Chapter 12

DOES CREATIVITY RELY ON EXPERTISE?
How the Danish reform-pedagogical agenda is related to present attempts to understand and facilitate creativity and personal expression among children

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ABSTRACT

According to creative theory, expertise is considered a precondition for creativity. The assumption is that the individual must master the common and accepted rules and techniques in order to create something new and valuable. Plenty of empirical documentation supports this hypothesis. However, real life cases demonstrate that this assumption may be too simple. Occasionally people achieve great success as creative individuals without much expertise. Additionally, empirical studies show that expertise sometimes may inhibit creativity instead of promoting it. In a pedagogical setting these ambiguities seem to be further reinforced by contemporary trends such as technology, globalization and individualization. What are in fact the proper rules of, for instance, music, drama, and visual arts? Do we need to learn basic skills if we can apply technology? How can general rules, individual preferences and expressions coexist? In the chapter, the balance between creativity, learning and expression are discussed from several angles. Firstly, the author seeks to sketch a specific Danish historical inherited approach to creativity. Secondly, the author presents exploratory fieldwork that suggests new ways to understand and facilitate creativity among children.

Keywords: expertise, creativity, pedagogics, music, drama.

1. EXPERTISE AND CREATIVITY: CONTRADICTING INTERPRETATIONS

In creativity theory, it is a common notion that creativity relies on knowledge and expertise (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Gardner, 1993; Sternberg, 1999). If we examine pedagogical literature, concerning aesthetics and creativity, we find the same trend. For instance Malcolm Ross points out that:

> … [The children] need the craftsmanship that will enable them to manipulate media and associated technology with ease and precision; without such skills they must feel themselves inhibited rather than liberated by media. Lacking effective control, they will never be carefree enough to play with media imaginatively or to improvise; both these activities are achieved only after the groundwork has been properly done (Ross 1978, p. 69).

A similar approach is suggested by Anna Craft, who argues that "the domain provides a knowledge context within which to be creative. This means that teachers need to be sufficiently knowledgeable of the subject domain to bring learners to the edge of their knowledge, and to enable pupil creativity within the domain" (Craft, 2005, p. xx).

The basic rationale within the field of creativity theory, as well as within the field of pedagogical and didactical theory, is identical: in order to create you have to acquire some basic skills. If you want to draw, you have to learn something about drawing, if you want to make music, you have to learn something about music, etc. (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). It sounds reasonable. However, in the Danish pedagogical community we have a strong tradition for thinking otherwise. In other words, our pedagogical approach in Denmark is in several ways connected historically to the reform-pedagogical movement, within which, the ability to create spontaneously without much expertise is repeatedly stressed. In a Danish context the origin of this pedagogical movement may be dated to the late 1920s. However, the Danish tradition is in various ways connected to artists, philosophers and pedagogical thinkers in the global community in the 19th and the 20th century, such as Rousseau, Fröbel, Montesorri, Dewey, and Carl Orff.

Today the reform-pedagogical movement is considered a little old fashion for many reasons (Thing, 1996; Michelsen, 2001; Sorgenfrei 2010). First of all, the reform-pedagogical approach to creativity is criticized for being rather romantic and naive. Second of all, the reform-pedagogical movement is of course politically and philosophically borne in a specific period of time and is consequently, by definition, addressing a specific type of culture that does not exist today. However, it seems as if some of the fundamental questions raised by the reform-pedagogical movement are still very relevant. Thus, key concepts of reform-pedagogy such as individuality, originality, and uniqueness seem to be enforced today by a society highlighting innovation, development and creativity (Lieberkind, 2006). Furthermore, modern digital technology is often understood in a pedagogical context as a tool by which creativity may be enabled among children without much expertise (see section four in this chapter). Therefore, it seems reasonable to draw on these experiences, and consider the potentials of what might be described in historical terms as the rise and fall of the Danish reform-pedagogical movement.

