

# Research Report

## COLOURS AND LINES

### on the practice and theory of creating learning

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## Foreword

***Learn the rules like a pro,  
so you can break them like an artist.***

**-- Pablo Picasso**

'Colouring outside the lines.'

If you ask people what creativity is, chances are they will use these words. Doing something you hadn't done before. Something new. Because you can't do it, or just don't think you can. Going to do something you have no talent for. Going out of your comfort zone. Colouring outside the lines.

In the Erasmus+ project 'Art as a leverage', we not only considered the interesting question of what creativity is, but especially how best to (teach) creativity. With the ambition of bridging the gap between theory and practice. After all, we are working with that practice every day in our own organisations.

Within the project, we started with a limited literature study on creative learning. We then confronted insights from the literature with the practice of creative learning in the four participating organisations and the experiences of a number of professionals. This confrontation produced exciting conversations. Sometimes it also crackled, but a lot was also recognised back and forth.

There is a common view in the literature that creative learning is basically improvisation within certain structures or frameworks. We tried to look at this in particular in the comparison between theory and practice. In doing so, it has become clear, that creativity thrives best in a gossamer interplay between a certain degree of structure and freedom. After all: without lines, you can't colour outside them. Lines can be narrow, wide, thick or thin. And you can colour inside, but also outside the lines. With the colours you like, are used to, or don't like. And all these nuances and specialisations produced wonderful conversations and new insights.

This report tries to put into words the findings and the discussions we had together. We would very much like to continue discussing this with each other and with you.

Wherever and however we can.





# I. Introduction

***Theory and practice are one, and like soul and body, they are they are usually at odds with each other.***

**-- Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach**

'In 2019, the Erasmus+ project 'Paving the way for essential skills houses' with the participating parties Libraries West-Brabant, Bergen Public Library, Blenders - organisation for socio-economic innovation, Cubiss, Municipality of Breda, Learning & Work Institute, Nieuwe Veste, ROC, Stichting Lezen & Schrijven and the Taalhuis concluded with the publication of an essay.

## **The main conclusion of the project was:**

*Creativity, like language, is a basic skill for functioning in today's and tomorrow's society. It helps in discovering your own talents, shaping your skills. This gives you more self-confidence, which is important for participating in society.*

From these questions, a follow-up project was started. Also internationally, under the title 'Art as a leverage' with the following partners: Blenders, Centrum voor Basiseducatie Kempen, de Ruimte and Het Gevolg (Turnhout, Belgium), Beschäftigung und Bildung (Hamburg, Germany) and Nieuwe Veste (Breda, the Netherlands). A curious collective of makers and thinkers from different (art) disciplines and institutions developing activities and doing applied research on the role of creativity and art for basic skills and talent development.

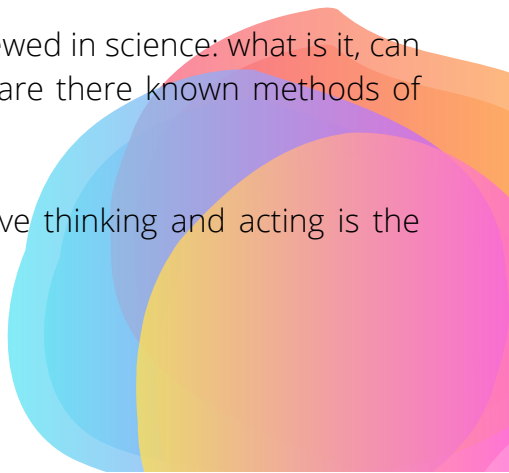
## **One of the components of the project is research with the following question:**

*What is meant by creative learning, how best to teach creativity and what does this mean for the practice of the institutions participating in the project?*

With this question, we actually want to try to make a connection between the insights from the literature on creativity and practice and whether it is possible to define a working method, to get started on developing creativity for basic skills and personal development. We call such a way of working creative learning.

With a limited literature review, we first looked at how creativity is viewed in science: what is it, can you learn it, what is important to know in the process and finally: are there known methods of creative learning that can be used?

For our study, we used the following definition of creativity: creative thinking and acting is the ability to find and apply new and/or unusual ideas to existing issues.





## II. Approach and reading guide

*We cannot always wait for insights to find us, sometimes we have to look for them ourselves.*

**-- Jonah Lehrer**

The question of what creative learning as a learning process looks like is particularly interesting within the arts and culture sector in which the organisations participating within this Erasmus+ project operate. After all, within the conception of creative learning as 'structured learning to improvise', comparisons are drawn in the literature to the way improvisation is taught in music, dance, theatre, etc. (see also the essay 'Creative learning'). This is interesting because all partners within the project work in the arts and culture sector. So it is quite possible to see how within our own field creative learning goes in practice.

For this reason, some ten professionals within the various disciplines were interviewed initially. The results were discussed with the participating organisations during a two-day workshop in Hamburg. In addition, in-depth topics were further explored in interviews with the participating organisations individually. These focused on questions such as which principles of improvisation can be mentioned per art discipline, which structures are used? What does the balance and interaction between structure and improvisation look like in learning practice? What are the important differences but also similarities between the professional disciplines? What works and what works less well?


