

Highlights

- Creative educators need to develop a deeper understanding of their own creativity.
- Creative undergraduate experiences had a positive impact on professional practice.
- Teaching for creativity involves rigorous, structured intellectual processes.
- Former students' reflections on creativity are used to inform course development.
- More emphasis needs to be placed on creativity in ITE courses and CPD in schools.

Deferred Creativity: exploring the impact of an undergraduate learning experience on professional practice

Dr Jan Watson
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich
NR4 7TJ
jan.watson@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of an art-based learning experience on former Education students' professional practice. Feedback from trainee teachers indicated that the true value of the creative process was only realised after they had graduated – what I have come to term 'deferred creativity'. The findings suggest that focusing on the development of their own creative characteristics, skills and attitudes helped students to become more creative practitioners. By drawing on the reflections of our alumni, we can help future students to develop the key creative competencies and skills required for 21st century life.

Keywords

Creativity; visual art; teacher education; higher education; reflective practice.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of an art-based learning experience on former Education students' professional practice. Feedback from trainee teachers indicated that the true value of the creative process was only realised after they had graduated – what I have come to term 'deferred creativity'. The findings suggest that focusing on the development of their own creative characteristics, skills and attitudes helped newly qualified teachers to become creative practitioners. By drawing on the reflections of our alumni, we can help future students to develop the key creative competencies and skills required for 21st century life.

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1 Deferred Creativity: Exploring the Impact of an Undergraduate Learning Experience on
2 Professional Practice

3 **1. Introduction**

4 Primary school teachers in England are encouraged to embrace and promote creative
5 pedagogical approaches in their classrooms (Craft, 2006; Turner, 2013): however, it could be
6 argued that the standards driven curriculum, and lack of creative opportunities in Higher
7 Education (HE), restrict or even prevent this from happening (Groce, 2014; Jackson, 2006;
8 Kleiman, 2005). Much has been written about the value placed on creativity, culture and
9 innovation in relation to society and the economy (Craft, 2005; Cunningham, 2005), as
10 educators help to prepare children, young people and adults for a very uncertain future.
11 However, it is also important to consider ways in which creativity impacts on personal and
12 professional identities; as Jackson (2010) points out, HE has a responsibility to help students
13 understand their own creativities as they develop an awareness of who they are. If trainee
14 teachers and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) are to encourage pupils to become more
15 creative, they need to develop an understanding of what creativity means to them. As Biggs
16 and Tang (2007) point out, the move away from traditional lecture-centred delivery modes to
17 more interactive, engaging approaches in HE is not new, but more attention needs to be given
18 to the development of students' creativity (Nygaard, Courtney & Holtham, 2010). As teaching
19 is acknowledged as a creative activity, there is an expectation that creativity is addressed in
20 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes but, as noted by Craft (2006), there is a tendency
21 for it to be neglected in undergraduate education courses. I would argue that having access to
22 course modules that include a practical creative element would help aspiring teachers to prepare
23 for their initial training year and beyond. As evidenced by the findings of earlier stages of this
24 study (Author, 2012; 2014), the majority of students did not regard themselves as creative
25 individuals, or even have the potential to be creative, at the start of the course. It is clear that

1 there is a great deal of work to be done if future teachers (and other educators) are to “address
2 issues of individual and collective creativity” (Wilson, 2015, p. 1) with confidence.

3

4 *1.1. The wider context*

5 In order to position this study in the wider, national context, it is important to consider
6 some of the different, often conflicting, discourses at play in HE and ITE, with reference to
7 creative pedagogy and practice. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the numerous
8 definitions and interpretations of creativity; this complex, elusive concept has been debated at
9 length by experts in the field (Craft, 2005; Cropley, 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 2003), in
10 relation to the ever-changing education agenda. As Jackson (2010) points out, it is difficult
11 to understand what we mean by the term creativity without having some appreciation of the
12 contexts in which it is constructed. Coate and Boulos (2012, p. 129) highlight that
13 “Universities are called upon to become centres for creativity and innovation at the heart of
14 the knowledge economy”; they are encouraged to produce graduates with creative and
15 problem-solving skills required in the twenty-first century. However, the rigid education
16 system within which teachers and teacher educators work makes it difficult, if not impossible,
17 to introduce elements of creativity into their practice. “The institutional structures ... put in
18 place within higher education constrain the emergence of creativity, based as they are on a
19 culture of surveillance, performativity and individualisation’ (Coate & Boulos, 2012, p.130).

20 Steers (2009) notes that the inflexibility of the Teachers’ Standards (Department for
21 Education, 2011) that underpin the ITE curriculum restricts the development of reflective,
22 autonomous practitioners. According to Carter (2015), these ‘standards’, which set a common
23 expectation across the system about the knowledge, understanding and skills new teachers
24 should have, tend to be viewed as finite checklists rather than as a basis for ongoing
25 development. Although they acknowledge the importance of developing subject knowledge

1 and professional skills, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Major (2014) feel that some training courses
2 reinforce the idea that effective teaching, resulting in enhanced pupil outcomes, is limited to
3 academic achievement. In a climate of increasing accountability and focus on league-tables,
4 there are few opportunities for trainees to develop their own knowledge in order to become co-
5 creators of new meaning making when they enter the teaching profession (McWilliam, 2007).

