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Final Report

Towards a Classroom Compatible Concept of Creativity

The question of whether education systems, as they currently exist, undermine creativity no longer seems to be a vital question. Enough of a case to the affirmative has been made that it is worthwhile to move on to the question of “what is to be done about it?” A major role will be played by the setting where that question is asked. I’m looking into this question as a High school teacher in South Korea, where I have been dealing with this question and other for seven years. This project aims to build from what I have learned in that time and through my experiences in CCT to create the foundation of a larger project with the goal of equipping teachers in the Korean High school system with tools to improve their classroom’s capacity for supporting creativity. The result of this specific inquiry is to have taken the concept of creativity, with all of its ambiguity and expectations, and transform it into something more manageable for teachers to include in their teaching. By manageable I mean I propose to reconceptualize creativity into Practices that promote creativity but will require minimal training for teachers as well as being as non-disruptive as possible to the Korean teaching roles already in place. This report will expose the thinking and research that went into the current reconfiguration of

creativity as well as the ideas for how to expand and utilize it. While this specific project is set in Korea and is targeting the hurdles of Korean educators, it is hoped that with adjustments and modifications the material presented here may be useful to similar-minded educators in other teaching environments.

Background

My experiences teaching in Korea are the starting point for this project so I'd like to highlight the most relevant aspects of that experience. I teach as a guest English Teacher (GET) at Daejeon Foreign Language (DFLHS). DFLHS is an elite public high school focussing on foreign languages, and the students there must apply and be selected, so in relative terms to other Korean High school students they are good students with an aptitude for languages. In my tenure at DFLHS there have been as many as five GETs but currently there are three, and in my role as GET I teach two types of classes: 1st grade English conversation class for all students, regardless of their language major (though I do not teach the English Majors who have their own 1st grade English Conversation class curriculum) and 2nd grade English conversation class which is only for English majors (Non-English Majors take language course from Guest teachers in their specific major, German, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese or Russian) At DFLHS all GETs teach the 1st grade English conversation class and the curriculum is collaboratively developed and implemented universally. The 2nd grade class is currently only taught by me, though in my early years it was shared with another

teacher and we had to collaborate on curriculum. These details are important because they exposed some of the difficulties this research project hoped to overcome.

Back when I first started studying in the CCT program, I shared the 2nd grade English major class with another teacher. I was eager to implement the concepts I was studying and the ideas I was generating because of CCT and my fellow teacher shared my enthusiasm. As shared ideas with him, his enthusiasm waned because he had expectations of what creative lessons would be like that didn't match the lesson plans I was producing, and furthermore he felt uncomfortable and unqualified to act as the instructor for my lessons. The next year the 2nd grade class became exclusively mine, and I was free to design a class that matched my capabilities and expectations in regard to creative teaching. In discussing my class with fellow teachers, both GETs and Korean teachers, the two most common statements that came up were variations on: "I could never teach like that, I'm not creative" and "How do you score the students creativity?". These two concerns stuck with me throughout the process of developing my curriculum.

Before I go into the decisions I made about my own class, which does exist in an exceptional position within the system, it's important to lay out some information about Korea's education. In high school students attend school from 8am to 10 pm, unless they are seniors in which case they stay until 11pm. Most Teachers need to be there at 7:30am but staying until 11pm is a rotating duty. Grades are mostly determined by midterm and final exams, and student scores must fit into a bell curve of nine ranks. From what I have seen, scoring rubrics focus accounting the mistakes. The underlying

assumption that a mistake free performance should earn a maximum score is supported by frequent question from students: “*Why did I lose points?*” On paper creative thinking is listed as one of the main goals of the high school curriculum: Goal #2 of the current high school curriculum is *To help students develop the logical, critical and creative thinking abilities necessary for the further pursuit of academics and everyday life.* At DFLHS, my experience has been that teachers and administrators clearly and openly state that they want to promote creative thinking. That being said, when teachers are designing their assessment rubrics the paperwork they must fill out has to lay out all of the acceptable correct answers and then get multiple signatures on the paperwork before submitting it. If students then provide answers that are not on that submitted paperwork that the teacher wants to give the student full credit for, then the paperwork must be amended and signed again by multiple people and then re-filed. Not only is this process tedious but teachers report that it also brings them a sense of embarrassment or self doubt for having not done their job right the first time. The conflict here is easy to see, if a teacher wants to support creativity, which many teachers claim to, then it seems likely that they are creating a substantial amount of additional work for themselves.