During the Multiplier Event on 24 January 2023, the workshop 'Creative learning and the bridge between theory and practice' was held four times for a total of about 40 participants, 90% of whom were professionals. This workshop was in combination with three other workshops, where people worked on creativity/art in the fields of theatre (Stefan Perceval of Het Vervolg), photography (Juan Monte of Space) and language (Deed Knerr and Christine? of Beschäftigung und Bildung, Hamburg).

In the workshop 'Creative learning and the bridge between theory and practice', participants' views and experiences were mirrored against the main findings of the literature review. Participants were also asked whether it was appropriate to take this on board as input for the final report on creative learning.

The discussion was based on two questions:

1. What do you yourself understand by creativity and what does it mean to you personally?
2. Can you share a memory of an experience you had in a learning situation about creativity that surprised you (tremendously)?

In this report, all the findings of the literature review, the interviews, conversations, peer discussions and the outcomes of the workshops are brought together and discussed according to the different aspects of creative learning.





'We consider successively the definition of creativity (chapter III), why creativity is important (chapter IV), the common theory on how creative learning works that we also used in the project (chapter V) and three important aspects of creative learning as the dependence on the subject or discipline (chapter VI), the influence of age and culture (chapter VII) and the necessary didactic skills in the teachers concerned (chapter VIII). In chapter IX, we take stock: what have we achieved, learned, where do we stand? In chapter X we look at whether it is possible and desirable to strive for a method of creative learning and we conclude by reflecting in chapter XI on whether the gap between the theory of creative learning and the practice of implementation is (un)bridgeable.

**Annex 1** contains an overview of the different building blocks we used for this report.





### III. What is creativity?

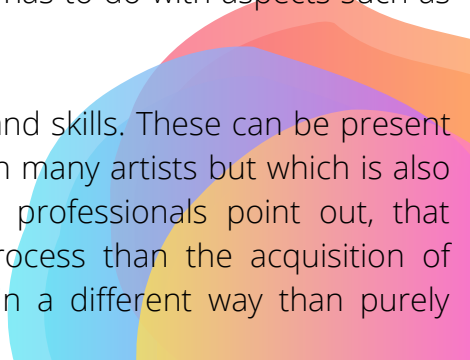
*Letting go, colouring outside the lines, finding beauty in anything, connecting with myself and the other, defining my own lines, giving freedom within certain structures, out of the box, problem-solving, expressing my feelings expressing yourself, tranquillity, outlet in art, being who you are, searching for freedom from within, transforming dreams or ideas into reality, allowing everything to be there, expressing emotions and thoughts, letting go-discovering-breaking away, turning a situation into something positive, freedom of thought and action, problem-solving creation, intuition*


Responses from participants at the 'Creative learning and the bridge between theory and practice' workshop to the question: 'what does creativity mean to you'?

As the workshop participants quoted above show, a multitude of descriptions are possible about what creativity is. Broadly speaking, though, many of the interviewees do align with this with the definition of creativity or creative learning, as is common in the literature:

*Creative thinking and acting is the ability to find and apply new and/or unusual ideas to existing issues.*

All the people we spoke to recognise the main concepts in the literature surrounding the definition of creativity, even though different languages are spoken. But people also add some from everyday practice and experience, dwelling especially on the catch-all term 'ability' in the definition used:

- To arrive at 'unusual' ideas or even solutions, it is important to dare to experiment, to 'muddle through'. Creativity often arises when things go wrong, when you get stuck, when there is resistance. Then you 'have to do something (or do nothing)'. The word 'unusual' in the definition used was widely endorsed: 'creating something new from something that already exists' was often mentioned.
  - The definition might suggest that if the right conditions are in place, creative thinking would 'come naturally'. This is not the case. Interviewees pointed to the importance of a good attitude, 'openness', feeling free to play with what is inside you, using your skills (or lack thereof!) to create something you recognise and surprise yourself in. 'You renew yourself'.
  - There is often a charge on creativity: many people do not consider themselves creative. This causes blockages in the learning process. Of course, this also has to do with aspects such as age, culture, origin.
  - Creative learning is often a combination of thinking, attitude and skills. These can be present in someone separately, but also integrated (as is the case with many artists but which is also overwhelmingly present outside the cultural sector). Some professionals point out, that creativity development seems to be a different learning process than the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Perhaps this also calls on the brain in a different way than purely cognitive learning processes.
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- Creative thinking is a 'quality', which can also be trained. Skills can be learned, your attitude is basically the willingness to engage in experimentation ('I want to do this, because I have no talent for it').

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Finally, there are also comments on the word creativity.

It is considered a complicated, difficult concept which is also used inappropriately. Sometimes it is unfairly made into something magical. It is not.

There is a need for a sharper definition, drawing attention to the (possible) difference in creativity among artists and amateur practitioners: 'the self-creative alongside the didactic process'. An artist cannot do without creativity, but not every creative person is also an artist, it is said.



## IV. Why is creativity important?

*With art, we communicate from mind to mind.*

*-- Marcus de Sautoy*

'There is a striking consensus among the professionals consulted on the importance of creativity. This is also largely in line with insights from science. Both in the interviews and in the literature, the following three levels often come up:

### 1. Person level

Creativity is 'good for you': it leads to openness in yourself, especially in new situations. It creates more peace of mind. You keep all options open, which leads to wonder instead of judgement, you start asking more questions. But you also recognise what is valuable to you, what you are good at (or seem to be!), you know who you are, what your own authenticity is, your own talents. It strengthens your empathic capacity.

