Creatively expanding research from work-based learning

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of creativity in work-based research and practice to yield deeper understanding of practice situations. Unexpected insights can lead one (or a team) to identify new approaches, tackling workplace issues differently, leading to unexpected outcomes of long-term impact.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on work conducted for a doctoral thesis, investigating the impact of work-based learning for recent masters graduates of a work-based learning programme. Fiction was incorporated into analysis of the data, creating play scripts to represent key aspects of the researcher's perceptions and interpretations for each participant.

Findings – Research participants experienced personal, professional and organisational impact, although there was considerable variability between individuals. Additionally, societal impact was wished for and/or effected. The approach to representation of analysis, which involved fictionalising participants' experiences, created a strong Thirdspace liminality. This appeared to deepen awareness and understanding.

Research limitations/implications – Such approaches can transform the researcher's perspective, prompting insights which lead to further adventure and development in work-based research and practice.

Practical implications – Managers and employees taking creative approaches in the workplace can prompt wide-ranging development and, with professional judgement, be constructive.

Social implications – Managers and employees taking creative approaches in the workplace can prompt wide-ranging development and, with professional judgement, be constructive.

Originality/value – The creation of play scripts, representing an interpretation of participants' stories about their work-based learning experience, is an innovative feature of this work.

Keywords Creativity, Thirdspace, Liminality, Work-based learning, Fiction, Play scripts, Impact

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper outlines how an investigation into the impact of work-based learning incorporated a creative exploration of learners' experience. It notes the journey taken to the creation of play scripts, one for each participant in the research; considers how such an approach challenged the researcher's assumptions about appropriate ways to deal with data, taking her into an unanticipated Thirdspace (Soja, 1996); and argues that such creative experiences can be useful for work-based learning and work applied management. This paper might also prompt ideas about how research into work-based learning experience can be presented in unusual, accessible and interesting ways. It is based on a doctoral thesis investigating the impact of work-based learning for individuals who were recent masters graduates of a work-based learning programme for which the researcher was a tutor.

Investigating the impact of work-based learning is of professional significance. Individuals' and organisations' participation in higher education programmes of work-based learning is more likely if the provision appears to have a positive impact for the

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company and employees. Such an impression indicates the provider's currency in and engagement with the external world (Major, 2016). The programme which participants had taken has been established for over 20 years, receiving several marks of national and international recognition. Most recently at the time of the research, it was recognised as one of the United Kingdom's "best breakthroughs" for "transforming professional development in the workplace" (Universities UK, 2018). Thus, signs of the provision's organisational and employee impact were strong. Investigation of impact is also significant at a personal and professional level for the tutor. Being mindful of impact in one's teaching can be challenging: there can be varying outcomes for learners; for some, impact might be imperceptible, and even when it is recognised, the degree to which it is attributable to engagement in a programme of work-based learning might not be clear. Such investigation could facilitate one's assessment of one's practice and identify aspects for development. An intention in this particular investigation was to build upon an earlier consideration of impact undertaken by the researcher (Scott, 2017).

An open narrative approach to data collection, in which control of research discussion content was intended to lie with participants rather than researcher, was complemented by a creative representation of aspects of the analysis through creation of play scripts, as outlined and illustrated below. The creative process deepened awareness and understanding of each participant's experience, and prompted consideration of the value of liminality to the workplace, when one seeks to challenge and re-imagine practice (Page *et al.*, 2014).

Research methodology

The intention to be creative in this exploration of the impact of work-based learning and in making representation of the research engaging and accessible**,** was supported by, for example, Poole's (2017) argument for creative approaches to researching impact. Pässilä *et al.*'s (2016) and Pässilä *et al.*'s (2017) practice, and Adams and Owens's (2016) investigation, all indicate how creativity can lead to enhanced understanding (in these cases for both researcher and participants). Further approaches (some presented a considerable time ago) allowing openness to a wide range of data, and flexibility in analysis and representation, were considered in relation to the research purpose. For example, Butler-Kisber (2002) suggests that arts-based approaches might better facilitate portrayal of complexity than traditional approaches; that specific, detailed contextual reference enables others to take from the portrayal that which resonates with them. Eisner's (1997) seminal justification for arts-based approaches refers to the potential to generate insight through the opening up of ambiguity, suggesting such approaches can give one a view from "the edge" (p. 9). Bochner and Ellis's (1998) suggestion that creative approaches can leave the research journey open to surprise, challenges and alternative perspectives, was further encouragement that taking an unfamiliar, unconventional approach could facilitate a critical exploration of impact. Regarding the wish for accessibility, Banks (cited in Banks and Banks, 1998) suggests that fiction can be a viable mode of presentation when there is a desire for the research to evoke in the reader "a feel for the subjective experience of others"(p. 18). Of course, the "feel" will be triggered by the researcher's interpretation and how this is represented – others might interpret differently; he suggests, misquoting Picasso, that presentation of the truth is not the aim, but a desire to convince the reader of "the truthfulness of his or her lies" (p. 17). Despite being unfamiliar with the use of fiction within educational research, the work of those considered here (and others) resonated with a wish for readers' engagement in the interpretation and with the participants, without suggesting the work that developed would be the only possible interpretations, or ways of presenting them. This wish was present alongside concerns over taking a creative approach to data analysis: while play scripts, and other creative artefacts might be recognised and considered legitimate within educational

