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Going with the flow or back to normal? The impact of creative practitioners in schools and classrooms

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This article describes the work of artists taking part in Creative Partnerships programmes and seeks to identify the ways in which they were able to motivate students, some of whom had anti-learning dispositions. These creative practitioners approached their task in a number of different ways from the teachers whose classes they shared. They tended from the outset to treat students as co-learners, employed different questioning strategies, and managed risk-taking without reducing the degree of challenge embodied in the tasks they set. Crucially, while not condoning misbehaviour they were often able to convey to students that they understood the reasons for it by drawing on their own personal experiences of similar situations. Despite their acknowledged success, creative practitioners rarely talked with teachers about their classroom practices or about the principles and values which underpinned them. The article concludes with suggestions for improving the pedagogic discourse between artists and teachers.

Keywords: artists; creative partnerships; pedagogy; motivation

Introduction

There has probably always been a tradition of having artists come into schools to work with children, although at the beginning these individuals would have been regarded as crafts people who helped with woodwork, needle work and the like (Fleming 2008). In the period following the ending of the 11+ examination and the publication of the Plowden Report the involvement of writers, poets, visual artists and musicians increased as primary schools, in particular, attempted to broaden the curriculum experiences of children beyond the 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic. Local Education Authorities, such as Leicestershire and Oxfordshire, under the guidance of enlightened chief education officers such as Stuart Mason and his deputy, and his subsequent successor, Andrew Fairburn, actively promoted arts education and encouraged the involvement of artists in schools (Jones 1988).

In the UK there is little available evaluative evidence of the effect that such interventions had on schools. In the 1990s, the help of two video artists enabled one school to mount an exhibition at a public gallery (Sink 1999). In this multi-ethnic infant school the children investigated their family backgrounds through multimedia story
telling, using a collection of photographs, video extracts and drawings accompanied by sound and text. No doubt experiences of this kind had a dramatic impact on the schools concerned but whether such effects were permanent went unrecorded. Some accounts of teacher–artist collaborations, however, point to certain tensions around aspects of the implementation of these creative activities (Dahl 1990; Sharp and Dust 1997; Thomson, Hall, and Russell 2006).

There is, however, abundant evidence of the changes that took place following the return of a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher and the introduction of a national curriculum. Galton and Fogelman (1998) showed clearly the arts were being neglected as a result of the emphasis given in the statutory orders to single subject teaching. The situation appears to have worsened since similar findings were obtained by Webb (1993) and Campbell and Neill (1994). The introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies by New Labour would appear to have exacerbated this situation (Galton and MacBeath 2008). Not only were arts subjects being neglected, some children whose performance in English and mathematics needed boosting were now missing out altogether. Associated with this restricted curriculum diet was evidence that pupils’ attitudes towards core subjects and towards school generally were in decline (Pell et al. 2007). Recent international comparisons have confirmed that English pupils’ enjoyment of school and mathematics and science in particular is among the lowest of all participating countries (Bradshaw et al. 2007; Martin, Mullis, and Foy 2008; Mullis, Martin, and Foy 2008). Accompanying these attitudinal changes has been a decline in various forms of intrinsic motivation, particularly during Year 6 and after transfer to secondary school (Galton, Gray, and Rudduck 2003).

**Creative Partnerships**

The Creative Partnerships programme was established within the Arts Council England in April 2002 as a shared initiative between the Department of Culture Media and Sport and the then Department for Education and Skills. Unlike the earlier ‘resident artist in schools’ ventures described earlier, an essential objective was to establish sustainable links between schools and creative individuals or through creative, cultural and business organisations. Schools were encouraged therefore to extend their choice of partners from the usual mix of poets, writers and visual artists and to solicit help from the likes of film-makers, photographers, ecologists and landscape designers. The use of the term creative practitioner rather than artist was intended to reinforce this enlarged understanding of what it meant to engage in ‘creative learning’ (Creative Partnerships 2005). Since November 2008, Creative Partnerships has evolved as an independent body – Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE).

The programme was initially targeted at priority areas for economic regeneration as well as rural areas and has operated in some 1400 schools. Each area, as well as having a programme director, employs creative agents who negotiate the nature of the individual school projects and act as a mediating influence between the teachers and the creative practitioners. Typically, projects extend a whole year with the creative practitioners visiting weekly or are concentrated in a particular term with the creative practitioners in almost constant attendance. In some schools there have been three phases (or rounds) of activity extending over several years but currently the focus is on the development of Schools of Creativity, akin to Beacon schools, which are to be used to disseminate successful practice; Change Schools, focussing on whole school development; and
Enquiry Schools, targeting specific groups of pupils and teachers. In an evaluation of Phase 1 partnerships, Sharp et al. (2006) reported that involvement allowed pupils to develop their personal and communication skills and that compared to the national profile they made similar or slightly better progress in their national curriculum assessments. Ofsted’s (2006) concurrent evaluation claimed that in some schools teaching had been transformed but as in most reports the inspectors failed to probe beyond a surface level to explore the ‘emotional geographies’ of these partnerships (Hargreaves 2001) which, as research studies have demonstrated, play an important part in creating a climate where intrinsic motivation drives learning (Brophy 2004). This present study sought to remedy this omission by exploring three main research questions:

(1) Are creative practitioners able to motivate pupils so that they become interested in the activity for its own sake rather than for some instrumental reason?

(2) If they do succeed in rekindling interest and enthusiasm, then what is it creative practitioners do to bring about this change?

(3) In what ways do they differ from teachers in this respect?

There are relatively few accounts which examine in detail the pedagogy of teachers when engaged in the arts (Tickle 1987; Jeffrey and Woods 2003; Jeffrey 2005; Pringle 2008) and still fewer that look in a similar way at the classroom practice of artists (Burnard and Hennessy 2006). The study also sought to explore those cultural influences (personal philosophy, life history, artistic inclination, etc.) that form part of Alexander’s (2004, 11) definition of pedagogy as ‘moral, purposeful activity … which we call education’ and which might explain these intuitions of creative practitioners.

