Teacher as Auteur: A Multi-Year Reflection on Teacher Motivation, Creativity, Constraints, and Collaboration

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ABSTRACT
In a program with a unified curriculum, instructors teach a carefully developed and refined type of lesson in accordance with defined goals and procedures. Through continuing professional development, instructors typically become highly technically competent at teaching these lessons. However, there is a risk that once the challenge of reaching a satisfactory level of technical proficiency loses salience, instructors might begin to lose motivation and a sense of personal meaning in their teaching. To confront this issue, the author reflects on his five-year tenure teaching EDC to explore an analytical construct of the teacher similar to a film auteur, thinking through the concept of creativity and originality in the context of teaching a unified curriculum. This paper addresses the tension between constraints and creativity and discusses how this can be a highly productive tension. It then emphasizes how collaboration can also be an important source of productive constraints, creativity, and meaning.

INTRODUCTION
Yeah. It's only a matter of environment if I'm a genius.

- Tomaž Šalamun

Even at my most arrogant, and as much as I may aspire to greatness, I know that I am no genius. And yet, this stanza from Šalamun’s (2015) poem struck me, since it seems to privilege the environment in which genius works. The environment of a teacher is typically thought of as the classroom, and a genius teacher might seem like a natural performer there. Teachers would seem to excel in this context through their individual, even iconoclastic, creative art and skill. The environment that would matter in this view would involve having the freedom to pursue one’s heterodox pedagogy. If we take this romantic view, then teaching a unified curriculum in a large department would be a terrible way to express one’s inherent teaching genius, and teaching in this context could become boring, unchallenging work. Teachers might come to believe that “regardless of how much—or how little—” they personally try, the results will be the same (Jesus & Lens, 2005, p. 123). Losing one’s teacher motivation in this way could then have negative knock-on effects on vital aspects of teaching, such as student motivation, program innovation, personal satisfaction and fulfillment (Jesus & Lens, 2005).

However, as I will discuss, not only is this individual view of teaching genius flawed, it is vital to note that teachers work a great deal outside the classroom, too. The contexts in which teachers do this additional work are as much their environment as the classroom is. As such, while teaching one’s own class might seem like an individual act, this broader view of one’s work environment suggests that teaching excellence may actually emerge through interaction and collective action.

The role of the work environment beyond the classroom is especially clear in Rikkyo University’s Center for English Discussion Class (EDC). Indeed, Livingston and Moroi (2015) found in their questionnaire study that “EDC instructors are highly engaged in their tasks outside the classroom” (p. 346). EDC is composed of a large team of full-time instructors and program managers who all teach the same curriculum. This makes collaboration necessary if not inevitable. We work in close proximity in shared offices, and we work on the same schedule toward established program goals. We also learn and develop together, as cohorts and an entire group.
Thus, while we typically teach alone in the classroom, what we do in the classroom is strongly influenced by all the collective work in our shared environment, and it seems clear that our classroom teaching is the better for it.

To me, aspiring to being a great teacher in EDC within and beyond the classroom, and thereby maintaining one’s motivation as an EDC instructor throughout an entire five-year term, has come to mean negotiating the tension between pursuing one’s own creativity, originality, or even genius, and working as part of a group within the constraints of a unified curriculum. In this paper, I reflect on my entire tenure teaching EDC to attempt to explain my personal negotiation of what I see as a common tension, discussing first an “ideal type” of teacher as the creative auteur of their course, then examining the relationship between creativity and constraints, before expanding this discussion to include the role of collaboration. As I describe in this paper, teaching EDC has given me a more nuanced view of teaching creatively and a new appreciation of teacher collaboration. It has also given me new sources of teacher motivation that I hope to transfer to future teaching contexts. I hope that teachers struggling with motivation might also find some inspiration through this multi-year reflection.