research, this seemed to be less so within work-based learning. Like the researcher, the approach crossed boundaries: it was undertaken within doctoral study facilitated by a faculty of education by a researcher who worked in a faculty of business and management.

Using narrative research and drawing, for example, on the work of Clough (2002), Andrews *et al.* (2013), six former part-time distance learning students participated in two research discussions over a period of three months. They were asked to tell the researcher about their experience of work-based learning. Each discussion lasted approximately 30 min and was face to face for most; Skype was used for one international participant. They were recorded (with the exception of one, which had to be conducted via email due to technical difficulties preventing use of Skype for the second discussion) and transcribed. The intention was for the participant to control the content of the discussion (an intention which was partially successful; revisiting the recordings and transcriptions revealed that in some cases, following initial open discussion, the researcher influenced the direction of conversation more strongly than planned). The discussion content was analysed in relation to selected themes, chosen for their resonance (in the researcher's view) with the learning experience, with work-based learning, and the researcher's values: Thirdspace (Soja, 1996), equality, creativity and critical reflection. Alongside this analysis, consideration of presentation formats took place. The idea to incorporate play scripts emerged during data gathering and analysis.

Regarding presentation of data and analysis, stories appeared to be an accessible, potentially powerful way of dealing with and presenting data. Clough (2002) presents stories arising from his educational research using narrative as play scripts, conveying dynamically deep aspects of his analysis through reference to words spoken, actions and attitudes. Brante (2012) offers a different articulation of stories through her found poetry using the words of teachers she interviewed who had left the profession, which captured data about career turning points. Sparkes's (2007) work indicates the potential of storytelling in academic contexts to convey pertinent, profound messages. Such work fits with an aspiration to accessibility, and with Reed and Proctor's (cited in Costley *et al.*, 2010) criterion for practitioner research, that it should be assessed regarding its likelihood of yielding "insights which can be conveyed in a form which make them worthy of interest to a wider audience" (p. 3). Various formats were considered throughout the data collection period. There was growing appreciation of Clough's (2002) partial play scripts; his approach offered an opportunity to present one's interpretations dynamically. It also fitted with the social constructionist ontological position taken in the research. In trying to understand participants' interpretations of their experiences, and how these arose, one became more aware of other "different voices" for each participant, such as inner voices which might concern identity or changing role; others' voices – those of friends, family, past, current or future employers; national or political voices – changing perceptions of employability, employment and wellbeing. The play script format had the potential to convey such interpretations of participants' voices, together with pertinent aspects of their stories for the research focus.

Fictionalising adults' experiences of work-based learning

Creation of play scripts would involve imagining how participants came to perceive their experience as they did; the focus would be on actions, contexts, relationships and perhaps interpretations could be written more concisely than might be the case with alternative creative formats. The approach taken fits Saldana's (2005, cited in Saldana, 2008) definition of "ethnodrama" as a written script comprising "dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews" (p. 196). A collection of play scripts was created, each script given a title intended to convey the researcher's impression of that participant's work-based

learning experience. The collection was included in full in the thesis, with pertinent extracts included throughout the analysis.

Figure 1 represents the process that led to play script development, and the contribution of their creation to the overall findings.