Scope of the study: samples and methods

The project sought to identify a group of creative practitioners with a successful track record of working in schools, not only including artists from traditional disciplines but also practitioners making regular use of various forms of information and communications technology (ICT) such as digital photographers and film-makers. The initial approach was made through the central Creative Partnerships team at the Arts Council who mailed all regional directors with the outline bid. Some 10 expressions of interest were received. These were followed up by telephone to ascertain whether the following conditions could be met:

(1) The partnership had yet to begin so that base-line measure of the pupils’ attitudes and motivation could be obtained.

(2) The period of classroom activity extended for at least one school term so that there was a reasonable likelihood of detecting significant shifts in attitude should they occur.

Subsequently, meetings were arranged with five of the 10 regional directors. As a result of these discussions 11 creative practitioners were selected from six schools in three partnerships (see Appendix 1). The choice was heavily influenced by the regional directors and their staff who were asked to bear in mind when nominating schools that the main purpose of the study was to observe experienced creative practitioners who had built up a reputation for working well with pupils. Throughout the article schools, creative partners and teachers have all been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.
All observations, interviews and measurements were completed during the 2006–07 school year. Apart from Perveril Vale, where communications proved difficult, schools were visited more than three times and in some cases as many as 10. On each occasion extensive notes were taken of the activities undertaken, conversations taking place and instructions provided during the session. On occasions teachers were present either watching from the sidelines or participating in the activity. Where it was difficult to record an exchange either the creative practitioner or the pupil was approached at a convenient moment and asked to expand on what had taken place. After each session the field notes were expanded by including a commentary in which the researcher added thoughts, questions and references to similar occurrences recalled from other classroom research studies. The above strategy might be characterised as an intermittent (ethnographic) approach where the lifetime of the project exceeds the time spent at a particular school site (Jeffrey and Troman 2004). Not only did this approach match the limited resources available but it also allowed for sustained observation at certain sites once the initial period of familiarisation had taken place. In this way it was possible to concentrate on emerging themes and to be present at certain events which creative practitioners deemed to be of crucial importance.

Creative practitioners were interviewed at the start and end of the project. The main purpose of the first interview was to obtain a life history of the individual, including their previous links with Creative Partnerships, their professional experience and general philosophy towards working creatively with teachers and pupils in schools. The second interview attempted to draw out general impressions of the experience of working in this particular school and to explore some of the issues that emerged during the period of residence. In addition conversations regularly took place over lunchtimes and other breaks which afforded opportunities for creative practitioners to comment on events during the immediate previous sessions.

Pupils’ attitudes and motivation were also measured using a short composite questionnaire based on those used in earlier research (Pell et al. 2007). This was supplemented by a projective approach consisting of digital images of either normal lessons or creative partnership sessions which were taken by the researcher during school visits. This approach was based on Arnold’s (1962) distinction between ‘evaluative’ and ‘motivating’ attitudes. Pupils were asked to pick two pupils from the picture and to speculate what they were saying (or thinking) at the time. In all cases the pictures were edited so that the adults’ and pupils’ features did not suggest a positive or negative impression (e.g. the teacher or creative practitioner smiling).

Schools took responsibility for obtaining informed consent from the parents with regard to the participation of their children and the taking of photographs for the projective measures. Assurances were given that the pictures would as far as possible not identify individual pupils and would only be used within the participating schools. Identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms and this was readily accepted by all parties since it was understood that the focus of the study was on the pedagogy of the creative practitioners and not on the outcomes of the projects which schools were keen to publicise.

Pupil interviews took place in groups of six towards the end of projects. Initially the interview themes were left open but gradually over time the process became more structured as responses tended to highlight certain issues. At the beginning pupils were asked about their enjoyment of the creative partnership sessions and for their evaluations of the various activities. In most interviews, however, pupils became more
animated when asked to compare creative partnership lessons with other lessons and in answering the question, ‘Is Pam/Andy/Maggie (the creative partner) like a teacher?’

The focus of this article is on the creative practitioners’ classroom practice, but some reference to the responses of pupils to the pictures will be made to support certain conclusions. Hence the need for this brief outline of the methods.

First encounters and initial discussions

When creative practitioners first met with pupils there seemed to be several immediate goals which they sought to achieve. The first of these concerned the kind of relationships that they were seeking to establish. In every case they began by giving a potted version of their life history. What distinguished this from what a new teacher might say to a class s/he hasn’t met before, of the form ‘I’m Mr Smith and I’ll be taking you for History’, is that the creative practitioners’ accounts were often accompanied by expressions of feeling about certain past events which were offered as explanations for certain choices. Thus Pam tells the pupils:

Hello! I’m Pam. I write and direct plays and I also act. I didn’t train in drama. I did a degree in modern languages which led me into teaching but fairly quickly I became a teacher of English and drama because that was where my heart was … I then became a writer working with young people on drama and loved that too, so now I combine work in the professional theatre with work for Creative Partnerships in schools. (Merryweather Primary School, Year 5 class)

Glynn arrived late for the first morning and tells a group of pupils:

My name’s Glynn and I’m a film-maker. I’m sorry I’m late; blame the trains, but it’s made me anxious because I wasn’t here to set up before you came. I’ve been doing this kind of work for some years now and I got into it by helping out with groups of pupils who were excluded from school – so I had to learn the hard way. (Woodstock Secondary School, mix of Years 8 and 10)

Whereas an introduction such as ‘I’m Mr Smith, etc.’ seems designed to establish the respective roles of the participants and, to a certain extent, reinforce the power relationship between the teacher and the class, those of the creative practitioners appear to take the form of an opening conversation gambit which signifies a more equal relationship. In Glynn’s case there may also be a secondary purpose, in that his task at Woodstock was to work with groups of disaffected pupils, and by telling them about working in a referral unit he indicates he has seen and can cope with most manifestations of disengagement.

Once introductions were over then the second purpose of the initial session appeared to focus on ways of stimulating the pupils’ interest as a means of increasing intrinsic motivation. The manner of doing this seemed to vary according to the particular artistic discipline but what each approach had in common was that all creative partners sought to achieve this by first exploring the pupils’ own ideas, even if this meant departing from the main purpose of the activity. Thus Simon, the photographer used PowerPoint to display a picture of a baby.

