Creativity and Inquiry

Creativity and Inquiry in a Preliminary HSC English Classroom

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Abstract: Creativity is integral to the inquiry process. Inquiry-based work highlights students' understanding of the ways that literature and language mediate lived experiences and social relationships. Within the secondary English classroom, students and teachers can engage in collaborative and imaginative activities to read texts, ask questions, and construct their own critical and creative responses. This action research study was situated in a Year 11 English class in Sydney, Australia. Through an inquiry-based project, students analysed William Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Jack Davis's *The Dreamers* and considered historical contexts, themes, and values. Through producing their own creative work in response, students developed the five core dispositions that mark the creative process as they became inquisitive, persistent, imaginative, collaborative, and disciplined.

All things are ready, if our mind be so. – William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

A classroom scene

'Miss, I'm responding to Shakespeare. His words are clever. I think I need to respond to him by trying to meet his style.'

His English teacher Peta smiled and said, 'Lachlan, if I told you a few weeks ago that you would have to respond to this inquiry question by writing a poem – '

He interrupted, 'I know, I know, Miss, but I gotta try, you know … I think it will be hard, but I think I gotta try.'

Introduction

An inquiry-based approach to teaching requires the development of lessons where students are challenged and self-motivated. Reflecting a constructivist view of teaching and learning, this approach is focused on the types of experience presented to students, the nature of active learning and the importance of curiosity, self-direction and collaboration. Meaningful learning occurs when students are able to 'discover knowledge for themselves, perceive relations between old and new knowledge, apply knowledge to solve new problems, communicate their knowledge to others and have continuing motivation for learning' (Macedo, 2000, p. 12). Inquiry-based learning, therefore, is based on students' independent intellectual investigations, confrontations, and contributions.

This action research study was situated in a Year 11 English class in Sydney, Australia. As an English teacher and a teacher educator, we believe that action research can be a tool for teachers to understand and improve their practice in a way that is 'governed by principles of honor, trust, and social justice' (Groundwater-Smith, 2005, p. 331). Rather than focusing on short-term goals or quick fixes, this approach to research aims to disrupt existing structures that often serve to marginalise and disenfranchise students (Curwood, 2014). To explore the role of inquiry-based learning in the secondary English classroom, we examined how students engaged with the plays *Henry V* and *The Dreamers*.

Linking inquiry, creativity, and technology

Inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning enable students to personalise their learning experience, selecting specific tools and strategies that work best to solve open-ended, problem-based, and experiential tasks. As Macedo (2000) argues, meaningful learning occurs when students are able to 'discover knowledge for themselves, perceive relations between old and new knowledge, apply knowledge to solve new problems, communicate their knowledge to others and have continuing motivation for learning' (p. 12). Teachers can initiate the inquiry process by posing a fundamental question that serves as a trigger for investigation. Students are then encouraged to select and explore information and facts before synthesising multiple sources, formulating a focus, and presenting their findings. Notably, there is a need for information to be presented in a variety of different ways, and then revisited at different times, in different contexts, for different purposes, and from different conceptual perspectives.

Inquiry is inextricably related to creativity, which involves the ability to produce work that is both novel and appropriate (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). Banaji and Burn (2007) argue that the rhetorics of creativity emerge from the contexts of research, theory, policy, and practice. To that end, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has identified five core dispositions for the creative process: inquisitive, persistent, imaginative, collaborative, and disciplined. Building on these dispositions, creativity 'improves students' self-esteem, motivation, and achievement, preparing pupils for life and enriching their learning experiences' (Lucas, Claxton & Spencer, 2013, p. 9). Furthermore, creativity is needed to solve problems and challenges beyond the classroom and enables the emerging workforce to compete in a global market.

Within the secondary English classroom, creativity is integral to the inquiry process. Rather than simply learning formulaic answers or repeating theoretical information, students need to be equipped with skills and challenged by activities that propel transformative knowledge construction. Inquiry-based work illuminates students' understanding of the ways that literature and language mediate lived experiences and social relationships. Students and teachers can engage in collaborative and imaginative activities to read texts, ask questions, and write their own critical and creative responses.

Within inquiry-based learning, digital technologies enable an interconnection of texts, encourage multimodal representations, and offer an authentic audience. Curwood, Magnifico and Lammers (2013) argue, 'Instead of taking young people away from literature and literacy, online spaces and digital tools can motivate students in new and complex ways to engage with reading, writing, and designing' (p. 684). Within the English classroom, online platforms can offer students new ways to participate in the inquiry process and share their writing as part of a community. Magnifico (2010) explains, 'Novice writers become more expert within a writing community … by becoming active members, taking on common practices and values – and, critically, being seen by an audience of other members as knowledgeable participants and, eventually, as experts' (p. 174).

