

Creating Space for Creativity

Are the spaces we already inhabit uncreative? The notion that creativity is not already part of our everyday life, that we need an 'elsewhere', another location or space in which these processes can come to life is evident in much of the drive to creative education in documents such as Robinson's All Our Futures - which is predicated on the belief that current education systems are too rigid, subject- rather than skills-driven and not equipping learners with the 'soft' skills for the new knowledge economies. I would like to explore different dimensions of the concept of space for creativity - of physically located space; temporal aspects, e.g. existing schedules and the idea of imaginative 'space' within existing processes and systems.

The hideaway, the shed in the garden, 'a room of one's own' - the concept of a solitary space apart has some currency as an essential prerequisite for artistic endeavour. Can this concept be usefully reapplied in institutional settings? A primary obstacle is of course the constraint of institutional space - older schools or hospitals and even newer ones do not always offer freedom for solitary escape. Creating 'space' within an institutional setting can be regarded as more often a question of reconfiguring spatial relations rather than finding new locations - an existing corridor or a under-used room can become a site for artistic work - to introduce a community to a teacher-artist or to invite responses and anonymous suggestions for change.

The work of Muf <http://www.muf.co.uk/> offers examples of how the reconfiguring of spatial arrangements can prompt a wider reinvention of institutional and social relations and engage the participant in a deeper consideration of creative potential. Other artists I have worked with - and I'll post details of their work as soon as I get permission - work very imaginatively using the idea of reconfiguration as a stimulus for an initial debate or consultancy about creativity and what it can offer to a client. Colleague and friend Sarah Cole took over the hall of a primary school, for example, and created an installation from hay bales. It worked both as a recreation and new meeting area for staff and pupils - and pupils who had been chucked out of classes helped to build it.

The purpose of these interventions was to interrupt patterns of pre-determined functionality and to invite new aesthetic responses. After all, how can we engage in a creative process unless we encounter a primary stimulus that moves us or makes us think differently? The role of different sensory intelligences and learning in relation to creativity is well-articulated by educational theorists such as Gardner. I would like to discover whether there are similar authoritative theories of creativity in the workplace that pay attention to the dynamics of sensory encounter - and even acknowledge the role of beauty and art in stimulating creativity.

Creating Temporal Space

The reconfiguring of schedules and timetables can bring about similar opportunities to described above for interrupting of patterns. In this case, I believe it is the emptying of space that is of greater significance. In pressured, time-poor environments, creative interventions can be viewed as yet another top-down management initiative. Freeing a timetable, for work with an artist or facilitator, dispels the possibility that creative activities are just another 'add-on' and offers a first step to generating conditions for artistic exploration and imaginative play.

In two schools where I have been engaged as a development worker for Creative Partnerships, I have been struck by the importance of freeing up existing schedules to explore creative learning strategies. In one school, after a long period of INSET and different input for staff to investigate and explore concepts of creativity, a headteacher invited her staff to go off timetable and use any creative teaching method in their classrooms for two weeks. This gave a significant 'green light' (or permission) for staff to experiment and try-out new strategies in comparative safety. As a result of this work, staff felt themselves to be in a much stronger position to consider how to develop creative learning further into their curriculum. In the other example, a headteacher similarly gave one day a week over to play and art activities in the summer term and suspended the curriculum which has created a similar momentum for further change. These examples may prove harder to replicate in other environments. They do illustrate, however, the role of temporal 'space' in initiating creative programmes.

Creating Imaginative space..

What do I mean by this? I think it's dependent to some degree on the provision of temporal space - a little quiet time to think and smell the flowers - and of course a place to do it, a quiet corner, a space free from office clutter, mobile phones, traffic noise..... Imaginative space could be construed as the spatially- and temporally-unbounded - a space where we can articulate the ideal, the visionary image of what our 'real' location or situation could become.

There is a lot more to be said here about the role of the artist in facilitating or enabling the 'envisioning' of a new creative organisation, school or institution. But I would be interested to read other ideas or responses to the categorisation that I am working with here.