2. THE RISE AND THE FALL OF THE DANISH REFORM-PEDAGOGICAL MOVEMENT

One of the main characters in the reform-pedagogical movement is Astrid Gøssel (1891-1975) who was a well-educated and skilled concert pianist and music teacher. In the 1920s Gøssel was teaching music and piano to adults as well as children, including very small children. The following story describes how Gøssel more or less turns the music-pedagogical world up-side down, at least from her own perspective. The narrative is published in the article *Rhythmic* (1930) and might be summed up as *the day Gøssel opens up her eyes and finds beautiful singing and dancing children instead of potential concert pianists and disciplined anonymous choir members and citizens*. This interpretation may sound a little romantic (or sarcastic), but nevertheless, when reading the article from 1930 one cannot help feeling that the story marks a dramatic turning point in the way children's expression might possibly be interpreted, described, and guided.

Picture the following scenario: we are in the late 1920's. Astrid Gøssel is sitting by the piano. In the room, young children are dancing. She is playing a song called *Circus Horse*. By the use of the piano, Astrid Gøssel is able to control and inspire the children's dance. If she plays allegro, the children will move fast. If she plays adagio, they will move slowly, etc. By adopting such exercises, a lot of basic musical elements may be practiced such as accelerando, diminuendo, piano, forte, etc. Now, the little 8-year old girl named

Ruth is dancing to *Circus Horse*. She is trying to find corresponding movements to the rhythm. However, eventually Ruth feels like doing something else:

> This child's body-rhythm is so strong, that the music has to give up. When I understood the child's artful work with her body, I did the opposite of what was intended and changed the music in order to make the accompaniment correspond the child's dancing (Gøssel, 1930/1981, p. 14).

From a reform-pedagogical point of view, this pedagogical shift of perspective is not only a minor shift of leadership in a musical dialog. First of all, it's a major redistribution of power and initiative in the interaction between the expert and the novice. The child is not the *listener* and the teacher is not the *speaker* anymore. The child and the novice becomes the *speaker* and the teacher becomes the *listener*. Second of all, the child is not really a novice any longer. The child is expert on herself, her own body, her own movements, her own rhythm, etc. Nothing really overmatches the individual idiosyncratic natural expression. What is beautiful and artful is not reproducible, schooled, cultured, and disciplined, but rather unique, unrestrained, and uncultured.

During the 1930s and 1940s the reform-pedagogical methods and thoughts inspired pedagogues in many Danish kindergartens. Gøssel traveled around like a kind of a consultant, and, accordingly, she had the opportunity to study the result of the reform-pedagogical experiments first hand. However, she didn't like what she saw. Thus, she finally concludes, that the focus on the child's expression and production apparently has a negative side effect. The children simply don't learn enough. In the long run, the spontaneous music played by the children is not beautiful but rather the opposite. Actually, according to Gøssel's descriptions, this kind of musical activity may be defined as *junk* rather than music (Gøssel, 1956/1981, p. 46).

3. EXPRESSION, EXPERTISE, AND THE REFORM-PEDAGOGICAL MOVEMENT

From a reform-pedagogical perspective, the children's spontaneous creations, productions, moves, singing etc. are, a priori, beautiful and interesting. This approach to children's creations is valuable for several reasons. Firstly, it addresses a well-known experience among adults, who become fascinated by children's expressions and admire their productions. The many popular videos starring young children on YouTube can serve as an example. Secondly, the children's expressions are taken seriously. From a pedagogical normative point of view, this means that the child is heard and respected. However, when trying to capture the essence of children's expressions, the reform-pedagogical explanations seem a bit insufficient. In the early writings of Gøssel the cultivation itself is portrayed as the enemy. The natural and the primitive are idealized and the cultural technics are demonized (e.g. Gøssel, 1930/1981, p. 18). On the other hand, Gøssel stresses later in her career that the child also has to be instructed, and a balance between self-expression and being taught is the key to successful development. This is a bit of a paradox (see, for example, Michelsen, 2001, p. 64). How can children learn the methods and technics belonging to a certain culture and at the same time retain their *naturalness*?

