed to find the search for the elements of story, of art form, of language and of embedded meaning that would resonate for the children and for the families who participated at various times. Finally the process of play-making, of devising a performance building on the ideas of all the participants was a creative venture.

The story the elders chose was the coming of Mataatua, the ancestral canoe, to Takou Bay. It is a story that shows the genealogical connections of that community not only to the other Northland communities but also to those of the Bay of Plenty, a region on the east of the North Island of New Zealand. It also explains the place names of the neighbouring coastline. It connects the bay and the people who live there to a founding ancestor. So, in the first instance the children were given a chance to explore and affirm their identity in terms of ancestry and relationships, and to claim pride in that identity.

The bay, with its golden beach, estuary, hills and valleys, was an integral part of story. In addition, our work took place there. Our exploratory exercises on the first day took place on the

beach with parents watching from the sand dunes. The dance of the canoe's voyage across the sea was choreographed at the edge of the breaking waves. When a storm forced us to evacuate the campsite we moved higher up on the land and worked in a grandmother's double garage. In this way the process of making as well as the story itself forged a sense of identity with the land and its bay.

As the devising and rehearsal process developed, the work was often arduous. Half way through the process we, the theatre workers, asked the children what they wanted from the process, and how much they were prepared to give. They asserted that they wanted their play to be good, so they would let us drive them. But they did not always find it easy to give full focus and to work segments over and over until they were strong. The work stretched them, perhaps more than their school work had, but they wanted to go on. A sense of their identity as workers, as self-critical and committed artists was developing. Performance to their families and community on the Friday night, and at the Festival on Saturday, confirmed their sense of pride in that identity. The sharing of the performance emphasised the children's place within the community. Their identity included belonging to those people, being supported by them, learning from them, and being able to surprise and delight them. They belonged.

Case Study 4: locating oneself in the story

The fourth case study is a reflection from my own teaching in a pre-service programme for drama teachers. There is an expectation that, among other topics, graduates will be able to teach New Zealand theatre, and will have a good understanding of the implications of biculturalism both in their general school practice (New Zealand Teachers' Council, 2009) and within the context of drama (Te Aika & Greenwood, 2009). The great majority of our student teachers are non-Māori, and while some are now leaving school with a keen awareness and respect for Māori culture, many still have only a very rudimentary knowledge of Māori language, custom, belief systems, history, and of the expectation of them as teachers in schools that are now required to report specifically on the achievement of Māori students as well as on overall student achievement outcomes. Some are enthusiastic to learn more; some carry baggage.

For a number of years, I gave an assignment that asked students to use an i-movie format to relate their theoretical understandings of postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism to teaching drama in a bicultural context, with particular reference to a Māori play they had studied, such as *Waiora* (Kouka, 1997) or *Purapurawhaetu* (Grace-Smith, 1999). In the assignment brief they were asked to position themselves in terms of the material they were studying: their reactions and the challenges it presented. The use of i-movie took away the pressures and the safety net of academic discourse, and called for the students to engage with the material and their own reactions more creatively. They rose to the artistic challenge in a range of ways. What is important to this discussion is the way in which the creative challenge asked them to engage with their sense of identity, as New Zealanders, as prospective teachers and as emergent researchers.

It was my hope that the process of considering their own identity in terms of the play they were examining, and the students they expected to work with, would help them better recognise difference, and begin to understand that research, creative practice and teaching are all activities that involve the do-er, as well as the work and the students.

The process asked students to step outside the space in which they had be able to regard themselves, the plays they studied, and my lectures as fixed entities, and consider ways in which the inter-relation between them created a sense of fluidity, potential change, and the possibility of temporary theorisations. For many of them it was a breakthrough to realise that "I think" and "I like" are constructs, shaped by a number of factors, and to a greater or lesser extent in a state of flux. Situating themselves within the research also allowed students to identify and acknowledge areas of discomfort or ignorance, knowing that these were situational and not necessarily permanent.

