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How Creativity is Oppressed through Traditional Education

Abstract

Purpose: Creativity has been positioned as a critical workplace competence, especially in societies in which conditions are rapidly changing. The fact that traditional educational processes oppress creativity is theoretically important. The purpose of the present paper is to theoretically map the process of teacher-directed learning and how the process oppresses creativity. **Design/methodology/approach:** A theoretical paper in which a conclusion is drawn that there is a primary and secondary process of creativity oppression with traditional teacher-directed learning. **Findings:** It is proposed in the present paper that the primary process of creativity oppression is that the pathway to a "high achieving pass" is for learners to make knowledge constructions that mirror that of the educator (rewarding non-creative learning outcomes). A secondary, silent, and powerful, mechanism of creativity oppression is where the learner does not "buy in" with the educator to accept their knowledge inculcation. The student here may indeed produce a creative learning outcome from the process, but they are likely to be judged for that work as a "low achieving pass" or a fail. **Originality:** The paper seeks to identify the mechanism in which creativity oppression may accumulate over time until learner creativity is quashed.

Key words

Traditional teaching and learning; creativity; behaviourism; teacher-directed learning; power; control

1. Introduction

Imagine the following formal schooling scenario: The teacher stands in front of a class of learners and provides instructions about (a) what is to be learned (b) how learners should learn and (c) how learning outcomes will be assessed. Here we have a traditional model of education in which the teacher is responsible for *controlling* the direction of the learning means and objectives: teacher-directed learning—the "traditional" teacher-directed form of pedagogy. The purpose of the present paper is to highlight the point that traditional teacher-directed education oppresses creativity—original ideas that learners generate have *no* or *low* value.

The fact that traditional educational processes oppress creativity is theoretically important, especially in societies in which conditions are rapidly changing. In such conditions, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Enriquez and Gargiulo, 2022) from an economic perspective creativity has been positioned as a critical workplace competence (European Commission, 2015; Shumylo *et al.,* 2022; OECD, 2021). I should highlight the point here that generating creative solutions is important in many professional fields, such as in medicine, teaching, informatics, business, engineering, entrepreneurship, etcetera (e.g. Morris and König, 2021; Davis, 2012; Ma *et al.,* 2018; OECD, 2021).

Creativity involves generating solutions that are novel and have utility (Mishra *et al.,* 2013; Perry and Collier, 2018). In the context of education, Robinson and Aronica (2009) define creativity as "the process of having original ideas that have value" (p. 67). Indeed, the present paper highlights the point that traditional teacher-directed education may follow an educational model where original ideas are not valued.

Scholars agree that every learner has the potential to be creative, but that concomitantly educational environments may strongly influence upon the creative potential of learners (e.g. Giroux and Schmidt, 2005; Ma *et al.,* 2018). On this point, it has been said that education might

act to quash a learner's creative potential when they are exposed to environments that do not inspire creative growth (cf. Robinson and Aronica, 2009). This theoretical paper is about exactly this—it positions traditional teacher-directed learning as oppressive in terms of creativity.

In this respect many scholars have written passionately about the ills of traditional teacher-directed education forms (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1963; Freire, 1970; Knowles *et al.,* 2020). However, it was perhaps Freire (1970) who highlighted the point that traditional educational—knowledge and skill inculcation is oppressing and even represents a process of "dehumanization" (p. 28). Freire named this process the "banking" concept: where the teachers job is to fill the learners heads with pre-defined knowledge and skill; and the more that the teacher is able to successfully fill the heads of children (or adults) the better a teacher she or he is.

