Generative divergent analysis as a model for reflection illustrated with reference to an early-years reception class and wicker settee
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Abstract:
Generative divergent analysis (GDA) is a creative additive approach to raising insignificant details of experience to significance. A schematic view of the model highlights use of evocative objects as starting point for ‘turning towards’, ‘turning away’ and ‘being-in-relation-to’ as part of an ongoing burgeoning of experience. The model is exemplified by focusing on a wicker settee as an evocative object that was noticed in an early-years reception class. Revisiting the object generated several speculative ideas relating to the hidden curriculum and energies of childhood. Poetry and song were used during the revisiting in order to develop a more direct experience in addition to the more contemplative awareness that was evoked during the first encounters. As an additive process the outcome of GDA takes the form of unfinished resources for thinking.

Keywords: reflection, paradigm, early-years, generative, evocative, arts-based

My extended experience during the last twelve years of supervising trainee teachers during teaching practices has led to a preoccupation with the insignificant details of experience, the contextual details associated with teaching activity. This is more accurately described as a speculative encounter with surfaces rather than with the ‘thick descriptive detail’ referred to by Geertz (1973). My personal subjective experience of supervising students over this period has included awareness of purposeful planned teaching events but with a more marginalised awareness of encompassing contexts. What could be done to bring this more into focus? The more restricted awareness, for example the more limited awareness of the physical learning environment, together with a belief in the value of creativity and ideas rooted within a process orientation to developing experience, led me to develop an approach to practitioner research that I refer to as the creative analytic paradigm (CAP) based on evocative objects (Turkle, 2007) and the idea of field as an emergent concept (Ely et al, 2001). There is insufficient space here to provide a detailed account of the CAP but the full explication of this approach to educational research was the focus of my PhD thesis (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process, 2013).

Whereas Bruster and Peterson (2013) focused on the analysis of critical incidents as a foundation for their approach to reflective practice, the binary analysis of Derrida (1978) drew attention to the overlooked or marginalised minor binary as worthy of consideration. Similarly, the situational analysis approach of Clarke (2005) drew on actor network theory when incorporating non-human actants into the analysis of social situations. Shon’s (1991) concept of knowledge-in-action, and also the Aristotelian concept of ‘phronesis’ (practical wisdom) help translate these views into the professional teaching context. More recent models of reflection (Bradbury, 2010) also lend support to the more engaged state of being which involves the moment by moment developing state of awareness rather than a more detached and remote scientific objectivity. When focusing on the role of research within education, Eisner (2005) reinforced this more creative response to experience by emphasising...
the value “of the attractiveness of a set of ideas, rather than of the rigor of a body of data-based conclusions” (p89).

The approach to analysis in relation to the evocative objects model is both generative and divergent. This is a process model which uses the evocative object as a source of ideas generation through repeated revisiting of the object over a period of time. This is more of a passive serendipitous background activity rather than an exhaustive systematic active interrogation and extraction of meaning. As with human relationships space for the relationship to develop and valuing of the other are signs of a flourishing and worthwhile relationship whereas interrogation is a sign of the impending breakdown of the relationship. Uncertainty can be the spark that adds value.

Generative divergent analysis (GDA) is an imaginative additive process of generating alternative speculative reflections and the analytical process is essentially a creative burgeoning of experience. The fluency, flexibility and originality of thinking referred to by Guilford (1973), the elaborative interpretation referred to by Novitz (2000) and the use of orienting concepts to kick start the thinking process as referred to by Layder (1998) are some of the possible starting points for engaging with experience in this creative way. This more creative approach to analysis recalls the creation of nomadic pathways and transcendental empiricism of Deleuze & Guitari (2004).

