

METAMORPHOSIS

Creativity, connectedness, embodiment and affect

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Presentation summary

A fundamental aim of this international symposium is to explore ways in which music and art can function as cultural bridges. This presentation aims to bring this issue to a more ‘local’ level, and speak about the power of music-movement experiences to break down barriers within the self and between the self and others. Informed by literature on embodied experience in art-based therapy and dance-movement (Merényi, 2004; Meekums, 2002, 2008; Vermes, 2007), the presentation will explore how somatic and affect-based experiences linked to music ground our connectedness to ourselves and to the social and physical world around us.

The presentation will discuss my emergent research, which builds on observations of music-appreciation sessions developed for young children by a prominent Hungarian music educator, Klara Kokas (1999). Inspired by music, children’s spontaneous movement often signals some sort of a *metamorphosis* (transformation involving the child and the surrounding world) and often results in the emergence of *collective* images, stories or narratives (Kokas, 1999). My current work aims to investigate the affective and physical dimensions of children’s engagement with music, and the ways in which these somatic and affective experiences resource and channel their imagination. Also, the research aims to examine ways in which musical experiences facilitate creative other-orientation through spontaneously coordinated, shared movement.

Thus, my aim is to examine the non-language-based dimensions of children’s creative other-orientation and collective imagination. Indeed, we can teach children to talk and think together, with undeniable educational benefits. We can also guide them in developing conscious use of specific thinking strategies (e.g. divergent, convergent, or possibility thinking) to facilitate a creative mindset (Craft, 2005). But can we also encourage them to learn and create together through collective experiences of being and becoming? This is an important, topical issue both for creativity research and general educational inquiry.

The presenter

I am an academic, working in the field of psychology of education. My main research focuses on children’s *collective* creativity (e.g. shared creative writing, collaborative creative design or shared music-appreciation sessions). My work so far has drawn attention to the affectively constituted dimensions (such as intuition, sensing, or shared chain of associations) of creative collaboration. My analysis of children’s collaborative discourse in creative tasks (e.g. creative text composition) has shown that children often use strategies that go beyond logic, engaging in collective, affectively-constituted idea-generation and reflection. In my current work I aim to explore the affective and embodied dimensions of collective creativity further, in the context of music-based movement sessions for young children.

Background to presentation

The research discussed in this presentation aims to investigate the links between embodied, affectively-constituted experience, imagination and creative connection, tying the examination to a unique pedagogical method for young children centring on music and movement.

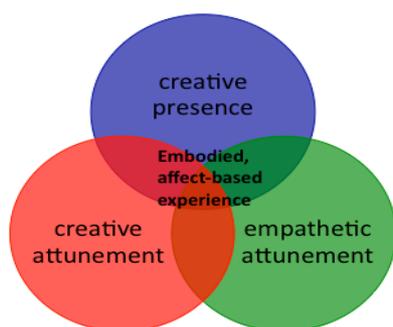
Embodied, affectively-constituted experience

In *Actual minds possible worlds*, Bruner (1986) reminds us that the separation and classification of cognition and emotion as ‘two forms of knowing’ can be traced back to the ancient theological debates around faith and reason. However, it is only in the period of Enlightenment that the emergent positivist emphasis on detachment and rationality became the institutionalised model of scientific inquiry, clearly linked to the values and social practices of the modern secular state (Burman, 1998). Thus, reason and logical thinking have become to be seen as the ultimate achievement of the human mind, not only in *what* we research but also *how* we define research (Donaldson, 1996). Crucially, such undue devaluing of emotions and contemporaneous separation of the mind from the body – approaching the latter simply as a convenient house for cognition to reside in – have been challenged in recent decades. Contemporary work reminds us of the dangers of placing “conceptual boundaries between thought, action and emotion as ‘regions of the mind’ then later being forced to construct conceptual bridges to connect what should never have been put asunder” (Bruner, 1986, p.106).

An important conceptual shift is the current scientific revaluing of the role of emotion in psychological functioning. Recent neuropsychological studies highlight the interdependence of cognition and emotion, indicating the need for a reconsideration of the appropriate role of emotion in the study of cognition (Phelps, 2005). Similarly, recent educational conceptualisations of cognition and emotion (e.g. by Bruner, 1986 or Donaldson, 1996) reject the traditional value-laden dichotomy, challenging the overemphasis on logical and *systematic thought* over *intuitive thought*. Significantly, these models describe emotion and reason as two equally important *aspects* of cognition.