DISCUSSION
Teacher as Creative Auteur
The myth of the “lone genius,” a romanticized image of the great scholar-educator as solitary artist “struggling against and rising above the limiting, stultifying forces of the conforming masses” (Montuori & Purser, 1995, p. 74), has perhaps always had an outsized influence on my ideas. Although I have never fully bought into the myth, acknowledging the historical contingency of such “strong poets” (Rorty, 1989) who change the world by redescribing it, it is hard to escape the sway of stories of individual genius. Fancying myself a creative introvert, I was drawn to the idea of heroically struggling by one’s own wits and chancing upon greatness. While it was also clear that these geniuses were hardly solitary, there was still something compelling about their role in creatively actualizing the ideas of a community in their own way.

Transferring this view to my own work, I came to see teaching as a creative act. For example, lesson planning was like writing the outline of an elaborate script and classroom teaching was like continually co-revising and co-rewriting it with students and facilitating this creative process. In EDC, designing supplementary materials and adapting activities gave me a creative outlet, and this allowed me to feel a sense of ownership over my teaching, like I was still putting something of my stamp on what I was doing. In fact, this image still holds some appeal: the teacher (re)creating a course like an auteur director creating a film. Focusing on authorship, in the film context or in the teaching context, accentuates certain aspects of the craft and forms a helpful analytical construct like a Weberian ideal type. Kim (2017) stresses that Weber’s ideal-type constructs are self-consciously subjective and fictional and seek “validity only in terms of adequacy,” not in strict correspondence to complex reality (5.2, para. 1). They simplify our world to help us understand what is important within it.

Sarris’s (1962/2004) influential essay on auteur theory presents an ideal type of the auteur film director, outlining their layered roles as technician, stylist, and auteur. The true auteur director fulfills all three; they must at least be technically competent, but they must also stamp their own personality on their work through a recognizable style, and most crucially, they must create meaning through the tension of the material and their personality. These roles map onto EDC instructors’ roles in interesting ways. We learn the technical skills of teaching EDC lessons, especially in our first few years in the program, but we continue to develop our competence throughout our entire tenure in the program. As with filmmaking, this technical facility is a fundamental requirement, and while by no means easy, it is relatively straightforward to determine
and develop, especially with the help of program managers. As with directing, however, the stylist and auteur roles are more elusive—how do we teach with a personal style and imbue our work with compelling meaning, or even “an élan of the soul” (Sarris, 1962/2004, p. 563)? While a true teacher-auteur would seem to require total creative control, which would not fit well in a program with a unified curriculum such as EDC, it is important to reemphasize that for Sarris (1962/2004), the vital meaning or spirit emerges precisely from the tension with one’s material, that is, the constraints.

Constraints and Creativity

Although it might seem counterintuitive, working within constraints can actually stimulate creativity. Haught-Tromp (2017) calls this the Green Eggs and Ham Hypothesis, referring to Dr. Seuss’s successful response to his publisher’s challenge that he use a maximum of only 50 words to write a compelling story. She acknowledges that previous studies have shown that constraints can certainly diminish creativity, especially when they are “conceptualized as social factors” such as surveillance (p. 2), but her own study’s findings support the theory that fundamentally, “creativity stems from choices and does not thrive under boundless conditions” (p. 6). As Haught-Tromp explains, constraints are enabling because they “limit the overwhelming number of available choices to a manageable subset within which a deeper exploration of unusual associations is more likely to occur” (p. 6).

EDC instructors essentially have one primary job: to teach EDC lessons according to the unified curriculum and course principles. Though “teachers are free to adapt the activities in any lesson, in accordance with the lesson goals, to better suit either their teaching style or the perceived needs of their learners” (Hurling, 2012, p. 7), the conditions are certainly not boundless. While one could interpret these guidelines as a limiting social constraint on one’s creativity and auteurship, as being subject to surveillance and forced conformity, I came to view it as a focusing mechanism that stimulates the kind of deep exploration that Haught-Tromp (2017) discusses.

