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## *Memory and Creativity: Finding a Place Where a Heart May Swirl*

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### **Abstract:**

This article draws from the fieldwork of my MA thesis, *“For a Seed to be Born”: Exploring the Links between Emotions and Everyday Creativity in Elementary Teachers’ Classrooms in Peru* (Cuculiza, 2017). Informed by collage inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2008) and memory work (Strong-Wilson, 2015), the fieldwork comprised an arts-based workshop in which participants were asked to explore and reflect on the lived experiences that contributed towards the development of their creativity (Averill, 1999; Runco 2010; Richards 2010). In focusing on the data collected from one of the participants, namely Heart Swirl (pseudonym), I attempt to answer the following questions: In what ways do memory and creativity interconnect? What sorts of spaces are conducive to the investigation of memories in the educational field? In what ways can artistic expression assist memory and creativity? In support of a reflective practice, this article highlights the importance of recognizing how spaces—and the emotions we attach to our memories of these spaces—may be “latent” in our present (Van Manen, 2016). Engaging in play through collage inquiry in an emotionally safe workshop can assist educators in the development of their own creativity and in their ability to become conscious of the ways in which their past lived experiences influence their pedagogy.

**Keywords:** art education; creativity; collage inquiry; memory work; autobiography; phenomenology; elementary education; conscious education

## Remembering Creativity

A mong the many creativity theories that exist, some elements are ubiquitous: wide interests, openness, an ability to tolerate ambiguity, originality, authenticity, autonomy, courage (Runco, 2010, pp. 241-246). Creativity may be understood as thoughts and actions that combine originality with meaningfulness (Richards, 2010). For Heart Swirl, the protagonist of the story told in this article, a creative child is one who “solves a situation, working through an experience that can unbalance him”, responding through play to “the vicissitudes of life”. (Interview 1, Heart Swirl).

Teachers’ schooling experiences can heavily influence the way in which they approach creativity. From a sociological point of view, Lortie (1975) has studied how teachers transferred their own schooling experience to their practice while Beghetto (2007) has looked at how teaching involves transferring deep unconscious structural beliefs and assumptions. Memory work might be the most productive way of disentangling these experiences so that we may see clearly what enhances creativity as well as identify barriers that may hold us back as educators. These barriers may be grounded in individual stories, but as we share them with our colleagues, we may find that they resonate with the stories of others, thereby creating circles of trust and understanding. In Chambers’ (1998) words: “Re-membering is self-work: it is the work that must be done on oneself and by oneself, and as such each must come to it on their own. Yet its benefits may be collective” (p. 14). The research conveyed in this article suggests that creating collaborative spaces where practicing teachers and researchers may work together and listen to each other with respect is a powerful way to support a reflective practice and promote the flourishing of an education that nurtures creativity.

The importance of autobiography, reflection and memory work for educators has been well established by curriculum scholars. Madeleine Grumet (2006), for example, has written extensively about the power of autobiography in education, specifically regarding the method of *currere* she helped develop with its main architect, William Pinar (1994), who characterized it as “work(ing) from within” (p. 10). Grumet (2006) explains that *currere* finds appropriate symbols in autobiography as well as theatre, as they are both “forms of self-revelation” (p. 69). She notes the “self” that is revealed is a “slippery construct that slides between our definitions and eludes them” (p. 69).

Curious about the sorts of experiences that nurture creativity and the self, I wanted to explore some of the links I intuited between spaces, memory work, creativity and pedagogy. Subtle connections emerged during the fieldwork I conducted for my master’s thesis, *“For a Seed to be Born”: Exploring the Links Between Emotions and Everyday Creativity in Elementary Teachers’ classrooms in Peru* (Cuculiza, 2017). The study took the form of an arts-based workshop with three primary teachers in Lima, Peru. I will focus on the data collected from one of the three participants, whose pseudonym was Heart Swirl. I share her story in the hope that it will allow us to better understand the need for memory work in education in order to support a creative practice.

I begin my exploration of Heart Swirl's story with a brief explanation of the methodology underpinning the fieldwork. Afterwards, I show how the space created in the workshop made room for Heart Swirl to remember important places from her childhood: the places that continued living in her—acknowledging the latency of pedagogical moments—and the places she wanted to leave behind, and some of the pathways she found useful for exiting them in favor of becoming an even more thoughtful, nourishing educator.