Simon: What is it?
Pupil: It’s a picture of a baby.
Simon: Yes but it’s a special picture.
Pupils [chorus]: It’s you.
Pupil: It’s a picture which makes you happy.
Pupil: It’s a memory.
Simon: Yes it’s one of the things my mother particularly remembers about me as a young child. There isn’t anything else that can give you a memory except a drawing or a film so how do films differ from photographs?
Pupil: It’s time.
Pupil: It’s place.
Simon [after a pause when no more answers are forthcoming]: Ok, where do we see photographs?
Pupil: In a museum.
Pupil: In a photo album.
Pupil: The Living Room.
Pupil: The Bedroom.
Pupil: In a scrap book.
Pupil: In books.
Simon: And something else? What about something your parents read that comes through the door each day?
Pupils: Oh! Newspapers.
Simon: Ok then. How about we take some pictures of the playground? But before, we do we need to think about what makes a nice photograph [Goes on to explore lines, shapes, patterns and emotions with a sequence of his own pictures].

(Ashby Grange Primary School, Year 4)

Here, Simon’s main purpose was to teach pupils to consider line, shapes and patterns before they go out to the playground. But he began by showing the class pictures of himself as a baby to stimulate interest. In an even clearer use of this approach, Glynn showed a new group of pupils the film made by the previous group earlier in the year. At the end of the film he asked for comments but received none. Two girls appeared totally disinterested; one playing with her hair. Glynn then called for a volunteer to act as a model for others to photograph. Nobody volunteered so Glynn agreed to volunteer myself again. Pupils took different shots (head, full length, etc.) and their efforts were then displayed on the computer. There was laughter when one shot had a light shining above Glynn’s head.

Girl: It’s like you’ve a halo.
Glynn: Anything else you notice? [Prolonged silence] Ok. I read that you guys spend all your time downloading videos illegally. So tell me something about the movement that goes with the music on these videos. [Again there is silence] I can’t believe this. You spend your time downloading videos and you can’t tell me a thing about them. [Another long pause] Ok. Think about an Oasis video and someone like Justin Timberlake. Can you think of any differences?

Girl: One’s a story and one’s movement. [Again silence]
Glynn: Is there a MTV style?
Boy: It features unusual places like standing on a volcano.
Glynn: Would a video for rap look the same as an indie?
The two disinterested girls: No.
Glynn: Why not?
Girls: Different dress and movement.
Glynn: Ok I’m going to take you back to those pictures. Which tells you most about whether I’m feeling happy or sad?

Pupils [chorus]: The full one.

Glynn: I’m going to disagree with you there. Look at my feet. Are they sad?

Pupils: No.

Glynn: Ok. What about my face? Does that show sad?

Pupils: Yes.

Glynn: So it’s got to be the face that shows most emotion.

(Woodstock Secondary School, mix of Years 8 and 10)

Glynn’s purpose, as it emerged during the rest of the lesson and from subsequent conversation, was to get pupils to understand that although all films tell a story it is the camera angle, the particular features displayed (full profile/clothes/background, etc.) which shape the narrative in the eyes of the viewer. He had wanted to use the pictures taken by the pupils, themselves, to draw out these conclusions but getting little response he looked for something to gain their interest, and picked on music videos, before returning to the pictures once he has gained their attention. Typically in such situations teachers use what Edwards and Mercer (1987, 142–6) call cued elicitations ‘in which the teacher asks questions while providing heavy clues as to the answer required’. Such exchanges are dominated by what Tharp and Gallimore (1988) call the recitation script whereby the teacher asks a question and the pupil having responded the teacher repeats the answer coupled with another question by way of a prompt for the response s/he was seeking in the first place.

This, in part, may explain the reluctance of Glynn’s group of pupils to respond initially to his questions, since instead of giving them a clue in the face of their silence when asked to comment on their pictures he appeared to go off at a tangent by introducing the topic of videos. In a similar situation a teacher following a recitation script would have prompted with a series of questions such as, ‘What about my face? What does it look like? Happy or sad?’ until the required response was forthcoming. A different approach can be discerned in the case of Andy, the conceptual artists, whose technique was to get pupils to ask questions which he rarely answered, preferring instead to raise further problems. In the following sequence Andy had added a mosquito net to the objects surrounding a tent.

Pupil: What is it? What is it? Is it a tent?

Andy: What would happen if it rained?

Pupil: Where’s the door?

Andy: That’s a good question. What would Harry do if he found this tent? [The Year 4 class have invented a person called Harry who lives in the old army tent]

Pupil: He’d say it was modern.

(Merryweather Primary School, Year 5 class)

This sequence provides a good example of this approach, in that instead of responding to the question, ‘Is it a tent?’ by directing the pupils to look at the tent and spot differences he responds by asking the children what would happen if it rained? Andy’s expectation is that pupils will conclude that the net is not a tent because it would let water through the holes. In the same way because the mosquito net has no door he hopes that they will also conclude that it is not a tent. In this particular instance, the pupils never made these inferences but this did not seem to concern Andy since his
main purpose was not to arrive at a conclusion but to stimulate the children’s thinking as he commented in a subsequent interview:

To me being here is about several things. One important thing for me is to look at a different model of working; of the ways artists can work with schools and teachers in a much more collaborative way rather than be expected to come in and deliver and then go away again. And another important thing is with the children. What we [pointing towards Pam] are trying to do here is to be a person who responds to ideas that the children are coming up with and then to bring our own practice to share.