6 This paper seeks to examine the impact of an art-based learning experience on former
7 Education students' professional practice. The following overview of the *Creativity and*
8 *Learning* module, presented in published papers (Author, 2012; 2014), has been included to
9 provide readers with contextual information.

10

11 *1.2. Creativity and learning*

12 The three-year BA Education degree course at the University of East Anglia aims to
13 introduce students to educational practices in a range of settings, with reference to
14 contemporary ideas about pedagogy, practice and knowledge creation. The focus on reflective,
15 critical, creative and conceptual ways of thinking means that students attain some of the key
16 skills and attributes favoured by employers, as well as develop their subject knowledge.
17 Although not marketed as a route into ITE, a high proportion of our undergraduates aspire to a
18 career in teaching. The degree, which draws widely on sociology, philosophy, psychology and
19 history, consists of compulsory and optional self-contained modules that enable students to
20 personalise elements of their studies.

21 Specifically designed to provide Year 3 students with alternative, creative learning
22 experiences, the optional Creativity and Learning module reflects the view that everyone has
23 the potential to be creative (Amabile, 1996; Craft, 2003; Steers, 2009) and supports the idea
24 that creativity can be taught and developed. It is underpinned by a broad, cross-curricular view
25 of creativity (Craft, 2003; Copley, 2001), which draws on some of the personal creative

1 characteristics identified by Treffinger, Young, Selby and Shepardson (2002) but reflects
2 studies that focus on collaborative approaches to creative work in education (Jeffrey & Woods,
3 2003).

4 The three-tier delivery model consists of traditional lectures, designed to introduce
5 theoretical ideas and concepts of relevance to creativity in education; interactive sessions, led
6 by local practitioners and practical workshops run by artists in the campus-based Visual Arts
7 Centre (VAC) studio. For assessment purposes, students submit a written assignment at the end
8 of the module; the aim is to demonstrate their understanding of the role played by creativity in
9 the current English education system, with reference to a topic of their choice. In addition to
10 exploring and gaining insight into the theory and practice, philosophy and policy of creativity
11 in education, they are required to engage in practical, self-reflective creative learning activities
12 and explore their own creative processes through the planning, creation, and presentation of an
13 art piece. The creative portfolio, which includes the documentation of the process, is assessed
14 on the last day of the module, when the students present their work as a peer group exhibition
15 in the studio. Having different types of assessment supports the view that HE students should
16 have access to creative methods and strategies that enhance, rather than replace, existing
17 practices (Author, 2014).

18 Although “creativity is not the sole prerogative of the arts” (Steers, 2009), the decision to
19 focus on art making was based on the idea that this would provide students with opportunities
20 to experiment with ideas and materials and take creative risks. It was also considered beneficial
21 for them to work in an unfamiliar, less formal, creative learning space, located within a
22 renowned Art Centre, where they could draw inspiration from practising artists and works of
23 art displayed in the galleries. Hirsch (2014, p. 403) talks of the value of incorporating “works
24 of art alongside the lived experiences of preservice teachers” and Greene (2001) advocates the

1 integration of arts into training courses as an antidote to the national obsession with data and
2 measurable outcomes.

3

4 *1.3. Research study*

5 The current research builds on an on-going action research study of Education
6 undergraduates' experiences of working in the VAC. The preliminary investigation reinforced
7 the view that they benefited from having access to creative learning activities that involved
8 self-examination and risk-taking in a supportive, collaborative space. The findings suggested
9 that "engaging in creative exploration and thoughtful reflection, in the final year of their
10 undergraduate studies, encouraged them to challenge the habitual ways in which they
11 approached their learning" (Author, 2012, p. 443). The next stage of the study looked at how
12 students negotiated the demands of an assessment method that took into account both the
13 reflective process and the finished product (Author, 2014): the findings indicated that having
14 access to alternative, creative assessment opportunities increased motivation and engagement.
15 The third stage of the investigation addressed how students used the art-based learning
16 experience to interrogate their self-knowledge, construct new meanings and explore personal
17 and professional identities (Author, 2014). Informal focus group interviews with students who
18 had just embarked on the university's Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
19 course revealed that the pressures of final grades and preparation for interviews had impeded
20 their creativity. The feedback indicated that the true value of the creative process was only
21 realised *after* they had graduated – what I have come to term '*deferred creativity*' (Author,
22 2014). This inspired stage four of the project: I was interested to see to what extent students'
23 creative learning experiences had influenced their practice. There have been studies of HE
24 students' perceptions of creativity (Oliver, Shah, McGoldrick & Edwards, 2006) but, to the

1 best of my knowledge, there is a dearth of research focusing on former students' reflections on
2 their undergraduate experiences once they are in employment.

3

4 **2. Research methods**

5 In line with the previous stages of this ongoing action research project, this qualitative study
6 was carried out within an interpretive-social constructivist theoretical framework. Once again,
7 the reflective methodology employed enabled the participants to reflect on and share their
8 experiences of working in the VAC studio over a twelve-week period. As Jeffrey and Craft
9 (2001) observed, there has been a move to undertaking small-scale, explorative research studies
10 of creativity in educational settings. The idea of creativity being situated in a social and cultural
11 context highlights "the practical, social, intellectual and values-based practices and approaches
12 involved in creative activities" (Craft & Hall, 2015, p. 11).

