The expendable extra

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Creativity in the English Curriculum: historical perspectives and future directions

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Lorna Smith is senior lecturer in education (English) at Bristol University's Graduate School of Education and chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE). She was awarded the NATE Terry Furlong Award in 2020 for the research that underpins *Creativity in the English Curriculum*.

The book is in four parts: Part I 'The case for creativity'; Part II 'Policy documents and official guidance: the English curriculum and creativity in context'; Part III 'Conversations in creativity'; and Part IV 'Forging connections, creating change'.

Smith begins by explaining that she writes 'from a position of several biases': 'I am a lover of language, seeing language as humankind's most important invention: I am a natural optimist, with an idealist, constructionist perspective; I hold that creativity is important not only to English but to education more widely, and believe it is a huge error of judgement to write creativity out of the Curriculum' (pp3-4).

She considers the nature of creativity and its relationship with English, art, science and culture. She outlines the history from ancient times to the present day, noting that there have been many different ways of understanding the term. She compares, for example, notions of 'Big C' creativity (famous artists etc.) with 'little c' creativity – the idea that we can *all* be creative; notes that creativity can be an individual matter or develop within a collaborative community (p13); and concludes that creativity is 'understood in so many different forms that it effectively resists a definitive definition' (p15).

She examines the history of creativity in education policy documents, noting that 'a creative approach to education is not a modern innovation' (p16). She identifies three periods when there have been significant developments: in the 1960s the abolition of the 11-plus freed primary teachers from 'stultifying test preparation' (p16), and the Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools* showed teachers 'an alternative and, implicitly, creative pedagogy through which the development of the whole child is promoted' (p16). In the 1990s, Britain's knowledge-based economy needed a workforce 'able to identify and solve problems' (p18), and there was 'a revival of interest in creativity for

personal and social wellbeing' (p18). And during the 2000s, the Labour government 'actively promoted' creativity (p20): 'creative thinking skills' were added to the national curriculum in 1999 and retained in the revisions of 2004 and 2007.

But creativity was removed from the knowledge-based national curriculum of 2014, and by 2017 Ofsted was expressing concern that for many schools examination specifications had become the curriculum. This situation is unlikely to change any time soon, says Smith, given the DfE's 'controversial decision to opt out of the new PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] creativity test' (p22).

With regard to the teaching of English, Smith notes that:

> Many English lessons in England are currently explicitly driven by assessment preparation at both primary and secondary levels ... accordingly, the role of the English teacher has been eroded: rather than having the freedom to make professional decisions about lesson content and approach, what to teach and even how to teach it is often out of a teacher's hands. (p22.)

The result of 'three decades of prescriptive curricula and oppressive testing' is that creativity and individuality have been lost in 'a punitive accountability system that sucks any remaining pleasure from the classroom experience', and that 'unfulfilled and demotivated' English teachers are leaving the profession in droves (p24).

Smith concludes Part I of her book with a summary of what creativity means: it has 'liberal and humanist connotations'; it is 'associated with social justice and so has political agency'; it 'offers opportunity'; and it 'runs counter to other powerful discourses that currently dominate education' such as test and exam results. Yet it is simultaneously 'a victim of this "old, tired" model' (p25).

In Part II, Smith investigates how creativity has been presented in English policy documents. She examines in some detail the writings of Matthew Arnold, the various editions of the Board of Education's *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers* (from 1905), and the 1921 Newbolt Report *The Teaching of English in England*, in each case noting what the documents say in relation to speaking and listening, reading and writing. She concludes that 'creativity was valued and promoted in English from its inception as a school subject' (p46).

She goes on to consider the Dartmouth conference of 1966, an Anglo-American seminar on the teaching of English at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, which became 'an important influence in English education over the next decade on both sides of the Atlantic' (p50); the Plowden Report (1967), which 'advocated a child-centred, creative approach' (p50); the Bullock Report *A Language for Life* (1975), which strongly supported the creative approach and 'child-led teaching' (p56), and presented English as 'a creative subject concerned with nurturing children's interest in language, developing their enjoyment and confidence in expressing themselves

through the spoken and written word, and encouraging a love of literature' (p48); and the Kingman Report *The Teaching of English Language* (1988), which had 'a more limited conceptualisation of both English and creativity' (p48), and which signalled 'the launch of the National Curriculum and the beginnings of a move towards prescription governed by assessment' (p62).

She then investigates how creativity in English has fared in the six iterations of the national curriculum over the past 30 years, tracing 'the decline in child-centred oracy, reading for pleasure and expressive writing' and arguing that successive curricula have become 'increasingly antithetic to creative work' (p64), even when it was officially promoted.

Education secretary Kenneth Baker chose Brian Cox to write the English national curriculum, but his committee's 'English for ages 5-16' (1989) was 'more child-centred and liberal than the Government might have hoped' (p65), so Baker commissioned David Pascall to review it almost immediately. Pascall argued that the prime purpose of English education was to enable children to 'master the basic skills' to serve the needs of industry (p68). Next came the national curriculum based on Ron Dearing's review of 1994, in which the views of English teachers and subject bodies were 'summarily ignored' (p68).

Tony Blair's New Labour government, elected in 1997, 'invested handsomely in education' (p69) but some of its policy decisions 'sat in uneasy tension with each other' (p69). Creativity was 'ostensibly encouraged for learners' (p69), but 'the climate for teachers became less creative' (p69) as the national strategies told them not only *what* to teach but *how* to teach it.

An 'outcomes-oriented notion of creativity' (p70), associated with raising standards, was incorporated into the third and fourth versions of the national curriculum (1999 and 2004) and became a 'key concept' (p70) in the fifth version (2007).