### Methodological Approach

My methodological approach with the teachers involved eliciting memory in a non-linear, intuitive manner: imagining alternative ways of “peeling the layers” from our conscious awareness in order to bring unconscious aspects to light in the service of a more humane and creative (self)—education. The work took its cue from collage inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2008) and memory work (Strong-Wilson, 2015a) and was further informed by Van Manen's (2016) notion of “pedagogical tact”. From Van Manen's (2016) perspective, a phenomenological approach to pedagogy can be described as “distinguishing what is good or right from what is bad or wrong in our ways of acting and interacting with children” (Chapter 1, Section 4, para. 6). As such, pedagogy is grounded in relational ethics, where the adult is sensitive to the particular situation of each child with whom he or she relates. In Levinas' words, an ethical experience is one “wherein you cannot help but to respond with responsibility for the other” (as cited in Van Manen, 2016, Chapter 3, Section 4, para. 3). When we care for a child, our questioning isn't theoretical or abstract; it is very concrete and real. We question ourselves about what the child we care for is feeling, needing, and experiencing. However, how could we even begin imagining what it is like to walk in his or her shoes if we haven't been able to recognize the marks our path has left within our own hearts? The adult has to be able to question his or her own assumptions, look into herself and tolerate doubt. Embracing the possibility of error is what allows us to change, to reframe our worldviews and actions, so that we become better at the task we are invested in. This process is related to being open to experience and tolerating the uncertain; both are characteristics that have been found to be necessary for creativity to flourish in education (Runco, 2010). Let's think for a while about the famous quote attributed to Carl Jung: “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” We cannot teach what we don't know. If we haven't done our own personal memory work, how can we accompany our students to discover their inner being? How can we help them become the best possible versions of themselves?

Memory work, as we know, isn't a simple task. According to Annette Kuhn, “memory work is rather like peeling away the layers of an onion that has no core: each level of analysis, while adding more knowledge, greater understanding, also generates further questions” (as cited in Allnutt, 2011, p. 20). It is an ongoing work in progress, as we ourselves are trying to make “a home for oneself” (Chambers, 1998, p. 14). To do so, we need to make sense of our lived experiences in a complex embroidery that invites us to revisit not only past events, but the relationship we have/had/are willing to have with each of the persons involved in these occasions. As educators, how have the relationships with our caregivers, teachers, and our own schooling experience affected us? How

might these experiences remain latent, continuing to influence our practice? In what circumstances do the latencies of our lived experiences express themselves, and with what intensities? How conscious are we of all of these events?

A psychoanalytical approach to creativity and memory work draws our attention to the sense of self we form through the dialogue we engage in with our caregivers. This usually starts with the mother, but teachers may be the second most important persons who establish meaningful relationships with children from a very young age, through their most important formative years.

A sense of reality is constructed through the ways in which the baby is “mirrored” by her mother. The quality of this dialogue allows us to “feel real” in the world (Cuculiza, 2017, p. 32). The way we are seen entails an active dialogue, where the one who sees— for example, the educator— needs to be able to distinguish her own personal elements from the characteristics of the child who is receiving her gaze. For this, the adult teacher needs to be conscious. If not, she will tend to project her own personal story upon her students, not allowing them to develop as unique human beings, autonomous, free and creative to become whatever they want to be (Freud, 1936/1968; Joyce, 2015).

Connected to the experience of mirroring is the responsibility of caregivers and educators to represent for children a human, flexible and fallible superego (the highest aspect of our psyche that decides what is right from wrong). Anna Freud, who studied children using psychoanalysis, alerted us to the power educators have to free children from mental health problems by paying attention to the messages children internalize. She wrote that adults need to offer the child a real image of human beings, with their weaknesses, and a tolerant attitude towards the instincts, instead of representing a moral code so rigid that it becomes impossible to put into practice (Freud, 1936/1986, pp. 65-66; translation into English by Cuculiza Brunke). As educators, we do this memory work so that we may become healthy and loving representations of what a human being is, nurturing confidence, freedom and creativity in all of our students.

### **The Workshop**

The methodology of the workshop was arts-informed, consisting of systematic use of an artistic process through the creation of symbolic artifacts or images. Arts-informed methods have been found to be very useful as participatory tools (Tao, 2009). Drawings and collage inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010), as central to the study, were put into practice. Before the first workshop, individual interviews were conducted with the participants. By way of preparation for the interview, participants were asked to bring a drawing in response to the prompt: “A memory that influenced my emotional wellbeing and creativity”. Each participant was also invited to create a personal symbol to identify themselves as well as to create a pseudonym. At the beginning of each workshop session, we engaged in collaborative reflection in the form of circle time. Strong-Wilson (2015b), has written about the power of teachers reflecting in circles: “When we have more time to think and talk about what we are thinking, we can become ‘more wise and courageous actors in the world (Wheatley, 2002, p. 9)’” (Strong-Wilson, 2015b, p. 103). This opening circle time was necessary to create a safe

space, establish trust between participants and researcher, and allow for reflection on the previous session.

