

Interpreting a Jazz Score: A Metaphor for Creative Teaching in Contexts with Strong Instructional Guidance

ROBERT E. FLODEN AND KUO-LIANG CHANG

Michigan State University

Abstract

To call a teacher “creative” has usually been a term of praise. In the current education system in the US (and likely elsewhere), however, teachers are expected to stick closely to a prescribed curriculum, perhaps even to a prescribed script. A metaphor has been proposed that would give a place for creativity in teaching, within the confines of instructional guidance. The metaphor suggests that the teacher’s job is to play from a jazz score, rather than working as a composer. This paper will explore this metaphor, with attention to the extent that it gives a positive place to teacher creativity.

Introduction and Sketch of Argument

In the United States and many other countries, a widely adopted approach to improving student learning has been to put in place policies and programs that give teachers guidance about what and how to teach. These policies and programs include government-mandated content standards, associated student assessment programs, requirements for using best practices supported by evidence, state- or district-adopted curriculum materials, and school reform packages that may go as far as scripting instruction in some subjects. The main rationale offered for all such standardized guidance is that the measures will improve student learning.

Some education practitioners and scholars have objected to such central guidance, arguing that these approaches constrain teachers, not allowing them to exercise their professional judgment, in particular not allowing them to be creative. The upshot, they continue, is that students are deprived of the benefits that come from creative teaching and that some of the best teachers find the loss of creative freedom so burdensome that they shift to other occupations.

These complaints about stifled creativity are rebutted with arguments asserting that what is stifled is not productive creativity, but a stubborn refusal to take advantage of the efforts of experts, an unwillingness to consider the evidence supporting new practices, or self-oriented idiosyncrasy. These rebuttals point, in particular, to the need for low-performing schools to look outside for direction in how to make improvements.

Evaluating the arguments on both sides of this dispute requires consideration of what is meant by creativity in this context and what the tradeoffs are between promoting creativity and restricting the range of instruction, in particular, restricting it to practices with established links to learning or with the support of expert or political authority. Does “creativity” have value in addition to its association with improved student learning? Is asking for creative freedom simply a request to act without an accepted rationale? Do variations in instructional context undercut arguments for standardization?

A metaphor for considering a balance might be playing a jazz score, where the overall shape the performance is fixed by composers, but specifics are produced by talented performers, who are given range for creativity, within bounds. The metaphor may offer a way about seeing the advantages in division of labor between those determining the general parameters for instruction and those who doing daily classroom teaching, acknowledging the talents and limitations of each, and suggesting an approach toward improvement that allows for appropriate creative freedom within each role.

The following sections will expand the argument just sketched, drawing on examples and prior publications. The US education system will be taken as the context for this analysis, but the line of thought should have application in other settings where education systems are pushing toward standardization.

The Push for Standardization of Instructional Content and Methods

Since the mid-1980s, the so-called “standards movement” has been the dominant trend in US education policy. National organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Academies of Science have drafted content standards with recommendations for the knowledge and skills that should be mastered by elementary and secondary school students. These have sometimes been extended into standards for teaching, with recommendations for the instructional practices that should be used in helping pupils meet the content standards. States and schools districts have followed by developing their own sets of standards, roughly aligned with the standards from national associations. While national organizations have not authority over schools and teachers, the states and districts do have legal authority over their jurisdictions.

To measure progress toward meeting these standards, states and districts have instituted or strengthened assessment systems. These systems have gained added importance under the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which put in place consequences for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward having all students meet the state standards. The sheer amount of testing and the pressure teachers feel to raise scores on the assessments have both grown in the five years since the passage of the federal legislation.

As schools and districts struggle to meet their annual improvement targets, they often adopt curricula or school improvement programs reputed to aid in ratcheting up test scores. These curricula and programs all provide teachers with some instructional guidance, ranging in specificity from suggesting possible approaches to a lesson to laying out a detailed description of how each lesson should proceed, including time devoted to each chunk of the lesson and prescribed responses based on student performance.