The fact that Gøssel changes her mind during the forties and fifties is quite interesting and informing in regard to the outlined paradox. In a modern context most creativity theorist would agree with the late Gøssel and argue that children need to learn rules and

techniques in order to be creative and produce artifacts of quality. But is it possible at the same time to preserve the intuitive *naturalness* that Gøssel emphasizes? According to Gøssel, it is actually possible in the sense that she often describes the adult Afro-American jazz musician as *natural*. Furthermore, it is quite normal in a present context to praise professional adult musicians for their *naturalness* and *intuition*. However, the complex relation between intuitive expression and formal training is still an ongoing question among contemporary researches and theorists. Some creativity researchers suggest that the child loses the intuitive approach as a result of the introduction to a specific knowledge-domain. According to this theory, the child may regain the intuitive competence later in life, when he/she learns to master the techniques and rules belonging to a certain domain (e.g. Gardner & Winner, 1982). The novice-expert taxonomy, suggested by the Dreyfus brothers, may support this thesis in several ways (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Nevertheless, empirical data points in various directions and the question still embodies an essential pedagogical paradox (Hickey, 2003).

4. PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATIONS RELATED TO THE REFORM-PEDAGOGICAL AGENDA

As noted in the introduction, it is suggested in this article that the reform pedagogical agenda is somewhat intertwined with present attempts to facilitate creativity and personal expression among children in Denmark. In the following, two recent projects, conducted by Jakob Kiøboe and the author of this chapter, will be outlined. The two projects are very different in regard to the didactical designs applied. However, in both projects, the attempt is to facilitate creativity and personal expression.

4.1. Using technology as a shortcut to creative expression

It is a general notion within the field of pedagogics and education, that technology might represent a shortcut to creative activity (Folkestad, 1996; Sefton-Green & Buckingham (1998); Sefton-Green, 1999; Manovich, 2001; Buhl & Hemmingsen, 2004). The assumption is that the computer might enable creativity among people without any specific professional competencies in the sense that it is possible to create music without knowing how to play an instrument, and it is possible to draw a sketch of a building without knowing anything about perspective, etc.

> The technology's ability to manipulate audio has meant that many people, who up until now did not perceive themselves to be musicians, can handle, create and communicate music using their computers. They employ inexpensive music software and hardware, which does not require 'traditional' musical skills or conceptual understanding (Crow, 2006, p. 123).

The assumption is contested, of course, and might be the result of a utopian technophile discourse, rather than a result of actual experience (Dyndahl, 2002). However, in the project outlined, the starting point is that digital technology actually offers an alternative pedagogical setting that might lead to valuable creative activities.

The pedagogical project includes different workshops conducted within, as well as outside, a school context. The music software Garage Band is applied as the main tool. Different ages are involved in the study and both children and adults with and without formal musical training are included. The workshops are comprised of several assignments, games and constraints. However, the general focus is to create music. The created

compositions are finally evaluated by the children themselves as well as by an established jury consisting of adults with musical experience.

The connections to the agenda and the learning-designs of the reform-pedagogical movement are quite visible. In the reform-pedagogical movement the so-called *Orff-instruments* are applied in order to enable musical improvisations and ensemble-play among young people without comprehensive musical experience. The Orff-instruments are designed as very simple musical devices only including few notes belonging to a specific musical scale (Orff, 1932, 1964). Thus, it is possible to improvise without knowing anything about music theory. The same method is applied in the design of the music software Garage Band. The software consists, among other features, of different kinds of prerecorded musical material that might be combined in different ways. However, the different musical material is limited to a specific musical key. Accordingly, it is possible to combine music that fits, from a normative point of view, without knowing anything formal about musical harmonies.

One of the interesting findings in the study is that young people without musical training quite often produce music that is evaluated more positively by the established jury than music composed by adults with comprehensive musical training. In the sessions of evaluation the jury, unaware of the composers' age and level of musical competence, typically emphasizes the originality and the spontaneity of the young people's compositions as opposed to the conformity of the adults' compositions. The referred finding might support the notion of technology as somehow enabling musical expression among people without musical competence and equally question the unambiguous benefits of musical training. Thus, a link to the reform-pedagogical agenda and core values might be established. However, the empirical data also points in other directions in the sense that the jury equally considers some of the music, produced by young people without musical training, as plain *noise*. Thus, it seems like the pedagogical dilemma regarding musical training as both inhibiting and promoting musicality, faced by Gøssel seventy years ago, still represents a true pedagogical challenge and paradox.