Each session focused on a theme related to the subject of inquiry. Prompts were given to incite reflection. Participants were asked to respond to each prompt creating a collage/drawing/artifact of their choosing, and then share their reflections. This article centres on the first two sessions. The first workshop session focused on exploring notions that the participants held around emotions in their daily practice. The theme of the second session was creativity in relation to childhood memories as well as ideas that each participant had about the creative teaching process.

After the workshops, individual interviews were also carried out with each participant in order to investigate in what ways (if any) the conscious working-through of emotions, creativity and the intersections between them using artistic methods, shed light on some aspects of their personal stories in relation to their practice. Participants were also invited to share their impressions, reflections and suggestions about the experience and subject of inquiry.

### **Finding a Place Where a Heart May Swirl**

Heart Swirl (pseudonym) was head of a department of elementary education in Tanganana School (pseudonym) in Lima, Peru. Because of her administrative duties, she no longer taught regularly. Nevertheless, she continued engaging with children through her play workshops, based on the famous French educator's Bernard Aucouturier's Psychomotor Practice methodology, a practice which is based in play. Learning Aucouturier's method (2007) represented a huge turning point in Heart Swirl's experience in relation to her own emotions and creativity. Reconnecting with play allowed her to reconnect with the beginning of her own story, as we see in the following account.

Heart Swirl didn't come up with a pseudonym<sup>1</sup>. She did, however, create the symbol that represented her. The symbol consisted of an orange heart, circumscribed by a spiral (the whirlpool). She said that the workshop had made her think about how aggressive emotions generated a great deal of stress in her. She recalled trying to manage her anguish by "shutting down" aggressiveness in her classroom. Her fear towards aggression went on until she re-connected with play through Aucouturier's (2007) practice, about which more will be said shortly.

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<sup>1</sup> During the workshop, Heart Swirl didn't create a pseudonym for herself. She said she needed more time to think about it. During the last interview, she said she didn't mind about the pseudonym and that her symbol was most important for her. Unfortunately, Heart Swirl passed away shortly after concluding the study. I wanted to remain as faithful as possible to her wishes, so I decided to call her "Heart Swirl", because it was the description of the symbol she felt truly represented her.



Figure 1. Heart Swirl's symbol (created by herself).

Heart Swirl's initial memories in relation to her creativity were grounded in place, and specifically in a safe space that remained in her recollections: the jungle of Eastern Peru.



Figure 2. Heart Swirl's drawing as preparation for Interview 1 in response to the prompt: "A memory that influenced my emotional wellbeing and creativity".

Heart Swirl drew a small picture that represented her earliest childhood memories of living with her parents and the local community in the jungle in San Martin. Her father was a railroad engineer, and they had to move from the capital city, Lima, to the jungle when she was only three months old. Looking back, she considered that the space of the jungle—and the relationship she and her family had established with the local community—shaped her understanding of the world and planted the seeds of curiosity for learning methodologies that connected with the body, especially through play.

"We are always emplaced; there is no body without its place in the world, no matter what that place is. Situating our subjectivities means acknowledging our placed identities and the fact that the spaces we move through are never neutral" (Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pitthouse, & Allnutt, 2011, p. 3).

Places are never neutral because they may already be “charged” (historically charged, socially charged, emotionally charged).

In Heart Swirl’s experience and recollections, living in the jungle encouraged her to develop trust towards others and a sense of security in herself. This trust was constructed on the confidence she felt her mother had in the local community. She remembered:

I feel that in the jungle she [her mother] could let me be in a trusting place, in a safe place. When we came back to Lima, she kept us inside our grannie’s house, because it was unsafe...in the jungle it wasn’t like that. There was trust, support. There were a lot of people around her... the local population. They had children and my mother trusted them...my life was more free. I feel that living like that, between children, taught me to resolve things as they appear...I always have this confidence that everything is going to be all right. (Interview 1, Heart Swirl)

Susan Allnutt (2011), drawing on Bachelard’s notions about the nature of memories, wrote: “the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (as cited in Allnutt, 2011, p. 17). Just as the jungle memories made Heart Swirl feel secure and free, she remembered feeling something very different when she came back to Lima, the capital of Peru. Moving from the jungle to the city was an emotional shock to her. She was very small, only five years old, but she remembered asking her grandmother, “Granny, why is your house like a stick?” She stated: “I felt everything was so gray and horrible.”