### 2. Relationship level

By strengthening your empathic ability in particular, you are better able to empathise and move with the other person. This makes you more flexible and also more tolerant, which is very important for successfully building and maintaining relationships.

### 3. Environment level

Creativity promotes resilience and flexibility in our rapidly changing society. Many people feel 'there are more and more and bigger problems coming at them'. During the lock downs as a result of the covid pandemic, it was easy to see how many people 'fell silent', but also that some also saw opportunities again to do and undertake different things than had been usual until then.

Incidentally, it highlighted that in this society there is also a tendency to 'efficiently prepare people in large uniform groups, losing individual richness and space'.

A strong signal was given from the participating organisations, that these three levels can only be successfully achieved if you start with the person level. We will come back to this later. Furthermore, people want to guard against an overly dogmatic approach: creativity is not always and for everyone essential for being able to solve problems.





## V. Creative learning as a balance between structure and improvisation.

*The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.*

-- Orson Welles

It is a misconception, that creativity 'just happens'. The literature agrees that creativity does not fall from 'nowhere'. A creative process succeeds only with perseverance. And even if there is an epiphany or a new insight, that new idea almost always comes from somewhere. To resist something, it has to be there. Colouring outside the lines is only possible if there are lines. Sawyer calls this 'disciplined improvisation'. For this, he uses the comparison with (mutually different) improvisation techniques such as in jazz, theatre and dance. A balance between structure and improvisation does not mean letting go, didactically speaking, but in an educational environment giving space within frameworks. Frameworks are, for example, a teaching practice, lesson structures and learning objectives, but also a question, an assignment, a time limit.

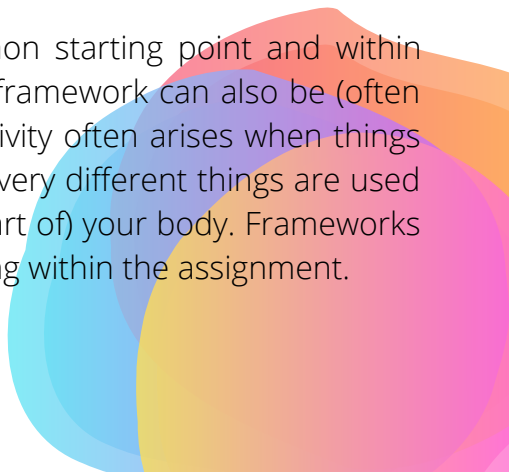
We asked professionals whether they recognise this principle of 'structured improvisation' in their own professional practice and with which 'frameworks' they then work. The extent to which this approach differs by professional discipline is discussed in the next chapter.

Beforehand: the word structure led to sharp discussion and also some miscommunication in some cases. It is very important to define structure as a concept (as is done above) than to use it as a 'loose' word. It is also often necessary to state above all what is not meant by it. Within the cultural sector, words like structures, frameworks, methods, etc. often evoke associations of uniformity, systems thinking versus people thinking, bureaucracy, etc., with appropriate emotions and disapproval.

'Structured improvisation' was recognised by all and also applied in their own professional practice. Even if people were not aware of what was being said within the literature on this, there was a clear consensus present on this point. Moreover, the professionals consulted gave a very consistent outline of how to approach creative learning as improvising within frameworks. Four aspects can be distinguished here:

### 1. Using frameworks and structures

Creative learning is not 'just doing something'. It is from a common starting point and within frameworks a journey where you can discover yourself. Because a framework can also be (often is) restrictive, it stimulates creativity. As has been said before: creativity often arises when things go wrong, when you get stuck, when there is resistance. As frames, very different things are used by the professionals: a theme, a story, music, time, a word, up to (part of) your body. Frameworks must be inviting so that you can (continue to) be creative while staying within the assignment.





## 2. Stagnation versus copying

It turns out to be an art to work with a framework or structure in such a way that it actually stimulates creativity. If the assignment is too open, too broad, there is a danger that it is too much and that pupils will fall silent (or become irritated). Too tight a framework or assignment, on the other hand, leads to copying behaviour (doing exactly the assignment) which is the opposite of creativity development. Assignments that are close to pupils' lifeworlds work best: it gives recognition and, above all, confidence that one can and dares to work on them. Of course, personal characteristics and environmental factors also play a big role.

## 3. How to start?


The assignment or theme as a framework only works if it is also clearly 'put away'. At the start, tell clearly what it is and what the intention is. Define things: what is meant? Take your time for this. Avoid assumptions, make things explicit. It can be useful to agree not to talk about creativity with each other ('flat talk'), but simply to do it, to get started. Some use bodywork to 'stop the thinking'. In some cases, it is necessary to ask 'permission' for the assignment from the pupils/course participants. Otherwise, resistance will play too big a role.

When working with students who do not or not well master the language used (Dutch, English), it is wise to carry out the assignments without language. After all, language is also a structure, which can be inviting but also blocking. Theatre and the visual disciplines, as well as music, provide many tools for this. Everyone has expression and it is a way of interpreting emotions (and related concepts). Within De Ruimte, people experiment with expressing emotions without words and in Bildung und Beschäftigung they often start by working with their own bodies.

What everyone else emphasised was the great importance that 'everything is allowed and possible' and that everything is also good. Therefore, laughing is allowed, laughing is not. You also have to 'arrest' this kind of thing to do with trust and safety at the beginning.