13

14 *2.1. Data collection*

15 The empirical data, obtained from questionnaires, semi-structured individual interviews
16 and focus group interviews, was collected over a fourteen-week period - between May and July
17 2016. Having gained ethical approval from my institution, I liaised with the alumni office to
18 contact former (Author's institution) undergraduate students, who had undertaken the
19 *Creativity and Learning* module between 2012 and 2015 (n=68). The initial communication,
20 which invited them to express an interest in the study, included a brief summary of the project,
21 a participant information sheet and a consent form. Those who responded (n=35) were asked
22 to complete an introductory questionnaire and indicate if they were willing to be interviewed,
23 either at the university or their place of work. As some of the respondents who submitted a
24 questionnaire (n=22) no longer live in the region, it was pleasing that fourteen former students
25 agreed to be interviewed, both individually and as part of a focus group.

1 The questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the study in order to obtain a
2 general overview of the participants' reflections of the module and the extent to which different
3 aspects of creativity explored may have impacted on their practice. Following a request for
4 details about their current occupation, they were asked if their understanding of creativity had
5 developed or changed as a result of taking the module. Subsequent questions invited them to
6 consider if their thoughts about creative learning and teaching, assessment, the learning
7 environment and their personal and professional development had been informed by this
8 experience. They were requested to record their responses to the statements on a Likert scale
9 and provide supporting comments in the open response boxes. A preliminary thematic analysis
10 of the questionnaires helped to inform the common, structured interview questions that focused
11 on creative practice at an institutional level. Most of the forty-minute interviews which,
12 according to Punch (2009, p. 144), are appropriate ways in which to assess "people's
13 perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality", took place at the
14 participants' place of work. There were also opportunities for participants to "put flesh on the
15 bones of [the] questionnaire responses" (Bell, 1999, p. 135), with reference to their own
16 practice. Mindful of their different circumstances, it was important to adopt a flexible approach
17 to the more open-ended questions, a process Douglas (1985) referred to as 'creative
18 interviewing'. The aim of the focus group interviews was to add another layer to the data; as
19 Menter, Elliott, Hulme, Lewin and Lowden, (2011, p. 149) point out, this method is 'well suited
20 to exploratory and illuminative work'. These were conducted in an open conversational style
21 (Kvale, 1996), giving participants who had undertaken the *Creativity and Learning* module at
22 different times, an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share ideas about creative
23 pedagogy and practice.

24

25

1 2.2. *Limitations*

2 Although there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the project, it is important to
3 note some causes for concern before the findings are discussed. As I had delivered the lectures,
4 participated in the art sessions and assessed the former students' work, I had developed my
5 own 'situational understanding' (Elliott, 1991) of the learning experience. I was aware that my
6 biased, subjective views of the module could influence the participants' responses and,
7 therefore, have an adverse effect on the reliability and validity of the data. As Denzin and
8 Lincoln (2005) point out, interviews are not neutral tools: I did not lead the discussions but
9 there was the implicit assumption that the module had been a valuable experience. However,
10 as evidenced by the correspondence, the personal approach instigated the high response rate -
11 alumni were genuinely keen to get in contact and reflect on an aspect of their university
12 experience. Those who expressed an interest did so because they *had* found the module
13 beneficial; as the focus was on impact not evaluation, the participants felt that they could make
14 honest comments. Another issue was the timing of the data collection; the ethical approval
15 process took longer than expected so this had to take place at a very busy time of the year for
16 teachers and other educators. It was difficult to fit the individual interviews into busy work
17 schedules and almost impossible to find a convenient time for the focus group interviews.

18

19 2.3. *Participants*

20 The participants included representatives from all four cohorts (2012-2015) and reflected
21 the full range of marks and final degree classifications achieved. At the time of writing, eight
22 individual interviews, conducted with the following practitioners, have been transcribed: one
23 Year 3 teacher with four years' experience; two Year 2 teachers, both with three years'
24 experience; one Year 1 Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT); one Early Years teacher with three
25 years' experience; one Year 4 Teaching Assistant (TA) who plans to embark on a teacher

1 training course next year; one Early Years TA and one campus-based International Student
2 Welfare Officer (ISWO). This data, together with responses from the first focus group
3 interview with the Year 3 teacher, one of the Year 2 teachers and the ISWO, has been
4 incorporated into the discussion.

5

6 **3. Findings and discussion**

7 This section provides an overview of the preliminary findings, with reference to former
8 students' reflections on their experiences of the *Creativity and Learning* module. Although
9 they were asked to consider the module as a whole, the central discussion draws on reflective
10 comments about their work in the studio. With reference to the initial questionnaire responses
11 and interview transcripts, it focuses on how exploring their own creative processes helped the
12 participants to develop a wider understanding of creativity. In particular, it highlights how
13 engaging in risk-taking, exploration and choice; being inspired by different artists in a creative
14 learning environment; working collaboratively and receiving feedback encouraged them to
15 approach their professional practice more creatively. Finally, the ways in which participants
16 addressed the barriers to creativity that emerged from the findings are discussed.

