Magical yet mundane: Emotion and creativity within teaching and learning

Introduction

Education is often characterized by a dichotomy between learning and creativity (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010). The “Arts”—if attended to at all—is typically positioned as a distinct element within the broader curriculum, and as something quite separate from the teaching and learning that takes place within other curricular domains. This is especially well exemplified in the structure of the new Australian Curriculum, for example, with the Arts introduced as a Phase 2 domain, and quite separate from English, Mathematics, Science, and History (ACARA, 2010).

Although it has been largely neglected within the social constructivist literature, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of mind and human development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) has as its core an interest in creativity, affect, and emotion. In particular, Vygotsky’s understanding of catharsis—the transformative potential of emotion—causes us to rethink the qualitative nature of pedagogical activity, and the importance of “mundane creativity” (Holzman, 2010, p. 27) for engaging learners in the transformative process of “becoming” through the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and competencies (Holzman, 2000, p. 88).

This paper examines the role of emotion, meaning, and sense within sociocultural theory, and implication for understanding the place of creativity within teaching and learning. It then provides a brief empirical example of such creativity within pedagogy with reference to “content and language integrated learning” (CLIL). CLIL emerged in Europe in the mid-1990s in response to the success of the Canadian immersion model (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010), in which regular curriculum content is taught through the medium of a second language (e.g., English speaking students learning mathematics through French). In this case, Year 10 students learning Geography through Japanese. Such a context provides an especially rich example to focus on creativity within pedagogy, as teachers and students are not only engaged in a constant process of creating new understanding about content, but are also working simultaneously with new tools (language) to produce that knowledge.

Development and perezhivanie: Emotion, meaning, and sense

Luria (1934/1987 cited in Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002, p. 50) contends that “without the exploration of the relationship of the word to motive, emotion, and personality, the analysis of the [Vygotskian] problem of ‘thinking and speech’ remains incomplete”. In Vygotsky’s early work, the focus was mediation, and the role of sociocultural tools and artefacts in human development. Later, with his shift in interest to the properties of the tool itself, and on “word-meaning” more specifically, came a corresponding interest in the relationship between intellect and affect. This was best encapsulated in his notion of perezhivanie, or one’s “lived emotional experience” (John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010, p. 8).

Perezhivanie offers a foundation for considering how “the human experience”—what it means to have a full and rich affective history at the core of our consciousness—is carried through to our appropriation of tools within social interaction (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002, p. 51). If we recognise the human as a “creative” animal (Lobman, 2010, p. 200), and define our humanity by its ability to create and transform the world within which we exist, then perezhivanie highlights the need to extend our focus beyond conventional rationality and reason to also consider the role of emotion “at the heart

Vygotsky’s interest in emotion emerged as no coincidence with the corresponding shift in focus to words and word-meaning in the latter years of his life; particularly the distinction he came to extend between word “sense” and “meaning”. While the latter is a “comparatively fixed and stable point … that remains constant” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 276), sense is “dynamic, fluid and complex”: “the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word” (p. 276). While meaning can therefore be understood as an agreed-upon, codified definition that denotes what the word signifies, sense carries with it the “feeling” of a word based on past experiences.

Through sense, then, Vygotsky’s understanding of development is inextricably tied up with perezhivanie, and the emotional, lived history of what it means to be a language learner and user1. Holzman (2010), for example, argues that we don’t “learn” our native language through a systematic focus on “meaning”. Rather, as children, we are expected that we can do (i.e., experience and feel) more than what we already know. This seems counterintuitive to the basic pedagogical premise of having to learn before one can be expected to do. Yet, despite young children being ‘not-knowers’ of language, we nonetheless relate to them as if still capable ‘language users’:

Before a child has acquired grammatical and written language, he knows how to do things but does not know that he knows … a child spontaneously makes use of his ability to separate meaning from object without knowing that he is doing it, just as he does not know he is speaking in prose but talks without paying attention to the words. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99)

Creativity, learning, and development

This understanding of language learning transcends the “acquisition” of language as if it were a mere “tool kit” for the language user. Instead, the focus shifts to a developmental process of continually becoming: one does not simply “take on” language, but comes to a realisation of how words come to shape our expression of one’s self, as well as the influence and effect of words on the relationships we have with others and the world around us. Language learning is therefore inextricably tied up with an appreciation of not only what words “mean”, but the feelings they also come to evoke through “sense”. Learning and using language is, therefore, a necessarily creative process, inseparable from emotion and affect.