## 4. So what does the further approach look like?

Guidance in structured improvisation is crucial and not always easy. It does distinguish between three phases you can go through (several times):

- divergent phase: exploring, trying out several things, but also: picking up an idea someone already had or something one can already do precisely not. This phase often seems chaotic, but of course it is not. A uniform approach to this does not work, nor does relying exclusively on what the pupil wants;
  - focus: making choices: what do I continue with? You make these choices by looking, analysing, asking questions, clustering, etc;
  - converging phase: working in a focused way towards one direction (which, by the way, does not mean that the creative process stops!).
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It was emphasised by several people that for the learning process it is not advisable to start with learning necessary skills (or crafts). It works much better to start doing that only when one notices that for the further learning process, the absence of good techniques or skills is going to get in the way of the further development of creativity. This can then even lead to new things and a breakthrough. Both the type of skills and also the way it manifests itself as a 'deficiency' or a 'lack' varies greatly from one discipline to another.





## VI. Domain- or subject specific aspects in creative learning

*The actor experiences a world beyond and above the ordinary, yet his doing remains a game*

-- Johan Huizinga

There is consensus in the literature that creativity is largely domain (subject) specific and that it also requires knowledge of that particular subject. Creativity in, say, mathematics requires different expertise than creativity in visual arts or theatre. And creativity in one subject therefore does not automatically lead to creativity in other subjects. This means, that deploying creative learning for vulnerable adult groups should always be subject- or discipline-specific and that the approach can also differ per subject or discipline.

The professionals consulted broadly agree that creative learning is especially successful when applied specifically within a subject or discipline. Linkage to the disciplines applied at the various participating parties is therefore obvious. What is typical for a specific discipline must then be known and preferably well described.

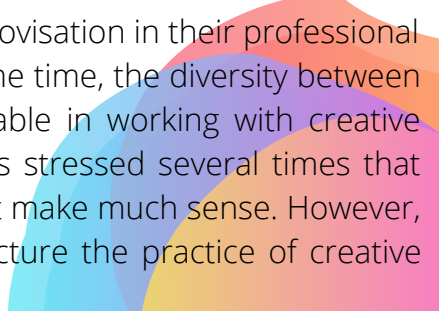
What is important here is that creativity as a basic skill in itself is not subject-specific, but the way in which creative learning is handled.

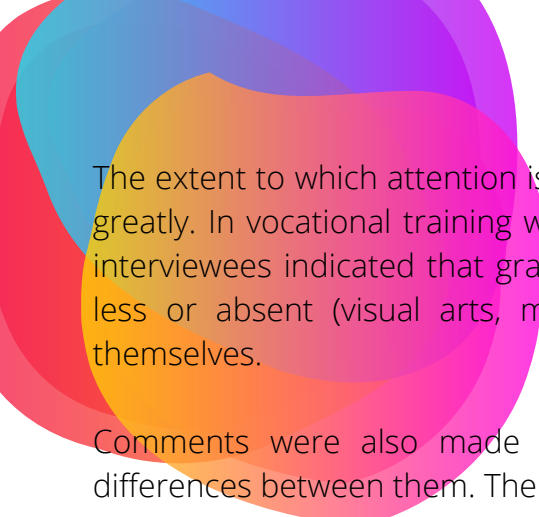
Because creativity only comes into its own within a particular subject or discipline, our target group will also have to be invited to enjoy working in it. In the essay 'Essential creativity' of the preceding Erasmus+ project, this was called 'goesting', which can lead to a flow. An introduction to different disciplines before choosing can be helpful in this, as applied in the 'Time of your Life' project (Breda).

Most professionals emphasised that the principle of the approach to creative learning (structured improvisation) applies to all disciplines. The way in which does clearly differ. In particular:

- What exactly does the structure used as also discussed above mean within a particular discipline? This will be different in music than, say, in dance or theatre.
- What then does improvisation look like linked to the specific discipline being worked in?


All interviewees appear to have developed a form of structured improvisation in their professional practice that clearly has discipline-specific characteristics. At the same time, the diversity between the practical examples given is great. This is probably also inevitable in working with creative processes within creative disciplines ('double up'). Therefore, it was stressed several times that developing a method focused on what should/can be done does not make much sense. However, a method focused on the how (process-wise) can enrich and structure the practice of creative learning.





The extent to which attention is paid to what we call creative learning in vocational training varies greatly. In vocational training where improvisation is part of the curriculum (dance, theatre), the interviewees indicated that grateful use is made of it. In professional programmes where this is less or absent (visual arts, music), the professionals concerned will have to develop more themselves.

Comments were also made by interviewees regarding the disciplines themselves and the differences between them. The main ones are:

- In the divergence phase, there is often a kind of 'chaos'. One is searching, trying things out, 'it flies in all directions.' With music, this is often difficult to deal with. As humans, we are trained to listen to music in terms of (a)melodic or even false/pure. That makes it difficult to distil a next step out of the chaos, which is clearly less the case with visual arts and dance, for example.
  - In the next chapter, we reflect on the fact that norms can hinder creative learning ('self-censorship'). This seems to be more strongly present in the discipline of music because of the aforementioned false/pure rather than terms such as beautiful/ugly or interesting/uninteresting, which are more present in other disciplines.
  - Correctly and consciously not working with subject-specific skills or techniques can therefore also stimulate creative learning. Instead of looking at notes or harmonies, pay more attention to 'do I see a movement in the score'? This ties in with the aforementioned observation that skills ('the craft') can sometimes help and speed up the creative process, but can also sometimes slow down or even block it. It is up to the teacher to play with this. With this, incidentally, the teacher's own norms and values also immediately come into play.
  - Literally working with your own body in a creative process can evoke emotions. In dance and theatre, this is often the case.
  - Play forms, stories and other theatre techniques are often used in creative learning practice (also in other disciplines). This probably has to do with the fact that theatre as a discipline is inextricably an interactive process between people: between players and between players and audience.
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## VII. Is creative learning age- and culture-dependent?

