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## MAJOR ARTICLES

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### Myriad Views on Creativity

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#### Introduction

Considered as one of the main 21st century skills, creativity seems to be a major concern of contemporary education. Over the past few decades, creativity seems to have increasingly filtered into educational discourse. Within ELT, we have a number of publications devoted to it (Maley & Peachey, 2015; Xerri & Vassallo, 2016), as well as a dedicated organization: the C Group. However, some argue that it is not yet adequately addressed at a practical level by curricula around the world. For example, Amabile (1998) affirms that “creativity gets killed much more often than it gets supported”, while Robinson (2012) believes that “We’re all born with deep natural capacities for creativity and systems of mass education tend to suppress them.” The reason for such negative sentiments is linked to some of the phenomena that inhibit the cultivation of creativity within education, such as a heavy emphasis on standardized testing and the absence of creativity training.

Nonetheless, one of the most powerful obstacles is probably constituted by misconceptions about what creativity is. Misconceptions about the nature of creativity are harmful as they have an effect on people’s practices in the classroom, as well as at policy and curricular levels. Despite the burgeoning popularity of the term in language learning and teaching, conceptions of creativity are highly varied and at times conflicting. In this article, I explore some of the most seminal views on creativity and how these can help to inform classroom practices. In my discussion of these views, I have had to be highly selective and the very selection I have made is indicative of my own conceptions of creativity.

#### The standard definition

The creativity research literature has traditionally defined creativity as bipartite. Runco and Jaeger’s (2012) review leads them to define creativity as being made up of originality and effectiveness. ‘Originality’ is when a product is seen as unusual, novel or unique, while ‘effectiveness’ is when it is considered to possess usefulness, appropriateness or value (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). The standard definition conceives of creativity as the production of something new and useful to others. Recognition by others is essential for something to be considered truly creative. In fact, Plucker, Beghetto and Dow (2004) claim that “Creativity is the interaction among *aptitude, process, and environment* by which an individual or group

produces a *perceptible product* that is both *novel and useful* as defined within a *social context*" (p. 90). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) attributes a higher purpose to creativity when he claims that it "is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one... What counts is whether the novelty he or she produces is accepted for inclusion in the domain" (p. 28).

One of the problems with the standard definition is that it seems to restrict creativity solely to a select group of individuals traditionally perceived as artistically creative or who produce something that is tangibly new. Notwithstanding the fact that these individuals possess a form of creativity that seems to be highly recognizable, this does not exclude the existence of other probably less lauded forms of creativity.

### **Polarities of creativity**

The creativity associated with artists, writers and other eminent creators is not the only form of creativity that exists. Craft (2003) suggests that in education we seek to engage in 'ordinary' or 'everyday' creativity, which should be distinguished from 'extraordinary' creativity. The latter "may be defined as the sort of publicly acclaimed creativity which changes knowledge and/or our perspective on the world" (Craft, 2003, p.114). Boden's (1994) distinction between psychological creativity and historical creativity is important in this regard since the former is the kind of creativity that is available to everyone given that it consists of generating ideas that are new to the person rather than to the whole of humanity. According to Boden (1994),

A valuable idea is P-creative if the person in whose mind it arises could not have had it before; it does not matter how many times other people have already had the same idea. By contrast, a valuable idea is H-creative if it is P-creative *and* no one else, in all human history, has ever had it before. (p. 76)

The traditional poles of creativity also exist within Kaufman and Beghetto's (2009) quadri-dimensional model, with everyday creativity being called 'little-c', and eminent creativity being described as 'Big-C'. The former can be found in nearly everyone whereas the latter is reserved for those recognized as possessing creative greatness. Acknowledging that everyday creativity is as important as extraordinary creativity is crucial since it enables us to value the kind of creativity that can be cultivated in educational settings. In line with this idea, Woodward (2015) maintains that

If...we redefine creativity to include the everyday doing, making, adapting and creating that is part of all of our lives – if we give ourselves time and space and permission to play with this, to work on this, we can create. (p. 156)

By broadening our conceptions of creativity we are able to move beyond the assumption that the only creativity that exists is the extraordinary type. In order to foster teachers' and students' creativity, we need to see it as being far more democratic than it is traditionally assumed to be.

### **Myths about creativity**

Restricted definitions of creativity are rooted in a number of myths that have been around for a long time. In *Myths of Creativity*, David Burkus (2014) identifies ten myths that can potentially be damaging not just within the classroom context but also in other sectors of society. Being aware of these myths is important for us as language teachers since they have implications for how we teach and how we perceive our students. Burkus (2014) maintains that "The myths of creativity might feel helpful, but stubborn belief in them despite evidence to the contrary will hinder us from achieving our creative potential" (pp. 14-15).

One of the myths that some educators seem to believe in is that creativity is the preserve of individuals who are born creative. The breed myth leads people to think of creative individuals as possessing a genetic predisposition for creativity. For example, my research in Malta, the UK, Australia and the USA shows that one of the reasons why some teachers do not encourage students to engage in creative writing is because they believe that this is something you are born able to do. Hence, they do not engage in it themselves and feel that most students are incapable of doing it. Unfortunately, some students inherit this belief and perpetuate it. However, as Pugliese (2010) points out, "Creativity is a dynamic concept...it is

not unique to certain gifted individuals, and it is not genetically learned” (p. 19). What is most important to note here is that creativity is an inclusive phenomenon, which is more of a process rather than just a product.