This creativity is not the type of creativity we are accustomed to recognising within schools, where “creative” is equated with a well defined “artistic” skills: those that enable the individual to “produce special things, original, novel, unique, and perhaps extraordinary or extraordinarily significant items, relative to others who are not creative” (Holzman, 2010, p. 30). By way of contrast, a Vygotskian notion of creativity is necessarily collaborative and social. It exists within the appropriation of tools, sense-making, and meaning-making that emerges through social mediation within the zone of proximal development (ZPD): the internalisation and (crucially) transformative externalisation of tools, signs, and other sociocultural artifacts (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). The ZPD—the point at which the learner moves from a reliance on others (other-regulation) to the independent capacity to perform or know for themselves (self-regulation) (Vygotsky, 1978)—is not, then, a zone in the sense of “place”, but a “creative, improvisational activity” (Newman & Holzman, 1993, 1997 cited in

1 Or, indeed, learner and user of any new tool or sociocultural artefact, including new concepts and knowledge.
Lobman, 2010, p. 202). Such “creativity” is thus understood as “the human ability to make things, to build, to develop—especially in its most mundane forms—to create a conversation, a picnic, or a lesson about angles” (p. 200). As Holzman (2010) observes, however, “while mundane, it is also magical!” (p. 30).

With reference to animal psychology in *The Problem of Age* (1934/1998), Vygotsky argues that purely mechanical imitation “says nothing about the *mind* of the imitator” (p. 201, emphasis added), and continues: “The animal’s imitation is strictly limited by the narrow boundaries of its capabilities. The animal can imitate only what it is capable of doing” (p. 201). Human development, on the other hand, is marked by its inherently (albeit an everyday and ordinary) creative process of externalisation: the internalisation of what already “is”, to be refashioned into something new—bestowing the old with what it *can* be (Connery, 2010). It is this cathartic process, and the nexus between what is internalised, perezhivanie, and the release that creates something new, that we see emotion, affect, and creativity working together within development. As Marjanovic–Shane et al. (p. 228) put it,

A cultural-historical approach to creative education provides ample opportunities for cathartic moments including the sudden “a-ha” one feels when grasping a new concept, the breakthrough insight a team experiences working on a science project, a brilliant solution crafted by novice and mentor to a complex social-historical puzzle.

If we rethink pedagogy as necessarily having to appeal to affect, in order to *effect*, “creative” engagement, then it has the capacity to shift our understanding of teaching and learning. In particular, it necessitates a shift in “focus … from the products of those environments to the dialectical relationship between what is to be learned and the creating of the environment for learning and development” (Lobman, 2010, p. 204).

The remainder of this paper turns to an example of the mundane (but yet magical!) creativity that unfolds within a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) setting. CLIL emerged in Europe in the mid-1990s in response to the success of the Canadian immersion model (Coyle et al., 2010), in which regular curriculum content is taught through the medium of a second language (e.g., English speaking students learning mathematics through French). In this case, Year 10s were learning Geography through Japanese at an independent boys’ secondary college in Melbourne. The excerpt is from a larger analysis of the role of Japanese as a sociocultural tool to mediate dual language/content outcomes (Author, 2010).

Like Lobman’s (2010) earlier point on the need to focus less on the product of instruction than on the environment that allows for creative engagement from which new products can be made, CLIL provides a rich setting to consider the role of creativity within teaching and learning. Rather than presuming the existence of already “finished” tools (language) by which to simply “transfer” finished cultural artefacts or products (content), both are constantly under construction and reconstruction by teachers and learners in their attempts to produce something new; namely, an understanding of the new knowledge (in this case, about Geography), together with a competence to communicate in the language being used (Japanese).