4.2. Teaching specific skills in order to facilitate personal expression among children

In the pedagogical project, unfolded below, digital technology does not occupy a privileged position. Instead traditional artforms and techniques are applied in order to facilitate creative expression among schoolchildren in the age of 10-11. The title of the course is *The Hub of the Universe*, emphasizing that the main focus of the workshop is the children's own life and experiences. In the course - mainly led by Jakob Kiørboe, associate professor at the University College Zealand - the children are working with four different topics, each of which are aimed at the children's idiosyncratic perspective on the world. The four topics are; what makes me happy; what makes me sad; what am I dreaming of; what are my fears? In the workshop, different forms of art are applied in order to work creatively within the frame of the four topics, including writing, painting, drawing, drama, singing, and dancing. As opposed to the music workshops described in the above, the children are being taught specific techniques in order to work creatively. In other words, they are not writing poems without initially learning something about poetry; they are not doing drawings without learning something about colors and drawing techniques; etc.

Some of the interesting findings and results of the workshop are the children's surprising, original, and reflective perspectives on the world. E.g. the topic *what are my dreams?* Results are some very reflective, humorous, and still conscientious answers. In the

following a ten year old schoolboy imagines a world without adults, in which children are free to decide for themselves.

> *Most children would decide that it should be free to buy things*
> *They also might say that they should be paid to go to school*
> *There would be chaos: Rubbish on the streets. Banks would be robbed.*

The parallel to the reform-pedagogical agenda seems obvious. As is the case in the described workshop; Gøssel composed music together with the children, involving the children's own world, e.g. the weather, the children's toys, the parent's profession, etc. Furthermore, the political implication seems comparable in the sense that the children in the referred workshop are invited to reflect upon their lives, their future, and their dreams, and thereby hopefully building up a sense of democracy, citizenship, and empowerment. Such political and ideological ambitions equally represent a significant part of the reform-pedagogical core values.

5. CONCLUSION AND CONFUSION: THE BASIC DILEMMA, NOW FURTHER COMPLICATED WITH AN ACTOR-NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

In the chapter, it is suggested that the relation between expertise, training and skills on the one hand and creativity, individuality and spontaneity on the other, represent a genuine pedagogical dilemma. In the first example, technology was used to facilitate creativity among children with no formal musical training. According to this case study, technology offers a platform upon which novices sometimes outperform the experienced in terms of creativity. Thus, it might be suggested that expertise in some cases inhibit creativity instead of promoting it. On the other hand, the case study equally indicates that lack of skills might also lead to a questionable result. Thus, there are hardly any unambiguous correlations or causality between creativity and expertise. Further, it might be questioned whether the children's computer-compositions actually represent intentional pieces of music rather than, say, random compositions of sound. In other words, one might question the autonomy of the music in the sense that the children possess only a minimum of artistic control. Thus, it seems questionable whether the music is actually the result of the children's personal expression and intention.

In the second case study the children were encouraged to express themselves by the means of different art forms. However, in this case, the children were initially introduced to basic techniques. Thus, this type of pedagogical design might be interpreted as a possible way to establish a balance between techniques and personal expression. In other words, it may be argued that these techniques enhance the children's control over the creative process and accordingly permit the children to express themselves more personally. However, it would be questionable simply to suggest that skills lead to clear artistic control. According to present theory preoccupied by materiality, including actor-network theory, a media like for instance a musical instrument, a computer, or a paintbrush, is not transparent but rather pushes the creator in specific directions (Latour, 1999; Dyndahl, 2002). Furthermore, the media is connected to techniques, rules, and norms in subtle networks, promoting a specific culture and tradition (Latour, 2005). Thus, it would be simplistic to suggest that learning skills, in order to gain control over a certain media, enhances personal expression per se. So, it seems, the practical and theoretical struggling with expertise, creativity, and personal expression continues.

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