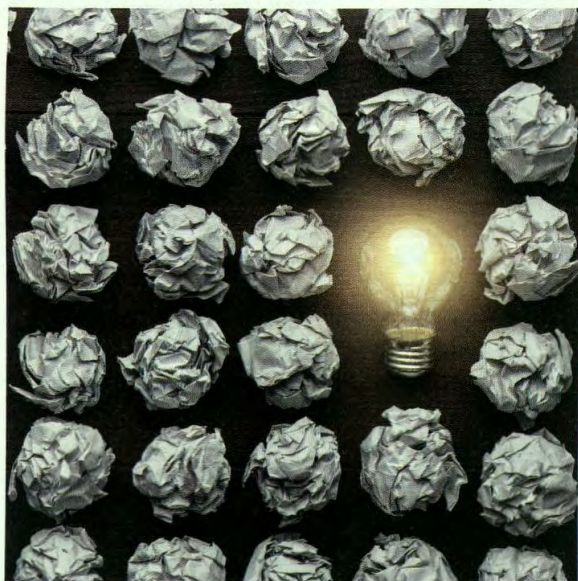


Enhancing creativity via teacher education

Daniel Xerri

Introduction

More than 30 years ago, the American scholar Richard Wayne Mack tested a theory that despite being familiar with notions of creativity, teacher educators fail to train pre-service teachers how to use methods of enhancing creativity in the classroom. Mack's (1987) study indicates that pre-service teachers value the role of creativity in education and feel a need for creativity training as part of their professional preparation. More recently, it has



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been suggested that creativity training has taken root in higher education and business organisations due to the value of developing people's cognitive ability to create and innovate (Hui et al. 2015). Nevertheless, teacher education still seems to lag behind in fostering the creativity of prospective practitioners. Hence, more emphasis needs to be placed on integrating creativity in preparatory programmes (Henriksen et al. 2016).


Prior to considering some ways which can enhance trainee's creativity during teacher education, it is important to define the term itself. In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler maintains that rather than seeing creativity as the creation of something out of nothing it is more appropriate to perceive it as the act of rearranging or regrouping already existing elements. He claims that creativity "uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills. The more familiar the parts, the more striking the new whole" (Koestler 1964: 120). Hence, creative people are capable of "combining previously unrelated domains of knowledge in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you put in" (Koestler 1980: 344). When Koestler's notions of creativity are applied to English language teachers, one could argue that teacher training programmes at pre-service level can play a pivotal role in promoting this form of creativity (Xerri & Vassallo 2016). Such programmes have the potential to cultivate teachers' ability to engage in what Koestler (1964) calls bisociative thinking, which is the formation of a new matrix of meaning through the act of combining elements from previously unconnected matrices of thought. In this way pre-service teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and beliefs needed to position themselves in a variety of creative roles in the classroom and in their professional lives. Some of these roles are: bridge builders, multimodal communicators, creative practitioners, and improvisers.

Bridge builders

In order for English language teachers to be creative they need to be open to as many influences as possible and willing to learn about a broad range of subjects (Xerri 2016a). For bisociative thinking to be possible, teachers need to revisit practices and experiences they might be too accustomed to, establish connections between elements they might never have considered similar before, and reacquaint themselves with knowledge and events through new perspectives.

Bisociation liberates the individual from habitual thinking and behaviour, and facilitates creative originality. The shift in attention entailed by bisociation is revolutionary as it is "wrought by jettisoning previously sacrosanct doctrines and seemingly self-evident axioms of thought, cemented into our mental habits" (Koestler 1980: 364). Creative originality is distinct from diligent routine or virtuosity and it "always involves un-learning and re-learning" (Koestler 1980: 364). This is because "The act of discovery has a disruptive and a constructive aspect. It must disrupt rigid patterns of mental organization to achieve the new synthesis" (Koestler 1964: 104). When teachers engage in bisociative thinking they are able to transcend the dogmas and entrenched beliefs that govern their practices.

By means of bisociative thinking, teachers build bridges in their lessons, establishing connections between subjects, topics and



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perspectives. They build bridges in the minds of their learners, enabling them to foster latent abilities and exploit these not only for language learning but for lifelong education too. They build bridges between the past, present and future because creative language teaching transforms learners' experiences, thoughts and emotions, and makes them inquisitive human beings who are themselves willing to engage in bridge building.