A further look at the concept of identity and at ethics

It is clear from the preceding examples that understandings of identity are complex and that the concept of developing a grounded and positive sense of identity is value-laden. The values evident in this discussion of the above cases are ones that this author considers important at personal and social levels. I am very aware that they are contestable. It has not been the purpose of this article to advocate these values per se, but rather to show how the creative process in the case studies encouraged the development of a sense of identity, that would inevitably be based on some sort of value system (even the value of absolute non-interference in students' values). What those values are is finally a matter of ethical choice. And that has implications for teachers as discussed below.

Furthermore the relationship between creative process, values and identity is not comparable to a simple maths equation where identity emerges after the equals sign. Perhaps a well-known drawing by the Dutch, graphic artist, Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) might be a better analogy. *Drawing Hands* (1948), shows a hand sketching a shirt cuff, but meanwhile the drawn hand that emerges from the shirt cuff has come alive and is in turn sketching the cuff of the first hand. Which hand is the agent and which the product? Or is this an artificial distinction? The drawing suggests that the inter-relationship between artist and artwork is a complex and fluid one.

So too, it seems that inter-relations between the creative work, through drama or other arts, and identity are inherently complex. Is it the art action that shapes identity? Or is it identity that shapes the art? Or is the distinction misleading? Are they interactive functions of each other, working in dynamic co-production?

Implications for teachers

Earlier I suggested that it is not enough for the teacher to simply encourage creativity, and leave the outcome to students. The development of learning situations that challenge and support learners to be creative requires an array of knowledge and skills. Within the field of drama, there is an extensive body of literature that discusses some of the strategies that teachers might use. Among these are, for example, Boal's processes (Boal, 1979) for physically identifying and analysing problems and strategising for their resolution, Healthote's use of teacher-in-role and mantle of the expert (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), Moriarty's strategies for marae theatre (Scott, 2006). The creativity engendered by good teachers comes in part from knowing and being able to manipulate such strategies.

However, knowing how to manipulate creative possibilities for particular desired outcomes requires a greater platform of knowledge and understandings. Elsewhere (Greenwood, 2003) I have discussed how teachers need to know about, and know how to interrogate, the world as well as about their art form, if they want to make actual the mantra in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000), that "drama is a way of knowing". To consciously work to develop their learners' sense of identity, teachers need to have some understanding of the wider social and cultural contexts in which identity is constructed, and to have some awareness of the values, overt and latent, according to which they make the choices that influence their learners' work and their potential discoveries.

They also need to know their students so they can be confident about when to let things flow, when to push, and when to pull back. Of course there are some, such as Danièle Naudin, a participant of the same keynote panel at the *World Creativity Summit* (2008), who would argue that a concern with the deliberate development of identity is outside the brief of drama education. In France, she explained, the first issue is "artistic production, discovery, and exploration of sensitivity" (Naudin, 2008); behaviour, relationships and connection to identity are possible by-products of rehearsal. That too is a choice teachers might make.

Conclusion

Within the context of the *World Creativity Summit* (2008) and the time frames that operated during the three days, it was enough to briefly indicate how particular examples of work in drama contributed to the development of a sense of identity. Here, I have taken the opportunity to further interrogate what the connection between creativity and identity might be, and to examine some of the aspects of identity that might be explored.

My argument has been to warn against too simplistic an enthusiasm about the contribution that creativity in arts education may make to our social and personal wellbeing. However, it does come from a belief that such a contribution is possible, and desirable. It is a belief endorsed by UNESCO. The declarations made in the *Road Map for Arts Education* (2006) have been welcomed by arts educators around the world as an affirmation of the value of their subjects and their potential instrumentality for stimulating emotional intelligence and cognitive development. While details are vague, the document's significance is in its reiteration of the right of every child and adult "to education and to opportunities that will ensure full and harmonious development and participation in cultural and artistic life" (UNESCO, 2006). The *Road Map* at this stage is perhaps little more than a sketch of the goals and a commitment to find routes. At the same time as global policy developers need to find ways of translating the UNESCO *Road Map* into strategic planning, classroom teachers need to continue to develop conscious and effective strategies for not only promoting but also directing creativity in their classroom practice. Travel might be envisaged through a road map. Skilled driving enables the journey to take place.

Note

1.   Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand. It is often translated as the place of the long white cloud, noting the cluster of cloud cover that greeted Kupe and early Polynesian navigators of these islands.

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