17

18 *3.1. Creative pedagogy and practice*

19 As highlighted earlier, this study does not seek to contribute to the on-going debate about
20 the meaning of creativity; this has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Author, 2012). Drawing
21 on notions of creativity explored in both the theoretical and practical sessions of the module,
22 the participants reflected on their understanding of the term with reference to their current roles
23 and responsibilities. As one former student said, "*I did not realise how wide-ranging creativity*
24 *was - that it has a part to play in all areas of the curriculum and beyond*" (Early Years TA).
25 Another felt that the module had enabled her to "*develop a deeper knowledge and*

1 *understanding of creativity and think about it in ways [she] had not considered before”* (Year
2 4 TA). Although there were some references to purposeful outcomes, most of the participants
3 highlighted the importance of the creative journey: the Year 3 teacher said, “*What this module*
4 *taught me was that it is so important to value the process of creativity - a process which involves*
5 *risk-taking, making mistakes and experiencing failure”*. When asked to elaborate on this, he
6 explained how he had associated creativity with art and design and technology throughout his
7 time at school and, as he was not very good at these subjects (in fact, he “*dreaded the lessons,*
8 *just as some children fear maths”*), was regarded as uncreative. Having opted for the *Creativity*
9 *and Learning* module with the view of challenging these perceptions, experimenting with ideas
10 and materials in the studio encouraged him to consider the creative process as being far more
11 important than the finished product. The following excerpt from the interview transcript
12 demonstrates how he applied this to his classroom practice:

13 *Having been encouraged to take risks in the art studio and experiment with ideas and*
14 *materials, I developed a sense of my own creativity and thought about how I could apply*
15 *this to classroom practice. There was not much time given to art in my training year, and*
16 *the art lessons I observed in schools seemed to focus on what children made rather than*
17 *how they went about the task. Now that I am teaching, I put all my energies into the process*
18 *– that’s where the focus is.*

19 This supports a point made by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural
20 Education (NACCCE, 1999, p. 90) that, if teachers are to encourage children ‘to believe in
21 their creative potential’ and ‘give them the confidence to try’, they need to have a deeper
22 understanding of their own creativity. As Loveless (2015, p. 130) points out, practitioners ‘need
23 to make time and space to think about creativity in their own lives, as well as in their teaching’;
24 it is important for them to have some experience of being creative themselves, if they are to
25 recognise and encourage creativity in others. All participants felt that children should have

1 opportunities to “*explore different textures and materials and be presented with open-ended*
2 *tasks rather than defined goals*” (Year 2 teacher), but there was some disagreement about the
3 level of support required. The following comments, made by the Year 1 NQT, demonstrates
4 how reflecting on her own experiences helped to inform her pedagogical approach in the
5 classroom:

6 *On the first day, when we were given time to just ‘explore’ the art studio and see where*
7 *it took us, I felt lost and desperately wanted guidance. However, as time went on, I*
8 *became more comfortable working without boundaries to experiment with materials*
9 *and I gradually felt my ‘child like’ imagination coming back. This is how I want the*
10 *children in my class to be - to keep their imagination and creativity rather than lose it,*
11 *which I feel, can happen so easily in our current education system.*

12 One of the Year 2 teachers interviewed felt that although “*some children found creative,*
13 *open-ended tasks difficult and frustrating at first, they responded positively and confidently*
14 *when given support and guidance*”. When asked to say more about this, she explained that
15 rather than let the children explore resources randomly, she “*presented them with choices and*
16 *encouraged them to experiment and develop ideas in their own way (just as the artists in the*
17 *studio modelled this approach with us)*”. Another participant said, “*The module taught me that*
18 *creativity needs to be structured – teachers should be well-prepared, providing children with*
19 *clear, overt instructions and scaffolding but giving them some control over the decision-making*
20 *process*” (Early Years class teacher). Reference to a specific example enabled her to enhance
21 on this: as part of their work on pirates, the children were tasked with making a boat that floated
22 – having explained what made this possible, she provided them with appropriate materials and
23 gave them time and space to follow their own ideas. Her delight at the wide range of
24 imaginative, original responses was somewhat thwarted when the observer (a school inspector)
25 criticised her for not having modelled an example at the beginning of the lesson. She pointed

1 out that, as there is a culture in the school of “*getting things right*” – the children “*would have*
2 *tried to replicate the model at the expense of their creativity – there would have been thirty*
3 *identical boats*”. The structure, she explained, “*was in the resources and information – these*
4 *gave the children the chance to explore and be creative but within a specific framework*”. All
5 participants felt that they had benefited from having planned introductory activities in the art
6 studio, followed by defined quality time in which to develop their own creativity.

7 The value of working in a supportive, creative learning environment which “*lent itself to*
8 *exploration and discovery*” (Year 2 teacher) was highlighted by all participants. Their
9 comments reflected some of the conditions that facilitate creativity identified by Jeffrey and
10 Woods (2003) which include encouraging children to explore alternative ways of doing things
11 and giving them enough time to incubate their ideas. With reference to HE, Jackson (2010, p.
12 8) talks about the importance of “*creating a climate where student creativity can emerge*”- this
13 is reflected in the following comment: “*the art studio felt like a blank canvas – a place where*
14 *I could let all my ideas flow and express myself*” (Year 1 NQT). The Early Years teacher said
15 working in (rather than just visiting) the VAC made her “*feel like a real artist*” and raised her
16 awareness of the “*importance of having access to so many different materials, some of which*
17 *I would not have considered using before*”. As evidenced by the focus group discussions, the
18 studio experience had encouraged the participants to develop a wider understanding of what
19 constitutes a creative learning environment. They acknowledged the importance of the physical
20 factors but highlighted the need to provide space and opportunity for the sharing of ideas.

