

STATE OF ART: CREATIVE LEARNING AND CREATIVE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT IN LATVIA

Dina Bite¹, Dr.sc.soc.; Ginta Kronberga², Dr.sc.soc.; Zenija Kruzmetra³, Dr.geogr.; Lana Janmere⁴, Mg.sc.soc.

^{1, 2, 3, 4} Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Economics and Social Development, Latvia University of Agriculture

Abstract. The importance of creativity and innovation in addressing the economic, environmental and social crises has been recognized in policy discussions in Europe. The article discovers main results of the pilot study "State of Art: Creative Learning and Creative Teaching Environment in Latvia" that was carried out within the project "Looking@Learning" in 2015. The aim of the study was to gather initial information about creative learning and creative teaching environment in Latvia. The study outlines problems in the area of creative teaching environment in education system of Latvia, simultaneously viewing education policy documents and inspecting the actual situation in education institutions of Latvia. The study uses qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and content analysis. In Latvia, creativity is defined as individual self-expression, ability to create new opportunities. Creativity is mostly developed by linking theory with practical activities, with everyday processes. Creativity is believed to be a mandatory skill necessary for every cycle of human life. Creativity is related to all individuals as attainable and developed skill. The main stimuli and initiators of creativity are different social agents in the environment of formal and informal education, local government, projects etc. that promote cooperation as essential prerequisite of creativity. These few 'key' people are essential, since they initiate and develop different activities, and different understanding of parties involved, acknowledgment and implementation of their opportunities and competencies are very important for reaching of common goals. The main obstructing factors are related to the lack of common understanding, goals and cooperation between parties involved.

Key words: creativity, creative learning, creative teaching environment, youth.

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Introduction

The importance of creativity and innovation in addressing the economic, environmental and social crises has been recognized in policy discussions in Europe. Recent policies call for the strengthening of Europe's innovative capacity and the development of a creative and knowledge-intensive economy and society through reinforcing the role of education and training in the knowledge triangle and focusing school curricula on creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. It has been recognized that schools and initial education play a key role in fostering and developing people's creative and innovative capacities for further learning and their working lives (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka, Punie, 2010). The aim of the study is to discover basic information about creative learning and creative teaching environment in Latvia as well as understanding of creativity in learning process. The research tasks are related with theoretical explanation of creativity and analysis

of empirical materials collected by document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Main research questions: how different agents interpret creativity, creative learning, creative teaching environment.

Theoretical insights

Authors use basic theoretical interpretations and conceptualization of creativity and creative teaching environment. Creativity is conceptualised as a skill for all and it is argued that educational actors have the power to unlock the creative and innovative potential of the young. It is argued that creativity, in the educational context, should be conceptualized as a transversal and cross-curricular skill, which everyone can develop. Therefore, it can be fostered but also inhibited. Creativity is defined as a product or process that shows a balance of originality and value. It is a skill, an ability to make unforeseen connections and to generate

new and appropriate ideas. The creative experience is seen as opposite to the reproductive experience. Literature shows that creativity is conceptualised in different ways by different people. It can be seen as arts-centred or as relevant to any domain of knowledge. It can also be seen as a quality some geniuses have or as a skill that anyone can develop (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka, Punie, 2010).

Creative learning is thus any learning which involves understanding and new awareness, which allows the learner to go beyond notional acquisition, and focuses on thinking skills. It is based on learner empowerment and centredness (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka, Punie, 2010).

Teaching environment is a set of social components, special objects and matters as well as interpersonal relationships in education. These factors influence and complement each other and affect every person involved. Teaching environment additionally specifies educational environment; it always implies organization process. It ensures correlation of material, communicative and social conditions in the learning process and beneficial circumstances for the development of student's creative potential. By using different sources of knowledge and various learning methods, a student constructs his/her knowledge, skills and dispositions on his/her own (Mezinska, 2011).

Creativity as a concept can be attributed to person's character traits and skills, teaching methods/content and teaching environment. Besides, creativity can be viewed as a result of some activity – new, original product or idea. If creativity is viewed as a personality trait or a skill, then it is described by innovation, originality, unconventional solutions, anticonformism, courage, productivity of innovation activities in various sectors, creative intuition, rich imagination, inspiration, psychic plasticity, viragoes activity (Bebre, 1997). Also creativity can be defined as ability for unusual thinking characterized by highly developed

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-17 imagination, divergent thinking, psychic plasticity, subconscious and viragoes activities. Assuming that the goal of education system is to encourage creativity of youth as personality trait or a skill, education documentation has to provide for fostering of the mentioned qualities.