Intentions regarding the use of play scripts changed during their construction, from attempting to convey most of the arising perceptions, to honing each one down to focus in each case on the strongest themes. This was possible through the constant revisiting of the transcripts, becoming increasingly familiar with each participant's story, developing deeper understanding. It was unexpected to find that in the course of editing, which was undertaken with thoughts of presentation rather than analysis, awareness and understanding deepened. As Figure 1 shows, there was a two way movement between analysis and creative stages. Identifying the strongest themes to emerge from what a participant said about his experience led back to the transcript to confirm this, to consider alternatives, to question why there was this balance. The understanding arising from this was incorporated into the analysis and influenced portrayal of the relevant theme(s) in each play script. Creating the play scripts required embodiment of participants' experiences. Imagining the situations which could prompt the participant to say what he said heightened the researcher's perception. For example, in honing Callum's script, the strength of his feelings about equality emerged; it forced a focus on the power of his words when talking about the right of disabled people to work, on the apparent waste of volunteers' talents, and on his research's apparent lack of organisational impact. Rather than continuing to perceive his studies as having little impact (his academic work was high in quality but there was little evidence of direct work place application), the creative approach led to appreciation of the strong personal impact, with potential over the longer term for professional and organisational impact. The following extract from the play script written about Callum, illustrates part of the researcher's attempt to represent some of his powerful, developing thinking and the workplace situation in which this was happening.

In this extract from *Follow your passion*, Callum tries to outline ideas for how Mary (manager of the charity for which he works) and the charity could use the findings from his research.

The deeper awareness of Callum's thinking and ideas which arose from attempting to embody his experiences and ideas in a play script was echoed when working with each of the other participants' data. For e.g. while in Callum's case notions of equality came to the fore, with Thomas, it was an unanticipated perspective on creativity: collaborative creativity.

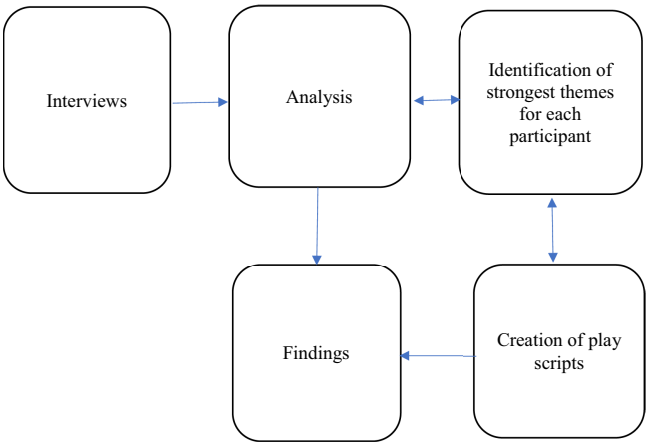

Figure 1.
The research process

Box 1. Extract from *Follow your passion*, the script written relating to Callum

Scene 2
MARY's office (a few months after Scene 1)
MARY is seated, CALLUM enters
MARY Oh, hi, Callum. How are you today?
CALLUM Very well, thanks. I passed my course.
MARY Congratulations. Glad we could help.
CALLUM I wondered if . . . er. . .
MARY Yes?
CALLUM (To himself) Just lunge
CALLUM (Looking at MARY) Yes, my report, about volunteers here, and how that could change. What did you think of it?
MARY Oh, yes, you gave me your report, didn' t you? Yes, ah, here it is.
Mary unearths it from underneath other papers on her desk and holds it up
CALLUM (Smiling) Yes, that's it. Y' know, once I got going, I had loads of ideas about the volunteers – using their talents, like James and his football knowledge, and Sally who could write a fantastic newsletter, devise competitions, and so on. What did you think?
MARY (laughs) Yes, such talent! And you could draw the cover!
CALLUM (smiling) Cool. True. But, did you know that Paul's great at cartoons? We could get the clients involved as well. Who says they can't do things just 'cos they're disabled? If they get the things they need, it'll be amazing what they can do. (Stops, looking at MARY expectantly)
MARY (Looking down at the front of the report, then leafing through it) Very true, Callum. (Sighs) Thank you very much, Callum. Yes, you gave it to me the same day we heard the arts centre is closing.
CALLUM Oh yes. That was bad. Er, so my report . . . the recommendations. Opportunities . . . er
MARY Definitely. Very interesting, Callum. Your ideas would be very satisfying for those groups of people. (Smiles at Callum)
CALLUM Thank you. Is it useful? Here?
MARY Useful? (Raises eyebrows, pauses) Well, a good question. Thing is, Callum, these things take time – if there was more money, then certainly!
Scene closes

Writers such as Robinson (2017) had raised the researcher's awareness that creativity is by no means a purely solitary endeavour, that it is intrinsic to workplace innovation, and that there are strategies creative managers can deploy to encourage it in the workforce. When working to embody Thomas's experiences, the researcher realised how collaborative creativity was possible and practicable in the workplace. As Thomas spoke via Skype from his office, it became apparent that engagement in work-based learning was triggering not just practice ideas for him, but for his colleagues and the company; he seemed to be prompting new insights and ideas often, and at different levels, as perhaps illustrated in the extract below from *Adjusting logistics*, the script written about Thomas.