Pringle (2008, 43) argues that the approach adopted by creative practitioners often stems from their own experiences of small working communities where the emphasis is on ‘participatory arts practice, wherein creativity is developed and meaning emerges through collaborative processes of facilitated dialogue and making activities’. Certainly, most of the creative partners in the present study who were active professionally belonged to small cooperatives. When these creative practitioners work in schools they regard both the teachers and pupils as co-learners in the same way as they view their colleagues in their cooperatives and this helps to explain the emphasis during the introductory phase of school projects on establishing relationships as co-workers and co-learners rather than as teacher and taught. Talking about one of the highlights of her time in school Pam, when interviewed at the end of the project, reflected on the following experience:

I felt one class in particular were moving towards a way of working that was risky for the teacher but he was completely committed to it. It was simply that he realised how spontaneous things could be and how much he could respond to things the children were coming up with; to their ideas. That he could work with them in a different way. That it could feel like a genuine collaboration between himself and his class. That something that started with questions then moved to imaginative playful spontaneous stuff then moved to creating something visual, first in 2-D then 3-D and finally poetry came out of it. The week just gelled and grew incredibly organically. It was unplanned but if you look back on it there was a wonderful structure and a very clear journey from A to B.

That is not to claim that creative practitioners were averse to periods when it was necessary to instruct rather than explore. This was particularly the case in dance and drama where pupils were introduced to certain moves and then asked to act out a situation using this new knowledge. Pam began by introducing the meanings attached to the terms ‘action, freeze and neutral’. She then got pupils to take turns to direct her while she mimed eating an ice-cream and turning on the tap to wash her hands afterwards. Groups of pupils then had to create their own mimes, each taking turns to direct the action. Each group then performed their mime in front of Pam and the rest of the class who were asked for evaluative comments. In a similar manner Maggie at Canongate first explained and then demonstrated to the class the differences between unison, mirrors and canons before going on to get the pairs of pupils to design their own dance sequence incorporating these moves. Again the class was asked to comment on each others’ performance. Generally, however, whenever the situation allowed it, creative practitioners preferred to begin a lesson by getting pupils to explore their own ideas before going on to decide on the tasks to be undertaken. Only when new knowledge or skills were required in order to perform these tasks did creative practitioners undertake direct instruction.
Risk taking and the management of time and space

There is a long history of research showing that many pupils in school are averse to risk-taking (Holt 1984). Pollard (1985) argues that primary pupils cope with risk by quickly developing \textit{knife edging} strategies in which they steer a course between responding to the teachers’ questions, so as not to be thought stupid, while at the same time not showing themselves too interested in case their peers label them ‘swots’. Similar concerns also dominate secondary school (Rudduck, Chaplin, and Wallace 1996) particularly in the period after transfer when pupils are seeking to establish their position within the year group.

The tendency for pupils to ‘play safe’ helps to illuminate the failure of teachers to break away from the ‘cued elicitation’ patterns of questioning. When teachers attempt to encourage more open dialogue, pupils through the use of various strategies draw the adult into giving more and more clues until the answer to the question becomes obvious. One of the favoured pupil strategies of avoidance is silence (indicating lack of understanding) exemplified in the episode where Glynn attempted to gain the pupil’s interest by asking them about music videos. In this situation, teachers tend to offer clues in the hope of persuading some in the class to risk an answer. Creative practitioners seem more comfortable with silence.

Doyle (1983) argues that for a task to present a challenge there has to be a degree of \textit{ambiguity} and \textit{risk} involved, since if pupils already had a clear idea of what constituted an acceptable answer there would be little chance of failure. The kinds of tasks set by creative practitioners are likely to be high on ambiguity and therefore perceived, initially, by the pupil as risky. Two solutions, according to Doyle are then available; either one can scaffold the task by lowering the level of ambiguity, thereby lowering the risk, or one can find ways of lowering the risk while maintaining the level of ambiguity. Guided discovery and modelling are two ways in which teachers most frequently scaffold tasks. Both methods reduce the ambiguity and thereby the risk in that the pupil is given insight into the kind of answer expected. However, the danger in these ‘teacher framed’ scaffolds is that pupils come to rely on this kind of help when confronted with difficult problems and this dependency increases the tendency for pupils to deploy risk avoidance’ strategies when help is not forthcoming. This dependency was clearly illustrated in Bridget’s case towards the beginning of her time at Barleycroft when pupils were producing the scenery for the local pub pantomime. With Bridget’s help a group led by Jason constructed a castle out of card board and then had to decide how to paint it. The following exchange took place:

Jason: Can I paint this red? [Pointing to the tallest turret]
Bridget: What do you mean by ‘can”? Do you mean are you allowed or are you able?
Jason: I can do it alright but am I allowed?
Bridget: Why ask me? You’re running this group.
Jason: I know that but we usually ask teachers first.

(Barleycroft Primary School, mix of Years 4, 5 and 6)

Scaffolding tasks by lowering risk while maintaining ambiguity is more difficult. It generally needs to be done during the design stage of a task. For example, typically, a creative practitioner might ask the class to ‘brainstorm’ in groups in an attempt to develop ideas when solving a particular problem. Here the complexity of the task is maintained but risk is reduced because each suggestion is not linked to
any particular individual. Other forms of this type of scaffolding can involve the use of cue cards, as with writing frames, as for example when Maggie provided a sequence of pictures of dancers in different poses to focus a discussion about the relationship between arms, head and torso in displaying different kinds of emotion. These types of scaffold appear to foster independence (Rosenshine, Meister, and Chapman 1996). However, if pupils are to take risks with their learning they require time and space to sort out their ideas initially. When they are on the wrong track they don’t necessarily want to be corrected directly but prefer help with their thinking. And this is just the kind of approach the creative practitioners appear to favour, as the remarks of one group of Year 5 pupils at the end of their school project testified:

Interviewer: Is [naming the artist] the same as a teacher?  
Pupils [in chorus]: No.  
Interviewer: In what ways is she different then?  
Pupil: She lets you make big decisions.  
Interviewer: How do you feel about that?  
Pupil: Scary at first in case things go wrong [nods of agreement].  
Interviewer: But if it comes out right in the end?  
Pupil: Then it’s magic. You feel proud and warm inside [nods of agreement].

(Ashby Grange Primary School, Year 5)

There were numerous examples where teachers offered immediate help to pupils by making suggestions while the creative practitioners stood back and watched. The most striking was observed at Merryweather where Pam was developing a drama sequence designed to involve the whole class in the performance (there being only six playing parts). She told the children that as there was no money for scenery they would have to mime their own. She then asked them to provide some houses, and watched while the pupils tried out various ideas in their groups. Meanwhile, the class teacher immediately joined one group and began to arrange them into position (actually gripping them by the shoulders and propelling them to their various stations). He explained each person’s respective role saying, ‘You can be a pair of semi-detached houses. You can be the garage on the side’.