Although there is certainly evidence of a shift away from teacher-directed pedagogies in some formal child and adult educational, this is not happening in all contexts (cf. Morris and Rohs, 2021a, b). I am writing this thesis because traditional teacher-directed pedagogies are still prevailing, or even dominant in some formal educational settings. For instance, from the context for which I am writing—England—I am passionately devastated to report that there appears to be a movement, to some extent, back toward more traditional pedagogies of teacher-directed learning in childhood formal schooling (Ball, 2021). Indeed, worse still, Reay (2017) states that concomitantly in England there has been a trend toward more segregation of disadvantaged children in certain schools, where—in order to close the "attainment gap"—pedagogies in such schools may fall even further toward "teaching to the test": the teacher gains an even further grip on control of directing the process of learning in terms of means and objectives. According to the thesis of this present report such realities would subsequence in oppressing children in terms of creativity (and perhaps other competencies, which are outside the scope of this paper).

Traditional teacher-directed learning is not limited to childhood schooling. For instance, the study from Nasri (2017) investigated Malaysian Higher Education teachers' (N=30) perspectives on teacher-directed learning. In this study, she concluded many educators were hesitant to move away from teacher-directed learning, which included their traditional roles as a teacher as an authority figure and knowledge expert.

In this regard, it is noteworthy to consider the interplay between the differential contextual factors that contribute toward promoting or discouraging teacher-directed learning (Morris, 2018; Merriam *et al.,* 2021; Mocker and Spear, 1982; Singh and Chaudhary, 2022). In this respect, Pilling-Cormick (1996) classified contextual factors as: social constraints, educator characteristics, and environmental conditions. Comparably, Cross (1981) classified two types of external contextual factors as situational barriers (related to learner's immediate learning environment) and institutional barriers (barriers created by institutional practices and policies). Then, the purpose of the present paper is to highlight a very important point to policy makers, governments and other stakeholders of the like: that traditional teacher-directed education oppresses creativity—through the educational process, original ideas that learners generate may have *little* or *no* value.

2. Teacher-directed learning and creativity

In order to substantiate the thesis of this paper, Figure 1 provides a mapping of a teacher-directed learning process. The purpose of the present section is to explain Figure 1 in detail to map theoretically a traditional teacher-directed education process and how it may oppresses learner creativity. Perhaps the most salient features of teacher-directed learning processes are that: the educator determines the means and objectives of learning; the educator retains responsibility for control of directing (a) what knowledge and/or skill is to be learned—what learner meaning should be made (b) the means of learning and (c) the assessment of learning.
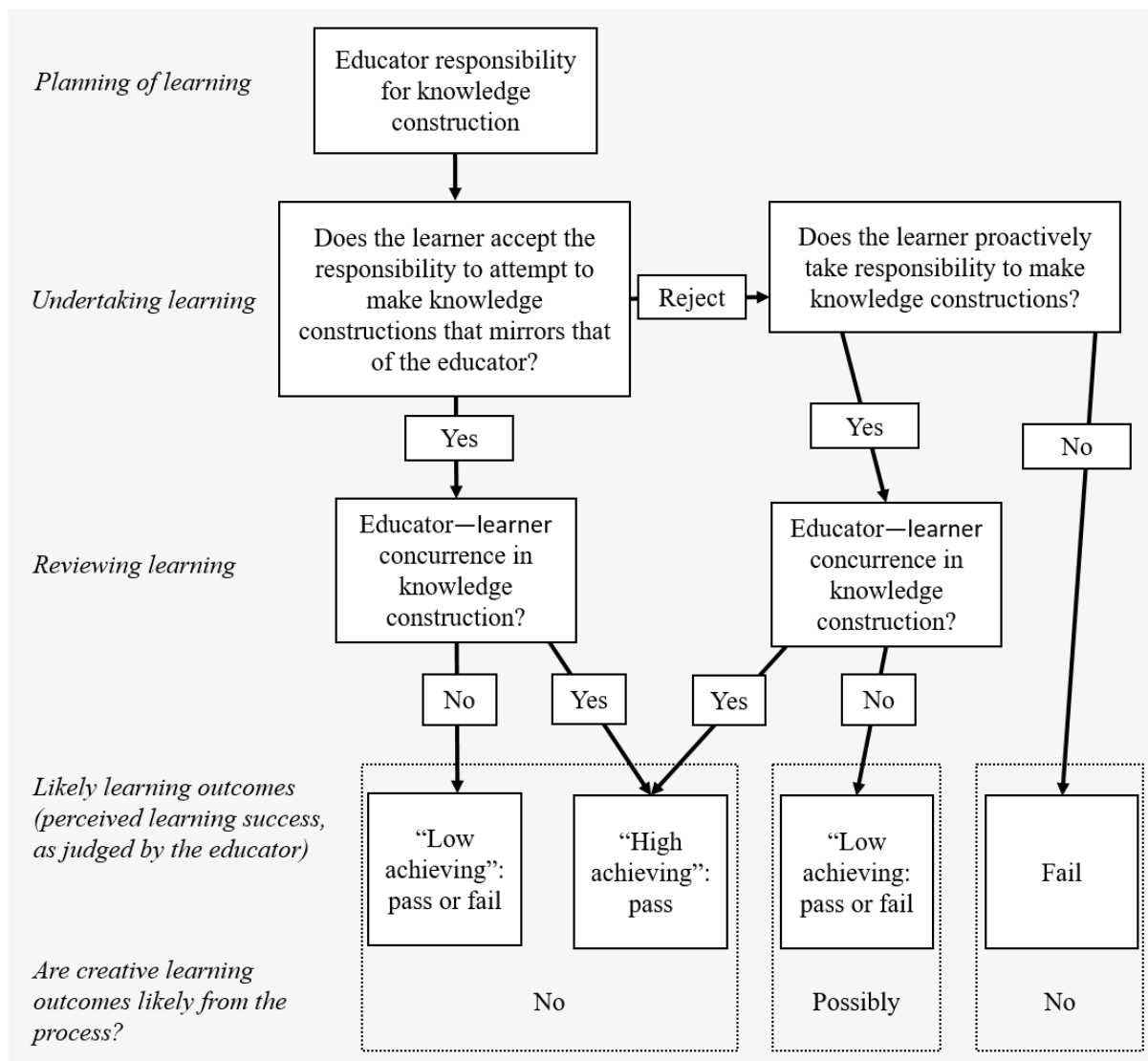
Figure 1. Mapping of a teacher-directed learning process

