

# In imitation of Hockney: *The value of teacher versatility*

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## Inspired by Hockney

On a recent trip to London I had the opportunity of visiting a retrospective exhibition celebrating the work of the contemporary artist David Hockney. The exhibition featured 60 years of work by someone who has been described as “one of the most popular and widely recognised artists of our time” (TATE Britain, 2017). Hockney was born in Yorkshire in 1937, and he is mostly renowned for his contribution to the pop art movement of the 1960s. *A Bigger Splash* (1967), depicting the splash made by someone diving into a swimming pool in California, is perhaps one of his most famous paintings. Despite the iconic nature achieved by many of the paintings he produced in the 1960s and 1970s, Hockney has remained a vibrant artist who has kept reinventing himself over the years.

The exhibition at TATE Britain sought to show how his creative output has reoriented itself with every passing decade, moving

between oils, acrylic, watercolours, and charcoal; experimenting with photography to produce photo collages; making multi-screen video productions; and utilising iPads instead of a sketchbook. Throughout his career, Hockney has explored the use of different media which enables him to diversify his creative work, believing that:

Whatever your medium is you have to respond to it. I have always enjoyed swapping mediums about. I usually follow it, don't go against it. I like using different techniques. If you are given a shabby brush you draw in a different way. That's what I do often: I deliberately pick up a medium which forces me to change direction (Hockney, 2004, p. 149).

His willingness to change styles, media, and techniques seems to be rooted in his interest in what constitutes picture-making. As an artist, he has produced a number of works that question and challenge the conventions of making pictures. *Demonstrations of Versatility* (1961) consists of four paintings that seek to show how adept he is at “playing with different realities and modes of representation (given) that style can be consciously chosen or dispensed with, and several styles are included in a single work” (TATE Britain, 2017).

Despite receiving formal training at the Royal College of Art, Hockney has taught himself a lot as an artist through his experimentation with different media and techniques. One of the main drivers for his creative learning has been his “insatiable curiosity about artistic technique. New ideas, new discoveries, and new exhibitions have led him to explore different creative paths” (National Portrait Gallery, 2007, p. 4). As someone open to a wide variety of influences, he has been, at one point, accused of amateurism for producing work that “skims across the surface of art, borrowing liberally from earlier masters” (Smith, 1996). In fact, while describing Hockney as “an adventurously, versatile modernist”, Johnson (2006) feels that “it is more the versatility of an illustrator or designer than of an artist driven to find new forms for new feelings”. Even though some people might see Hockney as a lightweight because of his constant experimentation, there are many who find his ceaseless explorations exciting (Kino, 2009).

As I walked through the 12 rooms housing the exhibition, I felt a palpable sense of excitement evoked by the progression from one stage of Hockney's career to another. One of the most striking things I noticed is that Hockney has spent the past six decades demonstrating how versatile he can be as an artist. This versatility has played a role in his success (Chilvers & Graves-Smith, 2009), making him someone who is “greatly admired for his constant innovation” (Seidl, 2015, p. 9). In fact, Low (2015) is described as an artist who has a “never-ending thirst for innovation”. For Hockney (2004), versatility is a means of innovating one's perspective: “In art, new ways of seeing mean new ways of feeling; you can't divorce the two” (p. 199). The more I reflected on Hockney's changing styles and openness to multiple influences, the more I realised that being versatile in one's practices is not only valuable for an artist but can be a highly-valid quality for language teachers.

## Defining versatility

Brown (1993) defines versatility as a person's “ability to turn easily from one subject, pursuit, or task to another; facility in or aptitude for varied subjects” (p. 3567). According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009), “someone who is versatile has many different skills” (p. 1949). Galenson (2007) argues that rather than dismissing versatility as idiosyncratic, we should

appreciate that it is common to most conceptual innovators, whether in the arts or academia. In the case of the former, “stylistic versatility is in fact often a characteristic of conceptual innovators whose abilities to solve specific problems can free them to pursue new goals” (Galenson, 2007, p. 17). Simonton (1988) sees versatility as one of the defining attributes of those who are achievers within their respective fields. He maintains that:

It is evident that a person is more likely to see congruence between hitherto isolated elements if that person has broad interests, is versatile, enjoys intellectual fluency and flexibility, and can connect disparate elements via unusual associations and wide categories that force a substantial overlap of ideas (Simonton, 1988, p. 43).

Elsewhere I have argued that the ability to forge connections between seemingly unconnected elements is a key characteristic of creative individuals (Xerri, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b; Xerri & Vassallo, 2016). This kind of creativity can be developed by teachers for teaching creatively and teaching for creativity, in the process positioning themselves as creative practitioners (Xerri, 2013). Versatility seems to be a crucial means by which such creativity can be fostered since it enables teachers to extend the range of competences they have and to diversify the sources of their influences.

## Teacher versatility

Hockney's versatility as an artist has at least two aspects to it, both of which can prove useful to teachers. The first one consists of versatility in terms of the repertoire of techniques at one's disposal. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), “versatility allows teachers to deal more effectively with the unique constellation of students with whom they are working at any one time” (p. 9).

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To some extent this implies broadening one’s teaching repertoire so as to be able to address students’ different needs more effectively. To do this, teachers might need to develop an understanding of a wide range of methods and approaches that have become part of ELT.

By being aware of what these methods and approaches entail and how they can be used in an efficient manner, teachers are able to construct a repertoire of strategies that they can apply to different classroom situations and while working with various kinds of students. Given the fact that pre-service teacher education might be limited in its capacity to cultivate teachers’ awareness of the variety of methods, approaches, and techniques that they can bank on in their lessons, it is important for the individual practitioner to seek ways of enhancing their learning via formal professional development, classroom experimentation, and research.

In addition, Hockney’s work demonstrates how there exists a powerful relationship between versatility and creativity, so much so that the former seems to facilitate the latter and vice versa. Hockney’s creative innovation is due to his ability to display versatility in his artistic production, but he would probably not have been so versatile in his career if his conception of creativity were based on the myth of originality, i.e. the belief that creative products need to be entirely new rather than a combination of existent influences (Burkus, 2014). Similarly, teachers’ ability to be versatile is probably dependent on their curiosity about fields other than ELT. If we accept the notion that creativity involves establishing connections between possibly unrelated ideas, then teachers’ practices in the classroom can be influenced by disciplines that might not necessarily be related to language teaching.

According to Behrens (n.d.), “the greater the number, disparity, and presumed initial irrelevance of such influences, the more likely that they would eventually make unexpected combinations”. Hence, it seems necessary for teachers to be versatile enough to “copy, transform, and combine old ideas, synthesize existing information, combine eclectic influences, remix material, build on what came before, and connect the seemingly disconnected” (Popova, n.d.). Writing about the American popular arts, Powers (2012) suggests that successful creative individuals soon discover how important it is to “be a magpie, take from everywhere, but assemble the scraps and shiny things you’ve lifted in ways that not only seem inventive, but really do make new meanings”. The value of this form of

creativity is underscored in Kirby Ferguson’s (2012) TED talk, *Embrace the Remix*:

Our creativity comes from without, not from within. We are not self-made. We are dependent on one another, and admitting this to ourselves isn’t an embrace of mediocrity and derivativeness. It’s a liberation from our misconceptions, and it’s an incentive to not expect so much from ourselves and to simply begin.

When teachers embrace this view of creativity, they are likely to become convinced of the significance of being open to as many different influences as possible, not only from within their professional field, but most importantly from beyond it. Once they allow these influences to enrich their teaching, they are better placed to be versatile in what they do in the classroom and in the way that they do it. At the same time, they are also being creative.

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