Multimodal communicators

The pedagogical understanding and subject knowledge that trainees receive on teacher education programmes can be complemented by the cultivation of the belief in the potential of creative teaching to engage language learners. One example of such creative teaching is multimodality, which is defined as "the crafted integration of two or more ways, or modes, of communication, so that their combined meaning as a whole is greater than either mode separately or their simple combination" (Dressman 2010: 71). A teacher's ability to bring a text to life by the careful combination of print, audio, video and hyperlinks can make it highly engaging for language learners (Xerri 2016d). In order for teachers of English to foster creativity in the learning environment they need to be equipped with the capacity to think creatively and generate innovation. Developing the knowledge, skills and beliefs needed to employ a multimodal approach is one means by which teacher education can help them achieve this form of creativity.

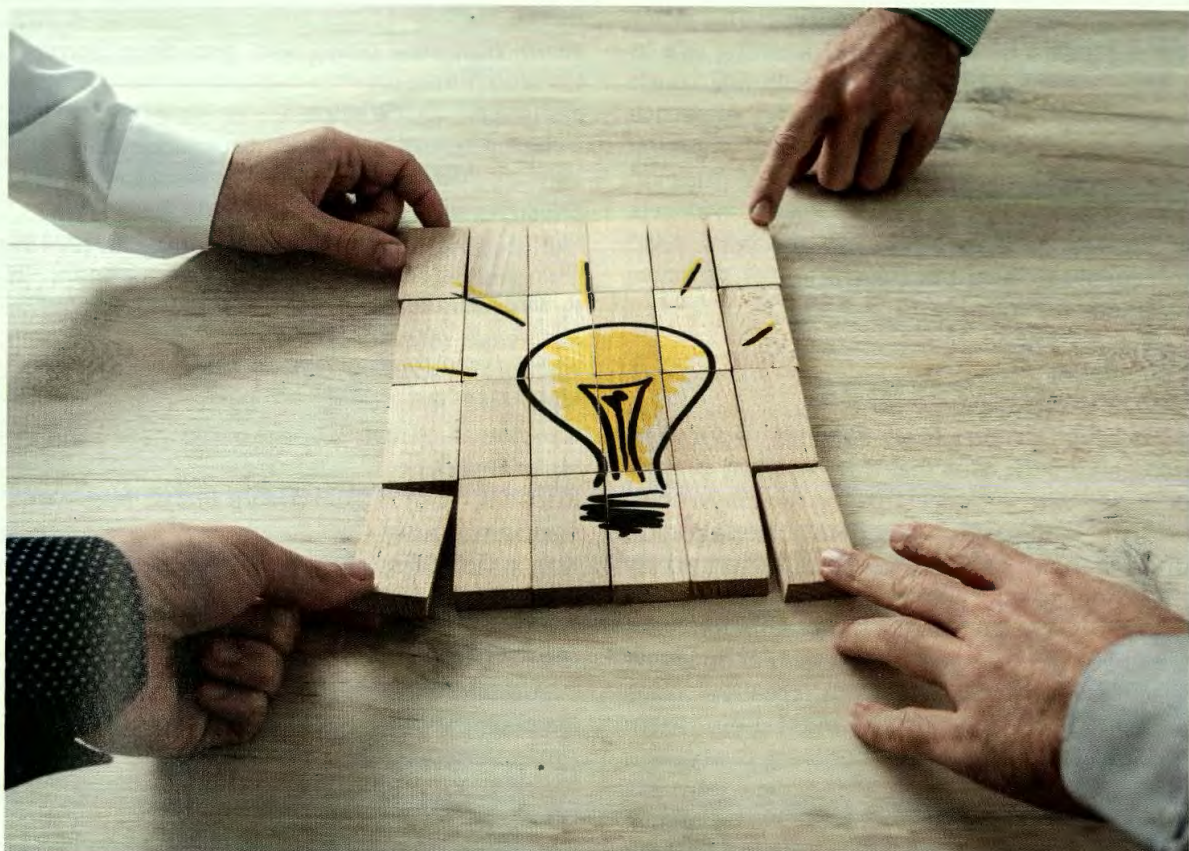
The notion of multimodality redefines pedagogy because learning itself is reconceptualised, partly because of the impact of new technologies. For example, Kress (2003: 141) argues that "the increasingly and insistently more multimodal forms of contemporary texts make it essential to rethink our notions of what reading is". This is partly because "the demands on readers, and the demands of reading, will if anything be greater, and they will certainly be different" (Kress 2003: 167). A multimodal approach promotes the formation of a learning community in the classroom whereby teachers and learners forge learning partnerships so that new knowledge is generated and connected to the world by means of digital tools and resources (Fullan & Langworthy 2014). This is particularly

significant when one takes into consideration the central role that teachers play in traditional forms of language learning and teaching. Multimodality seems to be a key priority for all those teachers hoping to engage digital natives with language learning via a variety of texts. It allows teachers to harness a text's communicative potential.