21 Working individually in a collaborative setting, with regular peer critiques and ‘work in
22 progress’ sessions, helped them to develop their own ideas and make progress with their art
23 pieces. There were numerous examples of how they had applied this to their own practice - one
24 of the Year 2 teachers explained what happened when the children in her class were tasked
25 with making ‘bonfire’ collages:

1 *I had extra help that day so decided to put a different material on each table and ask*
2 *the adults to demonstrate how to use it. The children chose where they wanted to work*
3 *and then, as expected, copied the adults – however, when they were asked to swap*
4 *tables and demonstrate what they had learnt to others, the creativity kicked in – there*
5 *was a buzz of excitement as they discovered new ways to use brushes and chalk as well*
6 *as the materials – the results were amazing.*

7 She went on to explain that she would not have approached the activity in this way before
8 taking the module as she thought that all art had to be perfect. Although she knew that becoming
9 a teacher would involve being more open-minded, working in the studio had “*given her the*
10 *confidence to challenge her established views*”. Responses from the focus group indicated that
11 they had come to an understanding that “*creativity was more about developing skills, qualities*
12 *and attitudes than new ideas*” (Year 3 teacher) and that their personal and professional
13 development were linked. With reference to the Early Years teacher’s comments about
14 challenging the school inspector, her own creative experiences had given her the confidence to
15 justify the pedagogical approach adopted in the lesson. She talked about a professional
16 development course, undertaken in her first year of teaching, which involved producing a
17 portfolio: “*Most people were anxious about this*”, she said, “*but I was able to approach the task*
18 *in an open-minded way, as I knew that the development of my ideas was more important than*
19 *the presentation*”. The Year 3 teacher said, “*I feel much more comfortable thinking beyond the*
20 *known, having taken the module. In a professional capacity, this has helped me to contribute*
21 *to staff meetings, lead curriculum days and consider applying for management roles*”. He went
22 on to explain how working in the studio had helped him to become a more reflective
23 practitioner; “*reflection was a key part of the module*”, he said, “*and this has had a great impact*
24 *on my practice*”. Making use of skills learnt in the module were of particular relevance to the

1 ISWO; he explained that working with young people who are more familiar with traditional
2 communication methods presents challenges on a daily basis.

3 *The majority of my students are not even aware of creative learning and they have*
4 *certainly not experienced it - they are taught by rote, which typically excludes*
5 *creativity. I often use the 'processes' of creativity when working with them and*
6 *reinforce the idea that it is not the result but how they got there that's important. My*
7 *attempts to promote the benefits of creativity alongside their familiar ways of learning*
8 *have met with some degree of success.*

9 Another point to emerge from the findings was that the module had encouraged the
10 participants to be more aware of children's wide-ranging needs and interests and, in some
11 cases, raised their expectations of pupils' creative potential. The Year 3 teacher said it had
12 made him realise that it was more effective to begin the planning process with "*a consideration*
13 *of what can be done to engage learners rather than on what you want them to learn*" and that
14 *'it was helpful to make their classroom experiences as meaningful and authentic as possible'*.
15 The idea that it is important for children to find personal relevance in learning activities (Jeffrey
16 & Woods, 2003) is advocated in ITE courses but findings from this study indicated that NQTs
17 are more likely to put this into practice if they have been encouraged to explore areas of interest
18 as undergraduates. When asked to enhance on the comment above, the Year 3 teacher said that
19 once he was given the freedom to pursue a personal line of enquiry in the art studio, inspired
20 by an artefact in the gallery that captured his imagination, he was fully committed to the task.
21 As Hirsch (2014, p. 406) points out, "Teachers and students need to savour the curiosity and
22 insight that comes from asking and thinking about questions that matter to them".

23 One of the TAs interviewed said that working with individuals and small groups made
24 her aware that "*taking risks means different things to different children*" and that some needed
25 much longer to think through their ideas. She related this observation to her experience of

1 working on her final piece for the exhibition: *“If I had not been given extensive thinking time*
2 *in the studio”*, she said, *“I would have kept to my initial, simplistic plan which was neither*
3 *imaginative nor original”*. She went on to say that *“working in an unfamiliar space was*
4 *challenging enough at the beginning of the module and yet we expect all our pupils to*
5 *immediately accept any changes we present to them”*. The Year 3 teacher said, *“Prior to this*
6 *module, I thought that creativity was something you either had or you didn’t have. I now know*
7 *that it should be fostered and developed in every child”*. He explained that working in an area
8 of deprivation meant that there were a high number of Pupil Premium¹ children in his class,
9 many of whom *“struggled to engage with regular classroom tasks but expressed their creativity*
10 *in different ways”*. The additional money was used to introduce an enrichment programme,
11 which focused on providing the children with stimuli to engage their interest and immerse them
12 in their learning. *“That’s where creativity really comes into practice’*, enthused the teacher,
13 *‘finding a hook to capture their imagination and draw them in – we made coloured dragons’*
14 *eggs, for example, and used these to stimulate stories and poems”*. He explained how ‘Talk for
15 Writing² in particular, (mentioned by several of the participants), which involves children
16 putting actions to stories and using these as prompts for their creative writing, *“enabled those*
17 *who struggled to formulate ideas to make phenomenal progress”*. The many interesting
18 examples to emerge from the individual interviews, some of which were shared in the focus
19 group, reflected their experience of this approach in the VAC. As the Year 1 teacher said,
20 *“looking at paintings and artefacts in the gallery helped to stimulate our creative thinking and*
21 *learning”*. Another made the following comment: *“Appreciating the work, ideas and methods*

