

# **‘Born Originals, how comes it to pass we die Copies?’ (Edward Young): A case study analysing the Masters’ thesis as a vehicle for student creativity, engagement, and transformative learning.**

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## **Abstract**

The poet Edward Young’s question in Trilling (1972) poses an important question for educators: how best to resist the pervasive tendency towards conventionalisation of thought and action and support students to discover their authentic voice and place within their chosen discipline and field? Teachers in higher education are often exhorted to stimulate and develop their students’ creativity through creative teaching methods as the antidote to standardisation, but they may have limited knowledge of creative approaches to teaching or baulk at what they perceive as the additional work required to implement them (Jackson et al, 2006). This single case study focuses on ‘Sarah’, a primary school teacher studying for the MA in Education at the University of Sunderland. Sarah engaged deeply and emotionally (even passionately) to produce a 20,000 word research thesis that stood out for its moments of inspiration, originality and discovery, elements often associated with creativity. The case study explores in what ways the process and outcomes were creative with reference to the concept of ‘little c’ creativity and reminds us that the familiar student task of producing a Masters’ research thesis does offer a framework and scope for creative engagement. It concludes that a key to helping students to engage creatively is to help them to tap into their own deeply held and felt values.

**Keywords:** creativity, engagement, transformative, learning

## **Context and rationale**

Sarah was in her fifth year of teaching when she embarked upon her thesis. She chose an action research design based on interventions that she devised for ‘Thomas’, a 10 year old boy in her class with Asperger’s Syndrome. The interventions were designed to improve Thomas’ social interactions in the expectation that this would help him academically as well as socially as interpersonal conflicts arising from his Asperger’s condition diminished. They included a series of carefully planned one-to-one social interaction training sessions with Thomas, followed by intensive participant observation and data collection.

In preparation for the thesis, Sarah undertook a Research Methods module which introduces students to the principles of research and some of the methodologies most relevant to the field of education. Assessment consists of

a) a critical analysis of the methodologies described in three published research papers of their individual choosing and b) a full research proposal for their own thesis.

Upon completion of this module, I was appointed to be Sarah's supervisor for the duration of the thesis. Use of my supervision time was negotiated with Sarah and finally consisted of no more than two or three face to face meetings, but ongoing email and some telephone contact, and written feedback on work in progress. Strong elements of originality in her final submission made me want to discover more about the links between creativity and engagement and how other students might be helped to engage at a deeper level.

## Literature

### *'Little c' creativity*

According to Jeffrey and Craft (2001), creativity research from the 1950s was largely focused on the psychological characteristics and creative output of particularly gifted individuals. The 1970s saw a shift towards the "universalization of creativity" as it became increasingly identified with imaginativeness. This supported a move away from research into exceptional individuals and towards investigation into creativity that is present in everyone and exercised in all domains.

Based on her research in education, Craft's (2001) model of 'little c' creativity (everyday creativity, as distinct from the paradigm-changing 'big C' or 'high' creativity of a Freud, Einstein or Picasso), characterises being imaginative as seeing beyond the immediately obvious in any situation. Posing questions and problems is emphasised, as well as openness to playing with new ideas and possibilities. Purposeful action is a necessary component, making self-directing attitudes, personal route-finding and the ability to operationalise ideas important. Craft sees "risk-taking" as taking a risk which matters to the individual that the intended result may not occur, while innovation can be related to the individual doing things differently, not necessarily to the wider field. For innovation and action to be truly creative, Craft says there must be development of the individual, who must recognise that their ideas or actions are creative with reference to previous convention.

According to Tusa (2014), this trend has over-extended the definition of creativity and undermined its true meaning and value, namely "the exceptional act of imaginative discovery in an art form" (p. 6). Conversely, Robinson (2011) argues that an over-emphasis on creativity as the preserve of exceptional individuals has contributed to a widely accepted and harmful assumption that people are either born creative or not (and that most are not).

### *Transformative learning*

According to Cranton (1994), Mezirow's (1991) transformation theory of adult learning proposes that individuals are shaped by social structures and that socialisation leads to dependency-producing psychological assumptions, which he calls reality 'perspectives'. Learning occurs as a result of reflecting upon experience, especially where there is a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) because experience is not in harmony with an individual's existing perspective. Learning becomes a liberating force as the perspective is transformed and the individual reintegrates the new ideas into a new perspective, planning new courses of action and new strategies for living.