But Michael Gove, who became education secretary in the Conservative-Liberal coalition government from 2010, claimed that 'the problem-solving, collaborative, practical skills view of creativity' (p71) promoted by the Blair and Brown governments had not worked, and set about creating a 'knowledge-rich' national curriculum, ignoring the advice of educationists, writers, subject bodies, three of the four members of his own expert advisory panel, and the business community. As a result, creativity was 'expurgated' from the sixth national curriculum (2014). Children were now to be taught to read and write so that their reading and writing could be tested, 'thus obliquely suggesting that the purpose of education is to meet economic rather than humane aims' (p73).

Smith then considers the six versions of the national curriculum in terms of 'the death of dialect and the rise of standard spoken English' (p74); the way in which 'reading for pleasure' has become 'reading for learning' (p77); and the 'gentrification' of creative

writing (p81). She concludes that only the first national curriculum (1989) 'recognised the unitary nature of English speaking and listening, reading and writing that had grown with the subject' (p85). Subsequent versions 'separated writing from the other elements of unitary, creative English' and thereby 'starved imaginative, expressive writing of what sustains it' (p85). Today, 'creative writing' in policy is 'reduced to a tokenistic sub-genre' and spelling, punctuation and grammar are 'rewarded more highly than originality and artistry' (p85). Creativity is now 'an expendable extra to a knowledge-rich curriculum' (p87).

For Part III of her book, 'Conversations in creativity', Smith interviewed the sort of people the writers of Gove's national curriculum ought to have consulted – 'current and former classroom teachers (from experienced Heads of Department to new teachers), a Headteacher, academics, teacher educators, and examiners' (p90). She stresses that she 'did not know anyone's explicit views on creativity beforehand' (p90).

She suggests that 'it is appropriate that a book about English teaching and creativity experiments with form, and underlines arguments made in Part II that rich oracy stimulates original, sophisticated writing' (p90). She therefore presents her interviews as a playscript, set in the British Library, and invites her readers to read it aloud – perhaps perform it – with 'colleagues or interested others where possible' (p90).

The conversations – 'colloquies' – are based on eight quotations from policy documents and associated literature from both before and after the publication of the first national curriculum, covering four themes – the purpose of education, creativity, creative English and the components of the English curriculum. They are presented in three acts, each taking between 10 and 15 minutes to read.

In Act 1, 'Why English, and what does creativity have to do with it?', the cast discuss different models of creativity and their own conceptions of it. They all regard creativity as integral to English. In Act 2, 'Making sense of policy', they 'deplore the restrictive nature of successive iterations of the National Curriculum, particularly the instrumental measures adopted by some schools as expedient for exam success; yet simultaneously note the importance of the individual teacher as a foil to such practice' (p91). In Act 3, 'Creating the conditions and imagining the future', they consider the conditions needed to enable creative English to thrive, and discuss the role of school leaders and individual teachers in 'creating an environment that allows for agentive practice including experiment and judicious risk-taking in order that students flourish academically and personally' (p91).

In the light of these conversations, Smith goes on in Part IV of her book to argue that while 'prescriptive curricula and oppressive testing' may be seen as deprofessionalising teachers, in practice it is they who 'ultimately control the lesson-to-lesson classroom experiences of their students'. As a result, English teachers 'are more powerful than they might imagine' (p120).

She emphasises the important role of experienced teachers in keeping alive memories of previous English curricula so that newer teachers 'who have had little experience of curriculum innovation' can understand what it is 'to explore in an arguably arid context' (p121) and urges the maintenance of collective memory through building 'communities of practice' (p122). She goes on to suggest 'practical ways in which the theories in this book might be made flesh' (p122).

She calls for 'creativity' to be rewritten into English policy (p123) and urges that 'education policy going forward should be informed by a consultative process' in which policymakers and teaching professionals come together (p123). She suggests that 'both the Curriculum and the assessment regime must be recreated simultaneously: to revise the one without the other would have little effect' (p123). And she argues for the creation of the 'agentive child': 'Children who learn from creative practitioners learn to be creative themselves and "grow" personally' (p124).

In her final chapter, 'Historical perspectives to future directions', Smith argues that 'understanding history can help us plan the way forward' (p126). She therefore sets out some ideas that 'connect policies and practice of the past with classrooms of the present, aimed at inspiring English teachers on their onward journeys' (p126).

The book concludes with a comprehensive bibliography and a subject index.

I enjoyed reading *Creativity in the English Curriculum* and learned a lot from it. I found it a remarkable book in four respects.

First, it is *informative,* in that it presents a detailed history of the way creativity has been seen by the writers of education policy documents over many years. My summary barely does the book justice in terms of the amount of information it contains.

Second, it is *analytical* in the way that Smith has considered in depth the nature of creativity, its relationship with English, art, science and culture, and its place as a vital ingredient of a humane education.

Third, it is *interactive*: Smith begins each chapter by inviting her readers to answer a series of thought-provoking questions. For example, in chapter 1 she asks:

- What is your own definition of 'creativity'? Note it down. You will be invited to return to this definition at various points through the book.
- What values do you associate with creativity?
- What hallmarks of creativity might be apparent in a school that could indicate whether creativity is promoted and valued (or not) in that setting? What hallmarks of creativity might be apparent in an English department or English classroom? (pp8-9)

And, as we have seen, she suggests that groups might perform the conversations she presents in Part III.

And finally, it is *inspirational* in that she offers suggestions as to how teachers can

work within the statutory framework and yet provide children with opportunities to be creative.

Readers of *FORUM* will, I am sure, agree with me that *Creativity in the English Curriculum* is an important book. I hope it will be widely read, not just by teachers of English, but by all teachers and others who are concerned about our children's education.

Derek Gillard is responsible for the invaluable Education in the UK website, where this review was originally published: https://www.education-uk.org/