

Thought and creation in contemporary education: Theoretical approaches and practical suggestions

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We desperately fight to give meaning to something fluid, still inexplicable, and fully unpredictable. Besides, we lack the time for reflection, a gap for the thought. Miranda (2008).

Abstract

This article discusses the role of creation and thought in contemporary life, in education and in gifted education in particular. Starting from traditional approaches to creativity, we discuss some implications of diverse forms of understanding those two human activities in education, and reflect upon ways in which the particular concepts of educators could favour (or not) the thinking and creating patterns of their students. We lastly present, based on Marion Milner's theory and highlights from the philosophy of Heidegger, ideas around activities offered to students enrolled in special programs for the gifted, which possibly foster thinking and creation for life.

Key words

Gifted Education, Creativity, Existential Philosophy

Introduction

We live an unprecedented moment of metamorphosis and transformation, maybe the most intense generation gap in human history. Machines, techniques, language, values and beliefs, all have changed. We constantly hear complaints about contemporary youth "respecting nothing", from dressing codes to formal language standards. The older generations seem to lack even basic conditions to understand the young, who have been raised in such diverse circumstances.

We therefore need to build bridges to overcome conflicts born out of unmatched world views, and open new horizons with viable alternatives to establish a more fluid dialogue.

From McLuhan to Pierre Lévy, many authors discuss the effects of globalisation and the new forms of sharing information between human beings, focusing on how they might shape cerebral functioning and the constitution of subjectivities. “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapped bursts – the faster, the better.” (Carr, 2011, Kindle Edition).

Our purpose is to discuss the role of creation and thought in education and in contemporary life. Starting from traditional approaches to creativity, we discuss some implications of diverse forms of understanding those two human activities in education, and reflect upon ways in which the particular concepts of educators could favour (or not) the thinking and creating patterns of their students. We lastly present, based on Marion Milner’s theory and highlights from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, ideas around activities offered to students enrolled in special programs for the gifted.

The principle of reason and the study of creativity

Contemporary life reflects the results of a process rooted in the Renaissance, of domination of the world through human rationality: the human subject as administrator of nature’s phenomena. He should renounce to his own experience and, through reflexive consciousness, perceive and set stable patterns for the functioning of things. A universal knowledge could guarantee safe grounds to his existence on Earth.

How could this knowledge be made trustworthy?

Heidegger describes the chosen alternative (criticizing it soon after): the establishment of superior values, meant to be the real measure of things, to which reality is to be submitted on a step by step basis; and the establishment of a method that validates this verification, forming a trustworthy knowledge – a "modus for the acquisition of truth". (Heidegger, 1990a, p. 99). That spells methodical and regular research. The experiment, in modern times, is a methodical practice based on some hypothesis that investigates a predicted order. According to this perspective, the knowledge about the world can be limitlessly enlarged, by relating every new fact to a previously established reference, through experimentation. The new and unknown fact

becomes focused, but always refers to a well-known “truth”. The unknown is reduced to the already known, which is then confirmed. The new is, therefore, no longer new.

Still according to Heidegger (1962), the utmost fundamental, preceding every other in the understanding of events – the principle of reason – postulates that everything that is, is for a reason, or in a different formulation, nothing can be without a reason. Phenomena are fluid, ephemeral. Research objects, however, are not.

Making reasons explicit, equates to making objects true, leaving to experimentation (as opposed to experience) the task of verifying the limits of this truth, or to which degree it is what it is. On the other hand, it has nowadays become increasingly difficult to deduce the future based on the past. The presented modus of production (and, consequently, of transmission) of knowledge has paved the way for amazing scientific and technologic development, and yet important questions have been raised and need to be addressed by society and, above all, by education.