Allen (2014) refers to "threshold concepts" in higher education, whereby in order to engage with difficult new knowledge, learners enter "a liminal cognitive space of unknowing in order to pass through the threshold of 'knowing'" (p. 33). Thus

*"a transformative learning approach seems appropriate for the development of the attributes of a creative disposition, providing a framework for personal transformation in the context of a learning process, and a method of managing the liminal space intrinsic to both learning thresholds and creative practice" (p. 34).*

Allen argues that some students attempt to make this liminal space 'safe' by employing mimicry rather than striving to achieve mastery but that "mimicry is the antithesis of creativity" (Allen, 2014, p. 33). Similarly, Kleiman (2008) suggests that where students are engaged in a transformative learning process, risk-taking and confidence to "step outside of the safe zone" (p. 215) are discernible creative elements.

This suggests there are sufficient links between creativity and transformative conceptions of learning to justify further investigation.

## **Approach**

Single cases "can be very vivid and illuminating, especially if they are chosen to be [...] 'revelatory'" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 26). Having followed Miles & Huberman's advice to "Think of the focus, or 'heart', and build outwards" (p. 27), it was clear that the heart of this study was Sarah. Her completed thesis conveyed a strong sense of her as a person throughout, itself an indication of personal engagement. The points at which her 'self' was revealed in some way were identified and given codes and the codes grouped into themes.

What was unfolding was a sense of Sarah's 'being' or 'authenticity', which "comes to us as a surprise, as if it were exceptional in its actuality and valuable" (Trilling, 1972, p. 93). Emerging themes from the textual analysis and associated literature were explored further in a seventy minute semi-structured interview with Sarah. This data was recorded, transcribed, analysed and coded and either linked to existing codes and themes or used to form new ones.

Further iterative readings of data and literature moved the focus from intrinsic interest in the case

*“toward illustrating how the concerns of researchers and theorists are manifest in the case”* (Stake, 2003, pp. 140-141).

## Reflections

Contrasting student responses of mimicry and creativity within the liminal space (Allen, 2014) seem pivotal to understanding Sarah’s originality. Despite encouragement to choose research topics they feel strongly about, MA in Education students often choose topics they think will be more manageable, or that are determined by the needs of their institution. Although the interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation is complex

*“motivation that stems from the individual’s personal involvement in the work – love, if you will – is crucial for high levels of creativity in any domain”* (Collins & Amabile, 1999, p. 297).

Sarah’s study rose directly out of her love for her work and for the children she taught. In particular, it was motivated by care for Thomas and driven by her conviction that he could make the same educational progress as other children. The key to this was understanding him fully as a person:

*“People say to me ‘I’ll just read a book on the strategies’ [for dealing with Asperger’s] but it’s not like that [ ... ] there isn’t a book that can be written for those children. They are all individual [ ... ] the way they come into the classroom on a morning, you have got to have the understanding of why they are doing those things, why they have chosen to sit here and why they have chosen to say those things to you – it’s getting to know them as individuals”* (interview).

Alma & Smaling (2006) define empathic understanding as “placing oneself *imaginatively* in another’s experiential world” (p. 206) and there was abundant evidence of Sarah’s empathy for Thomas as she undertook one-to-one social interaction training with him and intensively monitored its effects. In so doing, she was devoting “focal attention” which, according to Alma & Smaling (2006), the psychoanalyst Schachtel (1984) identifies as being essential for exploring the world and its possibilities. According to this view, our capacity for “focal attention” reaches its peak in childhood, after which

*“people’s perception and experience get ‘conventionalized’: they stick to the familiar and the socially accepted, sometimes to the point of not being able anymore to see unexplored aspects or surprising facets”* (Alma & Smaling, 2006, p. 207).

Sarah saw and questioned accepted norms. Even before Thomas came into her class:

*“I watched him in school and how he displayed himself in assembly ... he had people sat with him and I always thought why are they sat with him? Couldn’t they just sit away from him?”* (interview).