Sometimes, the different approaches to scaffolding could produce tension between the creative practitioner and the teacher. On one occasion Bridget had arranged for her group to meet some working artists. Her intention was for the children to be inspired, and also to see that doing art could be profitable. While some pupils set about planning the visit, the rest had to choose between T-shirt design and aprons. One boy, James, didn’t want to do either. Bridget had previously had a confrontation with him because he had got flour all over his trousers when they were doing paper maché. James had told Bridget that his mum thought she was a lousy artist and that his Gran had said painting was always messy and if Bridget was a proper artist she’d have known this and made sure that the paste didn’t go all over the place.

Bridget: Ok. Do you want to do hats? [James shakes his head] Well we will need to have a conversation about this. Are you happy to wait until I’m free [James nods his head].

(Barlycroft Primary School, Year 5 pupil)
Mrs P, coming into the classroom, saw James sitting there doing nothing.

Mrs P: What are you doing James?
James: Bridget told me I had to think out what I’m going to do.
Mrs P: Are you thinking James?
James: Yes.
Mrs P: Well not too long about it then. What ideas have you got so far?
James: None.
Mrs P: Well you can’t sit here all day. I know you’re interested in shells. Why not do a sketch of a beach and put some shells on your apron? I’ll help you. We can go to the library together to look at shell books and get some ideas.

This extract illustrates quite vividly the different perspectives that teachers and creative practitioners sometimes bring to the task of encouraging pupils to develop and express their own ideas. We do not know if James’ exhibition of ‘learned helplessness’ was the result of his previous experience of being dragged up to school by an angry parent to complain about the mess on his trousers, or if it is merely a manifestation of his reputation throughout the school of being ‘a difficult boy’. The teacher, Mrs P, saw Bridget’s open invitation ‘to sit and think about it’ as a rash move and set about forcing things to a conclusion. In doing so she made use of her previous knowledge about James’ interest in shells to scaffold the task, in Doyle’s (1983) terms by removing some of the ambiguities and thus lowering the risk. This is because once James agreed to Mrs P’s suggestion the choice of design was limited and the risk was reduced further by the teacher’s offer to go with James to the library to choose which particular shells to use.

Most teachers would argue that Bridget left the choices too open. Because of a lack of time she failed to set sufficient limitations on the apron or T-shirt tasks so that, as a result, some pupils’ designs had too many words to fit onto the material. A framework which suggested a picture and a limit to the number of words would have reduced the ambiguity and also forced the children to think more carefully about which words were more important. Notice, however, that at no point would Bridget have suggested which words to use, unlike one teacher at Merryweather where the pupils at Assembly were set the task of designing the programme for a musical evening (with the best one being chosen for the concert). Her advice consisted of the following: ‘One way to go about the design would be to think about all the musical instruments which will be played and draw pictures of them on the front cover with a box in the centre for the writing’.

Bridget clearly reflected on the lack of scaffolding because she began by setting limits to the number of words they could put on the aprons in the following week when the group again met. She told the class that, ‘This will really force you think what it is important in what you want to say’.

The difference between Bridget and the teacher’s approach in giving pupils ownership of the ideas can be seen in another episode at the end of the previous session when Mrs P suggested that next time she would bring in catalogues showing T-shirts which ‘the children can use for ideas’. Bridget reacted strongly to this offer by saying, ‘then it will just be something to copy’. At the end of the conversation she told Mrs P that she was going for a walk to calm down. Subsequently it appeared that Bridget was on the point of giving up. She was particularly upset by an incident where Dean, a Liverpool fan, had a problem. He wanted to put ‘Liverpool 4 Ever’ on his apron and also pictures of a football and various other things but had forgotten to leave space for the
letters. Bridget had merely told him to look for gaps or to consider the back of the apron. But when Mrs P came and he explained his problem she had responded: ‘Don’t use words. You don’t need them. You represent your words with pictures instead of words’.

In this instance, an understanding head teacher found an urgent task elsewhere in the programme for Mrs P so that she was replaced in Bridget’s group by a teaching assistant and the art classes continued. By the following week everything seemed to be going well and James was busy making a puppet’s head. He was sticking paper maché onto a balloon (this time wearing an apron to protect his trousers). James concentrated on this task for the best part of the afternoon, something so unusual that it was remarked on at tea break by the teaching assistant in the staff room. The incident is all the more telling when it emerges that the pupil in the earlier exchange who talked about having to make ‘big decisions’ and about ‘feeling proud and warm inside’ when one’s choices were successful was James. Bridget’s final reflection on the incident was to recognise the need to scaffold tasks initially: ‘I think I probably gave them too much freedom initially and this frightened some of them. They need restricted choices at first and then one can build on that’.

Alternative ways of managing risk-taking

Scaffolding is one way of managing risk-taking. Creative practitioners also used several other strategies. They seem to appreciate that many of the reasons which determine the pupils’ responses are emotional rather than cerebral. Teachers, on the other hand rarely tend to attribute pupil behaviour to feelings. For example, Ravet (2007) looked at teachers’ and parents’ explanation of pupils’ disengagement. Most of the teacher’s explanations involved deficit theories (either of attitude, ability or personality) or attributions to contexts outside the control of the school (home situation, family background or peer relationships). Parents, on the other hand, tended to attribute lack of interest in school to feelings of boredom, shyness or fatigue.

Creative practitioners frequently worked at the emotional level where fear of failure determined pupils’ response to challenge. Thus Glynn in the following episode confronted the pupil, Chris, with his tendency to be dependent on others for ideas. Having made their film the pupils were asked to include a little signature statement that described them as persons. They could do this by filming some object, cutting out a picture from a magazine or by doing their own drawing. One pupil, for example filmed himself in football kit. Chris, however, chose to copy a picture drawn by another boy.

Glynn: This is about yourself. What does it say about you that it’s a copy?
Chris: I don’t know.
Glynn: Have a little think about that.