*We don't stop playing because we get older, we get older because we stop playing.*

**-- George Bernhard Shaw**

From the model of creative learning as a system, creativity development is seen as a complex dynamic system rather than a linear one. There is always a mutual influence between child and environment, fixed (and culturally determined) established routines must be broken, and children's development is not linear as Piaget has already shown. The question here, however, is always: how do children (but also adults) learn new things and where do new ideas and solutions come from?

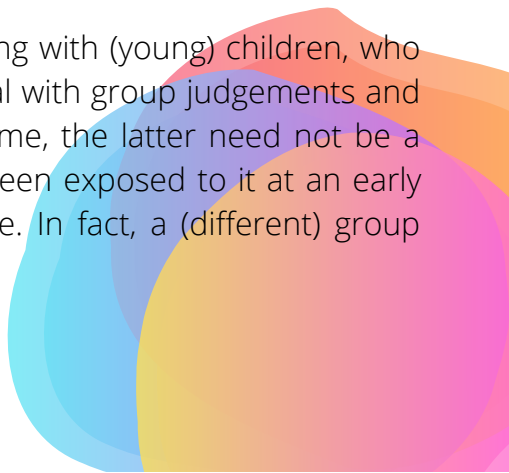
Csikszentmihalyi as a supporter of systems thinking emphasises that while the creative process starts with the individual, it soon involves the 'field' that also influences the further process. By the field is meant colleagues, teacher, parents. This field acts as a kind of gatekeeper to the third system component: culture.

If we consider creative learning as a system model, it is important to determine together what 'the field' and 'the culture' then mean. Who are they, how are they involved in creative learning? For the target group from other cultures, this issue is doubly interesting.

(Having to) start with the individual is widely and also sometimes very fundamentally endorsed. Only genuine interest from person to person creates room for a follow-up. In that follow-up, aspects such as those mentioned above are then addressed in the further learning process. The danger of trying to focus too much on cultural differences in particular (inclusiveness) at the front end means that people will still be pigeonholed and approached from here. And that is precisely the experience people have had before and which makes further development and growth difficult.

On the other hand, differences in culture should not be denied either. Some make a distinction here between 'learned' and 'innate'. Moreover, they stress, it is important if you want to take people seriously to delve into their culture. Keeping things light is mentioned several times, along with the importance of humour and (light) self-mockery.

As far as age is concerned, there is a big difference between working with (young) children, who generally have a rich imagination, and adolescents, who have to deal with group judgements and the accompanying issue of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, the latter need not be a showstopper for creative learning among adolescents: if one has been exposed to it at an early age, has become 'used to it', it remains much more commonplace. In fact, a (different) group judgment is then also built up together.





Adults have obviously had time to further develop their norms and values and make them part of their personality structure. In this group, this often manifests itself in beliefs. Therefore, it is usually not useful to start 'discussing' assignments with this group. Starting with body work ('to stop the thinking') can therefore work well.





## VIII. What are didactic prerequisites necessary for creative learning?

*The main task of the teacher is not to explain meanings, but to knock at the door of the mind.*

-- Rabindranath Tagore

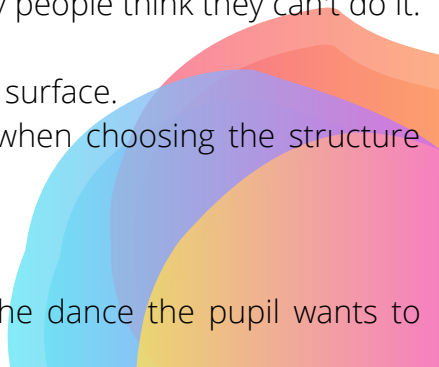
Seeing creative learning as a learning process of 'structured improvisation' implies that improvisation is an important part of that process. Since improvisation in the balance structure-improvisation requires an active role of the learner, didactic core elements such as open assignments, good handling of giving (and receiving) feedback, the principle 'try out is allowed and must be done' are crucial according to the literature.

The professionals consulted actually go a step further: without a teacher with sufficient didactic skills (and the attitude to want to keep developing them), creative learning has no chance.

These are, of course, primarily skills that are basic for anyone who teaches:

- Starting from the learner's initial learning situation.
- Being able to work systematically with learning objectives aimed at pupil development.
- Providing safety while stimulating.
- Being able to clearly and clearly indicate frameworks or preconditions.
- Being able to didactically solve unexpected (or even sometimes unpleasant) situations that may arise in a group.
- etc.