The combination of standards, high-stakes assessments, prescribed curriculum materials, and guidance, (sometimes quite detailed) for individual lessons constitutes a dramatic shift from the context many teachers faced two decades ago, when they had considerable range of choice about what topics to teach, how much time to spend on each topic, and how to organize the lessons. The rosy description of those earlier times would stress the virtues of teachers as curriculum constructors, designing engaging lessons that supported the development of the individual children in that year’s class. The critique of those days would characterize the times as ones where no one could be sure that any child had the opportunity to learn the most important topics and where many students left school without the skills most needed for college, work, or democratic participation. That latter view, characterized as a “rising tide of mediocrity,” prompted the push for policies that made instructional guidance stronger and more prescriptive.

Standardization May Stifle Creativity

Some education practitioners and scholars have resisted this policy trend, arguing that its press for prescription, standardization, and uniformity has damaged the quality of teaching and learning. These critics point to the inflexibility of prescribed teaching, which they say fails to acknowledge the complexity, variability, and uncertainty of teaching (Clark & Lampert, 1986; Cochran-Smith, 2006; Griffin, 1991; Floden & Buchmann, 1993; Floden & Clark, 1988; McDonald, 1992; Zumwalt, 1988). In addition, they claim that scripted teaching or prescribed curriculum removes teachers’ creativity (Sawyer, 2004) and professional judgment from the classroom (Apple & Teitelbaum, 1986; Griffin, 1991; McNeil, 1986; Sawyer, 2004; Zumwalt, 1988) and circumscribes teachers’ opportunities to question common practices and develop

responsible critiques (Cochran-Smith, 2006; McDonald, 1992). Therefore, they claim that general teaching prescriptions do more harm than good in the particular contexts or situations teachers face.

Sawyer (2004) gives explicit attention to the constraints on creativity. He criticizes scripted instruction that doesn't rely on teachers' creative potential or their subject matter expertise. Such prescriptive instruction guidance, he says, require that teachers simply rehearse and perform scripts (lectures and student exchanges) to the audience (the students):

Scripted teacher-proof curricula do not rely either on teachers' creative potential or their subject matter expertise; the message of these programs seems to be, if you can perform well from a script, you can teach. . . Scripted instruction is clearly performative: teachers stand 'on stage' in front of the classroom 'audience'; the lectures and student exchanges are 'scripts' for the performance; teachers [are told that they] should 'rehearse' their presentations; and the teacher/performer must work hard to hold the attention of the audience, with timing, stage presence, and enthusiasm. (p. 12)

Sawyer is asserting that scripted instruction removes all creativity and professional judgment from the classroom: "Scripted approaches attempt to teacher proof the curriculum by rigidly specifying teacher actions, and essentially removing all creativity and professional judgment from the classroom" (p. 12).

Selwyn (2007) makes the link between "scripted" curricula and the broader emphasis on state testing. He claims that the constraints such curricula put on teachers are discouraging to teachers, some of whom react by leaving the profession. He asserts that the standardized tests (mandated by No Child Left Behind) have drawn schools toward adopting scripted curricula to help increasing students' achievement on the test:

The concerted effort in states across the country to turn public schools into 'achievement factories,' as a former Seattle School District superintendent once called them, geared toward 'manufacturing' students who can pass the standardized tests mandated by NCLB, has had an impact, as well, on who wants to be a teacher. As the pressure has increased on schools to emphasize 'basic skills,' scripted curricula, and a one-size-fits-all approach to education, many who would have been drawn to teaching have been pushed away. (p. 128)

It is discouraging to faculty and students alike to recognize that the direction that NCLB is driving education is away from child-centered education that is 'locally controlled' by those closest to the students and communities, and toward a national curriculum that is programmed by bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., and, according to recent headlines, beset by charges of cronyism and corruption. (p. 131)

Part of the argument against standardization and prescription is that teaching is too complex an endeavor for any general guidance to be useful or appropriate. Though they do not use the term, "creativity," the tenor of these arguments is that teaching is an activity that requires on-the-fly decisions, which cannot rely on external guidance. Hence, it seems, they require teachers to be creative in their response to the specific situations they face. Clark and Lampert (1994), for example, illustrated the complexity of teaching from studies of teacher planning, interactive decision-making, and the dilemmas that characterize teaching. For teacher planning,

The curriculum as published is transformed and adapted in the planning process by additions, deletions, interpretations, and by teacher decisions about pace, sequence, and emphasis. And in elementary classrooms, where a teacher is responsible for teaching all subject matter areas, planning decisions about what to teach, how long to devote to each topic, and how much practice to provide take on additional significance and complexity. Other functions of teacher planning include allocating instructional time for individuals and groups of students, composing student groupings, organizing daily, weekly, and term schedules, compensating for interruptions from outside the classroom, and communicating with substitute teachers. (p. 28)

Because of the complexity and uncertainty in teaching, “Research cannot describe the sorts of decisions teachers should be taught to make in any particular setting.” (p. 29).