(Woodstock Secondary School, Year 8 pupil)

For the similar reasons creative practitioners were often quick to recognise situations where pupils were prepared to expose their feelings to others. Another Year 10 student’s signature statement consisted of a picture which showed a person with one half of the torso submerged in a cloud of smoke. He explained to Glynn that it represented his character; the visible part was what others see [around the edge of the visible
picture he has written words such as ‘superior’ ‘scornful’ while next to the hidden side were words such as vulnerable, sensitive, uncertain.

Gavin: It’s one half of me; the other is surrounded in smoke. It’s my split personality.

Glynn: I think it’s quite challenging to be so open about yourself. It’s very courageous. Well done.

Design teacher [arriving later and being shown the picture]: That could be an eye. You could draw another eye.

(Woodstock Secondary School Year 10 pupil)

Another very frequently used approach was for creative practitioners to express their own feelings, as if conveying a message to the pupils that talk of this kind was acceptable currency among the group. In particular, they often had recourse to feelings when giving reasons for their decision-making. In one instance, for example, Bridget was faced with a persistent request from a keen student to add snow to the trees that were part of the scenery for the pantomime. This girl wanted to add bits of paper, painted white to represent snow flakes.

Bridget: I like your suggestion but it’s been a hard afternoon with everything that’s being going on. I’m a bit stressed and can’t cope with any new ideas at the moment. So can we leave it for now? I’m not saying it isn’t a good idea. It is but not now. OK?

(Barleycroft Primary School, Year 6 pupil)

Thus in summary, creative practitioners, whenever possible, presented pupils with ‘big choices’ designed to encourage thinking that was ‘outside the box’. They provided both the space and time for pupils to undertake this thinking. To this end, they generally scaffold these tasks by reducing the risk of failure while maintaining the ambiguity. Because they see avoidance of risk as mainly an emotional response, they also frequently emphasise the part played by feelings (both their own and the pupils’) when working on such tasks.

Managing behaviour: I can’t condone but I can understand

Of late, teachers have expressed increasing concerns about pupils’ behaviour (Galton and MacBeath 2008) and these have been backed up in official reports such as Ofsted (2005). To cope with this deterioration in behaviour many primary schools have adopted the approach typically used in secondary schools by establishing strict rules which if infringed result in immediate punishment. Sanctions are graduated according to the severity of the offence and may start with verbal warnings before moving to periods of isolation. Critics of this strategy (Watkins and Wagner 2000) argue that this ‘one size fits all’ approach is often applied in too inflexible a manner. More pertinent to the present discussion about the fostering of creativity is their other criticism (Watkins and Wagner 2000, 48) that this ‘staged response’ approach does not, typically, allow for class discussion of the situation, nor the generation of joint (teacher and pupils) solutions to problems.

Watkins and Wagner’s position reflects a longstanding alternative approach which argues that teachers need to separate the consequences of the behaviour from the motives for that behaviour when seeking to create a climate in the classroom which
allows pupils to take risks with their learning. For example, Deci and Chandler (1986) argue that children will only be intrinsically motivated in a classroom environment which is not controlling either in terms of setting task or managing behaviour. They stress that in creating these conditions teachers must engage in what they term, ‘honest evaluations’. This is done by giving genuine reasons why pupils are required to act in certain ways. Thus telling pupils they are doing something for their own good (You'll need to tidy your own home when you grow up so you better learn how to do it now) or accusing pupils of character defects (You are a messy lot) are not effective ways of exercising control (Deci and Chandler, 1986, 591). It is better, according to Deci and Chandler to give a genuine explanation such as, ‘If you leave the classroom untidy, I have to clear it up after you’ve gone, otherwise the janitor gets cross’.

Elsewhere, Deci and Ryan (1985) stress that in the process of providing ‘honest evaluations’ teachers must sometimes be prepared to acknowledge that feelings may play a part in determining one’s actions. In this way it is possible, while not condoning unacceptable behaviour, for the teacher to indicate that s/he understands the reasons for it. This makes it possible to sustain relationships because teachers are then able to convey the message that ‘just because your behaviour is unacceptable it doesn’t mean I think you’re a bad person’.

In the present study two of the secondary schools seemed to have gone some way in moving towards this approach in the two departments where the creative partnerships were situated, although in both cases there was a strict school discipline policy in operation. The primary schools, however, presented a more varied picture. In Barleycroft, there were rules although no formal sanction policies. The school tended to avoid confrontations outside the classroom by keeping children occupied. At lunch-times, for example, there were numerous clubs, including a regular daily news broadcast compiled and presented by the pupils. Serious issues were the subject of class discussion. At Ashby Grange and Merryweather the atmosphere was less relaxed and it was not unusual, on occasions, to arrive at the former and hear a teacher shouting at children in the corridor. Initially, in both these schools teachers mainly tended to watch the creative practitioners rather than participate in the activities, the exception being the reception teachers and their classroom assistants. In most cases, however, while watching from the sidelines teachers sought to retain control of behaviour often interrupting the creative practitioner to reprimand a pupil or in some cases the whole class.

Most creative practitioners tended to deal with misbehaviour by using honest evaluations. The contrast can be illustrated by the following episode at Ashby Grange where Alex was rehearsing the reception class children in the dance they were to perform for their parents. As a finale, pupils had to lie on the floor and then, at the count of five, jump up with arms outstretched like a flower bursting into bud. They were supposed to count silently but as they jumped up most shouted out ‘five’ very loudly.

Alex: We will need to do this again until you can do it quietly. It’s supposed to be a surprise. We keep quiet until we jump so nobody expects it. I know you’re feeling excited but see if you can do it without talking or do you need my help? Can you manage it by yourselves?

Pupils [in chorus]: Yes.
Alex: Ok then. I’ll count you in.
Teacher [interrupting the count]: We won’t start again until you are all quiet. Brandon [shouting] that means you.
Alex [soft voice]: Are we nice and still? Off we go [resumes counting].
Teacher [at the end of the dance as pupils get ready to leave]: Ok class. Back to normal. Line up in pairs and go quietly back to the classroom.