The world of living things is a web of inseparable connections. It understands phenomena in their natural environment and is composed of flow and change, in unstoppable and ever-changing effects. As it contains the investigating subject and trespasses geographical boundaries, it demands contextualization. “Truths” must be agreed upon in shared consensus. Western societies, however, have been used to incorporate in their own cultures values derived from a science that reduces phenomena to their basic components, isolating them in specific situations (laboratory). “Intelligence is mistaken by the idea of a single and unchangeable order, administered by science and technique.” (Novaes, 2008, p. 9). This procedure, which controls and intends to eliminate randomness, must be protected from all human idiosyncrasies and conducted towards a desirable and univocal truth, equally valid for all.

We witness today a scientific and technological development where facts and events predominate, yet all becomes ephemeral and transitory. “We suspect that the knowledge and power created by reason and technical rationality, which resulted in techno-science – this new reality of knowledge – make harder the work of spirit. [...] Nowadays, when mutation replaces crisis¹, the spirit feels adrift.” (Novaes, 2010, p. 11).

¹ “Crisis” is here understood as the necessary condition to the exercise of a critical mind.

Under such preconceptions the study of creativity has been forged. Studies massively valued scientific production, in the most traditional forms of methodological and experimentalist models, in order to assure credibility. This, however, establishes conditions of imprisonment which, sometimes, neutralize the appearance of precisely what one seeks to know; and the annihilation of what is, in creativity, the most remarkable feature: diversity.

When we recall relevant studies on the theme, which are an important part of the contemporary discourse, we find theoreticians since the 50's caring for a 'democratization' of creativity, detaching it from geniality and transforming it in an attribute of common citizens, like, for instance, Alex Osborn ([1953] 1988). For them, to be creative was, in smaller or larger degree, a possibility for any person. Some individuals, as human history attests, spontaneously take ownership of this feature. Others depend on training, if they are to develop their creative potential to its utmost level.

They also state that the creative process is crafted by a series of features - individual and environmental – which could be dissembled for the purpose of training. Such qualities, flowing together at the moment of the creative act, demand, in one hand, individual ownership of skills and specific personality features; on the other hand, an accepting environment in which judgements are temporarily suspended, and personal resources can be explored.

Notably, two trends appear in such studies: a group defending directive training, which associates all research on creativity to the possibility of it being taught; and a humanistic group. Both consider creativity to be a way of being which realizes itself in everyday life, and consider creativity as an innate potential, cultivated in a facilitating environment, charged with effort by means of a positive attitude. Both groups share the principle of equality among the individuals, equal opportunities of access to creativity training, and a basic faith on the capacity and will of the subject to actualize his/her own potential. On one side, we find authentic defenders of directive techniques as a stimulus to the development of creative potential. They are, beside himself, followers of Alex Osborn, the creator of *brainstorming*. His principles guided most creativity training programs. On the other hand, we find the humanistic thinking in psychology, essentially non-directive in its formulations, represented in the study of creativity mainly by Rollo May (1975) e Abraham Maslow (1971).

One of the central difficulties to study creativity is the attempt to define the scope of its concept. The fact that it is considered universal creates the problem of discriminating who can be considered creative, and beyond that, what is, in fact, creative. How can we say what is new, and to whom? Some authors tend to consider new solely what has never been done before by anyone. Others consider that the new is so, by definition, to whoever has produced it. Seeking to solve this deadlock, researchers turned to the final product, going ahead with a procedure that seems to be generalised: to recover the creator's personality traces and environmental conditions to which they were exposed, in order to reproduce them.

Being safe results, the products are considered by the authors the most easily identifiable part of the creative process. At least, there is a near-universal consensus over some of them. "In the arena of developing criteria for the evaluation of degrees of creativity, (...) the evaluation of the product is much more important and acceptable, for a number of reasons, than the evaluation of the process. One of the reasons is that the product is more tangible." (Taylor, 1976, p 30).

We find ourselves facing a curious situation. It is postulated that we are all creative. However, as we are tied to criteria for the recognition of creative products, all attention in fact turns towards inventions or genial masterpieces. We return, therefore, to the conception that only special people are creative. We retreat from the "democratising" argument, by the very incapacity to consider as creative the less spectacular productions. We intend that everyone should reach the best development of their potentialities through unconditional acceptance, while we believe, from the start, that only a few are capable of that.