In this way, the English classroom can nurture student collaboration within an open-ended inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning, ensuring that the diverse creative dispositions are fostered. As students grapple to problem-solve the inquiry question, these creative dispositions, often synonymous with those characteristics required for learning, prevail. That is, in order to learn, students must demonstrate discipline, persistence, and imagination as they collaborate with teachers and classmates to solve the inquiry task.

How do English teachers ensure that their students are learning in a creative and dynamic environment? Effective teachers need to teach the expertise of their subject area while developing their students' inquiry skills and creative dispositions. Over the course of the inquiry project, teachers may find themselves being co-constructors of knowledge (Craft, 2005), reflective practitioners (Esquivel, 1995) and supporters and facilitators (McWilliam, 2009). Teachers need to support students as they actively work to find meaning and seek solutions to deepen their understanding of literature (Curwood & Cowell, 2011). They also need to mentor and support students as they wrestle with a concept, navigate through information, and generate possible solutions that illustrate their understanding (Gresham, 2014).

English in Australia

Although creativity has been identified as one of the seven capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, the established and at times rigid compartmentalisation of subject content may undermine transformative learning experiences. Ewing (2010) has noted that the current national curriculum 'continues to privilege a

traditional subject hierarchy with traditional textual understandings of literacy (reading and writing) along with numeracy taking priority. Thinking processes seem secondary to more technical skills that are more easily measurable with multiple-choice tests' (p. 28). Developing students' skills in deconstructing and composing multimedial, interactive and navigational conventions demands that teachers learn a new language and appreciation for new literacies. Cisco (2007, as cited in Cumming et al., 2012) distinguishes new and emerging digital texts as having distinct differences from long-held understandings of literacy education, and argues that 'these distinct differences extend to the range of skills and attributes designated as desirable for twenty-first century students' (p. 10). Furthermore, these types of skills and student dispositions cannot be assessed by standardised testing (Reeves, 2010, as cited in Cummings et al., 2012, p. 10). There is a responsibility for curricula, including models of assessment, to foster students' reading, writing, and viewing of multi-layered texts and to provide inspiration for their critical and creative work (Curwood, 2012).

The New South Wales Stage 6 English Syllabus requires Year 11 and Year 12 students to analyse and reflect upon a complex and diverse range of texts. Teachers and students are challenged to engage with a dense curriculum and meet national content objectives and outcomes. In addition, Australian schools are increasingly held accountable for student achievement on standards-based tests.

There is growing pressure for teachers and students to raise test scores in national and state examinations such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC). As Fehring and Nyland (2012) argue, 'What is valued in literacy learning has become that which can be measured, quantified, analysed, and compared', and subsequently 'a narrowing of the curriculum, together with a marginalisation of multicultural Australians, has been the result of such rectifications' (p. 10). In particular, certain subjects and assessment strategies are often privileged, which has a profound impact on curriculum development as well as on the ways in which schools are designed, staffed, and resourced (Wyn, 2009).

Unlike state and national assessments designed as a measurement *of learning*, classroom assessments must be designed *for learning*. Teachers use evidence about the progress of students to inform their teaching.

Local school assessment is centred on developing individual students' content knowledge. Inquiry-based learning positions the teacher to adopt the role of 'guide on the side' and 'meddler in the middle', creating 'opportunities for hands-on, minds-on and, where appropriate, plugged in learning collaborations' (McWilliam, 2009). According to Darling-Hammond (1994),

> The way we are going to get more powerful teaching and learning is not through national tests. It's through assessments that are developed by local communities … so that students are working towards much more challenging standards and teachers are learning how to look at their students differently, how to support their learning better.

Drawing on constructivist views of literacy and learning, this action research study explored how the responses to summative assessments through an inquiry-based approach can improve motivation and support the learning of Preliminary HSC English students.

Preparing for the HSC exam

We are concerned that such a narrowing of the English curriculum, coupled with the growing value placed on high-stakes assessments, serves to discourage students from engaging in active inquiry. In this study, we sought to explore how inquiry-based and digitally mediated learning has a place in Year 11 English and can effectively prepare students for the HSC exam at the end of Year 12.