The specific character of generative divergent analysis is marked by a ‘turning towards’ and ‘turning away’ from the evocative object as part of a developing being-in-relation-to relationship with the object. The collections of speculative reflections and elaborating interpretations of evocative objects constitute satellite topics conceived of as unfinished resources for thinking (name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process, 2013). What follows is one such satellite topic, originating in the early-years physical learning environment, where the primary evocative object is a reception class containing a wicker settee. The image, as a remarkable moment (Brown & Jones, 2001), was revisited on numerous occasions and several ideas were generated during an extended period of time. The GDA model involves generating different ways of responding to the evocative object and in this satellite topic there are two distinct approaches. The first is a contemplative awareness and elaborating interpretation; the second is a more direct encounter with the object through use of poetry and song. Whereas the first approach remains tightly connected to the wicker settee setting, the second approach begins with the wicker settee setting but then merges various reception class settings in order to develop the initial ideas. The overall effect is different levels of ‘turning towards’ and ‘turning away’ and a sense of drifting away from the original primary evocative object (Figure 1). Although the themes may appear markedly different the final ‘turning away’ begins to unite ideas related to hidden curriculum and the concept of childhood through a focus on normalisation.

(Figure 1) – goes here

Imagine a Reception class: On the left there are red, green and blue tables surrounded by the usual chairs made with tubular steel frames and hard plastic backs and seats. On the right, the
Interactive Whiteboard is located at child’s height on a wall with a mural painted directly along the entire length of the wall. There is a draped translucent curtain sectioning off a quiet area with some cushions. Although there are several types of display e.g. hanging from the ceiling and breaking away from the rectangular wall display, they don’t intrude on the space.

Probably one of the most notable features in the whole classroom is the very ornate, even Baroque, chaise longue, located as if on a stage in front of the Interactive Whiteboard, adding a sense of style and contributing to an impression of elegance. In stark contrast to the primary colours of the tables in what seems to be the more formal working area, the translucent curtain, the hanging display and the mural itself are soft pastel colours such as mauve, pink and turquoise. The teacher’s chair is covered with a lavender blanket and there are also touches of lavender in the expansive pale blue sky of the mural, which includes a few flying insects, and jade green grass with a few mushrooms just beneath the Interactive Whiteboard. Although the room is very small, the mural adds to the sense of space by giving the impression of direct access to sky and grass, and reduces the potential for the experience of crowding. The skylight windows also help to open up the room while the chaise longue acts to break up the space and reduce the potential for boisterous activity associated with the perception of open space.

Looking more closely there are several different types of chair and seating in this classroom, apart from the tubular steel work chairs. There’s a wicker chair, a rocking chair, a wooden chair for a pupil with a physical disability, there’s the comfortable teacher’s chair with its lavender blanket, adjustable height computer chairs and also several cushions piled in a heap. Actually, what at first sight appeared to be a chaise longue is really a stylish wicker settee covered with red cushions and leopard skin covers but the effect of the contrasting colours and chairs is to divide the class into ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ and brings the idea of the ‘hidden curriculum’ into focus.

The various forms of seating stand out as items of mass culture. The standard hard plastic backed work chairs appear as functional items, comfortable and durable but not particularly alluring from the point of view of style. They’re well matched to the working environment and as such they can be seen as components of the normalisation process, the way in which the school introduces children to the dominant culture where behaviour is regulated by the needs of conformity. Interestingly, other instances of the hidden curriculum might be visible through e.g. name labels on children’s trays which reinforce individualism, and good behaviour displays which reinforce working for extrinsic rewards which is also part of the dominant culture though neither are visible in this setting.

I’m still wondering about the children sitting on leopard skins; after all leopards are an endangered species. Consistent with the speculative nature of generative divergent analysis (GDA), other ideas also come into view. For example, returning to the formal/informal character of the classroom divided by colours and chairs raises questions about the nature of the classroom as a place within the encompassing context of the neighbourhood locale. And although the spread of mass culture and growth of mass communication has undermined class
consciousness and introduced multiplicity such as race and gender, does the separation in this classroom still reflect a working class division of work from leisure?

Figure 2 is a visual representation of the ‘turning towards’ and ‘turning away’ components of the GDA model in relation to the preceding reflections.

(Figure 2) – goes here

The insignificant details of experience are already beginning take on more significance: the settee is no longer just a settee but part of a tasteful environment that seems to support tidy sitting rather than indulgent but messy play. Children are potentially also learning through the hidden curriculum that work is separate from leisure. Maybe the judgment about the leopard skins is too harsh, maybe.

The burgeoning of this experience of the ‘reception class with wicker settee’ is also supported by a poetic encounter which helps to add an arts based layer that accesses other dimensions of experience (Leavy, 2009; Barone, 2001; McNiff, 1998). In the following section the wicker settee setting is revisited in a way that relates more closely to perceived feelings originating in the setting.