Another possible formulation to define the creative process states that creation is a process which unfolds over a period of time, seeking solutions for a specific problem – a time-consuming process. According to its defenders, in order for that to occur, a full understanding of the existing knowledge on the theme is paramount, as well as relevant techniques involved, be it a work of art or a scientific project.

Some of those statements have, however, been systematically questioned since the late half of the last century.

Creativity: gratuity and quiescence

The above issues appear in a complementary way, and announce the possibility to elect as organisational criteria for the human experience references that extrapolate the mere utilitarian exercise of thought to which we have been conditioned.

The most relevant philosophers in the field of Phenomenology – Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty – passionately defended the need to find ways to knowledge, without falling into the reification of the world that is typical of metaphysical thinking and traditional science. In that sense, they take up the artistic way as a paradigm for another kind of relation of the man with the world, understood in Phenomenology as inseparable.

According to these authors, the artistic way unveils possibilities of creation and expression opposed to the linear approaches to phenomena. The non-utilitarian creation, based on the artistic making and its gratuity, induces a different form of relation between the man and the world, as a counterpoint to science (here understood in its traditional form). Artistic creation and making are seen as the most intimate spot of contact between the human being and the lived experience.

Merleau-Ponty (2004, p. 15) describes poetically the attitude of the artist:

“[the painter] is there, strong or weak in life, but inarguably sovereign in his rumination of the world, without any other “technique” but whatever his own eyes and hands offer to the strength of seeing and to the strength of painting, obstinate to extract from this world, where historical scandals and glories resonate, paintings which will add very little to the hatred and hopes of mankind”.

Such gratuity fosters a suspension of rationality, and an approximation to what is sensitive. It signals towards the existence of two types of thinking. One is the functional thinking, which establishes reasons, breaks down and codifies things, works with them at an experimental level, and creates models that can be applied to other situations. The other type of thinking adopts the form, as described by Hanna Arendt (1995), of an inner dialogue. True thinking is, to her, as the painting to Merleau-Ponty: it has no immediate utility and, beyond that, has no end, in the dual sense that it is never completed and has no goal. This type of thinking is only possible through imagination, the possibility to take up different points of view.

Creativity in Education: the contribution from Marion Milner

Marion Milner was a British psychoanalyst born in 1900. Her studies on creativity and education are remarkably positioned mid-way between the two mentioned perspectives. She approached those themes throughout her life: since 11 years of age she wrote diaries that became her most valuable resource for an investigation, marked by human experience, as opposed to traditional experimentalism. Her a line of investigation was always based on experience.

One of her first influences was the work of Elton Mayo, from Harvard University, who studied the importance of *reverie*² in monotone jobs. Mayo spoke about direct and indirect thinking. “According to Mayo, the first type sought to establish truths; the second sought to establish relations”. (Milner, 1991, p. 15). Mayo recognised a way of thinking which happened through images, not only through words.

Departing from drawings and free associations out of her own analytic process, Milner dedicated herself to study how “a good drawing can be the genuine expression of a state of the soul” (Milner, 1991, p. 18). Perspective, visual outline, limits and boundaries between the self and the external world, all revealed fears from limitlessness: we are emotionally inclined to imprison objects in themselves by the use of outline. “The outline represented the world of facts, of solid, palpable objects. Hanging to them would surely protect a person from the world, the world of imagination.” (Milner, 1991, p 20).

Following her unusual line of investigation, thinking through images, she was capable to understand the problem of the educational system in schools, which excluded psychic creativity.

She was interested in finding “how the capacity for mental plasticity is established in the individual, permitting creative living” (Carvalho, 1998, p. 11), supporting Winnicott’s idea that a healthy life is related to creative living. Creativity is opposed to rationality, because the man-made effort to organize the world through techniques and logic pulls him apart from imagination and creativity; yet, only through creativity can we find meaning in what is meaningless. This issue is fundamental to the human condition.