In this way, place had assumed both a secure emotional memory and an insecure one. In Heart Swirl’s story and representations, two types of spaces appear: one filled with color; the other quite gray; one with a lot of movement; the other stiff as a box. The dialogue between these spaces would accompany Heart Swirl throughout her whole life, as she adapted to the gray city, becoming a “perfect” child and then found her freedom of thought and creativity when she reconnected with play as an adult.

As seen, our memories are anchored in place; but place can also be understood in a different way. Tim Cresswell invites us to consider place as an event: “Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice . . . place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence” (as cited in Allnutt, 2011, p. 29). I find that this perspective resonates with the intentional creation of spaces dedicated to memory work, emotional wellbeing and creativity through the workshops I engaged in with Heart Swirl and the other participants during this fieldwork. The acknowledgment of the importance of place and memory work is not enough *per se* to incite transformation or change, especially if we are trying to generate change in the educational field. We need to *make* place overcome the notions we have about the places where we have been or the places where we may still remain. And we also need to *make* place to find ways of walking out of the places we no longer want to inhabit.

The exercise of conscious remembering while producing something artistic, such as a drawing or a collage, helped participants to revisit the emotions and experiences attached to particular moments in their lives. As we continued to dig into childhood memories, allowing our hearts and

minds to wander and move freely through memories and then sharing the experience with our colleagues, cracks and openings emerged, and with them, the possibility of re-creating and/or understanding in a deeper—or just different—sense our lived experiences.

### **Places Where We Still Remain**

There are places we have exited physically many years ago, which nevertheless remain inside of ourselves . . . or where we remain psychologically. Many times, these places are related to strong childhood emotional memories. As educators, the emotions our actions with children may generate—especially unresolved, complicated ones—may leave a mark that can go on throughout the child’s life and beyond.

Van Manen (2016) refers to pedagogical tact as the intuitive element present in teaching, which involves improvisational actions and a capacity to discern “on line”. An experienced and thoughtful educator can readily grasp this notion of pedagogical tact (Van Manen, 2016). Pedagogical tact requires us to differentiate between pedagogical moments and needs, recognizing that during the pedagogical moment—when the “lesson” is being delivered—we can also mark in a very deep way our students, for better or for worse. Because of the particular relationship an educator has with a child, due to our responsibility for their wellbeing and the extent to which we may be emotionally involved with each child we care for, pedagogical moments imply a *latency* (Van Manen, 2016). The latency has to do with the chance of pedagogical moments to become “imprinted” in the child’s psyche.

If we develop pedagogical tact, we can intuit what a child is going through, and make them feel at least accompanied, seen, cared for. This emotional bond, linked to strategies that develop creativity—especially arts-based methods—may be of great assistance for the wellbeing and happiness of our students. Most significantly, they may become seeds for self-transformation, which can accompany students for the rest of their lives, assuring them that the possibility of change is always present.

The latency of the gaze of “the other” is very present in Heart Swirl’s experience of being “seen” as a child. The way children experience being seen (or not) may linger as a stamp in the hearts and minds of each person, influencing their emotional development throughout adulthood. The qualities of the gaze remain. Drawing from the perspective of psychoanalysis, the way the mother mirrors the child with her look allows the child to “feel real” in the world and to exist as an individual (Joyce, 2015; Winnicott, 1971). From an educational perspective, Van Manen (2016) has written extensively about the importance of developing a “healthy (inter)independence” (Chapter 8, Section 1, para 1) through the look of the other.

In Heart Swirl’s narrative, the way she remembered being seen as a child left a strong mark in her psyche, affecting her relationship with creativity in her practice. During the first session of the workshop, she was asked to respond with a drawing or collage to the prompt: “What were the emotions that I remember bringing to school as a child?” She drew a pair of judging eyes, surrounded by a dark atmosphere. The eyebrows formed a rigid triangle. Their gaze had a punitive

expression. Underneath this look, she drew objects that she used in her play sessions with children: fabrics of different colors, cubes, circles and other shapes.



Figure 3. Heart Swirl's drawing in response to the prompt of Session 1: "What were the emotions that I remember bringing to school as a child, and what is the link between my emotions as student and as teacher-self today?"

Heart Swirl didn't recall a particular moment where she felt that gaze. She said it was sometime during her childhood:

I don't know exactly when, I started to feel that the look from "the other" caused me a lot of . . . expectation. I thought this look was judgmental, permanent, and I feared to be misinterpreted. I feared that the things I did might be misinterpreted, and that people would think I was bad. I never wanted to do anything that could give the slightest suspicion that I wanted to be bad about something. So I was always good. (Heart Swirl, Session 1, Drawing in response to the prompt: "What were the emotions that I remember bringing to school as a child?")