At the time of the study, Peta worked as an English teacher at a K–12 boarding and day school in Sydney, Australia, which included over 1,600 boys from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. While the school has a strong focus on academic achievement, it also prides itself on developing a boy's character. There are many programs designed to cultivate a sense of altruistic leadership, appreciation for the arts, pride in athletic prowess, and spiritual enrichment. The school encourages teachers to engage in action research, take risks, and implement innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

The study was conducted in Peta's Year 11 Preliminary HSC Advanced English class. The Preliminary HSC is the prelude to the final high school year, in which students complete examinations at the end of their senior secondary schooling. All 17 students in the class volunteered to participate in the research. English classes at the K–12 school were streamed according

to current achievement and the participants were considered to have average performance in the subject. Over the nine-week unit, data collection included two surveys, multiple interviews with each student, a teacher reflective journal, and artefacts including student work samples and online blogs, forums, and wikis. Fifteen class periods were video-recorded for later analysis, and five other class periods were observed by multiple educators. Debriefing occurred with professionals from the K–12 school and The University of Sydney who served as external auditors to clarify the interpretation of data and support critical self-reflection as a teacher-researcher.

We used a thematic approach to data analysis and employed multiple cycles of coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Data sources were analysed as they were collected, which allowed themes and relevant subthemes to emerge. For example, under the *motivation* theme, multiple subthemes emerged such as *rite of passage*, *competitive nature*, *deadlines*, *novelty of project* and *collaboration*. As Saldaña (2013) noted, some themes may be refined into subthemes as participants' processes, emotions and values become apparent and the data progresses towards 'the thematic, conceptual and theoretical' (p. 12). This process clarified the emergent themes and assisted with triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The inquiry-based project on *Henry V* and *The Dreamers*

In this project, students analysed Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Jack Davis's *The Dreamers*. The inquiry-based question posed was, 'How do William Shakespeare and Jack Davis shape empowerment and disempowerment in their respective texts?' Using a blended-learning approach, this project was incorporated into the NSW Board of Studies Stage 6 English Curriculum; Module A: Comparative Study of Texts. In their investigation, students examined how, within the historical contexts, values could be projected differently, enabling some to feel empowered while others feel disempowered. The students had a full term to complete the inquiry and present a creative project showing their knowledge and understanding of these concepts.

Agency is a vital part of the inquiry process. Heick (2013, as cited in Chu et al., 2017) asserts that inquiry frameworks need to be grounded on the level of student agency, whereby as they 'advance in their acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills, [they] are allowed increasing freedom in their choice of

research questions, study methods, data collection and analysis processes, and presentation mode' (p. 135). Each student created timelines, set their own activities for classwork and homework, and selected tools from the resources available to complete each stage of the inquiry process. Gannon (2011) argues that both print and digital resources are important, as 'young writers take up these resources not as 'products' like books but textual 'assets' for playing with and generating new textual artefacts' (p. 187). Students' inquiry-based projects were driven by both their uncertainty and their curiosity, as they engaged in self-directed learning (Wilhelm, 2007). Their final creative work included diaries, interviews, documentaries, websites, poems, and speeches. Digital tools facilitated their investigation as well as their production processes, and students used tools like iMovie and iBook to demonstrate technical skills such as programming, video editing, and remixing.

The entire course content was flipped online so that Peta could assume the role of mentor in the classroom while students adopted a self-regulatory style in their approach to learning. The digital platform iLearn, commercially known as Schoolbox, enabled Peta to support self-directed learning by mentoring and guiding students with their own discoveries as they navigated through course content in order to solve problems and devise solutions.

To support students' inquiry process, Peta established a resource-rich digital platform for the students to navigate, investigate, and contribute to as they made discoveries. It included pages, audio files, movie files, wikis, blogs, and forums dedicated to: (1) introducing and explaining inquiry-based learning; (2) Shakespeare's *Henry V*; (3) Jack Davis's *The Dreamers*; (4) how to compare and contrast texts; (5) guides to creating different text types; and (6) explanations of the formative and summative assessments for the unit of work.

Conscious that such fundamental freedom offered to students to govern their own learning, and thus their own use of time in class, may have been initially confronting and overwhelming, Peta asked each learner to select a visual cue that would indicate the phase they were at within their inquiry process. Peta's idea for these visual cues was inspired by de Bono's (1985) concept of thinking hats, but she adapted it for inquiry-based learning. This method encouraged students to plan, monitor, and regulate their thinking processes while developing new knowledge and communicating

their inquiry process to others. Students were asked to wear different-coloured hats in the classroom to indicate their activity or purpose for the day. Students often changed their coloured hats during the lesson as they moved to different phases of inquiry.

The processes of inquiry included:

- Researching – those digging through information wore a green hat.
- Questioning – those who were perplexed or asking questions wore a red hat.
- Reflecting – those who were digesting information wore a blue hat.
- Analysis – those who were deconstructing and exploring a concept more deeply wore a gold hat.
- Illumination, composing, creating – those who were building their solution or generating their findings wore a silver hat.