Morris (2019) made the observation that the teacher-directed learning process involves moving back and forth between "instruction" and "performance"—the Reinforcing Model of Modes of Learning in which "An educational curriculum may be systematically arranged in a stepwise fashion so that learners progressively target more difficult learning objectives" (p. 59). Concomitantly, perhaps most importantly, in such a process the learning outcomes are predefined: they are uniform for all learners. Specifically, then, because learning objectives are intended to be uniform for all learners creative learning outcomes are *not* intended.

2.1. Educator responsibility for knowledge construction

With teacher-directed learning, learning outcomes are normally made explicit by the teacher at the beginning of the learning process and the accomplishment of which defines the perceived learning success, as judged by the educator (cf. Figure 1; also Morris, 2019; Houle, 1980). Because learning objectives are intended to be uniform rather individually differentiated teacher-directed learning is therefore *not* underwritten by a humanistic perspective nor constructivist epistemology (cf. Morris, 2019; Merriam, 2018), but rather behaviourist learning assumptions—characterized by predictable, measurable, and pre-definable learning outcomes for all learners (cf. Aubrey and Riley, 2022; Murtonen *et al.,* 2017; Skinner, 1984).

Educator responsibility for knowledge construction forms the basis for instruction in which "the teacher (a person, a book, or any other source) already knows or is designed to convey everything that the student will learn" (Houle, 1980, p. 32). It is notable here that in teacher-directed learning the teacher will be responsible for relaying the knowledge or skill that is to be taught; and this knowledge and skill may be from a pre-defined *centralised* curricular (cf. Ball, 2021), which leads to specialised knowledge and skill—"high classification"—in each subject (cf. Bernstein, 1990).

