

## Teachers' conceptions and practices of assessing creativity

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### Background

Assessment of creativity is a hotly debated and difficult issue for teachers. Despite the long-standing challenges of classroom-based assessment of creativity in general education and, music and the visual arts in particular, the development of a systematic approach to the assessment of creativity and the constructs used by primary and secondary teachers in assessing young people's creativity, remains a slippery, highly contested and under-researched area. In the absence of extensive research, we do not know with any accuracy what we are talking about when we speak of creativity assessment in music and the visual arts. We know little about what constructs primary and secondary teachers use in assessing creativity in children and young people's work in music and the visual arts, nor the extent to which these constructs are modified for different arts subjects and school sectors.

The seminal study by Hargreaves and Galton (1996)[1] reported substantial agreement about the quality of different pieces of work across all scales and between the different rating scales employed in each of the art forms in the creative arts in British primary schools. Challenges for assessment in the arts remain, however, concerning where creativity resides in the assessment of different arts disciplines? What is it that teachers are assessing (i.e. the construct)? How do teachers of different arts disciplines judge consistently that something is creative? What are the constructs used? In the absence of adequate research we do not know with any precision what we are talking about nor looking at; neither do we know what constructs primary and secondary teachers use in assessing creativity in pupils' work, nor the extent to which these constructs are modified for different arts subjects and school sectors.

[1] Hargreaves, D. J., & Galton, M. (1996). Teachers' assessments of primary children's classroom work in the creative arts. *Educational Research*, 38(2), 199-211.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is: (a) to identify the broad relationships between the construct of 'creativity' and its assessment in secondary school music practices; (b) to clarify the nature (i.e. specific features and range) of teachers' views of the construct of 'creativity' and their classroom creativity assessment practices; and (c) to provide theoretical and empirical insights into the design and development of a questionnaire intended to further our knowledge about the construct of 'creativity' as it applies (and is located in) arts assessment practices. The analysis was designed around the key question: 'What is the construct 'creativity' and how is it expressed in assessment practices in different regions in secondary school music classrooms in England?'

The criteria used for selection of schools for the study were: (i) a willingness to be involved in the project for the duration of the pilot; (ii) the range of contexts to be represented in the overall sample: urban / rural; small / large; different specialism and Arts Mark status; (iii) people identified as leaders in developing 'good' assessment practices in a range of primary and secondary schools across a diversity of communities; and (iv) teachers who have been able to juggle policy and practice in the radically changing context of the English education system - chosen by reputation or recommended by the Local Authority Inspectorate. The study employed a combination of qualitative data collected by interviews (and contextual observations) and an on-line survey, distributed via email to key music personnel across a range of secondary schools in five local education authorities.

The analysis of the interviews suggested that 30 constructs should be used, but this number was reduced to five (Originality, Meaningful purpose, Judging value, Creative thinking skills, and

Effectiveness) to be able to capture the most important elements of teachers' views on the assessment of creativity.

## Methods

Instruments for data collection included:

- Observations: Each class was observed; where possible this included some presentation of pupils' work. This was primarily for familiarisation with the schools, teachers and students and for contextualising the interview questions and analysis.
- Interviews: These included face-to-face individual interviews with the teachers and group interviews with the students from four schools (two primary and two secondary in the East region of England) and provided visual and documentary evidence of good assessment practice in creativity-rich arts programmes. Data sets included transcriptions involving 8 focus group interviews of student groups in which further visual-based construct elicitation techniques were explored, together with questions relating to the challenges and common practices of creativity assessment in music. The data sets also included transcriptions of interviews with 6 secondary teachers of the focus groups. This resulted in approximately 24 hours of interview data for transcription.
- Work samples / artefacts: Integral to the design was the collection of documentation of teachers' practices and the inclusion of assessment tasks, work samples, teacher-developed tests, portfolios, critiques, sketchbooks and checklists reflecting the emphasis on assessment of pupil work in music composition, improvisation, performance and listening tasks.
- Survey: The questionnaire was designed and developed over a period of four months following the data collection and analysis of the interviews, artefacts and literature. The questionnaire was piloted utilising a review by expert teachers and feedback from a group of teachers who participated in the in qualitative phase of the project. The questionnaire included background variables as well as statements (3-5 items per concept for the development of latent variables) developed from the results of the qualitative study and the literature. After finalising the questionnaire, it was emailed to 40 schools recruited to the CAPA project from five south-eastern English counties (Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk). It reached approximately 120 music and visual arts teachers in primary and secondary schools. (The purpose was to gain more views from practitioners on 'creativity' as a construct in the assessment of music. We were aiming for a 50% response rate, across East Anglia, for appropriate statistical analysis.)