Another significant shift in scientific inquiry is the increasing pervasiveness of the concept of *embodiment*. The central premise of the *embodied* approach is that bodily and emotional experiences determine our capacity for reason (Damasio, 1994), our physical interactions with our environment conditioning the way we understand this environment. This turn towards the reconnection of the body and the mind has been grounded in philosophy – notably Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account in *Structure of Behavior* (1947) – and has taken different routes across disciplines, ranging from cognitive science and neuroscience (e.g. Clark, 1997 on embodiment and robotics; Barsalau, 1999 and Wilson, 2002 on embodied cognition theories; Niedenthal, 2007 on embodying emotions, or Damasio, 1994 on embodiment and neuroscience), sociology (e.g. Ignatow, 2007), education (Dadds, 2008), linguistics (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), design research (Wright, Wallace & McCarthy, 2008) or *dance-movement* therapy (Merenyi, 2004; Meekums, 2002). The simultaneously emerging themes centring around the notion of *bodymind* (Incze, 2009) point towards the fundamental role of embodied experience in sense-making, knowing and relating.

Figure 1 – Psychological dimensions of embodied, affect-based experience



The research discussed in the presentation combines the two closely related inquiries, integrating the exploration of how embodied (or somatic) experience and affectively-constituted thinking (e.g. free associations, intuiting and feeling) ground our connectedness to ourselves and to the world around us. The exploration of such links can inform scientific understanding of the embodied and affective nature of *creative presence* (creative disposition connected to bodily and affective experiences), *creative attunement* (Seddon, 2004; denoting imaginative intersubjectivity) and *empathetic connectedness* (Merenyi, 2004; the narrowing of self-other boundaries and development of empathy) – see Figure 1. Whilst the third dimension has become of central concern in art-based therapy (Merenyi, 2004; Meekums, 2002; Vermes, 2007), the outlined research concentrates on the first two dimensions linked to imagination and creativity.

Contemporary issues in creativity research

In our multi-modal *Knowledge Age* (Loveless, 2002) innovative ways of using information, readiness to deal with the unexpected and exploratory, playful, flexible thought are of paramount importance. The societal need for cultivating creative and imaginative thought – and the recognition of the lack of creativity in the curriculum – has in recent years been emphasised by educators and researchers alike, leading to what Craft (2005) refers to as a ‘revolution of creativity in education’. One of the major themes in current educational research concerns the creative development of children, with a growing number of attempts to conceptualise, implement and evaluate strategies to foster creativity in educational contexts (Craft, 2005, 2008). From a socio-cultural perspective, such research needs to consider ways in which social interaction with adults or peers facilitates creative skills and competencies in children. Although recognising the pivotal role of expert guidance in fostering creativity, the focus of the current research is on peer collaboration, a steadily growing field in educational inquiry.

Academic concern about the benefits of peer relations and peer interactions for learning (and the associated conceptualising of peer facilitation effects) is relatively recent. So far, the majority of collaborative learning literature has focused on the conceptualisation and facilitation of productive peer work in maths and sciences (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Thus, we know relatively little about the facilitative effects of peer collaboration in creative tasks, although these activities are often based on paired work in formal educational contexts (Vass & Littleton, 2010). However, in recent years, research on collaborative creativity (Miell & Littleton, 2004) has become of increasing significance, examining the potentials of peer collaboration to facilitate imagination and creativity in children, and conceptualising productive forms of shared creative engagement in

educational contexts. Such shifts in the research agenda are especially timely in an era when education for creativity is gaining ground, yet teachers are reported to have difficulties regarding the teaching of creative techniques to be used in groupwork (Byrne, 1996 in MacDonald & Miell, 2000, Vass, 2004).

Nevertheless, a major obstacle for research on creativity in general, and on children's creative collaborations specifically, is the predominant view of creativity as powered by the intellect (building on conscious, deliberate mental operations), and disembedded from bodily experiences. For instance, taking a more traditional view, Boden (1990) attributes creativity to deliberate explorations and transformations in the mind. In contrast, recognising the salience of emotional engagement, Gelernter (1994) sees the foundation of creativity in inner processes by which unique analogies are formulated as emotion surfaces and binds thoughts in a dream-like associative manner. Sharples (1996) joins these two arguments, and posits that the two types of thinking are both crucial in creative design.