My class, which for the purposes of this report I mean the 2nd grade English major class that I am the sole instructor for, is an exception to some of the restrictions laid out for Korean teachers. Because we are foreign teachers who have been hired specifically for our foreignness there are some compromises made to make our classes fit within the Korean system but still allow us to teach. Another factor is that in terms of

student transcripts, the general perception is that English conversation class has less impact in terms of university acceptance. My students scores must still fit into a nine ranked bell curve, the format of my exams must be a timed verbal conversation scored along categories that the school provided. Other than those requirements there is rarely any interference from administration in regards to course content or teaching methods, so I have used my class as medium for implementing my own ideas as well as the ideas I have had since joining the CCT program. My class is an English language class but these students have been studying English for more than a decade on average and many of them have spent years living abroad in English speaking countries. I decided to specifically not focus on teaching grammar, or boosting vocabulary instead I took a project based approach that emphasized using English to collaborate and create. Looking back over my curriculum documents I noticed there was no mention of the word “creativity” anywhere, but it’s near the top of things students mention when I ask them about what they learned in my class. The success I have had in my class might provide some guidance in helping other teachers create classes that fit within the Korean system and help their students to learn creativity, without the teachers necessarily teaching creativity.

When I was given the task of developing my class’ curriculum I had a couple years worth of experience teaching at DFLHS to draw from and I knew that when given the opportunity, motivation and support, my students were certainly capable of being creative, and even relished the chances they were given. In the introduction to Creators on Creating, Frank Barron goes through a number of questions about creativity and one

of them struck me as very pertinent: *Why does creative potential sometimes seem to go to waste?* His answer echoed something I had been considering, he wrote: *If the society we live in puts too much emphasis on an established “right” way of doing things, it may cause a loss of adventuresomeness and willingness to experiment.* When grades are at stake it doesn’t make sense to take risks and experiment if that experimentation may negatively impact the grade. The obvious solution then is to make creativity part of the grade, but this necessarily requires a method for assessing creativity, which is problematic. It also brings in the question of what creativity even is. I wondered what would happen if I didn’t grade the projects I assigned to the students. It seemed to make sense, without the worry about impacting their score negatively. I wanted the students to focus more on the process they went through in creating the project more than the product, so after each project students are assigned a “reflection paper” in which they examine the process they went through. These need to be graded but it seemed misguided to base the score on things like proper grammar and spelling, so I center my grading on how well the papers address the questions “How”, “Why”, and “So what” in regards to the process they undertook. Having a student explore how they intended to accomplish some goal with their project, and why they thought that goal was important as well as what the meaning of the whole was to them, as well as their ability to communicate these ideas in English, seemed a more suitable task for advanced English learners, than having proper punctuation and solid sentence structure.

The students also are assigned mentoring roles where they are to mentor another student, and be mentored by another student. The way it works is that they

must meet weekly and, in English, have a conversation in which the student being mentored brings a topic related to my class that they wish to talk about, and the mentoring student has to help them explore that subject. Reporting on these mentoring sessions is part of their weekly journal assignment. The thinking for this project is it gives the students a chance to determine where they want to put their focus in regards to my class as well provide an opportunity for students to see that even if they aren't experts their input can help improve understanding.

To get a sense of how successful my class was in promoting creativity in my students I contacted a number of ex-students. In discussing the way that my class supported/promoted their creativity they said things like "*Working with what you've learned and experimenting I think results in being more creative and a better understanding of what you've learned through text*" and "*I liked the skits I think. I think that way people got a chance to participate on their own terms*". Both of these students are giving credit to the sense of agency they felt and how that helped them. Another student stated "*Self-reflection! when we write reflection paper we can think about every single part of the process and then complement what we want to improve so we can improve ourselves next time.*"

Knowing that my class and the methods I have been using in that class have met with some success in a similar teaching environment to the one my Korean colleagues find themselves in, provides me with a starting point. It's important to recognize the differences and two of the most important ones are: my status as a GET teaching English conversation class as opposed to a Korean teaching a more standard class

subject, and the fact that I am actively studying Creative and Critical Thinking. My greater freedom and my specific training have to be taken into account if I am going to produce something actually useful.

Development

Taking all of these factors of the classroom and the complaints of the teachers into mind, I began with the idea that creativity itself may be too cumbersome to be injected into classrooms. As it stands the concept of creativity comes with a huge amount of expectation about what it is and isn't, and those preconceptions differ person to person. If the concept of creativity could be broken down into a number of Practices, each of which having its own value while also contributing to creative habits that seemed like a more integratable option for teachers. I also hoped to create a simple metric for measuring these Practices, not for grading purposes (which would automatically create a lot of new paperwork) but to demonstrate growth and help demonstrate to students that creativity *can* be improved.