Another powerful myth about creativity is the eureka myth, which is when people assume that creativity is a product of flashes of inspiration that enter our minds from the outside without gestating in the subconscious. In *The Art of Thought*, Wallas (1926) proposes a model of creativity that challenges this myth. As one of the stages in his model, incubation consists of the active cognitive processing of a problem and the passive subconscious generation of connections. This is followed by the stage of illumination, in which possible solutions are identified.

The originality myth is another significant myth about creativity. Some people hold the belief that in order for something to be creative it has to be completely new. Hence, the amalgamation of existent concepts is not seen as being creative. However, as discussed below, this myth has been strongly challenged by a number of thinkers who conceive of creativity as a combinatory process.

### Combinatory creativity

In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler (1964) maintains that rather than seeing creativity as the creation of something out of nothing it is more appropriate to conceive of it as the act of rearranging or regrouping already existing elements. Hence, rather than being the production of something quintessentially original, 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, p. 120). Creativity is the act of “combining previously unrelated domains of knowledge in such a way that you get more out of the emergent whole than you put in...each new synthesis leads to the emergence of new patterns of relations” (Koestler, 1980, p. 344). Koestler (1964) describes this form of combinatory creativity as bisociation and he was building on the work of previous thinkers when writing about it.

In fact, when Jacques S. Hadamard wrote to Albert Einstein (1954) enquiring about the mental processes he used in the course of his inventiveness, the latter replied that “combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought” (pp. 25-26). By means of this idea, Einstein seems to suggest that creativity involves the combination of disparate elements that blend together into something new. His conception of creativity is similar to that of Henri Poincaré (1913), who believes that creativity equates to the act of establishing useful combinations of a limited minority of ideas. According to Poincaré (1913), “Among chosen combinations the most fertile will often be those formed of elements drawn from domains which are far apart” (p. 386). When applied to language teachers, this conception of creativity entails being open to as many different influences as possible from beyond the scope of language education and being willing to identify connections that have not yet been deemed possible by engaging in new ways of thinking.

### Disrupting set patterns

In *Human Motivation*, Franken (2006) conceives of creativity as the ability to adopt a different perspective and discover new alternatives. One way of doing this might be to employ lateral thinking, which involves a conscious attempt to change routine responses so as to generate novel ideas and solutions (de Bono, 1967). Given that the brain is a self-organising patterning system, it is important to find ways of disrupting its cognitive patterns so that information can be processed differently and new perspectives are made possible (de Bono, 1970). Lateral thinking consists of a set of strategies that can be learnt and this challenges the myth that creativity is an inherent quality that one is either born with or not.

The idea that creativity involves the disruption of set patterns is also echoed by Chomsky (2013), who says that “Creativity presupposes a set of rules, forms and rules. You can challenge the rules; one form of creativity is challenging the rules... There’s got to be some structure that provides you with capacities.” Chomsky’s words challenge the myth that creativity entails being free of all restrictions. In reality, creativity seems to thrive in constraints and this is why it can also flourish in the somewhat rigid environment of the classroom. This seems especially pertinent given the value that the classroom has in promoting the skills needed by present and future generations.

## Creativity in 21st century education

Creativity is recognized as one of the four Cs of 21st century learning, the others being critical thinking, communication and collaboration (Plucker, Kaufman, & Beghetto, 2015). Cultivating young people's creativity is not only important on a personal level but it is also pivotal for society's future progress. Wagner (2012) claims that "if we are to remain globally competitive in today's world, we need to produce more than just a few entrepreneurs and innovators. We need to develop the creative and enterprising capacities of all our students" (p. 4). If creativity is so valuable, it seems logical that creativity training needs to become an important component of both students' and teachers' education.

In order for creativity to be nurtured in students, teachers' own creative capacity needs to be developed via teacher education and development. This would enable them to position themselves as creative practitioners, i.e., teachers who teach creatively and who foster students' creativity (Xerri, 2013). Pugliese (2010) underscores the significance of choosing to be creative rather than believing you are unable to do so because you were not born creative. He claims that "creative teachers are such, precisely because they have made a conscious effort to be creative – they have, in other words, *decided* to be creative" (Pugliese, 2010, p. 15). Teachers who choose to teach creatively by combining things they have learnt and read in order to come up with new possibilities are better placed to foster students' creativity. This is because in order for creativity to flourish in the classroom "the role of the teacher as creative practitioner – modelling the qualities sought in the learner – is fundamental" (Stevens & McGuinn, 2004, p. 38).

If creativity is to become a key aspect of teacher education, the latter might have to do more than just furnish pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach a language. According to Stafford (2010), "Valuable though it is for student teachers to be given exciting ideas for the classroom, true creativity will only be achieved when they are empowered to think for themselves and generate their own innovations" (p. 42). One example of what pre-service teachers might be equipped with is the ability to engage in disciplined improvisation so that they are able to respond to the here and now or else merge the curriculum-as-planned with the curriculum-as-lived (Xerri, 2016).

In order for creativity to take a more central role in 21st education, it is not enough for students and teachers to discover the ability and willingness to nurture their creative potential. The social environment in which learning and teaching take place needs to support the development of creativity. In fact, in Amabile's (2012) componential model of creativity the social environment plays an important role given the idea that "Creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in supports for creativity." This chimes with the suggestion that "the bolder aspirations of twenty-first-century education require new thinking and new ways of doing, and those require everyone involved, particularly the adults working in schools and those who support them, to learn new ways" (Reimers & Chung, 2016, p. 247). Hence, in order for creativity to become part of the fabric of 21st century education, all relevant stakeholders need to play an active role in making it more prevalent in the curriculum, teacher education, and the school environment.

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