This extract is an imagined conversation between Thomas, a logistics manager for an oil company, and his two colleagues, Henry and William, and is based very closely on what Thomas said in the research discussion.

Researching and representing aspects of analysis in this way highlighted more strongly than appeared in Thomas's assignments both the part played by creativity in his use of his work-based learning, and also the considerable professional and organisational impact he was having.

Further insights arose in a similar way, such as the challenges of applying and encouraging critical reflection in the workplace, as articulated by two participants who, in different roles and contexts, were seeking to develop collaborative reflection and creativity. Their play scripts offered an opportunity to articulate insights prompted by Robinson's (2017) suggestion that teams in the early stages of development might have more freedom to be creative, and that more established teams can become constrained by the developing

Box 2. Extract from *Adjusting logistics*, the script written relating to Thomas

SCENE 1
THOMAS's *office, shared with* HENRY *and* WILLIAM. *All are seated at their desks*
HENRY (*Looks up from his computer and across to* THOMAS) Thomas, you seem to be very busy. I thought you'd finished the review of logistics contracts. What are you doing?
THOMAS Yes, I have. (*Looks at monitor, types, looks back at* HENRY) Right now I'm doing my course.
WILLIAM Oh. (*Stops typing, turns to* THOMAS) What are you actually learning?
THOMAS At the moment, I'm learning about the cultural web (*Smiles*)
HENRY Oh, my tutor's mentioned that. (*Waves his hand dismissively*) What do you think of it?
THOMAS I think it's good. It gives me a better understanding of this place.
HENRY What do you mean?
THOMAS (*Spreads his hands*) The organisation. Most of the time we look at it from our own point of view, what we (*pointing to himself, and to* HENRY *and* WILLIAM) think should happen -
WILLIAM Yes?
THOMAS - from the worker's point of view. But now I can think of taking it from the management point of view, (*pointing out of the office*) what they want to achieve, their vision of the organisation.
HENRY So, where does the cultural web come in?
THOMAS Just there! We come with our own culture, values, belief system, but must adjust to the organisation's culture, achieve what the organisation wants, understand the culture. So, here's an opportunity to read more on issues, on corporate culture, from the organisation's point of view.
HENRY (*Purses his lips, thinking*) Is it worth it?
WILLIAM Well, it will be if he gets his Masters! (*Laughs*)
THOMAS Yes, it is worth it. It gives you a different perspective. Look, at the moment I'm writing about length of contracts, and terms and conditions, and I'm reading about other approaches, and they could work here, making transport and delivery more reliable.
HENRY OK. I get that (*thoughtfully*). Sounds relevant.
WILLIAM Ah! Is that why they've started asking you to meetings?
HENRY Yes. What's that all about?
THOMAS (*Shrugs*) Well, researching logistics . . . it's something they have to know about. (*Looks at the others*). I'm sure you'll also be giving us new ideas when you start your research!
Scene closes

custom and practice. This could explain to some extent the different experiences these two participants had in using creativity in their management approach. In contrast, a fourth participant had freedom to be creative in his use of critical reflection, as he moved between jobs at the end of his studies, and had the opportunity to articulate ideas to his new employers and set them in train before he even began working with them officially. *Moved to here from Revelations*: There was concern that it would be inappropriate or disrespectful to use data in this way. Concern regarding participants' feelings was addressed through contact and invitation to read "their" play script and provide feedback (those that did so were positive about this use of their data). Also, despite such worry, the desire to explore the unknown, to experiment creatively, was powerful.

Revelations

As indicated above, the creative approach to dealing with data facilitated analysis, leading to insights not reached during teaching and unlikely to have arisen to the same degree without it, including recognition of impact that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The themes chosen proved to be open and flexible concepts, allowing deep comparison of participants' experiences.