In addition, the professionals we spoke to regarding creative learning in the creative domains also indicated the following:

- Safety is a precondition for creativity development ('everything is allowed, everything is good, laughing is a no-go'). Insecurity can arise from other judgements, but also from one's own individual references ('I'm not creative').
  - Dealing with different cultures: keep it simple and basic. Talk from yourself, use humour, keep it informal because some topics are (can be) loaded. Delve into their country, life, observe, defer judgement. See them.
  - Don't put too much emphasis on learning creativity: in fact, many people think they can't do it. Just go and do it, keep it light and assume mutual learning.
  - It is important to be able to dwell on emotions that are bound to surface.
  - Be able to deal with both creative and subject-related issues when choosing the structure within which to work.
  - Focus on the pupil's development, do not let them copy.
  - Make contact without judgement.
  - 'De-self' yourself as a teacher: no ego behaviour, but 'dance the dance the pupil wants to dance'.
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## IX. We take stock

*Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is nothing more than an intellectual game*

-- Immanuel Kant

Our ambition with this part of the 'Art as a leverage' project was to try to bridge the gap between the theory of creative learning and practice among ourselves and other professionals we consulted. What has it given us and where are we now?

We can conclude that the theory and practice of creative learning are still too much two different and, unfortunately, separate worlds. Including a friendly and a sharper variant. Thus, in the workshops and among several professionals interviewed, people looked with great interest at the findings from the literature and made the translation to their own practice and experience with high commitment and energy. People were surprised at the convergence between their own experiences/concepts and those in the literature. Few are (noticeably) aware of the literature. So, despite this convergence, translation is needed in parts. People enjoyed exchanging views on these issues and getting input from scientific sources.

That tastes like more. Thus, in the future, we would like to work on exploring the similarities and differences in approach within the disciplines of the participating organisations.

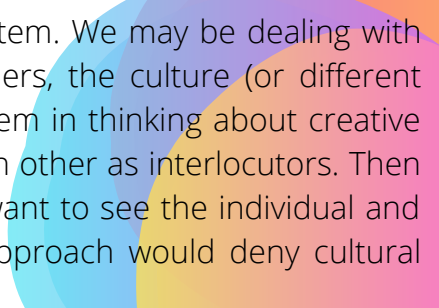
But unfortunately, we also found that not everyone can or wants to seriously delve into the insights from the literature review. Naturally, this makes a fruitful discussion about the connection between theory and practice more difficult. It was further complicated by the fact that the same concepts can and do have completely different interpretations. A conversation with each other based on being open to other insights is a requirement here.

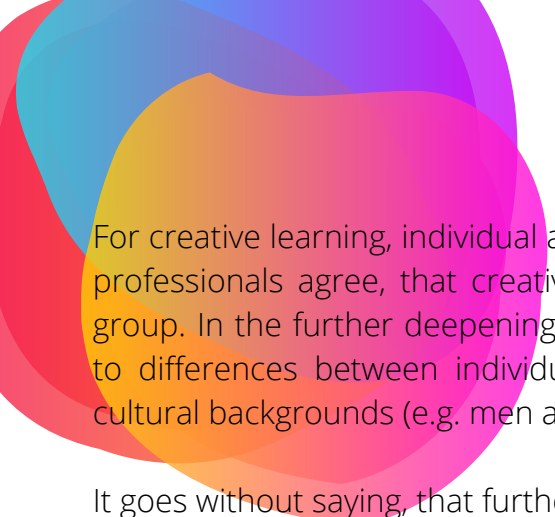
Theory and practice: there is a gap we notice, in both the friendly and the sharp variant We lack a common foundation. Dialogue is important, with the position of artists not being compromised or stipulated.

Two topics caused the most discussion and also recurred in the various interviews and conversations. We deal with them separately here.

### **1. System- and people-centred**

In the literature, it is common to think of creative learning as a system. We may be dealing with individuals, but they are part of and influenced by parents, teachers, the culture (or different cultures!) they live in. When the individual is pitted against the system in thinking about creative learning, we lose meaning and, for that matter, sometimes lose each other as interlocutors. Then it seems as if the adherents of systems thinking no longer see or want to see the individual and value her or his uniqueness. And conversely as if an individual approach would deny cultural differences.





For creative learning, individual and system are mostly sequential in nature and importance. Most professionals agree, that creativity development starts at the level of the individual and not a group. In the further deepening, so characteristic of the process of creative learning, in addition to differences between individuals (e.g. age), the differences between groups of people and cultural backgrounds (e.g. men and women) also become important.


It goes without saying, that further exchange of experience and accumulation of knowledge at this point is only possible with fruitful dialogue, supported by techniques and methodologies such as 'Socratic listening', 'method of consent', 'dynamic judgment', etc.

## ***2..A structured form of improvisation as a learning process in the cultural, creative sector.***

In the preface, we stated that creativity thrives best in a gossamer interplay between a certain degree of structure and freedom to improvise. This is already a challenge in itself and requires a certain mindset from the teacher/supervisor. Partly to be learned, but also, to a large extent, to be developed from within one's own discipline, as the interviews revealed. It becomes an extra challenge when this role of guiding learning is performed by the artists themselves. After all, the creativity so characteristic within this group can not only be hugely stimulating for creative learning, but also complicate further knowledge sharing and peer to peer coaching. Always assuming the individuality and uniqueness of one's own approach, approach and even concepts does not create a good breeding ground for exchanging and testing different approaches. Incidentally, this is reinforced by the fact that many cultural organisations have to fight for their survival every day and simply do not have time for things that do not seem to serve that purpose directly.