The five processes of inquiry are not rigid, and they were often revisited and sometimes occurred simultaneously. For instance, as students analysed, they may also have reflected, and as students reflected, they may also have asked questions.

The digital platform offered a number of resources and materials to support students' inquiry process and guide them in each role as a researcher, questioner, reflector, analyst, and illuminator. Ultimately, the flipping of Preliminary HSC Course Content into a collaborative online space enabled Peta to use scheduled class time to both mentor students as they adopted self-directed learning strategies and nurture their development of critical and creative thinking processes in problem-solving.

The creative dispositions enable the inquiry process
Our study uncovered a symbiotic relationship between the processes of inquiry and the creative dispositions. In effect, the creative liberty offered to students activated multiple creative dispositions and actively engaged the students with inquiry. Moreover, inquiry-based learning cultivates the creative capacity of students. It became clear that the participants in this study had different favoured dispositions: some were more naturally collaborative, while others were more inquisitive. Notably, it was the stronger or more prevailing creative disposition that engaged the students with their inquiry project and in turn propelled the development of their creative thinking skills.

Charlie (all names are pseudonyms) was inquisitive with his study, and he reflected how his inquiry

was driven by 'how much I wanted to know'. Frank preferred collaboration, and he suggested that learning 'independently can sometimes be a bit hard, but on a class level can be too big. Small groups allow the discussion of ideas'. Interestingly, it was the more predominant creative disposition of the student that served as the way *into* the processes of inquiry.

The self-regulatory nature of inquiry-based approaches to learning enables the creative dispositions to emerge organically. In this study we observed how, through the processes of inquiry, the emergence of one creative disposition fostered a simultaneous development of the other four core dispositions of the creative mind. For example, Charlie was curious about course content and course concepts. He preferred to work independently and grappled with disciplining his focus to problem-solve. At one point, he reflected, 'It's also really hard to get used to that freedom … it is hard to pick a direction to take'. However, through engaging in inquiry-based learning, Charlie developed discipline as his inquisitive nature drove his desire to create a solution that far exceeded the expectations of students in the Preliminary HSC course.

Charlie's final project, an hour-long presentation using integrated technologies through Prezi, illustrated the depth of his investigation. Through carefully and critically analysing the language of the plays, he examined: (1) the role of women in empowering male leaders; (2) the role of friends in shaping the empowerment of male leaders; and (3) the relationships of leaders with children as symbols of empowerment. He shared, 'Being creative allows me to restrict myself in ways that I choose'. Through inquiry-based learning, Charlie developed the discipline to curb his curious nature in order to effectively and efficiently solve problems.

Frank, who is collaborative in nature, reflected in his use of the plural 'we' and 'us' that he identifies learning as a collective experience. He said, 'I learned that we can use technology to help us express our thoughts, as seen with several students project, who did things like websites, iMovie and virtual books on iPad'. Frank is a social student who was aware of other students' progress with their projects. He was challenged by the discipline required for solitary research, and shared, 'At some stages, it was difficult getting myself to push through with it and getting motivated to work on it'.

Frank was engaged by the collaborative experience and developed persistence and discipline through the inquiry-based approach to learning. He reflected, 'After

getting started on it, and thinking out how I am going to set it out and what I was going to write about, it became much easier to work on it'. In fact, Frank came to value the independent experience of being inquisitive and imaginative as he constructed his own solution to the inquiry question. He stated, 'When we are continuing on with our own project, we can tell the teacher the points we find interesting, and if the teacher believes it to be debatable, the teacher can present it to the whole class to gather various ideas and opinions on it'. Though Frank still valued the collaborative experience, the inquiry process encouraged him to develop the other four core dispositions of the creative mind.

There is an interdependent relationship between being creative and engaging in inquiry. Notably, it was the student's favoured creative disposition that initially engaged them in inquiry. When one creative disposition is ignited within a student, a growth in all five is naturally fostered through the inquiry-based approach to learning. We argue that English teachers who design tasks that offer creative liberty nurture deep-learning experiences for their students.

The relationship between inquiry-based learning and the processes of creativity

By researching, questioning, reflecting, analysing and composing, students developed their creative skills. Importantly, students who were given the opportunity to be self-regulating and who were empowered with finding a solution to an inquiry question were engaged in critical and creative thinking. In other words, an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning motivates the development of students' creative capacity. Gresham (2014) identified a number of ways that students express this creative capacity within the English classroom, including:

- to grapple, wrestle, and develop grit.
- to collaborate, cooperate, and play.
- to be absorbed, immersed, and to experience a sense of flow.
- to re-create, re-invent, and re-envision.
- to escape and experience the unreal.
- to have elevated capacities for expression.
- to have confidence, feel pride, and fulfilment.