Creativity is, in my view, something that cannot be defined with words. How, then, can we talk about it? Words can indicate or point to something in the mind of the reader that may be similar to what is in the mind of the writer. I would like, thus, to indicate to the reader what creativity means to me. This is the very first paragraph of David Bohm's book On Creativity and while it's a fine beginning for a book about creativity it highlights how hard it is to express what is meant by "creativity". There

seems to be a paradox in trying to nail down a universal definition of creativity, but it also seems to be an essential need. This sentiment is echoed by Dean Keith Simonton when he writes: *All this scientific growth is well and good, but I would argue that creativity researchers have not devoted sufficient attention to the single most fundamental problem in the field: What do we mean by “creativity” in the first place?* He goes on to advocate for a definition based on how US patents are awarded. His case: that creativity can be expressed as “ $C = NUS$ (or $NxUxS$), where N , U , and S indicate novelty, utility, and surprise, respectively” might be useful to researchers studying creativity. Robert W. Weisberg raises issues with the commonly included criteria of “usefulness/value” in creativity definitions, instead advocating for “Intentionality” as a substitute. The sum impression after reading these and other writers is that while creativity as a concept is almost universally valued, it is far from universally defined. That’s not a huge problem for researchers and academics who are studying creativity, but it is a huge problem for educators whose superiors are asking them to implement creativity. The problem for teachers who are non-experts in creativity is that this disagreement over definitions makes the whole subject matter an overwhelming and unfamiliar burden. This problem is one of the biggest aspects of this project.

Another aspect I had hoped to address was the concept of measuring/assessing creativity. This is a tricky concept for the purposes of introducing into Korean classrooms, because any assessment needs to be deemed objective. I don’t know the exact specifics of this requirement, as I have only dealt with it/looked into it through my English speaking coordinator. In the past I have, on occasion, been asked to

re-formulate my assessment protocols because someone higher up felt they were too subjective. It's always pretty opaque as to who made that decision or on what grounds, but it's a safe operational assumption that if teachers are to be giving out any kind of marks on student creativity, it will need an objective basis to be accepted.

My purpose in searching for an assessment method was that part of supporting student creativity would be to demonstrate to students that they are improving and are capable of improving. I was concerned that balancing my goal of helping students see their growth, without violating my goals of keeping things less burdensome and overwhelming would prove to gain less than it would cost.

Much like how the definition of creativity varies in the criteria included, the various published tests do the same. There are a broader number of tests for creativity than I initially expected. While some of them presented some potentially intriguing prospects for modification to suit the needs of helping teachers to support creativity, ultimately they are tests. Putting teachers who aren't specifically trained in assessing creativity into the role of arbiter of what is and is not creative runs counter to the larger goals of this project. Looking into testing methods helped me realize that my focus should be on supporting the process of developing creativity rather than supporting the state of being creative. The testing process necessarily slants focus on the latter. This may be a topic worth revisiting later, but for the time being this prong of my goals will be dropped.

Concept

Having now gone over the setting that this project takes place in, the development I have done in my practices and thinking for my own class as well as some of the research into definitions and testing of creativity I would like to lay out the reconceptualization of creativity I came to as well as some ways this can be used by teachers in their classes.

Drawing inspiration from how Arthur Costa broke the similarly ambiguous concept of “Critical Thinking” into sixteen habits, I aimed to break creativity down into separate “Practices”. No single Practice represents creativity entirely but each one contributes to creativity. This fits the goals of this project in that the constituent parts will have less ambiguity in meaning and will be simpler to match or include in activities that already occur in any given classroom regardless of subject. I wanted the Practices to be broad enough to maintain flexibility in application and focussed enough to detect if the Practice is being used. The list of Practices, though not intended to be exhaustive, is: Agency, Association, and Process Focus,. The idea is that any assignment or activity that targets the development of one or more of these practices will contribute to students’ overall creative development.

Agency: The Practice of Agency can best be described as an individual seeing that their actions and choices will have an impact on the final result. Agency is essential for creativity because it gives the individual who is engaged in a creative endeavor

control over the value of the endeavor. Students who are engaged in the Practice of Agency know that it is up to them to show how the result they come to is a *solution*, but needn't be what the teacher has declared *the solution*.

Agency is a difficult Practice to find in Korean education, because the structure of classes is typically based around a teacher providing information which the students memorize and somehow produce in the form of an assignment or exam. Assignments that require the students to make their own decisions that determine the final shape help develop the Practice of Agency. An example from my own class include the unit on public speaking. The students learn about public speaking skills and are required to perform three speeches, an informative speech, a persuasive speech, and an inspirational speech. The specific topic and skills they want to emphasize are up to the student. If the student wants to do a persuasive speech about vegetarianism and emphasize eye contact, and then do their inspirational speech about volunteering and focus on body language and voice, those choices are all acceptable.