## Frame

The interviews were recorded electronically, given an anonymous code (P1-P27) and transcribed verbatim. A social constructivist perspective was applied to the qualitative data. This involved careful and repeated reading of each interview. Initially, three transcripts were independently scrutinized by each researcher (drawn from across the range of Key Stages). The procedures of qualitative content analysis were undertaken, initially, using an open coding procedure where teachers and pupils' responses were placed into conceptual sub-categories using emergent themes arising from sets of transcriptions across primary and secondary sectors. Following a meeting to assess inter-coder reliability the codes were refined, defined and clustered; meta-themes were used to categorize like concepts. These were grouped, and expanded to form core categories and items for the questionnaire.

The analysis of interviews, artefacts and the write-up included what might be termed an integrative analysis where interviews, artefacts and survey data informed questions relating to the validity of creativity assessment. Here we were particularly interested in what the data said about creativity and the validity of creativity assessment in terms of:

- (a) What constitutes consistency in standards for assessing creativity?
- (b) How was this defined by each group and made manifest at the teaching-assessing and assessing-learning interface? and
- (c) Where was there disjunction and conjunction between groups?

The on-line format of the survey enabled us to gain instant access to the quantitative data file. The data were cleaned, imported into SPSS, and labelled. Variables were examined by producing descriptive statistical measures and charts as well as using the internal consistency of the developed constructs (Cronbach's alpha). This helped to assess the suitability of the data for analysis. Next, non-parametric tests (due to the ordinal measure and low sample size of the data) were carried out between different characteristics of participants and schools. This was followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the robustness of the constructs in the questionnaire. If the CFA offered a robust factor structure the developed latent variables could be used for developing structural models for the data (the low sample size may pose difficulties in the model fit, but the models could indicate directions for further developing the questionnaire for a larger scale study). Also, CFA helped us determine the strength of each questionnaire item. Based on the emerging theories and the latent variables from CFA, SEM models were developed and evaluated.

### **Research findings**

Findings reveal aspects of the broad relationships between: (a) teachers' constructed conceptions of 'creativity' and (b) what teachers do with regard to the assessment of creativity in music generally and composing in particular (in secondary school music practices). A brief synthesis of the findings includes: (i) the impact of performativity agendas and the wider political contexts within which music education is currently being delivered; (ii) lack of a clear and shared understanding of what constitutes 'creativity' in music; and (iii) teachers' (and pupils') continuing struggles with assessment on a number of fronts simultaneously. Additional themes are: significant differences between attitudes compared by subject, teacher practice, background and sectors; and the notion of what a creative response in music and arts might entail for teacher education.

Conclusions and implications include a consideration of the differentiated nature of what creativity might mean in relation to classroom-based assessment of music, where assessment of creativity in music can be practiced and how creativity assessment can be operationalised in secondary school music (e.g. from the consideration of possibilities for the alignment of curriculum and pedagogy).

Creativity assessment is currently under-theorised in terms of developmental creative thinking in music and the visual arts. It is neither clear what a creative skill is nor what constitutes an effective creative stimulus that engenders meaningful creative purpose and leads to successful task completion. The use of the Assessing Creativity in the Arts (ACA) questionnaire in future research in teacher education will facilitate further investigation of creativity assessment in school practice and stimulate greater integration of practice-based research paradigms in creativity research.