Students developed grit for learning as they wrestled with unique problems and challenges. For instance, Henry was confronted by the freedom of personalised learning experiences through inquiry-based learning. He said, 'The challenge is plunging into the unknown as I have never done anything like that before'. Kevin

agreed that there is an element of apprehension with inquiry-based approaches and having creative freedom, and remarked, 'What I thought about the inquiry process … the whole idea was quite scary – to do my own thing'. Indeed, at the outset many students wanted the teacher to resume the role of directing their ideas and determining their schedules. Ben shared, 'What has been challenging for me was when I started I had no clue where to go. It's hard to get a grip and start. But when you start you get the guts of it and it's a lot easier and you get direction and purpose on where to go'.

The students' reflections on tackling the challenges of inquiry shows how the classroom evolved into a place of dynamic student-driven activity. The self-directed and self-regulatory nature of inquiry-based approaches to learning permitted students to take risks, and overcome challenges as they wrestled with researching, questioning, reflecting, analysing and composing. As Nathan stated, 'I find I can always step out of my comfort zone when I express myself creatively'. There was a self-realisation and developing maturity in confronting intellectual challenges and understanding their own processes for learning.

Henry's reflection captured how inquiry-based approaches to learning develop a student's grit and confidence:

> In the initial stages of the project I was very sceptical about what it would involve. I honestly never saw myself at the stage I am now. And I was very anxious about the weeks ahead. I based my timeline on what I thought I could achieve in the period of time given and looking back now I see my project is very different to what I thought it would originally turn out to be.

The students developed pride as they progressed with the inquiry and met their self-imposed deadlines. They realised that the enjoyment of learning comes at a price and they were determined to *pay it*.

In one lesson, a colleague from a different teaching discipline observed how the inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning was unfolding in the flipped English classroom. In particular, he was interested in how the digital platform facilitated their inquiry. More than a third of the class indicated that the most useful online tools had collaborative features. In particular, students found each other to be a source of inspiration in broadening and deepening their understanding of the concepts studied. Both Ben and John were explicit in suggesting, 'The forums were most useful. These provided a space for students to pose questions or make

statements for others to comment upon'. Consequently, it can be surmised that young adults can productively and effectively use online interactions to share work for the purposes of collaboration and critique.

Conclusion

English teachers who adopt inquiry-based approaches in the classroom shift their focus from teaching content to equipping students with an appreciation and understanding of how to learn. Students initially found the coloured hats to be a novelty; however, they served as meaningful signifiers. Firstly, the hats ensured that students entered the classroom with a clear sense of purpose. Secondly, the hats enabled students to see who else was working in the same phase of inquiry at any time. Many students commented that they had 'started to think in hats' in other subject areas. Ben commented that he had become aware that he was working more effectively in other subject areas. He explained, 'I think that the method you go about things is important because you have learnt how to inquire and how to start from the bottom'.

Students were exceedingly proud of their sense of achievement in having solved the inquiry question and presented their knowledge and understanding with creative liberty. Gresham (2014) argues that fostering creativity in classroom tasks bolsters students' confidence and pride. Nathan reflected on the processes of being creative: 'It feels that you can express your ideas and be proud of it when other students look at your achievement. Good ideas shine through with [creative compositions] in a way they do not to the same extent in essays'. The inquiry-based approach to learning nurtured the students in developing skills in researching, questioning, reflecting and analysing. At different times, and throughout the process of inquiry, students were challenged to be disciplined, persistent, imaginative, inquisitive, and collaborative in order to problem-solve. This action research project shows how inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning are essential in developing students' creative capacity.

> I will let you dream – dream on old friend
> Of a child and a man in September,
> Of hills and stars and the river's bend;
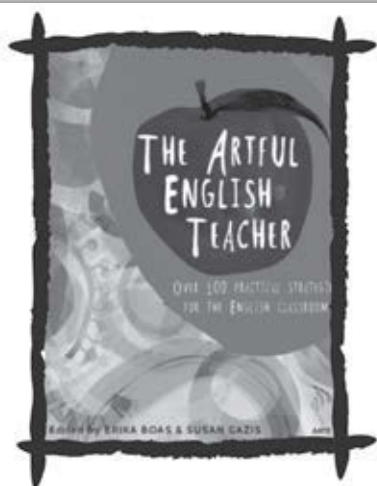> Alas, that is all to remember. – Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*

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