Research results and discussion

Methodology

The study uses qualitative approach in order to understand problems linked to creativity, creative learning and creative teaching environment in Latvia. The study was conducted in June-July, 2015. The following methods were used in it:

- 1) analysis of theoretical literature in order to understand theoretical interpretation of creativity, creative learning and creative teaching environment;
- 2) qualitative document analysis used to analyze national planning documents and education system documents;
- 3) seven individual semi-structured interviews with representatives of different institutions of education. The selection of interviewees was made according to the principle of availability and purposefulness, including representatives of formal education (school and education administration), a representative of alternative education (Montessori pedagogy) and a researcher of creative learning in the study. Interviews took place from June 26 to June 29 in the informants' workplaces as well as in casual environment – in Jelgava and Riga. Average duration of an interview was 50 minutes.

Results and discussion

Document analysis. Creative environment and creative people are named in planning and normative documents of Latvia as one of the goals that must be attained and developed in both the near and distant future. In 2030, the Strategy of Sustainable Development describes Latvia as a green, clean, easily accessible and

also creative place. Therefore, creativity is significant in connection with long-term goal of sustainable development of the nation along with the priorities of clean environment and optimal infrastructure. Besides this concept is not only attributed to individual characteristics and human resources but also to Latvia as a whole and its environment.

Creativity as a priority interlaces the main mid-term development planning document "National Development Plan 2014-2020" of Latvia; and in it as well, the vision of development of Latvia is seen through creativity and – in particular – through creative people: "Latvia will be Latvian and confident, safe and people-friendly, green and clean, prosperous, effective and competitive country with hard-working, educated, creative, fit and happy people living in it" (National Development Plan...). So, in the context of the strategy of sustainable development, creativity is more focused on individual characteristics. Also, creativity has its position along with other indicators describing statehood and public welfare.

Courses of action and tasks highlighted in the National Development Plan (NDP) link creativity with two important aspects: development of business environment and human resilience. In the first case, the idea of creativity expresses itself through invention of innovative products and development of creative industries that are viewed as conditions of export capable production. Human resilience is meant to be strengthened through different competencies, including creativity and critical thinking. It can be concluded that at least on the level of political planning in Latvia there is an understanding that ability to get and keep a decent job and ability to take care for the development of oneself and nation is not possible without a set of particular competencies, including creativity.

There are several instruments that can be used to develop the competency of creativity in the society, and all of them are linked to

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-18 education: training and attracting highly qualified and creative general education teachers, implementation of innovative study content and work forms in basic education and general secondary education and provision of possibility for informal education in order to encourage creativity and entrepreneurial abilities. Both the role of human resources and education content is being stressed as well as physical environment, material and technical supply and its impact on the development of a creative individual. Innovative study content has been put forward as the main task, and the key words that describe the promotion of creativity and entrepreneurial skills are digital study environment, learning of modern languages, improvement of study content in the areas of natural and social sciences and strengthening of career education system.

Encouragement of creativity is also linked to provision of possibilities of informal education: support for youth technical innovation centres, organization of summer study camps, science seminars, competitions and science projects.

Based on the NDP guidelines, it can be concluded that on political level creativity is viewed in the context of entrepreneurial abilities and creation of innovative, exportable product. The corresponding tasks are viewed only through education system using opportunities of both formal and informal education.

Although the document "The Guidelines of Education Development 2014-2020" names creativity among the main goals, among the course of action it is only mentioned secondarily. It often highlights modern methods and modern infrastructure but it is hard to understand whether they are linked to creativity or not. The document points out necessity to improve education content to be oriented on the competencies, healthy lifestyle, creativity and promotion of innovation. Generally speaking, policy planning documents that relate to the education system present creativity as one of

many political priorities which fits into overall context of value-oriented education. Such concepts as 'creative personality', 'skill of creativity' and 'creative place' are often mentioned among the goals and particular tasks but most of all they are mentioned in goals and some of the tasks without specifying the ways how creativity is defined from the standpoint of policy planning and how it will be promoted. Abovementioned actions and tasks are general enough and can be applied to nurturing of any skills. The Cabinet Regulations attempt to specify what aspect of self-expression and creativity is but this explanation only partially reveals creativity and its meaning is reduced to the areas of the development of artistic creativity and imagination.

Compared with other EU Member States, Latvia is among those that rather often include ideas of creativity and innovativeness in education programmes. But there are different approaches to the conceptualization of creativity – from creativity that is centred on arts to creativity as interdisciplinary competence that is related to different areas of knowledge. Teachers of Latvia are among those in Europe that mostly agree with the notion of creativity playing an important role in study content (Cachia, 2010).