This is similar to the perceptual shift that distinguishes work from play, even when the task and goals are identical: working typically means finding “the least effortful way of achieving [one’s] goal” and being done with it, while in play, goals “are subordinate to the means for achieving them” such that the joy is in the process (Gray, 2013, para. 5). Laran and Janiszewski (2011) demonstrated a similar phenomenon in a series of experiments suggesting that the framing of a task as work or as fun affects people’s self-control and effort regarding tasks. As I found with student on-task play (Kasparek, 2016), I saw a similar opportunity to play on task as a teacher and thereby maintain my intrinsic motivation. Freed from the work of the paradox of choice stemming from the infinite possibilities of course design, involving all the combinations of elements such as content, methodology, underlying theory, and assessment, EDC instructors can focus on mastering technical skills while also playing with developing their own style and meaningful goals within the existing framework. As Haught-Tromp (2017) puts it, “Once a frame is in place, the focus can shift to creating something memorable within it” (p. 2).

Returning to Sarris’s (1962/2004) framework, being technically adept is not only a necessary condition of auteurship but is also itself enabling. When the technical aspects of teaching become more automatic, we are free to focus more on other things, whether broader technical mastery or matters of personal teaching style and interior meaning. Following the internal creative drive of the auteur, I started to reject easier, more familiar initial ideas and to persist in trying to explore new directions. However, as the discussion of enabling constraints hints at, novelty alone is not sufficient for a product to be “creative”; rather, it must also be useful and relevant in its context (Amabile, 1988). Being technically competent and working within a framework makes it far more likely that the new directions pursued are actually meaningful.
In my case, as my contextualized teaching skills improved, I came to develop a personal style of teaching that privileges playing with language and ideas and encouraging students to use their creativity in English (Kasparek, 2017). I also found meaning in co-creating a particular space in the classroom in which students and I co-construct the conditions for playing with ideas and language. In my view, this style and meaning grew out of and reinforced the program’s curriculum and goals, though not without the animating tension of trying to clarify and justify these connections. The additional constraint that EDC instructors’ research and professional development should also contribute to program development encouraged me to find additional meaning in innovating through collaboration with others.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration entails its own constraints, as one must take up shared tasks and explore in similar directions in order to work together. These are often highly enabling constraints, since in collaborative inquiry teachers support each other to “engage in generative cycles of self- and co-regulated practice and learning” (Schneller & Butler, 2016, para. 1). I found that when designing lesson materials for and with others, I drew inspiration and motivation to persist longer to create increasingly better versions of materials. My experience certainly supports the idea that collaborative design provides learning opportunities for teachers all throughout the iterative design process (Voogt et al., 2015).

I often collaborated most fruitfully online, through materials-sharing on Google Drive and more in-depth discussion and development on Slack, an online communication service that specializes in facilitating discussion and collaboration within distinct topic-based channels. As Voogt et al. (2015) discuss, “re- and co-design help teachers learn to better understand the innovation and provide them with competences in instructional planning and enactment” (p. 277). Furthermore, remixing or recontextualization by adapting others’ materials to make them one’s own is itself a creative process, and one can develop a sense of ownership through this (Pennycook, 2007). In my experience on Slack, thinking through how to adapt lessons with others by reading and carefully considering their comments enabled me to explore new directions and innovate with them. As Haught-Tromp (2017) points out, “when inputs from other brainstormers are fully processed, they provide new, much-needed constraints for the participants, and these starting points for novel cognitive explorations end up yielding more unique outputs” (p. 2). Sometimes, fellow EDC instructors and I would go off on tangents and follow flights of fancy, but this play added to the intrinsic value of the collaborative work we were doing and sometimes inspired more serious ideas.

This was also true of the intense experience of collaborating to adapt and co-teach a specially-designed repeating course for a special educational needs (SEN) learner who did not speak (Turner, Kasparek, & McLaughlin, 2017). I was one of three instructors to teach successive parts of the fall semester make-up course to this SEN learner one-on-one. We approached this process of adapting our teaching and individualizing the course for our learner in the spirit of collaborative inquiry, since the challenge of teaching a SEN learner in this context also presented an opportunity for continuing professional development (CPD). In order to help each other become better teachers of SEN learners, we worked together to complete iterative cycles of inquiry, but we also played with creative ways to engage the learner with anime characters and other tasks. With the other instructors, it became a fun and interesting challenge to adapt the course so radically.