Creative practitioners

Teacher education should enable trainees to identify themselves as creative practitioners who are able to engage in creative activities in the classroom together with their learners. For example, teachers of English who encourage learners to practise creative writing join in the activity and write creatively together with their learners (Xerri 2016e). The benefits of this attitude are underscored by research — "when teachers embrace the professional identity of writer, their practices as teachers of writing undergo a transformation that enhances the experience of and performance in the writing of their students" (Locke et al. 2011: 273). If it is deemed desirable that an increasing number of young people have recourse to creative writing as a means of developing their writing ability and discovering an avenue for personal expression, then it is imperative that teachers position themselves as creative practitioners (Xerri 2013). This is due to the fact that teachers are role models for their students and their enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for creative writing is infectious. Hence, it is necessary to break the vicious circle of teachers who fail to inspire students to enjoy creative writing and who subsequently fail to inspire their own students once some of them embark on a teaching career. This has to start by supporting teachers to develop the required knowledge, skills and beliefs to engage in creative writing.

The incorporation of creative writing workshops into teacher education can play a vital role in providing support. Besides equipping teachers with the competences required to write creatively, writing workshops have the potential of increasing teachers' confidence and helping them in developing the belief that creative writing can be engaged in for its intrinsic worth. Just as young people are taught to read fiction, poetry and drama for the sake of personal enrichment, they can



also be taught to write such genres for the same purpose. Writing workshops are highly significant for teachers as they help them to position themselves creatively, both inside and outside the classroom. Writing workshops can contribute to the growth of a culture of creativity amongst educators and the young people they are tasked with inspiring.

Improvisers

English language teachers who have been trained to act as improvisers are capable of creatively dealing with the unpredictability and spontaneity of the classroom by thinking on the spot and improvising a course of action (Xerri 2016b). In the context of teacher education, improvisation is somewhat frowned upon given that detailed lesson planning is considered fundamental. Nonetheless, teaching is a form of performance and the ability to improvise is crucial in order to respond to situations that one would not have anticipated, as well as to better cater for learners' needs. Not everything can be pre-empted in the planning phase; in order to maximise learning it is sometimes necessary to engage in improvisation. Some people argue that the ability to improvise is

acquired through experience. While that is true to some extent, actor training shows us that it is also possible to prepare inexperienced performers for improvisation.

Incorporating improvisation in teacher education provides pre-service teachers with the ability to respond to impromptu situations and to understand that they might not always be able to rely on their lesson plan in the variable circumstances of the classroom. Equipping pre-service teachers with the ability to improvise means enabling them to teach creatively and to promote creativity in their lessons. However, it does not imply jettisoning lesson planning and the curriculum. Beghetto and Kaufman (2011) claim that many teachers want to foster learner creativity while covering the curriculum but fear curricular chaos when teaching for creativity. Disciplined improvisation enables teachers to address this teaching paradox given that it "involves reworking the curriculum-as-planned in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of the curriculum-as-lived, thereby adding unique or fluid features to the learning of academic subject matter" (Beghetto & Kaufman 2011: 96). This means that teachers


need to develop an understanding that while some aspects of teaching and learning are to a large extent fixed, other aspects are much more fluid. This entails both expertise and experience. Hence, lesson planning and improvisation should both feature in teacher education as they represent two sets of knowledge and skills that teachers need to capitalize on in the classroom for effective teaching and learning.

Conclusion

It is high time that teacher education transcended the idea that trainees need only be provided with practical tips for the classroom. English language teachers' pedagogical understanding should be complemented by the knowledge, skills and beliefs needed to engage in creative teaching and to instigate creativity in language learners. Encouraging teachers to adopt different creative roles as part of their training might help them to discover their own latent creativity and thus assume the stance of teachers who are willing to teach English in a creative fashion. Teacher education has the potential to foster true creativity in the learning environment by equipping teachers with the means to empower learners to think for themselves and produce their own innovations.



Acknowledgements

Parts of this article have featured in Xerri (2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2017). 

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