In one of the discussions about how we as participating parties within the project dealt (and unfortunately had to deal for a time due to corona) with theory and practice, the metaphor of an island kingdom was mentioned. We are all doing fantastic things in our own organisation, on our own island. And love to tell others about them too. But do we also know what is happening on those other islands? If we see the insights in the literature as bridges that can connect these islands, at least two questions arise: how can we best connect these islands and what will be the effect on all of us of the traffic that will then come over those bridges towards our islands? To our minds, we have only just begun this.

With the 'Art as a leverage' project, our ambition was not only to learn and share more about the process of creative learning. We also wanted to see if a working methodology could be developed that would benefit us all. This question is attempted to be answered in the next chapter.





## X. Towards a method for creative learning?

*A preconceived method is often just a stand in the way.*

-- Simon Vestdijk

*It is common sense to try a method. If it fails, admit it honestly and try another method, but above all try something.*

-- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Given what knowledge, insights and experiences came along in the earlier chapters, it seems tempting to describe a method based on these building blocks. A manual of what to do to successfully engage in creative learning.

However tempting, all interviewees pointed out that such an approach is unlikely to work.

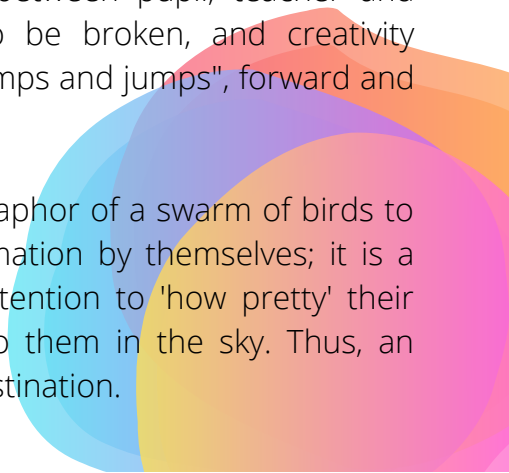
Why? There are several reasons. A manual is itself contrary to the principle of structured improvisation. The degrees of freedom within a framework are crucial. A method is quickly limiting at this point. But it also has to do with the intended target group: dictating to subject teachers from art subjects what to do is contrary to their own capacity for creativity. Creativity that leads to great diversity, which is also the harvest of the interviews.

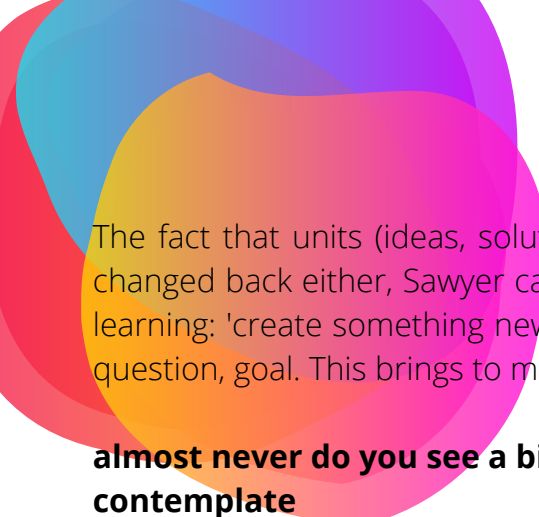
Should we then just leave it to everyone to decide and figure it out for themselves? That would also be a waste and would not do justice to the scientific insights and countless practical experiences.

To stay in the image of structured improvisation: we think that a method, or call it a toolbox, that pays attention to the how-question can provide a wonderful structure or framework within which everyone can improvise according to their own competences, organisation, profession, target group, etc. This method should be framing on the one hand, but also inspiring. And especially not linear, because creative learning is not a linear, simple process.

It has been said before, that creative learning is seen as a complex dynamic system rather than a linear one. This is because there is always a mutual influence between pupil, teacher and environment, fixed (and culturally determined) routines have to be broken, and creativity development does not go gradually from A to B, but rather with "bumps and jumps", forward and back again.

Not for nothing do authors in scientific literature often use the metaphor of a swarm of birds to characterise such a process. Geese do not want to fly in a V-formation by themselves; it is a consequence of thermals and endurance. Starlings do not pay attention to 'how pretty' their swarm looks, but mainly to what their neighbour is doing next to them in the sky. Thus, an apparently random and even chaotic way of acting does lead to a destination.





The fact that units (ideas, solutions) can develop into something new, which cannot actually be changed back either, Sawyer calls the principle of emergence. This is also the essence of creative learning: 'create something new that wasn't there yet'. Which (irreversibly) leads to the next step, question, goal. This brings to mind a beautiful poem by Judith Herzberg:

**almost never do you see a bird in the sky  
contemplate  
slew  
back.**

So a method, or rather some tools for an approach to creative learning, must do justice to the complexity of the process while ensuring that the process owner (the teacher) can remain in the lead, both in the foreground and in the background. Improvising within a structure and the associated letting go, therefore, applies not only to individual creativity development, but also to the learning process as a whole.

The literature identifies essentially four fields or domains that are important for and influence creative learning: the learner (and his/her environment), the teacher and his/her teaching skills, the context, or the specific subject, and the approach of divergence/focus/convergence. They also guided the discussions we had. It is clear that these four fields are distinguishable, but not separable: together and in connection with each other, they determine the success of creative learning.