¹ The pupil premium is additional funding for publicly funded schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and close the gap between them and their peers.

² ‘Talk for Writing’, developed by Pie Corbett, enables children to imitate the key language they need for a particular topic orally before they try reading and analysing it. It is based on the principles of how children learn.

1 *of different artists enabled us to broaden our ideas and develop our own creativity*". This
2 supports the model of creative learning as apprenticeship, led by creative practitioners, which
3 involves learners "in coming to understand the artist's ways of working as a set of practices, as
4 well as the opportunity to see work created as a part of the leader's own artistic or commercial
5 practices" (Craft, 2006, p. 24).

6 As evidenced by the findings, exploring their understanding of creativity encouraged
7 the participants to consider the impact of the module on their practice. In particular, it helped
8 them to distinguish between 'creative teaching' and 'teaching for creativity'. Cremin (in
9 Wilson, 2015, p. 34) says the former "is seen to involve teachers in making learning more
10 interesting and effective, using imaginative approaches in the classroom" whereas 'teaching
11 for creativity' involves "teachers in identifying children's creative strengths and fostering their
12 creativity". With reference to the numerous examples discussed, which draw on aspects of the
13 creativity framework produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 2005,
14 it is clear that participants support the idea of allowing pupils some choice over what they
15 explore and how they go about it. This 'inclusive approach' to fostering creativity (Jeffrey &
16 Craft, 2004), which involves children in "using their imagination and experience to develop
17 learning ... strategically collaborating over tasks' and 'critically evaluating their own learning
18 practices" (Craft, 2006, p. 26), reflects the participants' experiences in the studio.

19

20 3.2. *Barriers to creativity*

21 The findings indicated that participants felt generally comfortable about incorporating
22 creative learning opportunities into their own classroom practice, but some common barriers
23 to creativity emerged from the findings.

24 **Lack of support and understanding.** At an institutional level, there were comments
25 about "*colleagues not being very supportive of open-ended, creative tasks that seemed to focus*

1 *on playing rather than learning*”, with Senior Managers favouring “*controlled rather than*
2 *overt creativity*” (Year 1 teacher). When asked to explain this, she said that they “*paid lip-*
3 *service to creativity, by including it in policy documents and communications to parents, but*
4 *didn't really seem to have a grasp of its meaning*”. This reflects Turner’s point that, as
5 definitions vary, “some teachers may lack confidence in their ability and understanding of
6 creativity as it is described in the curriculum” (2013, p. 30). One of the TAs commented that
7 although most teachers in her school demonstrated “*the personal characteristics associated*
8 *with creativity and made use of a wide range of innovative strategies, the general ethos was*
9 *not conducive to creative development*”. This supports a point made earlier about the
10 importance of establishing a positive, supportive learning environment which inspires a
11 collaborative approach to creative practice. Another participant said she understood why some
12 teachers devalued creativity as, before undertaking the *Creativity and Learning* module, she
13 had not expected to find the practical work academic and challenging. An investigation of HE
14 students’ experiences of creativity, undertaken by Oliver et al., identified “a sense of frustration
15 at a perceived conflict between being creative and being academic” (2006, p. 54) from the
16 participants’ comments. A suggestion to emerge from stage one of the current study was that
17 students “need to have access to course modules which genuinely promote open-mindedness
18 and experimentation and recognize that creative practice involves rigorous, structured
19 intellectual processes” (Author, 2012, p. 455).

20 **External pressures.** As anticipated, references to the challenges and pressures caused
21 by numerous government initiatives imposed on teachers (Newton, 2012) were made
22 throughout the data-collecting phase. The Year 3 teacher pointed out that with the “*constant*
23 *monitoring and accountability, and focus on results, especially in schools deemed by Ofsted*
24 *[Office for Standards in Education] to require improvement, it is no wonder that teachers feel*
25 *stifled*”. He went on to say that, paradoxically, it is the children in these schools who need