The songs and poems originate in the wicker settee setting but have been transformed into factional accounts (Eisner, 2005) through merging with images from other settings in order to engage with and communicate the experience more directly. The particular focus when turning towards the evocative object was specific forms of energy of childhood. This was evoked by the ideas of tidy sitting in a tasteful environment contrasted with the more indulgent expressions of childhood. The turning away involved more general reflections on the nature and value of childhood (Figure 3). The end result is a more elaborated but still unfinished resource, a more developed evocative object; a more conscious, direct and personal experience of the energy of childhood; and the nature of the classroom as a learning environment, as an object for thinking (Turkle, 2007).

(Figure 3) – goes here

The first poem is a response to the tasteful classroom design that suggested sitting on the settee was a privilege. The decision to rewrite the poem as a song was influenced by the evocative potential of this form of expression. The song version of the poem is loud with a
driving blues rhythm, drums, bass, funky lead guitar and rock style voice. This is essentially
the raw energy of childhood, the authentic expression of the child, of who I am. The image
is that of Flemming’s (1996) orgiastic play within the early-years learning environment. This
is the child’s space, my space, immersion in the moment, the ‘flow’ that Csikszentmihalyi

(Listen to the performance of the song at:
http://www.eyle.org/SoftPastelBlueSunglow.mp3)

The full version of the poem (Figure 4) is the only one in the series that has rudimentary
rather than developed form, which suggests the unbounded potential of childhood but which
also reflects an emerging yet uncultivated self. The poem, as a string of words, is read rapidly
with urgency and purpose but never really escapes the orgiastic/ascetic dimension of play
(Flemming, 1996). Although a continuation of the energy of childhood, the images are
always weighed down by a sense of the imposed order of the environment, the sophisticating
influence of education, and the formation of ‘docile bodies’ (Naughton, 2005).

(Figure 4) – goes here

The history of the concept of childhood has moved away from the early anthropological
perspective linking the child and the savage where the natural activities and games of
childhood were seen as “echoes of the ways in which our human ancestors lived”
(Montgomery, 2009, p.18). This may suggest there is nothing raw about the energy of
childhood but self-expression may still be more the self-expression of the child than the
expression of the values of the encompassing social context until the cultural world of
advertising, family and education begin to exert their influence. Various authors have
highlighted Philippe Aries’s study which suggested that childhood is a social construction
that didn’t exist until after the 15th century so that the meaning of childhood relates to a social
rather than actual reality. Sociocultural studies have also drawn attention to different cultural
perspectives on childhood (Tobin, Wu et al 1989; Kehily, 2004). Philosophical views of
human nature also raise questions about what it means to be a child and whether there is a
raw energy that is distinctively part of the essence and spirit of childhood. However, within a
Western cultural context it’s at least not alien to notice the abundance of energy associated
with childhood and the image of children running wild contrasted with the more constrained
activity typical of educational settings such as the wicker settee.

The second poem (Figure 5) conveys a more ascetic view of children playing in different
areas without making too much mess, organised, tidy and cultivated activities, planned use of
space and teacher’s perspective. In contrast to the preceding view the setting is experienced
as ordered and quiet but where children are involved and preoccupied with ‘measuring and
pouring’, ‘digging and delving’ and ‘translucent views’ – the channelled energy rather than
raw energy of childhood.
An alternative perspective would be to contrast the cultivated energy of teacher directed activities within the educational setting with children’s cultural worlds (Swann & Kehily, 2003) and the ‘third space’ (Grant, 2011) characterised by Pokemon, gooey aliens, card swapping but also by the impromptu creative utilisation of resources. The point is well illustrated by the child who wants to keep one foot in the role play area when called upon to do a planned reading activity with the teacher. A similar image of valued self-initiated activity is provided by children playing outdoors where one of the children spontaneously decides to relocate a large tyre to a more central but unused part of the play space. Very soon other children join in to help move what is quite a heavy tyre and before long they create a car tyre area for climbing on and standing in.