Thirdspace notions of crossing borders, uncertainty and marginalisation; enacted and/or perceived equality; creativity through imagination, applied imagination and innovation (Robinson, 2017), alone or with others; individual and collaborative critical reflection were all

constituents of the experience, and facilitated identification and analysis of impact. There was evidence of personal, professional and organisational impact, differing between participants, and of societal impact wished for, and sometimes enacted. This impact might be subtle, yet deep and long term. The potential of work-based learning to disrupt practice and assumptions, to which Wall (2016) alludes, seemed possible.

In contemplating and persisting with a creative approach, the concept of Thirdspace provided significant encouragement: Thirdspace became not only a theme for data analysis but also a concept to aid the researcher's understanding of the experience of tackling uncertainty. Soja's (1996) spatial metaphor conveys a conception that might challenge a purely facts-based approach to understanding. Through use of imagination, the concept of Thirdspace opens up alternative ways of thinking; of perceiving our experiences; of imagining alternatives and future possibilities. Soja (1996) perceives a constantly changing mix of experiences, of how they appear to us, and of the ideas and understandings we gain from them. He warns against letting tradition constrain our ideas, or favouring a contemporary approach on the assumption that relevance is more important than depth. Thirdspace is integral to an alternative approach, "creatively open to redefinition and expansion in new directions" (p. 2). It is a space "where all places are capable of being seen from every angle, . . . a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood" (p. 56). Soja (1996) envisages Thirdspace as lying between Firstspace: "the "real" material world", and Secondspace: an interpretation of that reality "through "imagined" representations of spatiality" (p. 6). Such ideas articulated aspects of the researcher's intentions in her investigation of impact and facilitated persistence in using a creative approach for analysis and representation.

This perception was an unintended consequence of having selected Thirdspace as a concept pertinent to analysis of participants' experience; to thinking about their experience of uncertainty, of meeting challenges to assumptions and of changing views of personal, professional and organisational development. The analysis was enriched by consideration of Bhaba's (1994) Third space, in which border-crossing can be both difficult (maybe unsought or undesired), and exciting, offering opportunity and new experiences. As with Soja's (1996) Thirdspace, Bhaba's (1994) Third space helped the researcher "contain" this unfamiliar approach, perceiving it as an adventure, with an opportunity to reach an unanticipated Secondspace, and for which there was an endpoint.

It was possible to make connections between the ideas and understandings facilitated by Thirdspace with others' (such as Page *et al.*, 2014) consideration of the transformative potential of liminal space. The Thirdspace experienced through writing the play scripts was also a liminal space for the researcher to engage with the research concepts and with participants' articulation of their experiences. The liminal space of play script creation led to insights unlikely to have otherwise occurred, such as those relating to a challenging of the social order. Page *et al.* (2014) suggests that the liminal experience reminds one of the affective as well as the cognitive. This was borne out in the creative process, as participants' experiences were envisaged, and appropriate scenarios created, and also as the researcher monitored her approach to the analysis, and the degree to which emotion and subjectivity influenced perception, interpretation and creation.

Creative management and workplace practice

Much of the literature considered above was perceived by the researcher as seminal, influencing practice, research and thinking over a considerable time. The insights and understanding gained indicate that the relevance and pertinence of such sources continues, and are applicable to both work-based learning and work applied management. In her earlier paper (Scott, 2017) the researcher suggested that when a manager is ignorant, or effects

ignorance, this can emancipate an employee (who may be a work-based learner) to apply their ideas in the workplace, so supporting organisational development. The doctoral research considered here, and in particular, the creative approach taken to data analysis and representation, leads to development of this suggestion: perhaps the "ignorant manager" (Scott, 2017, p. 1) could be seen as someone taking a similar role to Rancière's and Ross (1991) emancipatory teacher, who stands at the start of the employee's journey, facilitating the employee to work through innovative Thirdspace.