**Sense-making through an integrated focus on tools and content**

In contrast to a traditional language lesson where students might always be expected to “use” the target language for any language being produced, the content-oriented focus within CLIL engaged
students in a much broader, more indirect platform for language usage. The dynamic between “using language/doing content” was complex, and there was no compulsion for students to use Japanese except for the “products” of specific content-based tasks, such as a completed worksheet about drivers in tourism, or a presentation outlining an itinerary for a target tourist group. Interestingly, despite this indirect focus on having to use Japanese, this integrated content and language space was one that teachers described as much richer for engaging students in language use compared to their typical “language” lessons:

It seems like a bit of a childish thing to be putting magnets on a map, but that’s actually one of the most interesting ones for the groups I sense, because every time that you put the magnetic map there, all four of them usually would gather around and be sticking magnets on, and they’re really interested in that. So it’s just a different way of looking at the vocabulary, because all of the names are in *katakana*. And then they’ve gone through and attempted to identify all of the countries in their booklets. (Language teacher, 237-244)

In CLIL we do some drills at the beginning of the class … but it’s not the main part of the lesson. The CLIL part is more active, so they actually use their knowledge and try to apply the knowledge for what they’re actually doing for the new goal. (Language assistant, 160-164)

Most crucially, this dynamic focus on “using language/doing content” led to a context within which students seemed to have greater ownership and creativity over the language when it was used. As such, language became a tool for which students appeared genuinely focused on attempting to understand what was being said to them, as well as also on how they were being understood in their own attempts to use language:

[With regular LOTE], it’s just doing exercises and drill, drill, drill . . . it can be a little bit more passive . . . [With CLIL] it’s more fun and they try to use Japanese as much as possible. And although they don’t “understand”, they can still “think”. (Language assistant, 166-177)

I think in CLIL if students are so enthusiastic and if they want to, maybe they can go even further—that’s why maybe some students used those vocab and grammar that they haven’t learnt in the lesson. (Language assistant, 576-578)

In contrast to a regular language lesson where the use of English is often seen as a negative, in a CLIL context, despite students having considerable freedom on whether to use Japanese or not for the most part, they did not appear to deliberately avoid Japanese. That is, the content seemed to provide a fertile “sandpit” where Japanese was not positioned as “language as object” for students to accept (or reject), but as a tool that was subtly worked in through the content-based tasks that engaged students at another, more indirect level. Students seemed to set their own rules on when and how they would use Japanese, with the gain being higher, genuine levels of student engagement because language was then being used in the ways “they wanted to”:

Some breakthroughs were in terms of when we came to a discussion question, there were students volunteering . . . some of them were using the structures which we’ve been working on so it just came out. (Language teacher, 15-18)

Similarly, teachers noted at other points during the program that it was the students who were often taking ownership for the type of language being produced and used:
Because the context of the unit is that you’re looking at why people go where they do, because the geography is in terms of the location of things, and that language of why, and explaining why, is really important, and so we’ve emphasised that probably right from the start—talking about why do people go to France, for a start. Today the students just started to volunteer why they were interested in going to particular places in Japan . . . I think that was a breakthrough. (Language teacher, 130-136)

When I say something in Japanese, actually they understand, and they try to confirm in English . . . they start talking in English, but still they get input. Maybe the output part still takes more time, but I think their listening ability and listening skills is getting a lot, a lot better—and, yeah, students actually enjoy it. (Language assistant, 274-279)

There was one boy who was using the computer. He is a little bit weaker compared to other students, but I was pretty surprised that he was looking at the Japanese website. He said like, “Oh, it’s all in Japanese, so I don’t know,” but he was still trying to find some information! (Language assistant, 281-284)

In sum, rather than direct attention to learning and using the language, the integrated focus on content therefore seemed to provide a platform for students to be creative with the language they were encountering through teacher input and the classroom materials on their own terms. The object became one of transforming their understanding of the content into language that they could use, rather than as language being something “performed on cue.”