2.2. Does the learner accept the responsibility to attempt to make knowledge constructions that mirror that of the educator?

The teacher-directed learning process benefits from learners acting meekly and uncritically rather than actively or judgmentally (Morris, 2019, 2021; Dewey, 1916/2013). In this process the student may (and is encouraged to) implicitly and/or explicitly make the judgement to accept learner responsibility to attempt to make knowledge constructions that mirror that of the educator. But to do this means the learner accepting a learner position not of humility but rather a hierarchical teacher-learner *power* dynamic relationship in which the learner accepts a meek

and obedient positioning to take on board, to *try to learn,* in an uncritical fashion, the information that is presented to them.

In this respect, learner self-regulatory processes are important. Self-regulation, in this respect, concerns the process of learners regulating motivational, affective, cognitive, and social contextual learning aspects (Day *et al.,* 2022; Pintrich, 2004; Zimmerman, 1990). Self-regulatory processes for teacher-directed learning may include the learner skills of acting meekly, accepting instruction, collecting and organizing information, understanding information as intended by the instructor, and remembering the information.

Thus, in order for an educator to successfully operationalize teacher-directed learning, information is commonly communicated as "correct", irrespective of its context (origin or application context are not considered): in other words the information is decontextualized (Langer, 2017; Maithreyi *et al.,* 2022). This may act to, deliberately or not, disable learners from *thinking critically* about the correctness or fittingness of information in differential contexts. Dewey (1889/2010) explained this quite clearly: "Facts are torn away from their original place in experience and rearranged with reference to some general principle" (p. 68). Moreover, it is a process that does not often include details of the sociocultural and historical roots of the knowledge (e.g. Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1993; Radović *et al.,* 2022; Vygotsky, 1978).

The consequence of this is multiple. Mezirow (1991, p. 4) for instance outlines that meaning schemes may cultivate as "uncritically assimilated habits of expectations". Meaning schemes constitute "specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgements, and feelings" (ibid, p. 5) that determine one's unique frames of reference, or meaning perspectives, through which an interpretation of experience is construed. On this, Langer (2017) argues that a premium is placed on absolute decontextualized "truths": students may learn solutions to problems, but then habitually apply these solutions mindlessly in other contexts in which the solutions are not

quite fitting (cf. also Morris, 2020; Scott, 2018). Put simply, learners will become more rigid in their thinking and less adaptable. This is important, and a problem, given that Ward and colleagues (2018) place adaptive skill as the conditio sine qua non of expertise.

2.3. Educator—learner concurrence in knowledge construction?

Ultimately the educator is assuming a goal of uniform knowledge and skill inculcation. In this process, positive or negative learner feedback is used to assist the effectiveness of the inculcation process: the educator assumes an active role to "assist or to shape growth" (Bruner, 1966, p. 1). Actually, at this point, formative assessment may quash creative ideas, prior to them being taken forward to the final summative assessment. Furthermore, if one or more student strays away from the behaviour that is suitable and enabling of the process—i.e. the student avoids being meek, docile, obedient, but is rather judgementally or critical about the instruction, or attempts to be creative or "smart" in any way then this is a signal for *punishment* or subject to "behaviour management" techniques (cf. Dewey, 1916/2013; Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970).

Moreover, Foucault's theory of panopticism regards how power in exercised to docile bodies/subjects is fully relevant to a teacher-directed learning process: where schools are viewed as panoptic spaces. Panopticism highlights how constant surveillance impacts upon the behaviour of those being watched over time; the concept was initially derived from an architectural design from Jeremy Bentham for a prison in which all of the inmates could be constantly monitored (Gallagher, 2010). Theoretically, knowledge of, or perception of, being watched all of the time ultimately leads to self-surveillance: a conscious-building device (Foucault, 1977). On this Foucault (1977, p. 187) explained "It is in the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection".