For Heart Swirl, feeling she was judged did not allow her to express anger. The punitive look required her to be "always good" and for many years, she tried to control the more "difficult" feelings, in herself and in her students.

For many years, as an educator, she remembered always being "very interested in creating a peaceful classroom climate, with songs, music . . . I used all my strategies so that the aggressive things weren't there, because I was afraid" (Interview 1, Heart Swirl). Until the time of the workshop, it was still difficult for Heart Swirl to express anger and negative emotions. Nevertheless, her path to self-freedom began when she learned about the Aucouturier (2007) methodology. This method is based in the recognition that children need to affirm themselves through the authorized destruction of the adult construction: "There is no way you can create if you don't break the adult. If you don't break the teacher, your mother . . . if you don't rebel" (Heart Swirl, Session 2, Prompt: "At the heart of the creative teaching process").

## **Playing Our Way Out**

How can we transform our latent hurting wounds? Is it possible to create new pathways, to become free from our own past, even as an adult with the limits and constraints that adulthood entails? We can if we reconnect with play, as Heart Swirl did. Playing is essential to all human existence; it is by no means reduced to childhood living: "Adults may play in different forms; through artistic engagement, humor, the way in which they chose their words when they speak" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 40).

Playing allows us to integrate our conscious and unconscious in a productive, healthy way. As educators, actively engaging in play is a way to connect with "the other". The nature of playing always involves "the other", real or imagined. "Playing always presupposes the other: as witness, as guarantor, as playing companion, as the person at who the activity is directed" (Nicolo, 2015, p. 33). Playing allows us to incorporate our painful experiences in a tolerable way and to merge them with new elements, generating a healthier representation of self and reality. "Playing," Nicolo (2015) reminds us, "is equivalent to being free within our own minds" (p. 27).

Play may be the pathway to heal ourselves, at any age. But to be able to play, we need to trust. As adults, playing and memory work may be seen as the legs that work together for us to walk. Memory work helps us discover what we need to heal. Play—in all the forms play may express itself—can help our fears to diminish, reconnecting us with our primary emotions and creative potential.

In Heart Swirl's experience, playing and watching play were fundamental for her own personal healing process and in the development of her creativity. During the second workshop session, dedicated to creativity, she described the process of a typical Aucouturier session. The teacher would begin by constructing a large tower made of huge foam blocks, as tall as it could possibly be:

It all starts with destruction. They have to destroy a tower that the adult has constructed. They need to know that they are authorized to tear apart what the adult has constructed, in order to create something new, whatever it may be, as individuals or as a group. (Heart Swirl, Session 2, Drawing in response to the prompt: "At the heart of the creative teaching process".)



Figure 4. Heart Swirl's drawing in response to the Session 2 prompt: "At the heart of the creative teaching process".

Permission to "break the adult" must be granted for children to express themselves freely. The green figure at the bottom left corner represents "deconstruction". In Heart Swirl's words: "Creativity happens when the child has the right to decide what she wants to do. Everything is possible, to the extent that it is contained in that *space* [emphasis added] . . . anything is possible with unstructured materials" (Heart Swirl, Session 2, Drawing to the prompt: "At the heart of the creative teaching process").

Heart Swirl worried about the absence of conscious awareness she perceived in adults with respect to the delicate nature of creativity: "I think adults kill children's creativity when they want a correct answer, when you want the student to answer what you as an adult want him to say or to do" (Heart Swirl, interview 1). To nurture creativity, she understood, adults need to respect the different ways in which children express themselves:

As teachers, we build many times children that are the antithesis of this (of creativity.) You want the child to respond to what you expect, you want him to choose between the three possible forms that you have taught him. You feel that you have provided the tools, the strategies, and that he is compelled to use them . . . you even want the child to use the tools the same way you would! You expect the child to rise to your standard of the "pretty picture" and sometimes children just need to play and we don't respect them. (Interview 1, Heart Swirl)

Just as children require spaces to express themselves freely, as adults and educators we also need to provide ourselves with similar spaces. Memory-work workshops, particularly arts-based ones, are an ideal vehicle for teachers' continued education, in the favor of creativity. This work, though, cannot be imposed. Nevertheless, understanding the relationship between memory work and creativity may help us develop spaces where we can propose to our colleagues (and to ourselves) a more playful path to explore the autobiographical sources of our teaching. By engaging in the development of our creativity, we will eventually find ourselves with the memories that shaped us. As

we become more reflective educators, we will free ourselves and inspire our students to find their own freedom, and in this pathway, we will continue creating better versions of ourselves, in a spiral of collective (self) transformation, creativity and reflection.

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## Endnotes

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1. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and were translated by the author to English.
  2. The images in this article are used with permission of their creator.