Griffin (1991), similarly, claimed teachers’ intellectual authority would diminish if teaching is conceptualized as following directions, implementing mandates, and moving through predetermined activities. “If teaching is conceptualized as following directions, implementing mandates, and moving through predetermined activities, teaching becomes automaton-like and teacher’s intellectual authority diminishes” (p. 124). He likewise believed teaching is complex. “Teaching and learning are extraordinarily complex, especially when they take place in classrooms populated by twenty-five or more students who bring different perspectives, cultural characteristics, and expectations to the interactions” (p. 125).

Excellent teachers engage in thorough planning, drawing upon their own and others’ intellectual resources so that they are prepared to move students through complicated and often unfamiliar terrains of the mind. They reflect upon their practice, testing out their theories in use against their hypotheses about learning possibilities. (p. 124).

These complaints about the standardization of teaching predate the current standards movement. Reacting to education policies derived from the process-product research of the 1970s and 1980s, Zumwalt (1988) claimed the trends of over-standardization of curriculum, measurement-driven instruction and research-based prescriptions for effective teaching devalue teachers and treat teachers as technicians delivering the curriculum.

The three other trends undermining good teachers and teaching are : (a) over-standardization of curriculum, (b) measurement-driven instruction, and (c) research-based prescriptions for effective teaching. Such control efforts, while providing a temporary façade of improvement are ultimately doomed because they devalue the teacher – relegating the teacher’s role to that of a technician delivering the “curriculum.” (p. 149)

Arguments for Restricting Teachers’ Scope of Action

Some of the points made by those critical of standardization seem undeniable. Teaching is extraordinarily complex. No single teaching practice, even if supported by research, will be best for all teaching situations. Pressing for standardization will reduce teachers’ range of possible choices for what and how to teach. To some extent, there is a trade-off between increased teaching efficiency and effectiveness (on given outcomes) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, professional autonomy and discretion. Similarly, a press for standardization is, to some extent, in tension with allowing free range for teachers’ creativity.

The critics might, however, be creating a false dichotomy between teachers’ having complete freedom to do whatever they deem best and teachers’ becoming unthinking machines, robots following a centrally written script. Upon reflection, the inaccuracy of this dichotomy is apparent, though is also a familiar feature of educational discourse.

Saying that teachers should be able to do whatever they choose is a romantic notion, reminiscent of the rhetoric of freedom surrounding Summerhill and education movements from the 1960s. Similar romantic arguments have been made for giving students license to decide what and when they will learn. As Strike (1982), among others, has argued, however, true autonomy involves making choices within externally set standards and boundaries; acting without such guidance is mere thrashing about.

For the case of teaching, encouraging every teacher to act purely on the basis of their personal preferences is a license for idiosyncrasy. While many of the courses of action teachers choose may have positive effects on students, giving teacher preferences primacy over group professional norms or empirically documented positive effects shifts the purpose of schooling from concern for pupils to concern for teachers. Buchmann (1986) has argued that teachers’ role obligations, including the obligation to

acknowledge some sources of external authority, imply that teachers should not be guided primarily on their personal beliefs about what students should learn or how they should be taught.

Buchmann (1986) claimed that teaching requires professional obligations that can be justified by the public, not private, standards. Such professional obligations are some kinds of behaviors and dispositions that people can expect of teachers, for example, good ways of working or justified beliefs.