The human being needs to be creative, and the creative process produces the necessary anxiety for the process of learning. To her, the educational methods that were widely applied in schools, with their foundation on logical thinking, not only blocked

² Concept forged by Wilfred Bion, meaning phantasy, dream, wishful illusion. (Arantes, 2011, p. 30)

creativity, but also did not hold doubt – which is the essential place where learning can truly happen. Approving and celebrating the fact of knowing, the school penalises the not knowing, refraining children from accessing their psychic reality through doubt and uncertainty.

As children could not express their inborn creativity, they would experience the school as something foreign to themselves. Knowledge occurs by the measure in which the human being re-creates the world through his creativity. Each person, in their own way, can find a channel of expression, and produce something meaningful to themselves and to the significant others around them.

Creativity Workshops and the freedom to create

We have so far reflected upon relations between thinking and creation, signalling varied ways to understand these two elements out of opposed contexts. We will now discuss the practice of Creativity Workshops for gifted children, as to support educators finding some freer access to their own processes of understanding and creation.

Creativity Workshops are a model of psychological practice based on the use of expressive resources with an artistic nature. Set in 1990 on a program for gifted children³, they were soon after extended to Education and Psychology graduates, and they have been formally researched since 1995 (Cupertino, 2001). They are presently offered in a variety of contexts and situations, always happening in a group context, utilising expressive resources like collage, drawing, painting, ceramic, moulding dough, expressive movement, expressive sound and music.

Creativity Workshops are spaces open to creation, so they should offer, before anything, a “condition of knowing through a gap between what is known and what is, unexpectedly, presented to us” (Cupertino, 2001, p 197). This is a necessary condition for the discovery of new ways of being, as well as of new possibilities for coping with a myriad of situations presented to each person in daily life.

The creative, in that sense, is closely related to Heidegger’s idea of freedom: not the freedom to take one or another specific direction, but rather, the freedom to

³ The ‘Programa Objetivo de Incentivo ao Talento’ (Objetivo Program for the Incentive to Talent), from Objetivo School, in São Paulo, Brazil.

choose between options (which could be known, but also newly envisaged). This is the freedom to risk following new pathways, as we face old and new situations.

In the case of children's education, we think again about Milner (1991), who in 1942 wrote her first article, "The infantile capacity for doubt", where she concludes that the state of doubt generates the individual's capacity to accept emptiness, or the 'not knowing'. This acceptance of emptiness is one condition for germination characteristic of creativity, as envisaged by Milner.

We observe in the workshops that children initially connect themselves with their projects in their usual form of contact with the world: some will imagine things before they try to build them; others will find in a concrete contact with the materials inspiration for the conception of form and, later, for a concept to justify it with a function; others work in small groups, having some initial difficulty to generate their own ideas. Invariably though, children search in the leading adult, a validation to his/her participation. They seem to have an instant and intuitive comprehension of what aspects of his/her production the adult, in fact, validates.

Being in a school environment, we expect that children freely create and experiment, but we also expect that they present a satisfactory product (according to the evaluation criteria of the school environment). When we conduct the workshops, we should be focused on nourishing a facilitating environment for experiences of freedom, relating much more closely to the process than to the final product. Our fight for freedom is similar to the child's, since we are located in an environment that tends to measure the quality of our interventions through the presentation of the final product.

Not to lead a school's child in the traditional way is one terribly challenging task. When we refuse the usual didactic role, we lose most of the validated criteria to judge quality. We suspend our interference on the contact between the child and the materials, and find uncomfortable feelings of uselessness and untrustworthiness. The initial projects from children tend to show predominantly rustic results, with no recognisable finish, as if they were a mere piling up of pieces. The temptation to control the creative environment, to teach techniques, to "polish" the projects and make them look pretty to the eyes of the adult, is overwhelmingly powerful.