First, we defined the essential questions or problems together: how could we differentiate our curriculum while maintaining high-level learning expectations and outcomes; and related to this, how could we serve as better teachers for our SEN learners in this case and in the future? We were fortunate to have access to previous teachers, program managers, and support staff as
additional resources at this stage and as we moved onto planning and enacting our strategies. Throughout each iteration of the cycle, we kept each other focused on redefining the problem, re-planning, enacting new strategies, monitoring, and adjusting. Moreover, we collaborated in the planning and adjusting stages to discover and refine new approaches. We all felt a sense of accomplishment, at the individual and the group level, about how the course turned out, and we felt that it would not have been as good if only one of us had taught it alone (Turner, Kasparek, & McLaughlin, 2017).

All of these good experiences and results are consistent with the literature on collaboration. Teacher collaboration has been linked to broad positive ripple effects, including creating a better atmosphere for teachers, greater teaching skills development, and improved student outcomes; as Glazier, Boyd, Bell Hughes, Able, and Mallous (2017) point out, collaboration has gained a reputation as something of a panacea. For instance, Moolenar, Sleegers, and Daly (2012) showed that when teachers were connected in dense networks, they gained a stronger sense of group efficacy and co-constructed a more innovative atmosphere. In turn, this led to greater learning outcomes for students, especially in learning language skills. Looking at a number of potential factors related to teacher collaboration, Moolenar et al. (2012) found that network density was most strongly correlated with student learning. Ronfeldt, Owens Farmer, McQueen, and Grissom (2014) further suggest that the ripple effects extend beyond the immediate network of highly collaborative teachers. In fact, even when some teachers were not directly involved in collaboration, what Ronfeldt et al. (2015) term the “collectivist mechanism” also improved learning outcomes for their students (p. 36).

Sensing some of these benefits of collaboration and finding support for them and more in the literature, I increasingly came to value teacher collaboration as a source of meaning in itself. Helping other instructors and learning from them in the broader work environment provided another layer of meaning to my work as an EDC instructor, and I began to aspire more toward innovation than creativity alone. Amabile (1988) clarifies the distinction this way: creativity is the individual or small-group “production of novel and useful ideas,” while innovation is the broader “development and implementation of new ideas” (p. 126). Beyond the individual creativity of the auteur, I started to focus more on contributing to broader experimentation with others, and I found that these were mutually supportive goals. Collaboration gave me renewed motivation to contribute more creative ideas within the shared framework, and this collaborative work inspired me to explore directions that I would not have considered on my own.

**CONCLUSION**

As I have discussed in this paper, teaching a unified curriculum in the EDC program has given me new insights into teaching as a personally creative and meaningful act. I still view the teacher-auteur as one of Rorty’s (1989) strong poets, feeling compelled to “demonstrate that he is not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own” (p. 43). I believe that I will always feel this need to determine my own meaning and sense of personal creativity, even in contexts that require some level of conformity. Without this sense of creative ownership, I—like many teachers—would lose motivation. The reflections in this paper are themselves an attempt to redescribe teaching EDC in my own terms, to create its meaning for myself, and I hope that others might find some inspiration for their own redescriptions and meaning through it.

As I have argued, if one is motivated by aspirations to a particular ideal type of creative teacher, the teacher-auteur, then an environment with certain constraints should not be demotivating. Instead, they create the conditions to play in useful directions, to be truly creative.
Contrary to the idea that “the creative person must in a sense disengage him- or herself from the environment” (Montuori & Purser, 1995, p. 74), I have come to believe that the teacher-auteur should seek out enabling constraints, both internally and externally imposed, to create new meaning, and that they should collaborate to persist in finding new paths for real innovation.

Genius would thus emerge from the environment, made possible by technical mastery developed by learning with others, enabled by the constraints of a strong framework, and stimulated by collaboration. This is how I now read that line of Šalamun’s (2015) poem—genius is only a matter of environment. I am still nowhere near a genius, but I will continue to seek out environments providing the conditions that at least make its emergence possible, and I will still draw motivation from trying to find it.

REFERENCES