Norms of collegiality and experimentation are moral demands with intellectual substance. They are not matters of individual preference but are based, instead, on a shared understanding of the kinds of behaviors and dispositions that people have a right to expect of teachers. These norms require detachment – a willingness to stand back from personal habits, interests, and opinions. What one does or believes in is not talked about as part of one’s self but as something other – it becomes a potential exemplar of good (or not so good) ways of working, or of more or less justified beliefs. In teaching, what people do is neither private nor sacred but open to judgments of worth and relevance in the light of professional obligation. (p. 539)

Floden and Klinzing (1990), note that, while the complexity of teaching implies that no single teaching approach will be the best for every teaching context, that does not mean that teachers should rely solely on their individual views about what is best for their context. Instead, information from research can provide justification for at least starting with approaches that have proved valuable across a range of contexts. Evidence from the local site may suggest ways in which an approach should be adapted, but the weight given to that evidence should be in line with its reliability, in comparison to the reliability of the broader research.

Considering Creativity

What does it mean to say that recent increases in the specificity and strength of instructional guidance stifle creativity, that is, make it difficult for teachers to be creative? The definition of “creative” probably in play here not the primary one of making something out of nothing, but rather a secondary definition applied primarily to the context of literature and art. The Oxford English Dictionary online has this meaning for “creative”: “Inventive. . ., imaginative; exhibiting imagination as well as intellect, and thus differentiated from the merely critical, ‘academic’, journalistic, professional, mechanical, etc., in literary or artistic production.” This definition suggests the positive affect associated with creative teaching – it is not merely academic or mechanical. The connection the complaints that standards or assessments lead to scripted teaching, or mechanical instruction are evident.

But this definition also suggests the possibility that creativity could be exercised within bounds that are set external to the performer, that is, the teacher. Theater productions, for example, ask the actors to follow a script, but the actors’ work will show imagination, indeed the quality of the performance is tied both to the script and to the creativity shown by the actor. Creativity and instructional guidance may be compatible, rather than polar opposites.

Playing a Jazz Score: Creativity Within Structure

A suggestive metaphor for the balance of guidance and creativity is playing from a jazz score. Jazz is a musical genre in which the specificity of the score can vary widely, from oral specification of a set of chord changes to a written score that notes the pitch, time value, mood (e.g., *mysterioso*) and loudness for each note for every player in the ensemble. That range in specificity can be seen as analogous to the range in specificity of instructional guidance. The performance may be directed by a designated leader, perhaps standing on an elevated podium, or may have be a collaborative effort, with each player sensitive to what the other players are doing, but with the central direction limited to a player designated to count off the initial beats.

Each player's role then will be constrained in some ways by the score and by the organization structure of the performance, but those constraints do not imply absence of individual creativity. Even with a detailed score and a central director, the individual performer, perhaps more in jazz than in classical music, contributes to the overall quality of the performance both by following the score (and direction) and by using his or her imagination to embellish the performance, within the set bounds. If all players' performance is merely mechanical, the result may be of some value, but if the players are also creative the performance may be outstanding.

Jazz ensembles sometimes stretch the limits of what it means to follow the score. One might say that they sometimes follow it flexibly. To play a score flexibly means to change the melody, harmonies, or even the time signature of a score. Some of Charlie Parker's brilliance, for example, came in starting with a jazz standard like *Cherokee*, following the chord progression, but improving a tune based on extended versions of those chords (C9, C11, C13, rather than C7). The result was *Koko*, a landmark in jazz. The jazz performance as metaphor, then, allows for a wide range of creative possibilities in performance. Part of a score might be repeated, varied, combined, played by different instrument combinations (perhaps substituting tubas for trumpets), different tempos, injected with emotional interpretations suggesting sadness or happiness.

I suggest this metaphor as a starting point for thinking about how teacher creativity can intersect with instructional guidance from standards, assessments, and curriculum packages. Rather than seeing a need to decide *between* teacher creativity and central instructional guidance, the metaphor offers a way to begin thinking about what sorts of creativity are possible *within* varying instructional contexts. I do not intend to argue for a particular model of instructional guidance, or for a particular amount of flexibility to be allowed for teachers. Rather, I hope that I have rehearsed some of the arguments around creativity and guidance, which do not, I think, dictate a particular resolution.

One final note, the metaphor suggests, in a general way, a role for the performer. It also suggests a role for the composer, a role for which a different range of expertise may be most beneficial. It also hints at the differences in preparation that might be most valuable for each role. For the realm of education, perhaps teacher education focused on creative performance would have advantages over preparation that attempted to make teachers both excellent performers and excellent composers.

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