The field of discovery is made up by the encounter with the unknown, the momentary loss of references. Children will only go ahead in that path when they feel authorised and validated in this condition of uncertainty. We, as adults, occupy a position of double responsibility – for the child and for the institution where we work.

We easily feel anxious when we find *lack of meaning* in the child's production. We tend to rush either into polishing, to make it look nice, or possible representations – “is this a plane or a car?” The child tends to endorse this inclination, giving the project some kind of function, perhaps so that *we* feel better. Many times, the child will come into *our* rescue, reassuring us in our leading role.

Whenever a child elaborates a project in a deeply personal way, the final result, albeit of arguable aesthetic value, becomes deeply meaningful. It is not surprising that many mothers are forbidden by their children to discard certain pieces of work, which happen to occupy special places on study tables and bedroom shelves. Such pieces are the concrete expression of new ways of being, only just discovered in the workshops.

The beauty of the work is founded on its authenticity, and the creative experience that the child takes afterwards to their life, inside and outside the school. This mirrors words from Cupertino (2001, p. 197): “Whatever is good, beautiful and truthful is ‘just because’. This experience of ‘just because’ gives meaning to itself”.

We can therefore see that our way towards freedom with children is rooted on a feeling of *gratuity* around the production. When the educator feels insecure for the lamentable quality on a project's finish, the child will certainly choose to experiment less and polish more, replicating a process that is already largely explored in the regular school setting. If we are to encourage the child to make a new step, full of creative courage, it is a pre-requisite that the educator be confident walking on that road. And he must have the privilege to develop this work in a receptive educational environment.

Our role is then eminently grounded on the effort to suspend expectations about final results, with a careful holding of the unfolding process of the child in contact with the materials. Creativity workshops should complement – rather than mirror – the process of child schooling. We truly need to be capable of maintaining a state of “not-solution”: the experience of suspension, of a planned instability, of gestation; being able to sustain, for long stretches of time, the absence of solutions.

Once this initial dimension is open, every conductor of the workshops will have a personal inclination towards some particular aspect of the group work. Some will be inclined towards looking at the child's feelings; others will pay attention to group dynamics and the usual roles adopted by every individual in the group; others will look at the development of new abilities and repertoire with the materials

themselves. These attitudes allow, throughout the process, for an intertwining of creative experiences and cognitive development.

Once the children survive the initial loss from the usual criteria of quality, they begin to produce more varied pieces. “If you look this way it is a spaceship, but looking this way it can be a gun”. Even further, “I’m not sure what it is, but it looks good, and it can stand up”. New ideas appear in the groups, and every new idea from a participant spreads as quickly as wildfire – little attention being paid to pre-conceived or objective criteria of quality breeds more diversity in group leadership. The value attributed to technique gives way to the value of innovative ideas. That can only happen at the cost of lamentable finish, which is always fairly challenging to the educator...

Eventually children see the materials differently: how to use texture, balance forces, stick pieces, etc.: “if you do this way, it probably won’t stick very well, but if you prefer doing it like this we can go for it, and see later how it ends up”. We might, indeed, be strongly surprised by the results. What really matters is to always share the credits of that exploration with the child, acknowledging its results.

After some time of scarce and repetitive production, we finally see the children studying junctions of pieces that bend and fold, balancing standing volumes, carefully sliding fingers on the clay to avoid cracks, observing the logic underneath the passage of the needle in the fabric... action and consequence are finally in the agenda of free creation from our little students. We think together about constructive problems: “We need here to fix something that turns in order to open and close, do you think we can find anything like that?” This is usually enough for them to find their own solutions, and a stimulus to the curiosity and the reasoning of the child.

Children are very satisfied when they feel that they progressed on the structural understanding of a newly created piece of work. The contact with their truly creative capacity gives to the child a strong feeling of autonomy, opening endless new possibilities of creation.

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