It was this unscripted quality of student language that most impressed the teachers. The language assistant commented that although she noticed students used language incorrectly at times, “still, I’m glad that they tried to use it” (525-526). The focus was therefore away from linguistic accuracy, to what the students are actually trying to say through Japanese:

Maybe with Year 9, I know all answers and I know everything, you know what I mean? [ . . . but with the] CLIL task, there are suitable answers, but not definite, “This is the right answer,” or “This is wrong.” Or maybe students can create the things, especially what we did in today’s class, those leaving a message, and they need to sort of give more information about the one area. But they don’t, there is some direction what they need to say, but it’s not definite, like “Oh, you should say this word.” They can be more creative. (136-152)

Conclusion

What is most notable about this integration of content and language is that it produced a space for students to learn about language in a way that was contextualised and purposeful. Rather than a situation where students “had” to use language in “a” particular way, as might typically be the case in a language-as-object oriented classroom, the space created by the dual content focus in this environment was one where students could move in and out of Japanese. This allowed students to think about both the ideas being discussed and the language being used, from which they then made their own, creative choices about what and how to use the language for themselves.

In terms of mundane creativity within pedagogy, this was a context where not even the tools we would typically take for granted within teaching and learning (i.e., language) were readily available to simply
“transmit” the finished “product”. Rather, both teachers and students were constantly involved in a process of creating and transforming all of the resources available to move from “not knowing” to “knowing”. For Lobman (2010), “when learning and teaching are viewed as forms of joint meaning making, curricular standards are enhanced” (p. 223), and this is precisely what we see happening in this context, where both teachers and learners engage in the creation of something new; both new conceptual understandings about content in geography, and the language through which those ideas are made and expressed.

Recurring themes within the teachers’ perceptions of the learning observed in this setting were marked by keywords such as ‘try’, ‘active’, ‘new’, ‘enjoy’, and ‘volunteer’. Significantly, despite students being “not knowers”, they were simultaneously positioned as still being expected to transform what was made available to them in the L2 into something new. Like the boy at the computer who exclaimed, “It’s all in Japanese … I don’t know!”, he nonetheless remained working with those tools until he did understand.

There are, of course, limitations to what is possible, and Vygotsky recognised this in the notion of the zone of proximal development, and the potential for development according to the conditions under which such activity takes place. Yet the critical point here is that learning, when it does occur, is the result of transforming something new to create something that did not exist before. The learner must always be positioned one step ahead: “they bring with them some expectation they will learn” (Holzman, 2010, pp. 37, emphasis in original).

The pedagogical imperative is to therefore appreciate learning as not the act of “being taught”, but of creating and refashioning tools based on one’s own foundation for sense-making, or perezhivanie. Like all genuinely creative acts, it depends on “environments where children (and adults) can take risks, make mistakes, and support each other to do what they do not yet know how to do” (Lobman, 2007, p. 605). The “safe” classroom is a phrase oft cited within the literature, but safety must go beyond a notion of general well-being. The language teacher in this setting was almost apologetic with his reference to his students’ high levels of engagement when it seemed “childish”. Yet this ability to feel comfortable to take such risks, and feel free to “learn playfully” (Holzman, 2010), is not a luxury, but crucial for genuine development:

> Though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and consciousness. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102)

In attempts to understand best contemporary practice within teaching and learning, much has been made of what it means to “work” within the ZPD to achieve higher student outcomes. The result has been a focus caught up with attempting to identify models, techniques, and strategies for what teachers and learners should “think” and “do”. While clearly important, what cannot remain ignored is the need to also appeal to how learners “feel”: the recognition of the deeply emotive and affective dimension of what it means to “make sense”, “create understanding”, and understand the act of learning as ultimately the creative act of the learners’ self in a state of constantly “becoming”.
References