When she became his class teacher, she moved Thomas' personal support assistant away from him in the belief that her constant close proximity was stifling Thomas' independence and causing conflict (thesis). Sarah's frustration with colleagues who failed to see past the Asperger's label and her desire to change their perspective was a significant and sustaining motivation for the study. She spoke of 'daring' to go against the received wisdom that came from training and practice:

*"We have one little boy with Asperger's Syndrome and he is totally non-verbal and she [colleague] said 'it will be very difficult because he won't speak to you, he won't do this and that' ... and I'm not saying I'm the magician but I only had to sit with him in the dinner hall and talk to him and he spoke to me"* (interview).

Referring back to Craft's 'little c' creativity framework, Sarah was therefore being creative not only in problem-solving, but in problem-posing. She was a critical observer who imagined other possibilities, acted and critically reflected. The risk, as perceived by her, was the risk of ostracising herself from her colleagues by challenging them or being proved wrong about Thomas and not being able to change their perceptions.

Emotionally involved as she was with Thomas, it upset her to see him being misunderstood in the wider school environment. In one incident, he was taken out of assembly and disciplined for laughing at the news that another boy at the school had been in a car crash. She felt conflicted about writing such incidents into the thesis:

*"At times it was hard because some things I saw Thomas doing in the classroom when I first set off on it, I didn't want to record because I thought 'that's not him'"* (interview).

Nevertheless, her concern for the integrity of the research, and her perception that she was making a contribution to knowledge in the domain, helped her to overcome her apprehensions:

*"but I wanted a true reflection of him and I wanted a total understanding of him, so I did put everything in"* (interview).

This is reminiscent of Tusa's (2014) characterisation of the strong sense of direction and deep instinct for when something is "right", that drives artistic creativity to a point of completion:

*"When the word 'true' is used in this context, it signals a reconciliation with their [artists'] internal sense of truth, with their understanding of personal integrity"* (p. 9).

Sarah's internal sense of truth came from her deeply held and felt values of care and knowledge of the individual child. The research thesis vehicle provided time and space for the "self-critical gaze" (Tusa, 2014) of focal attention, enabling her to test theories and data against her inner sense of purpose and direction.

Discovery and transformed perspectives were among the outcomes – for Sarah, Thomas and other school staff. She writes about a moment of “complete revelation” while observing Thomas becoming increasingly frustrated by his inability to engage the attention of another child. She resisted the temptation to remind him of the ‘voice inflection’ strategies she had taught him and endured another five minutes of his rising distress before he:

*“looked up from his work and began to speak to his partner using his correct tone of voice [ ... ] He spoke calmly, softly and showed total awareness of his audience. Whilst there is an abundance of literature that suggests voice inflection is an impairment for a child with Asperger’s Syndrome, the researcher [Sarah] found no evidence to suggest that intervention through activities could bring about such a transformation in understanding”* (thesis).

This led Sarah to make links to self-regulation theories, from which she developed further strategies to support Thomas, which contributed to changes in perception about him in the wider school community:

*“[The assistant head] was very much ‘this shouldn’t be happening’ about me doing this in the classroom, but we actually set up a thing where Thomas would go as sort of a release time into his room and go and sit and he would have his baskets he would choose from in his room and now he has an understanding of him [ ... ] before, he would get told off but now I see him in his office and Thomas is showing him his Dr. Who things etc. and it is slowly leaking out where people are having more of an understanding”* (interview).

## **Conclusion**

It has been argued that a wider, universalized conception of ‘little c’ creativity, is a useful framework for thinking about creative teaching and learning in higher education. It has also been argued that the process of completing a Masters level research thesis offers the scope for creative student engagement leading to authentic transformations in knowledge, understanding and perspective.

Conceptualisations of transformative learning emphasise the cognitive and rational aspects of critical reflection, yet as Cranton (2006) points out

*“extracting oneself from the herd can also be an intuitive, imaginative, and affective process”* (p. 12).

Sarah’s case reminds us of this and illustrates the role of emotions and personal values in negotiating the “disorienting dilemma” of the liminal space creatively and confidently. Yet not all come equipped to approach this space creatively and teachers need to find effective ways of helping them to come to a fuller understanding of their own values in relation to the subject being studied. This requires further investigation and needs to go beyond mere repetition of the commonly held assumptions and values of practice; students need to be helped to find their own ways of connecting to deeply held and felt values. As Sarah said when asked for her advice to Masters’ students selecting a research thesis topic:

*“I would say do something that you are passionate about and something that you believe in and possibly through it you could make a difference”.*

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