1 access to the most creative approaches, if they are to engage with their learning and,
2 subsequently, make the required progress. *“The workload is phenomenal in school and you*
3 *constantly feel like you're ticking off objectives”*, remarked one of the Year 2 teachers. *“Despite*
4 *reference to creative learning journeys, the focus at this time of year [July] will be on the*
5 *number of learning objectives covered and what can be crammed into the time left”*. These
6 comments reflect barriers to creativity identified by Steers (2009, p.128): he pointed out that
7 “pressures to conform created by a standardized curriculum, ... school league tables, constant
8 initiatives to raise standards and intimidating inspection regimes ... severely limited the scope
9 for individual teachers to take risks and avoid becoming mere *curriculum delivery operatives*.”
10 There were mixed feelings about the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) which, according to
11 Cremin (2015), is overly prescriptive and pays little attention to creativity. The Year 3 teacher
12 was not alone in recognising opportunities for creative pedagogical approaches within the
13 constraints of the curriculum but he felt that these were thwarted by government-imposed
14 school systems. *“The National Curriculum has, in most cases”*, he said, *“allowed teachers to*
15 *be more creative with their practice - this has been particularly evident within mathematics.*
16 *The creativity module encouraged me to tap into that and provide the children with rich,*
17 *creative learning opportunities that impacted on their progress”*. He went on to say that, *“the*
18 *problem has been its implementation and the assessment that goes with it”*, a point supported
19 by the following comment: *“I am sad to say that the National Curriculum has restricted my*
20 *creativity because of strict assessments, targets and percentages – it had so much scope and*
21 *potential but this has been ignored”* (Year 1 teacher).

22 **Assessment and feedback.** The thorny issue of assessing creativity, recognized as
23 being both complicated and controversial (Loveless, 2002), was identified as another cause for
24 concern by the participants. It was generally agreed that although, as undergraduates, they
25 valued “assessment methods which enabled them to demonstrate their knowledge,

1 understanding and skills in different ways” (Author, 2014, p. 96), the emphasis placed on final
2 grades impeded their experimentation and risk-taking at the beginning of the process. This is
3 explored at length, with reference to the findings of the third stage of the study (Author, 2014)
4 but, for the purposes of this paper, it was interesting to examine the participants’ reflections on
5 their own creative experiences. As one teacher said, *“I enjoyed being challenged but was
6 mindful that the mark I achieved would impact on my degree classification - now I have the
7 licence to be creative in my classroom but with the restrictions of the national assessment
8 system hanging over me”* (Year 2 teacher). The following comment demonstrates the
9 frustrations of the Year 3 teacher:

10 *When the government announced it was scrapping traditional levels and allowing
11 schools to come up with their own assessment systems, I saw this as an opportunity to
12 create some real assessment processes that were of value to the child. Unfortunately, I
13 think schools have been left in a quandary about how to assess children whilst
14 providing crucial evidence to show Ofsted that they are progressing.*

15 He went on to explain that, as a future Year 6 teacher, he was particularly concerned that the
16 National Curriculum tests (statutory assessments carried out in primary schools in England)
17 would not reflect the creative learning experiences introduced in previous years. *“I am in a
18 position ”* he said, *“where I have to assess children a certain way even though I know that they
19 would benefit from more creative assessment practices”*. The following comment supports this:
20 *“It's really hard because you've got those children at schools who are very creative with this
21 real imaginative flare and then when it comes to assessing them you're so tightly bound by tick
22 boxes”* (Year 1 teacher). As evidenced by the focus group discussions, it was generally agreed
23 that formative assessments offered more scope for creativity; there were comments about the
24 value of talking to the children about their progress and acknowledging the many different

1 ways in which they can demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills. This is
2 demonstrated by the following comment:

3 *I feel this is especially relevant to my work in the Early Years. The majority of the*
4 *assessment that we undertake is observation based and documented in a visual way. I*
5 *am responsible for the learning journeys of eight children and I attempt to be creative*
6 *in both the collection and documentation of evidence (Year 1 TA).*

7 She explained that focusing on the creative process rather than on the outcome in the studio,
8 with on-going feedback, helped her to approach the assessment of children's progress with
9 more confidence. The Year 1 teacher remarked that, "*having an understanding of what it feels*
10 *like to be judged on your creativity has helped me to tailor my feedback to the children*". When
11 asked to expand on this, she said it was important to talk about their work "*in a sensitive and*
12 *encouraging manner, taking care not to confuse them or dismiss their efforts*". She
13 remembered being upset when one of the artists in the studio said her work was 'Naïve';
14 referring to a recognised style of painting, this was meant to be a compliment, but it
15 demonstrates the need for teachers to use language that is understood by their pupils.

16 Although mindful of the institutional and national barriers to creativity, evidence from
17 the interview transcripts showed that the participants were keen to rise above these by
18 developing and modelling examples of effective, creative practice. Referring back to the
19 discussions about the new National Curriculum, the Year 3 teacher remarked: "*Not enough*
20 *good practice has been shared and I think this has been a great failure of the Department for*
21 *Education (DfE). There was a great opportunity here which, sadly, has been missed*".