Informed by literature on embodied experience in art-based therapy and dance-movement (Merenyi, 2004; Meekums, 2002, 2008; Vermes, 2007), the research discussed in the presentation expands on Sharples' conceptualisation of the duality of intellect and affect, and draws attention to the bodily dimensions of creativity. A major contribution of this research is therefore the consideration of both the embodied and the affect-based nature of creative work, which is encapsulated in the concept of *creative presence* (creative disposition connected to bodily and affective experiences). The concept was developed to incorporate Sharples' description of creative engagement – idea creation through emotion-driven associative work – but also capture the bodily essence of such processes.

Creative collaborations

Crucially, most of the research on children's collaboration emphasises the need to give children the *intellectual means* to engage in shared work (e.g. Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Problems with the low status of emotions are especially evident when we look at collaborative creativity, where connectedness may be achieved by means that go beyond the realm of logic and explicit reasoning (Vass 2007; Vass, Littleton, Miell & Jones, 2008). Thus, a central task for research on collaborative creativity is to challenge the potential over-emphasis on logic and reason, and the consequent focus on sharing through reasoned dialogue. The study discussed in the presentation aims to respond to this challenge, exploring those facets of creative connection building that go beyond reason: ways in which partners in creative collaborative contexts influence each other and allow themselves to be mutually influenced without recourse to explicit argumentation. In fact, they may not rely on language-based communication at all, but are tied to metacommunication and collective, embodied experiences (Vass 2003; Seddon 2004; Cross 2009; Kokas 1999). Such embodied, affect-based connection building is central in *creative attunement*.

The concept of *creative attunement* is used to describe intensely shared moments in the collaborative music production of adult artists (Seddon, 2004). It has strong links with various attempts to conceptualise and explore the establishment and maintenance of connectedness in creative-improvisative contexts, such as work on *emotional resonance* (Imberty, 2009) or *collective entrainment* (Clayton, 2007). Departing from such focus on adult participants and music production, the aim here is to unpack the nature and value of creative attunement in young children's collective musical experiences linked to active music perception.

The uniqueness of the research discussed in this presentation is that it aims to investigate the non-language-based dimensions of intersubjectivity and collective imagination. Indeed we can teach children to talk and think together, with undeniable educational benefits. We can also guide them in developing conscious use of specific thinking strategies (e.g. divergent, convergent, or possibility thinking) to facilitate a creative mindset (Craft, 2005). But can we also encourage them to learn and create together through collective experiences of being and becoming? This is an important, topical issue both for creativity research and general educational inquiry, demanding attention. As Holzman (2008:115) notes, ‘New ways of seeing...emerge through new ways of being’. There is an urgent need to explore how the intersubjectivity and sharedness of the *figured world* of collaborators (Holland *et al.* 1998, in Moran and John-Steiner 2004) may be constituted via processes that go beyond logic, or emerge through collective, affectively-constituted, embodied experiences.

Embodiment and movement

The centrality of embodied experience has been long established in therapeutic approaches building on movement, which view consciousness, creativity and connectedness with others as rooted in the body. The *bodymind* approach posits that activities focusing on the embodiment of experiences (e.g. through music-based movement) have a special role in establishing connectedness with self and others (Vermes, 2007, Mekhum 2003). The philosophy that grounds academic work on movement-based therapy powerfully captures the links between bodily experiences, affect, imagination and connectedness.

Research context and design

An innovative aspect of the research discussed in the presentation lies in its use of a unique pedagogic model, which lends itself naturally as an *environment* for the exploration of the links between embodied experience, affectively-constituted thinking and creativity. It builds on the Kokas-method, developed by Klara Kokas, a prominent Hungarian music educator and a disciple of Zoltan Kodaly. This method aims to facilitate a deep musical understanding in young children through encouraging spontaneous, improvised body movement inspired by music. In recent years, the educational and therapeutic value of the Kokas-method has gained significant recognition in Hungarian music education and music therapy. Klara Kokas has received the Kossuth-prize for her contribution to music education (the most prestigious cultural award in Hungary), the Apaczai Prize (the highest distinction in Education) and four international prizes in recognition of her achievements in music education and therapy. Crucially, however, the potentials of the Kokas-method to facilitate and foster children’s creativity and imagination have not yet been explored. This research aims to redress this balance, and look at the affordances and constraints of the Kokas-method to facilitate imagination and creativity through orienting children towards the embodied, affective nature of their imaginative experiences. The study examines the links between music, body perceptions and imagination by looking at the ways in which musically inspired movement can facilitate *creative presence* (or bodily imagination). Equally, the study looks at the potentials of the method to foster collective imagination through initiating creative other-orientation or *attunement*.

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