(Ashby Grange Primary School, Reception class)

Here Alex both hints she understands the reasons for the children’s behaviour (their excitement) and also provides the genuine reason why she requires them to be silent. She also models the behaviour by using a soft voice when asking for stillness and this is in sharp contrast to the teacher’s call for quiet by shouting at Brandon. As remarked on earlier, in the case of Maggie and the girl who wished to attach paper snow to the pantomime trees, creative practitioners often cite their own feelings in conveying the messages to children and this appears to be particularly effective when it concerns behaviour because it provides a powerful means of demonstrating the can’t condone but understand principle which Deci and Ryan (1985) argue enables the adult to maintain the relationship with children while still effectively controlling their behaviour.

Another example occurred at Merryweather with Pam. After exploring the tent with Andy a Year 4 class decided that it was a time machine. Their theory was that the tent’s inhabitant, whom they named Harry, really belonged to the Second World War period because the tent was army issue and inside were a canvas sleeping bag, ration book and a RAF forage cap. Harry had a wooden leg and limped (false leg plus walking stick found beside the tent). In subsequent discussions with Pam and Andy the class decided that they would like to help Harry get back to where he belonged so they sought to discover from the study of various events, still pictures, films and songs, etc., something about each of the intervening decades between 1940 and the present day. In groups the children then recorded an assortment of sounds (songs made up of snatches of conversation, etc.) which represented a single decade. The idea was for each group to leave these audio-recordings in the tent for Harry to play his way back in time.

On this particular afternoon each group was to practise their medley while another went into the tent to listen. At the outset, they were warned by Pam that this could be risky because it could activate the time machine and whisk them all off to another decade. This notion provoked considerable excitement and generated much laughter and noise so that Pam had problems controlling the class. At this point she clapped her hands for attention and said:

When I was your age my brother and I had a tent in the garden. We wanted to sleep in it but my mum said, No; we wouldn’t get any sleep because we’d get excited and be giggling all night. So do you think when you go into the tent you could not have a giggle. I know that’s hard but you will have to stop yourself if you want to hear all the sounds when you go on time travel. So are you ready for the challenge? (Merryweather Primary School, Year 4)

Here Pam is able to put the ‘can’t condone but I understand’ principle to good effect by conveying the message that although no giggling is allowed she understands from her own experience why it is one does giggle when excited.

One final description of an incident at Ashby Grange, again with Alex, the dancer, illustrates most powerfully the value of the approach adopted by most of the creative
practitioners in situations where mistakes were made and needed to be rectified. This time the Year 4 class were also rehearsing their routine for the parent’s concert. Alex created a dance where pupils had to form themselves into a tight spiral. This coil then unwound slowly with pupils breaking off to form new groups ready for the next routine. On this particular day, one girl, Melissa, left the spiral too early and ran to her next position. Realising her error she clasped her hand to her mouth in horror:

Teacher [shouting above the music]: Melissa. Concentrate and pay attention.

Alex waited until the music finished. There had been some aggressive behaviour because when children came out of the spiral they didn’t always end up at the exact spot where they were supposed to stand waiting for the next move to begin. When more pupils arrived they frequently tried to take over the occupied space by pushing their peers out of the way.

Alex [turning to Melissa]: I want to congratulate you Melissa. You did exactly the right thing. You went to the next spot and didn’t run back into the spiral. I did something like that when I was your age and I was so embarrassed I did what you did and put my hand over my mouth. But afterwards I realised that nobody in the audience realised it was a mistake, that is until I put my hand to my mouth. They thought I was doing a solo. And now then you others [turning to address the rest of the class]. Melissa has taught us all something. Mistakes are going to happen. It doesn’t matter. What matters is how you cope with them. So when you come out of the spiral and you find someone is in your position don’t try to move him away but go to his place instead. So well done Melissa for teaching us all such an important lesson.

(Ashby Grange Primary School, Year 4)

Again Alex uses an incident from her own childhood, including her feelings on making her mistake in public, to empathise with Melissa (and no doubt other pupils listening) before going on to deal with behaviour issue of pushing and shoving. This incident had a powerful impact on the class. When interviewed and asked the question, ‘Is Alex like a teacher?’ they all gave negative responses and said that this was mainly because, ‘She didn’t shout like teachers’. Asked to explain further, they mostly talked about the above incident with Melissa. Whether it left a similar impression on Mrs Matthews, the class teacher, we shall never know since in a subsequent interview with Alex it was established that the incident was never discussed.

**Going with the flow: the impact on pupils**

At this point it is appropriate to discuss the pupils’ responses to the attitude and motivation questionnaire. Of the primaries, pupils at Barleycroft maintained the strongest dispositions, overall. In Year 5, where comparisons across the three schools were possible, they equalled the scores of Ashby Grange pupils while both surpassed those of Merryweather. When self-esteem was examined pupils at Barleycroft, on average, registered 10 percentage points more than their peers at the other two primary schools despite having the most disadvantaged circumstances. The projective test using
pictures did not work well in the secondary schools. Older pupils tended to explain the incidents in the pictures rather than to use their imagination to compose a story. With primary children there were clear differences between the stories for core subjects and the creative partnership activities as the following excerpt illustrates:

Pupil 1:  7 × 8, what does that equal?
Pupil 2:  What time’s lunch?
Pupil 3:  Soon I hope. This is boring.
Pupil 2:  I don’t get this question.
Teacher:  Stop talking and get on with your work.

With creative practitioners the dialogue usually tended to concentrate on the task in the picture and to be extremely positive:

Pupil 1:  What shall we do?
Pupil 2:  Lets [Let’s] make a brige [bridge].
Pupil 1:  OK. That will be fun.
Pupil 2:  You look like a brige [bridge] now.

It is not possible to be certain that the Creative Partnership activity brought about these positive outcomes, but nevertheless there are certain inferences that can be drawn from the different approaches adopted by the three primary schools. Although at Barleycroft there were teachers like Mrs P who were controlling, most recognised from the start that if pupils were to take risks they needed to have a voice in decision-making and freedom to make their own mistakes. Thus the choice of creative partnership activities was initially made by pooling the results of class discussions. Children were then allowed to choose their own group; the only restrictions being a limit on numbers and the fact that once choices were made pupils were not permitted to change. Staff were actively involved in working alongside the creative partners, unlike the two other primary schools where, for the most part, teachers watched from the sidelines or absented themselves from the sessions.

