

Mindful Creativity

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My interest in technology began as a teacher in two Suffolk high schools. I completed PhD research using a case study approach within large curriculum projects - Dunwich Revisited and Reflecting Others.

Through this research, I studied the work of EA composers. More recently, I have researched songwriting processes & sound design amongst other things.

Over the years, I've met many creative people. However, my argument is that modern schooling does little to promote creativity, and that the impact of technology in this process is often over-inflated and misunderstood.

Who is the most creative person you know?

For me, my friend Andrew Diey - Creative Director of Radium Audio - is one of the most creative people I know. His work is a wonderful example of creativity in composition and sound design. He is also a innovative user of technological tools.

Play example from Micro Kingdom (www.radium-audio.com).

Andrew does not have any formal education in music. He learnt his art in a very different way. Focus of a published article.

But Andrew is unusual.

Growing conservatism in education. Fact and knowledge based approaches dominate the curriculum. GCSE and A level reforms in Music are retrospective. Key Stage 3 curriculum which was broad and balanced is now shrinking. At primary phase the notion of a 'foundation' curriculum is one that is replaced with core subjects and enrichment.

In the context, the arts are being diminished. Polly Toynbee article raised this in the *Guardian* yesterday.

Education secretary Nicky Morgan last year warned students off studying arts, saying it held them back for years. How profoundly wrong she is. Facts soon fly out of mind and out of date too. Future-proofed education breeds creativity that spurs enterprise of every kind: nearly a quarter of the UK workforce is in creative employment, according to the charity, Nesta – higher than any other country. Research shows how the arts improve attainment in all subjects: drama improves literacy, music improves maths and early language. The arts make most difference to children from low-income families – those who get arts teaching are three times more likely to get a degree and a job.

And she goes on.

This conservatism in educational policy is insipid, narrow minded and pernicious. It is having a devastating effect on the arts in schools. Music education is facing a crisis on many fronts. I would refer you to my blog (www.jsavage.org.uk) if you are would like further information.

In contrast, the positivistic discourse around technology and what it can achieve is rampant within schools. The history of technology in education is an ongoing 'salvation' narrative. Computers, interactive whiteboards, iPads, etc. The waste of public money is staggering.

Teachers and policy makers, on the whole, really don't understand the affordances or the limitations of technology.

Psychologists tell us that reading on a tablet is not the same as reading a physical book. Nicholas Carr's book is informative on this.

Writing in a word processor is not equivalent to writing with a pen and ink. Hunter's *The Missing Ink* is a beautiful exploration of the benefits of hand writing and what we lose as it is replaced by digital interfaces.

Researching something on the Internet is not the same as researching from a textbook, a worksheet, or a specially constructed physical learning environment.

It is right to be sceptical about technology. I'm with Andrew Keen. The internet is not the answer.

We have a complex relationship with technology; but you are not a gadget! Lanier strongly argues that recent developments in our culture deaden personal interactive, stifle genuine inventiveness and change us as people.

One of my hobbies is horology. As I've got older, I have learnt to love older watches like my 1969 Omega Speedmaster. It has a resonance with my birth year and childhood. I have no affinity with an iWatch nor a desire to own one. The idea of being constantly tethered to the cloud is worrisome. The negative effects on our sense of identity, our well being, mental health, productivity, the way in which we care for one another, communicate, the sense of what it means to be social, are all problematised by this. No wonder there is a rise in the practice of digital sabbaticals. No wonder teenagers are unhappier than ever before.

Similarly, in music the interface between the creation and organisation of sound has long been the contemplation of musicians and composers.

John Cage wrote in 1937:

The present methods of writing music will be inadequate for the composer who will be faced with the entire field of sound.

Varese, in the 1920s, wrote that new technologies would offer composers:

Liberation from the arbitrary, paralysing tempered system; ... the possibility for the formation of any tempered scale; ... new harmonic splendours ... new dynamics; a sense of sound projection in space.

The digital revolution in musical production has been staggering in its impact in how music is created, performed, received and shared. But is it all entirely positive? Does it all count as 'progress'. I would argue not.

Within an educational setting, careful consideration needs to be given to the affordances and limitations of technology. I'm saddened by the numerous classrooms I visit where children are seated facing away from each other, headphones on (surely a 'technology of isolation') staring at computer screens doing some sort of mundane composition task. Is this a music education attuned to the key principles of teaching music musically? No.

At the heart of the interface of creativity, technology and education there should be one thing: **Mindfulness.**

A few years ago I had several months off work with sciatica. During my recuperation, I was introduced to Pilates.

My Pilates teacher constantly talks about mindful exercise. Not the repetitious, unthinking drilling of the body as evidenced in so many modern gyms - the cause of my lower back problems.

Carefully chosen exercises, done slowly, carefully, mindfully! Pilates works the body from the inside out from the **core** of our physiology. It is about relearning and strengthening one's posture, basic movements and stability.

What a great metaphor for the creative use of technology in learning.

Our pedagogy as teachers or designers of learning spaces should be underpinned by careful, mindful choices. Wise choices about the tools we and our students are using.

It is about their deliberate use. There is a skill here that develops over time. No quick fix but the results from careful, regular engagement are highly beneficial.

It is about a focus on the core. What is the key learning that I am trying to facilitate here? Is this tool I've chosen the best one for the job. The subject always come first. The tool follows. For me, does this tool allow me to teach music musically?

Done skilfully and conscientiously, this can result in a quietness, stillness and security in our pedagogy as teachers or designers of learning environments.

It will result in mindful teaching and mindful learning that will last a lifetime.

References

Notes from my presentation are available from <http://www.jsavage.org.uk/technology/presentation-access-innovation/>.

Case studies from my PhD thesis can be found here: <http://www.jsavage.org.uk/phd-thesis/>

Radium Audio: www.radium-audio.com

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