Perhaps, all things considered, we should not want to aim for a method in the form of a process description, but more like a toolbox with four compartments. Richly filled and regularly supplemented. To be used by everyone, in their own (unique) situation, working with unique people. Complementary to the few already existing ways of working with creativity that also show characteristics of a methodical approach.



## XI. Is the gap between theory and practice (un)bridgeable?

Let's face it: the ambition to reflect from theory and literature on what was conceived and implemented in practice by the partner organisations for enhancing creativity among the participants turned out to be too high. But also vice versa, it was very difficult to look from the daily implementation practice of professionals and assess to what extent the theory (formation) could be enriched, supplemented, or perhaps even corrected.

Therefore, the conclusion expressed in Chapter X that a method of creative learning probably has little chance of success should be seen as a snapshot in time. Indeed, we are convinced, that the connection and reflection between theory and implementation practice can be initiated if there is a setting of inquiry-based learning, preferably in the form of learning workshops with each other. This means that the partners explore with each other and in a participatory way how the design and implementation of the creative learning process relates to and can be enriched by theory and vice versa.

We are so sure of this because this was exactly our experience during the closing event on 24 January. The participants of this day participated in three workshops and reflected on these with each other using the insights from the literature as a mirror. The results were very positive, but most of all people found it heartwarming.

Why did we fail to achieve such a setting in and during the project? Three main factors in particular can be cited for this, in addition to elements already mentioned (such as the scientific jargon and the time cultural organisations have to devote to the continuity of their own business).

These three factors are:

- 1.** A relatively large amount of project time was spent doing a (still limited, incidentally) literature review in the field of creative learning. An existing, readable and accessible overview of the main definitions, theories and criticisms of them is missing as far as we can oversee.
- 2.** The approach to creative learning used by the partners in the project was not written down (in any form). Therefore, we were forced to acquire and record this information in interviews and visits. This also took project time.
- 3.** In retrospect, we exchanged too few experiences with each other, so a substantive dialogue on theory and practice did not get off the ground properly. This was, of course, caused first and foremost by the corona pandemic, which meant that physical contact was not even possible, but also because this mutual coordination was not optimal in the planning of the project.

With the Erasmus project 'Art as a leverage', we started trying to answer the question of how best to put creative learning into practice. Looking back, we have come a long way, but also not far enough. A next step would be to further develop creative learning together in learning workshops from a feed of practice and theory. We know the topics, because although we have recognised them in this project, we have not more than touched upon them (**see Chapter IX**).



A next step, besides substantive progress, will yield other results in our belief: greater mutual understanding, being able to enrich each other and a higher quality standard of implementation practice.

We started this report with colours and lines, we end with them too.

**Colours can be learned, you can also just do it and both can be done at the same time. Lines come in all shapes and sizes, very different and in combination can be used in infinite ways. As long as we keep exploring the boundaries of lines and use all the colours we know and can invent. That, we believe, is also the power of creative learning.**

We are far from finished talking about this, so let's get on with it.





## ANNEX BUILDING BLOCKS FOR 'COLOURS AND LINES'

1. Essay 'Essential creativity. The relationship between creativity and the process of learning essential skills'. Case study Erasmus+ KA2 project 'Paving the way for essential skill houses'.

2. Essay 'On creative learning'. Case study Erasmus+ project 'Art as a leverage'.

3. Interviewed professionals (*lasts names undisclosed*)


- Lizet (music, in-school cultural education)
- Connie (music/vocals)
- Lianne (low literacy, Language House)
- Karlijn (digital creativity, Makersbase)
- Ellis (dance)
- Irma (theatre)
- Monique (language, writing)
- Annette (dance, in-school cultural education)
- Cecile (visual arts)
- Anton (visual arts)

4. Discussion two-day session between the parties participating in the 'Art as a leverage' project on creative learning.

5. Interviews with:

- Juan , de Ruimte Turnhout
- Nikki , Ligo -Kempen, Turnhout
- Deed , Beschäftigung und Bildung Hamburg
- Stefan and Marit , Het Gevolg, Turnhout

6. Input four workshops 'creative learning and the bridge between theory and practice' during Multiplier Event ' Art as a leverage', 24 January 2023 in Turnhout.





## **ART AS LEVERAGE**

Looptijd: 01/03/2021 tot 28/02/2023

Het Erasmus+ project 'Art as Leverage' wil met een cultuurparticipatief proces werken aan het versterken en verbinden van laaggeletterde studenten. Onze onderzoeksvraag is: Op welke manier kan creativiteit bijdragen aan persoonlijke ontwikkeling bij het bereiken van levensdoelen en basisvaardigheden? Daarom richten we ons op participatie in de breedste zin van het woord. Naast de meer klassieke methoden voor kennisoverdracht, willen we onderzoek doen naar andere - creatievere - methoden voor het verwerven van taal en essentiële vaardigheden of methoden die leiden tot een betere inbedding van geleerde lessen.

Blenders is promotor van 'Art as Leverage'.

Voor dit project werken we samen met volgende partners: Centrum voor Basiseducatie Kempen, HETGEVOLG en deRUIMTE als binnenlandse partners en Nieuwe Veste (NL) en Beschäftigung und Bildung (DE) als buitenlandse partners.

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