However, even at Barleycroft creative practitioners seemed reluctant to engage in conversations with teachers about the ways in which these small but significant changes in pupils’ dispositions were achieved. Some ex-teachers themselves, who had left the profession because of the restrictive nature of the curriculum and the tyranny of testing, felt it unreasonable to put more pressure on classroom practitioners. As one creative practitioner put it when discussing these findings:

Teachers often get defensive and I think this is because lots of them aren’t able to teach as they wish but are constrained by targets, other initiatives and concerns of the management. Allowing pupils to take ownership is a big risk.

**Could teachers become more like creative practitioners?**

The pupils in the study, for the most part, clearly relished the contact with these creative practitioners. They talked about them with warmth and also about the transformative effects these individuals had on their self-confidence, their capacity to face challenge and on their relationships with other pupils and sometimes teachers. And yet to say this is to be accused of creating a ‘them’ and ‘us’ situation where creative
practitioner equals good and teacher equals bad. Pringle (2008, 47) makes a similar point.

In the contexts of CP consideration must be given to how and whether artist-led pedagogy can endanger broader and longer-term creative learning strategies across the school. One issue associated with artists’ interventions in education (which these artists are aware of) is that art practitioners can adopt creative and experimental pedagogic modes because generally they are free from curriculum constraints whereas teachers are not always at liberty to do so. The artist thus becomes a creative ‘other’ whereas the teacher can be cast in the role of didact or policeman. There is a danger that artists reinforce normative relations because they act as one off bubbles where they are perceived as limited outside interventions.

Given freedom from such constraints creative practitioners chose to operate in schools much as they did in the world outside. Those who belonged to small artistic communities brought a similar approach to their work in schools and treated pupils in much the same way as they would their fellow artists. In an interview, when asked how he developed his approach Andy, the conceptual artist, responded:

I don’t really like working in galleries, although I do work in galleries. But I kind of like working with other artists within systems. I see Local Councils as a system, regeneration as a system and education in schools being a system. And my job as an artist is to sit outside that and question it and challenge it. And I think that’s what I’ve tried to do here like in any other project. As an artist I’ve challenged the system, so it’s been like a piece of work. It’s conceptual for me.

Teachers, however, are taught from the outset that to be successful you shouldn’t ‘smile till Christmas’ and tend to revert to this maxim whenever things are not going well (Galton 1989). Other maxims such as, ‘A friendly teacher is a weak teacher’ or ‘a teacher craving to be popular never is’ have become part of school folklore. This serves to blur the subtlety of the relationships which creative practitioners exemplified by equating their attempts to show respect for pupils’ personal identities with over-familiarity.

These findings, however, may present too pessimistic a view of what is taking place in Creative Partnership schools. In this research, in order to establish a base line for measuring pupils’ attitudes, schools, with little or no previous experience of working with creative partners, were deliberately chosen. On the other hand, Pringle’s (2008) analysis suggests that the issues surrounding the pedagogy of creative practitioners and teachers, which have been identified in this article, also exist in other schools where the links with Creative Partnerships have been built up over an extended period.

Like the artists in Pringle’s (2008) account the creative practitioners in this present study mostly felt that only by sustained dialogue with small groups of teachers and students can this clash of pedagogies be resolved. This discourse needs to adopt Alexander’s (2004) notion of pedagogy as more than the act of teaching so that it also involves the principles and values which underpin the practice. Similar views have been expressed by Thomson (2007) who has also identified the need to bring such matters out into the open and to widen the dialogue to include consideration of the arts and artists in society and a number of initiatives such as Dance Partners for Creativity (Chappell 2008), and the work of Jeffrey (2005) point to the potential of this approach in helping teachers foster children’s creativity while meeting the more formal demands of the statutory curriculum. Initiatives of this kind will be rejected
by many policy-makers on the grounds that they are never likely to lead to more than individual small-scale improvement. However, given the repeated failures of both large scale ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ reforms to impact in a fundamental way on existing pedagogy (Cuban and Tyack 1995), it is perhaps time to give more attention to ‘seed corn’ initiatives of this kind which could, at least, provide signposts for future development.

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References


Appendix 1

*Creative Partnership A* (situated in the North West of England)

Secondary school: Peveril Vale
Creative practitioners: Sue and Phil, both visual artists and ecologists
Project: Improving the quality of the school environment by designing and decorating a new garden using ecologically friendly materials. Work took place during the autumn and summer terms.

*Creative Partnership B* (situated in West Midlands)

Secondary school: Woodstock
Creative practitioner: Glynn, a documentary film-maker
Project: Encouraging healthy eating by the provision of a juice bar as part of a school-wide enterprise initiative. Two documentary films were made over two six-week periods in the spring and summer terms.

Primary school: Ashby Grange
Creative practitioners: Simon, a photographer and Alex, a dancer
Project: A one-term study of the school’s surrounding environment. Pupils took photographs of interesting buildings. These were computer-edited to provide various designs which were developed into dance routines.

*Creative Partnership C* (situated in the East Midlands)

Secondary school: Canongate
Creative practitioners: Maggie and Theo, both dancers
Project: Introducing contemporary dance into the curriculum with a view to strengthening the school’s bid for specialist status as a Creative Arts College. The dancers worked with staff and pupils in the physical education department on one day each week over three terms.

Primary school: Barleycroft
Creative practitioners: Asha, Indian music and Bridget, a visual artist
Project: The school gave the entire Thursday throughout the year to partnership activity. Pupils selected one of several activities with a view to mounting an exhibition for parents in the summer term. Asha was seen only once and then withdrew from the programme because of outside professional commitments.

Primary school: Merryweather
Creative practitioners: Pam, an actress/director and Andy, a conceptual artist
Project: Two six-week periods during the spring and summer term. Andy created two visual presentations built around the themes of travel and puzzles which subsequently became the focus of drama workshops.