The third poem in the sequence (Figure 6) depicts lost energy through moments of inactivity where the environment is implicated in the action in the form of tangled wires and broken headphones in the listening area; indistinct and unappealing classroom areas; outdated displays and overcrowded space; where the classroom is too noisy, too bright, too dark, too cold; where the physical setting is over stimulating and distracting, and where resources are inaccessible.

An alternative image is provided by Glasser’s (no date) concept of under-energised children who

“… are often overlooked in a busy classroom or family and do not actively seek to have their needs met in positive ways. They may also turn to misbehaviour for attention, but usually in obtuse or inconspicuous and less pronounced ways. In some instances, this type of child is the “daydreamer,” “doodler” or “worrier” who fails to finish or undertake required work and responsibilities. In other instances the child is quietly defiant.”

Claxton & Carr (2004) referred to learning environments as prohibiting, affording, inviting and potentiating. One instance of a prohibiting environment would be the perception of busyness in the classroom setting as a form of overcrowding which may lead to children

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1 Figure 5 Wordle image created using http://wordle.com
switching off and withdrawal, conveying a sense of aloofness (Evans et al., 1991). The outdoor mural and strategic location of the settee helped to manage the small size of the wicker settee setting. Although the setting was instantly appealing and inviting upon entry to the classroom the artistic styling gave the sense of being in the ‘best’ room of the house rather than in the living room which takes some getting used to and may undermine the potential for children to be children. The inappropriate use of space may also prohibit learning e.g. where books for reading are located next to a noisy role play area rather than in an alcove affording semi-private space. Lost energy!

The concept of ‘lost childhood’ extends the image of lost energy further. Kehily (2004) referred to the 19th century account by Henry Mayhew of the 8 year old Watercress Girl which recalls other images of street children who lacked experience of play and the fun of childhood. Economic necessity forms part of a composite image together with the spare the rod to spoil the child perspective.

The fourth poem (Figure 7) represents a combination of raw energy in the form of the child’s rapid and spontaneous movement possibly suggesting Glasser’s (no date) concept of the over-energised child in relation to a focus on ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). The poem also suggests cultivated energy in the form of perseverance with planned activities and lost energy in the form of ‘hanging round the areas’ and ‘hands in pockets’.

(Figure 7) – goes here - NB Can be located on left of page with tight wrapped text - adjacent to text beginning “The fourth poem...”

The raw, cultivated and lost energy schema focuses attention on values and the source of different values, learnt behaviour contrasted with natural curiosity, the separation of self from other. Where does the child as a source of value start to express external values? How does the educational setting acknowledge and also disregard the values of the child? Cannella (1999) approached the social construction of childhood from a Foucaultian perspective when considering the insidious power of teaching and management methods to “imprint the souls of the children rather than just their behaviours” (Scheurich & McKenzie, 2005).

The final poem, rendered as a song (Figure 8), is a reminiscence that portrays childhood without the intensity of the various forms of energy. It’s a potentially stereotypical ‘tempus fugit’ happy days view reflected both in the title ‘Water Play and Wellies’ and in the brevity of the song.

(Figure 8) – goes here
How much of the image originates in my own childhood experience of childhood as a happy time or in repressed images of experiences sooner forgotten, and how much is suggested by the affordances of recently visited early-years settings?

“Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts. Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips, and when the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these innocents of the joys which pass so quickly, of that precious gift which they cannot abuse? Why fill with bitterness the fleeting days of early childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you?” (Rousseau, 2011)

Moss & Petrie (2002) expressed a similar view when characterising ‘children’s spaces’ as opportunities for the development of children’s culture where children can pursue their own agendas through an emphasis on processes and relationships rather than predetermined outcomes. Contributing to this more positive image of children with values, interests and purposes of their own Batycky (2008) valorised listening to the voice of the child and urged that children need to be recognised as co-creators of knowledge as part of a “lived and negotiated curriculum that is not predictable” (p. 177).

Drawing the threads together, the generative divergent analysis approach to reflection as an additive process of generating alternative speculative reflections through engagement with evocative objects led to an encounter with an extended range of themes. The first ideas evoked from the wicker settee related to

- sense of artistic style
- space and the strategic breaking up of space
- leopard skins seat covers
- work/leisure patterns and social class
- the character of the setting as a desirable place to be within the encompassing context of the neighbourhood locale

These images ‘turned away’ to begin to engage with a more general focus on the hidden curriculum, including separation of work from less formal activities, the role of extrinsic rewards in the early-years and environmental support for developing independence.