Connections between this creative approach to research, inspired by sources of some age, and more recent publications**,** including those focussed on the workplace**,** can be identified. While sources used in the doctoral research remain pertinent and appropriate for contemporary use, other work offers possible developments or directions. For example, Caroff *et al.* (2018) indicate current recognition of creativity (by, for example, the World Economic Forum) as one of the top employability characteristics. They consider how individual creative potential might be measured, suggesting that companies who create groups comprising people with high creative potential are facilitating organisational creativity and innovation. Such a "singling out" might be possible and desired in some organisational contexts. In others, such selection is not possible; managers have their team already; further recruitment is unlikely; resources are limited. Robinson (2017) argues for seeing and using the creative potential of every individual, and considers organisational factors which can facilitate this (such as diversity in various forms, including innate characteristics, and cultural and professional backgrounds; allowing time to explore ideas; adopting an enquiring approach; creative spaces allowing personalisation and collaboration). Unsworth (2018) also recognises the significance of organisational factors for creativity, arguing that developing creativity at work will be influenced by an employee's other goals, such as productivity, and also by the degree to which support for or barriers to creativity exist. Such work indicates the continuing significance of creativity in work and that, while individual behaviour and skill play a part, this is influenced by the organisational context.

Young (2018), in his consideration of creative research methodologies, recognises the potential barriers to creativity in higher education, when people work only within their discipline. He suggests that working in a context where it is possible or essential to recognise linkages with those from different fields supports creative collaboration. Widmann *et al.* (2019) assert that "innovation is crucial in meeting the demands of societal change, competition and customer expectations" (p. 312) and employees' work behaviour needs to support this. They, like Young (2018) suggest that crossing boundaries, communicating with others outside of the immediate team and – for them – outside of the organisation, introduces "diverse perspectives that will help to create new knowledge and generate new ideas" (p. 313) and facilitates the gaining of support for implementation of ideas.

Such arguments fit with the researcher's experience: creativity occurred through breaking away from some conventions, and considering the pertinence and application of ideas from other fields. However, for the outcome to be acceptable as well as innovative, the breaking away needed shaping to fit overarching requirements (in this case in relation to doctoral thesis standards). Similarly, creative management and workplace practice need to be appropriate to the context. *Deleted first part of sentence:* work-based learning research and practice can be facilitated by creative approaches, prompting different perspectives, views from "the edge" (Eisner, 1997, p. 9). In order to be incorporated into practice, such approaches must be shaped by professional judgement, and organisational requirements.

Creativity and Thirdspace for professional development

Work-based creative practice will be facilitated when communication and collaboration are not only supported but also allowed space for development, with measured, appropriate,

attention to overall aims. Thirdspace offers support in this: it enables one to recognise the temporary nature of this creative space, that it is informed by past experience and understandings, and that it is occurring before the move to a future stable, comprehensible state. Examples of using Thirdspace to support transformative change include those outlined by Veles *et al.* (2018); Veles *et al.* (2017) and Veles and Carter (2016). In this work, "third space" (Veles and Carter, 2016, p. 1) is perceived as a space where traditional borders between professional and academic staff members in Australian higher education institutions collaborate equally on complex projects. The writers suggest such work has potential for further research about development of professional staff members, and for examination of the influence of cultural values across geographic as well as professional boundaries. Outside of the university context, "a third space of understanding" is sought in order to retain and realise the potential of Aboriginal employees working alongside non-Aboriginals in civil construction (Todd, 2018, p. 1).

Doubts similar to those the researcher felt when taking a creative approach in her studies may well be felt in the workplace. Jordan (2013), examining the nature and content of two discussion groups in Washington D.C., sound that "Third Space" (p. 1) elements allowed more freedom of expression of views and experiences than existed within the workplace. This led to collaboration and sharing of resources and experiences. Of the four elements Jordan (2013) conceptualised as components of Thirdspace, he found "safe space" was "core" for the design of informal learning spaces (p. 1).

Setting boundaries, as Thirdspace perhaps does, can ease one into creative practice, with feasible goals. Checking back to original intentions, monitoring the progress towards their achievement, recognising and evaluating emergent insights, are strategies to help judge the worth of such practice, and to help "contain" the creativity.

Conclusion

Creativity in work-based research and work-based practice might be undertaken with some uncertainty, and a preference for more usual approaches might remain strong. A balance between creativity and other goals has to be sought, and regained if it is lost. Persistence is required when attempting creativity in the workplace. Creativity might be challenged, by Boal's "cop in the head" (Cope, 2015) – the inner fears that constrain an individual's actions and investigation of ideas – as well as by established conventions, competing priorities and lack of resources such as time and space.

Some strategies have been outlined which can support creativity in research and in the workplace. They include communicating and collaborating across boundaries; creating space for exploration; revisiting, reviewing and revising; setting an endpoint and parameters with which to work. Taking small steps with some of these ideas can yield insight and lead to innovation.

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