Teachers looking to create activities that promote the practice of Agency need to do two things: provide a wide enough base of material that students will need to decide what to use and what not to use, and provide an open enough outlet for students to exercise those choices. Assessment of activities involving the Practice of Agency can be objective, but should not focus on whether the result matches a predetermined correct answer. In the example above the speech could be assessed on whether it included the qualities a persuasive speech needs to have (good reasons and

explanation) and whether or not the targeted skill was used (eyes focussed on the whole audience, not focussed on notes or up at ceiling)

Because Korean classes are focussed on either finding a correct solution, or providing the correct answer, both as determined by the teacher or some other source, it is important to be explicit in assuring that the goal is *an answer* not *the answer*.

Transparency in assessment methods will also help Korean students to buy in to the idea that they are actually free to engage in the Practice of Agency.

Association: The Practice of Association can best be described as making connections or seeing relationships. Identifying relevant skills or concepts to apply to a problem is a part of the Practice of Association, as is exploring unknown or potential relationships. Association is a key Practice for creativity because there is a lot of novelty to be found in previously unseen or under-explored relationships. Novelty or newness is one of the principle characteristics in definitions as well as tests of creativity. Students who are engaged in the Practice of Association will take stock of whatever the task is as well as what is known/unknown and then make connections to create a path towards their goal. The Practice of Association gives students the opportunity to transcend the boundaries of the class subject. For example a student using what they learned in History class to further their understanding of something they are learning in Art class is engaged in the Practice of Association.

Lessons that promote the Practice of Association are best suited for when the students have had the chance to study a number of concepts. Activity design should

present some kind of problem without an obvious connection to what was studied. For more advanced lessons in this practice note that creativity researcher Csikszentmihalyi draws a distinction between problems that are *presented* and those that need to be *discovered*, with a preference for the latter. Math word problems and logic puzzles are great examples of activities that promote the Practice of Association. The difficulty in the task isn't the actual solution necessarily but rather finding the appropriate tools to apply.

In Korean classes subject are usually taught, then tested and then moved on from, so teachers who wish to promote their students ability for the Practice of Association, may need to model the behavior by referring back to relevant past material from the class, as well as reminding students that there are connections beyond even the subject of that specific class. Citing a use of statistics in a geography class lesson about population density affects water usage can remind students that different school subjects are related and the subject separations in school don't reflect reality beyond school.

Process Focus: Process focus can best be described as critical attention to the methods used to produce any given result. The concept of Metacognition is a close parallel to Process Focus. The Practice of Process Focus is essential to the development of creativity in that creativity often involves experimenting and taking risks and the Practice of Process Focus allows for building off of successes while correcting mistakes. The practice of Process Focus also allows for successes in one endeavor to be utilized in another. This is a very underutilized Practice in Korean education, where

rankings are based entirely on end results. Even when students find the common study methods, usually some form of cramming or memorizing, to not be meeting their needs, they are demotivated from changing the methods because of the powerful social pressure to conform and the risk of a new methods producing a less good result. The usual advice given to students for whom cramming or memorizing isn't working is that they should study more and study harder.

This Practice is the target when I assign my students to write Reflection Papers after their projects. By having the students think about and record their process I hope to have them see what they are doing that helps them when they feel successful at being creative and how their actions impact their results when they feel like they are unsatisfied by their results. The final project of the year requires the students to look back through their reflection papers and choose one project from the class and redo it with a specific plan for how they will apply what they have learned to produce an improved result. Of course they need to reflect on this project as well through a paper.

Teachers wishing to promote the Practice of Process Focus can make demonstrating the process as part of the grade, this often happens in math based classes, but projects in any class can have including early sketches and early ideas as part of the final submission to promote this Practice.

Conclusion

The process of getting to this Practice focused approach to creativity was heavily influenced by the structure and restrictions of hoping to implement it in Korea. Asking untrained and overworked teachers to start integrating creativity into their lessons is likely to be discouraging in its ambiguity and disheartening in its scope. By breaking such an amorphous and ambiguous concept as creativity into more specific Practices I hope to reduce the sense of being overwhelmed with the task of supporting creative learning while also providing some direction and structure for teachers who have no specific training in creativity, which is most teachers in Korean schools. Even if a given teacher only focuses their efforts on one Practice, they are still providing creative educational value to their students.

This Practice based concept of creativity is just the first step in what I hope to develop through CRCRTH694 which will be a workshop or educational module which will expand on the ideas here and provide actual training to teacher who attend to prepare them to integrate the Practices into their teaching, regardless of subject matter. My students have been vocal in their support of the teaching practices I have adopted from my studies in CCT. I can always improve myself as a teacher, but the greatest impact I can hope to have, and one I now feel more ready to enact is to share what I have learned with those who can most readily and beneficially apply it.

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