22

23 **4. Implications**

24 Although this study focussed on the practical, art-based element of the module, it was
25 evident from the findings that the participants valued the theoretical sessions, too. The general

1 view was that having an assignment that required them to demonstrate their understanding of
2 creativity in the current education system, with reference to areas of interest, helped them to
3 develop a wider view of the term. As one of the Year 2 teachers said, “*Reading about the*
4 *different stages of creativity in education over the last few decades made me realise how the*
5 *policies we have in schools now were informed by reports introduced years ago*” (she was
6 referring to the ‘All our Futures’ report, produced by NACCE in 1999). Another former student
7 said, “*I am not always aware of doing this but when I encourage children to ask interesting*
8 *questions and explain their choices, I am drawing on some of the models of creativity we*
9 *discussed in the seminars*” (Year 1 NQT). These comments reflect a point made by Loveless
10 (2015, p. 137) that teachers who are interested in promoting and developing creativity need to
11 recognise “the wider cultural, political and economic spheres in which creativity is
12 encouraged”. She went on to say that creative tasks or strategies introduced are more
13 meaningful if they reflect the wider challenges of 21st century pedagogy and practice. This
14 study reinforces the view that the experience of Education undergraduates would be enhanced
15 by giving them access to “dynamic course modules” (Author, 2012, p. 454) that enable them
16 to explore their own creative processes. However, as suggested by the findings, these need to
17 include strong theoretical elements and draw on wider debates about creativity in education, if
18 they are to have a positive, long-lasting impact on students’ future practice. This concurs with
19 the point made by Swift and Steers (2009, p. 13) that trainee teachers should be provided with
20 “the essential theoretical and philosophical underpinning needed to sustain them in practice”.
21 The more experienced teacher participants supported the idea that creativity should be given
22 more emphasis in teacher training courses (Turner, 2013), but they highlighted the importance
23 of being able to link theory and practice. As the school-based teacher training routes, favoured
24 by the current UK government, pay less attention to the theory of education, this study has
25 wider implications for ITE. Elliott (2012) pointed out that rather than regard HE and school-

1 based teacher training as offering theory and practical skills respectively, the relationship
2 between theory and practice should be interactive. Carter (2015), in his review of ITE, also
3 highlighted the need for a close relationship between theoretical and practical elements of
4 learning and teaching.

5 With reference to her training experience, the Early Years teacher said she would like to
6 have seen more “*opportunities to engage in creative practice*’ included in the programme, ‘*with*
7 *reference to research in creativity*”. Having acknowledged the enormous amount of content
8 that has to be covered in a year, one of the Year 2 teachers said it would be useful to incorporate
9 elements of the *Creativity and Learning* module into the PGCE course. “*The presumption is*
10 *that trainee teachers are creative by definition, but I feel we need to be taught these skills*
11 *before we go anywhere near a classroom*”, she said. This reflects the over-reliance on the
12 Teachers’ Standards, discussed in section 1.1; as Steers (2009) points out, if teachers are to
13 become autonomous, creative practitioners, ITE programmes need to incorporate opportunities
14 for students to explore and evaluate a range of learning and teaching strategies. Nisbet (2005)
15 suggests that incorporating research opportunities into teacher training programmes would
16 encourage a self-questioning approach that led to reflection and, where appropriate, action; this
17 supports Elliott’s idea that action research can be a type of creative resistance to the technical
18 rationality that underpins government policy (1991).

19 The findings indicated that focusing on the identification and development of their own
20 creative characteristics, skills and attitudes, in the module, helped them to become creative
21 practitioners. All participants demonstrated the confidence, enthusiasm and commitment,
22 identified as common qualities exhibited by creative teachers (Jones & Wyse, 2004); as Steers
23 (2009, p. 128) remarked, “Creative pupils need creative teachers with the confidence to take
24 creative risks”. They found it useful to reflect on their practice, as individuals, but agreed there
25 should be opportunities for colleagues to discuss their understanding of creativity, if

1 stereotypical notions of the term are to be challenged. As explained in section 1.3, art was
2 chosen as the stimulus for creative development in this study but the ideas presented could
3 apply to other domains; the key point is to provide learners with a framework of knowledge so
4 that the subject is seen as intellectually challenging and taken seriously. The participants who
5 thought that creativity was not encouraged in their institutions said they were keen to introduce
6 creative learning opportunities in their own classrooms but often felt isolated. The general
7 feeling was that very few professional development sessions focused on creativity and that “*the*
8 *creative initiatives that were introduced tended to be short-lived and unsustainable*” (Year 2
9 teacher). As evidenced by the focus group conversation, the former students welcomed having
10 an opportunity to share ideas with like-minded practitioners; one of the TAs said the discussion
11 had inspired her to set up a creativity group in her school and the Year 3 teacher expressed an
12 interest in having regular meetings with the participants of this study. These are small steps
13 but, by establishing creative communities, teachers (and other educators) will be able to
14 contribute to the wider debate about cultural creativity, with reference to their personal
15 experiences.

16

17 **Conclusion**

18 This study has made a small contribution to the understanding of reflective practice: it
19 is evident that former students felt better placed to consider the impact of their creative
20 experiences when they had distanced themselves from third year undergraduate pressures. As
21 evidenced by the findings, there is scope for undergraduate programmes and ITE courses to
22 include creative experiences that challenge conventional approaches to learning and teaching.
23 In order for these to have a positive impact on professional and personal development, there
24 needs to be more synergy between HE institutions, providers of teacher training and schools.
25 In-depth discussions focusing on what creative practice means to educators and learners in

1 different contexts should encourage course leaders to regard creativity as an essential element
2 of curriculum design.

3 When all interviews have been transcribed and analysed, the participants will be
4 invited to attend a series of small group meetings focusing on the sharing of creative practice.
5 Drawing on the professional experiences of our alumni, until now a relatively untapped source
6 of expertise, should help students of the future to develop the key creative competencies and
7 skills required for 21st Century education.

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