Revisiting the wicker settee as an evocative object led, at a more experiential level, to a focus on raw, cultivated and lost energy which ‘turned away’ to an initial encounter with the potentially burgeoning topics of

- Energies of childhood - either as an empty shell or regarded as a more substantive schema – a more philosophical approach to considering the essential nature the child and the categorisation of childhood energy
- Immersion in the moment – the valuing of being in the ‘flow’ - the unbounded potential of childhood that knows no limits and wants to keep one foot in the role play area while doing the teacher directed number activity– the pedagogical implications of regarding the child as a source of value
• Childhood as a social construction - the uncultivated self – a developmental perspective that recognises the child as a source of value and 'child’s voice' – rights of the child within the encompassing cultural context

• Learning environments – influences and types - elements of ascetic play orgiastic play

References

(name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process) (2013) Developing a creative analytic paradigm in relation to the early-years physical learning environment, Unpublished PhD thesis. (Place deleted to maintain integrity of review process)


Title: Generative divergent analysis: reception class and wicker settee

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Captions:

Figure 1: Schematic overview of the satellite topic

Figure 2: Initial generated ideas

Figure 3: Initial generated ideas upon revisiting

Figure 4: Full version of the poem – SoftPastelBlueSunglow. Listen to the recorded version at: http://www.eyle.org/SoftPastelBlueSunglowFullPoem.mp3

Figure 5: Channelled energy poem. Listen to the recorded version at: http://www.eyle.org/SearchPage/poems/WellyPoem2a.swf

Figure 6: Lost energy poem (Noah’s Ark)

Figure 7: Combined energies poem (Visit to a reception class)

Figure 8: Water Play and Wellies. Listen to recorded version at: http://www.eyle.org/WellyPoem1a.swf
Figure 1
Figure 2

- Sense of artistic style
- Breaking up the space
- Leopard skin ethics
- Work/leisure patterns

Type of environment

Reception class with wicker settee
Figure 4

Strategic wicker settee centre stage informal space soft pastel colours mauve jade green lilac blue sunglow tidy carpet ascetic play artistic style marginalised orgiastic art involvement running boys leopard skin ethics mural – sky, grass open space - translucent curtain skylights streaming sunlight wicker chair rocking chair wooden chair cushions inclusion stool formal rectangular tables hard plastic backed chairs tubular steel faint alphabet number line hint of words and sounds Normalisation separation - Hidden curriculum - Identity – Attachment
Noah's Ark Poem

As I wander through the space
   Hands neatly placed in pockets
     Expressionless face
       Then pause

   Rocking to and fro', to and fro'
No thought of play or place to go

   Do I know that I am standing
   In the centre of the room
     Life going on around me?

   Am I listening to the music?
   Am I dreaming of the day?
     Do I hear the teacher calling
       To tidy classroom things away?

   Do I notice children passing
   While rocking to and fro'
     to and fro' to and fro'...?

What’s this beside me, what’s inside?
   Press down, jump up, look around,
     It’s time to go.
Visit to a Reception class

Functional, purposeful, colourful
Inside and out and calm

Standing in the doorway
Sleeves concealing hands
Looking out

Hands in pockets
Wandering about

And we’re not moving
Staying with the Blocks
Staying with the Towers

And now we’re just together
Sitting on a chair
On the seat and arm
No, wait… I’m crawling over there
- And back again
And to the winding train

Staying with the writing
Staying with sand

Egg timer held on head
And Action Man in hand
Waving sleeves and flapping sleeves fun
Hanging round the areas
Jumping up and skipping

Tidy up time... music - now the day is done
Figure 8

**Water play and Wellies**
The classroom setting  
Fine mesh netting  
Sand, soft furnishings and sunlight  
Comfortable children  
Free from fretting  
Outdoors, puddles and muddy site  
Self registration  
Work on the walls  
Toys and the carpet, books to share  
The Christmas card shop  
Dressing up shawls  
Post cards, dancing – glad I was there