For example, an empirical ethnographic study from Gallagher (2010) employed fieldwork in a Scottish primary school over a seven month period with one class of 28 learners from non-disadvantaged backgrounds concluded that the *embodied docility* in the children was particularly striking. Surveillance and monitoring were found to be a common feature of everyday life in the school. He found also that alongside the teacher the children sometimes took up the role of the surveyor. What we will describe in the forthcoming section is that the process of such surveillance and monitoring within a teacher-directed learning process of knowledge and skill inculcation is to oppress creative learning outcomes; and together these learned and practiced self-regulatory and panoptic monitoring processes therefore act to strengthen the oppression of learner creativity.

2.4. Likely learning outcomes—are creative learning outcomes likely from the process?

In short—no. Creative learning outcomes are not likely from a traditional teacher-directed learning process: this is not the goal. In returning to Figure 1, it is clear to observe that the educational process starts with educator responsibility for knowledge construction (the learning goals or objectives). Actually, the only pathway to a "high achieving pass" is for learners to make knowledge constructions that mirror that of the educator (with or without "buying into" the inculcation process [note here, according to behaviourist principles, buying in will become more commonplace over time, as the student learns that this is the easiest way to achieve]). In such a circumstance the educator has successfully enacted the laws of behaviourism: the educator has shaped learning in a certain direction through the positive feedback: toward the predictable, measurable, and pre-definable learning outcome(s) (cf. Aubrey and Riley, 2022; Bruner, 1966; Murtonen, Gruber, & Lehtinen, 2017). And, according to these behaviourist learning principles, the more such positive reinforcement occurs overtime to more a student is likely to perform that behaviour. I.e. over time the student will learn become accustomed to

being uncritical in judgement, in meek and obedient in behaviour, and *avoid* creativity at all costs. In sum, this is the primary process of creativity oppression.

All other outcomes possibilities (cf. Figure 1) for the student are either an outcome of a "low achieving" pass or a fail. These are negative reinforcements that will tend the student away from repeating the action (process of learning) again (Bruner, 1966). Again, according to these behaviourist learning principles, the more such negative reinforcement occurs overtime the less likely a student will repeat that behaviour. In the scenario that the learner does not "buy in" with the educator to accept their knowledge inculcation and their resultant learning outcomes is not in concordance with that of the educator, the student will achieve a "low achieving pass" or a fail. However in this circumstance it is possible that the student may have indeed (in judgement of the student or another person, but not the educator) produced a creative learning outcome from the process. Indeed then if the student has produced a creative learning outcome from the process, but then they are judged for that work as a "low achieving pass" or a fail, then this is a secondary, silent, and powerful, mechanism of creativity oppression. Importantly, creativity oppression may accumulate over time until creativity is quashed (cf. Robinson and Aronica, 2009).

Conclusion

The purpose of the present paper is to highlight the point that we can say objectively: that traditional teacher-directed education oppresses creativity—original ideas that learners generate have no or low value. The fact that traditional educational processes oppress creativity is theoretically important. Particularly as creativity has been positioned as a critical workplace competence, especially in societies in which conditions are rapidly changing.

The discussion in this present paper highlights the point that is a primary and secondary process of creativity oppression with teacher-directed learning. The primary process of creativity

oppression is where learners make knowledge constructions that mirror that of the educator—positively reinforcing knowledge and skill inculcation of non-creative learning outcomes.

A secondary, silent, and powerful, mechanism of creativity oppression is where the learner does not "buy in" with the educator to accept their knowledge inculcation. The student here may indeed produce a creative learning outcome from the process, but they are likely to be judged for that work as a "low achieving pass" or a fail—negative reinforcement for any knowledge and skill gained that falls against the intended inculcation process: a secondary, silent, and powerful, mechanism of creativity oppression.

It is discussed that creativity oppression may accumulate over time until learner creativity is quashed. This is a very important consideration for educational policy makers, governments, and other stakeholders. Each incidence of a traditional teacher-directed pedagogy in which learning outcomes are pre-defined is oppressive. The more teacher-directed pedagogy the more oppressive the education.

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