It can be generally concluded that in political planning documents creativity is more revealed in the broadest sense (Latvia as a creative place), instead of mentioning of it in particular study standards (creative self-expression, artistic creativity). Although creativity as a concept permeates all planning documents and education regulations, one cannot find a precise definition of creativity. Besides, promotion of creativity is mainly assigned to education system, and the role of other social institutes (family, economics) is not accessed and it can create problems in the area of implementation of creativity in the life of society.

Analysis of interviews. In their interpretations of creativity, creative teaching

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-19 environment and learning, informants of the research are fairly consistent. Sometimes it is not easy for informants to define these terms, but the essence of explanation is similar. Informants refer to creativity as a skill necessary for teachers, pupils and youth, as well as teaching methods, equally emphasizing all three aspects.

The informant that has studied creativity for several years defines it as divergent thinking that implies ability to create new correlations between different ideas and ability to understand which idea is worth implementation, realization and sharing. The highest expression of creativity is when every pupil has opportunity to express his/her creativity, to reflect on it and understand what should be done differently next time. Other informant defines creativity as ability to create new opportunities and change situations. Creativity also implies making of mistakes and learning from them, but the main accent is placed on gaining experiences, testing one's strength, daring and opportunity to do "*as a pupil sees the best*". So, creativity is defined as a set of skills that allows pupils and youth to take responsibility for their work and choices. According to informants, creative teaching environment is when child's senses, attitude towards training content and understanding of the life around them is being nurtured. Creativity implies connection to real life and emphasises things that are useful for everyday life:

„This is the right creativity – searching for links between grammar law and its practical use. Here is my task – to place theory into the everyday context so that they could both gain the Latvian language skills and obtain something they might need later in life. And it is important for them to realize it!”

In the case of children and youth with special needs the emphasis is placed on sensual experiences, and this principle in the context of creative learning can be related to everyone. So, creative learning is a way for pupils to be prepared for real life when they 'learn by doing',

not by theorizing, thus, learning to adapt to the changes of labour market, critically assess situations, find solutions and feel secure in unusual settings. Informants believe that creativity includes such important qualities as boldness, daring to try different things in life and to find those that suit the best and trust in own strength and communication skills. A creative person will be able to solve different problems and life situation; it is a resource that allows individuals to adapt to different life cycles. Creative learning is necessary and allows seeing both gifted children, children with different disorders, helps to notice and develop individual gifts and meet different needs, to increase diversity and tolerance towards one another, and to reduce uniformity in schools. Generally speaking, the result of creativity is ability to live. Part of society of Latvia Latvian society sticks to stereotypical beliefs about creativity as part of bohemian lifestyle that is not meant, available or necessary for everyone. Informants deny this view emphasizing the potential of creativity in every individual. According to informants, talented is not the same as creative, since it narrows the notion of creativity to particular field and does not apply to every individual. Even though it is easier to develop creativity through subjects linked to arts, informants emphasize necessity to integrate creativity into all school subjects and social and cultural activities as well. At the same time, creativity does not mean the lack of planning or anarchy, as it is sometimes presented in literature and pointed out by informants; it implies planned learning process with expected results and known methods. By teachers' creativity, informants understand their ability and skill to use environment and teaching methods to motivate and teach their pupils. Teachers' creativity is considered to be a vitally important condition, since everything else depends on teacher's personality and motivation. Creative learning is interpreted as teachers' and pupils working methods that ensure the

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-20 development of pupils' creativity. Creative learning means to deliver current training programme using different teaching methods. Informants do not see the need to significantly alter training programmes, which correlates with the results of other studies. Informants give almost unanimous description to creative teaching environment: it is a set of supportive, interesting, favourable conditions (school, community, society) for the training: „*A child must feel welcome. If a child sees that the janitor greets him/her favourable in the morning that the flowerbeds are neat and pretty; if he/she sees that every work is valued and that every task can be done with the right attitude*“. While describing current school situation in relation to creative teaching, informants admit that the potential of creative learning is not used sufficiently. One of the informants believes that only about 20% of teachers are creative in their work, and the percentage is smaller when working with children with special needs. It can be helped, to start with, by agreeing on a common platform for the concept of creativity. It means creating empirically understandable, clear definition of creativity, creative learning and creative teaching environment. It is needed, for example, for cases when it is difficult to assess particular teaching methods from the standpoint of creativity.

The results of the pilot research confirm known facts about the weak connection of formal documents to the real life in Latvia. Even if informants theoretically know that there are some formal requirements in relation to promotion of creativity in schools, in their work they are governed by other principles – by the particular situation, problems, finances and other factors. The interviews do not create an impression that teachers that are not faced with policy-making on any level take into their account NDP or education policy guidelines. The teachers that are creative and use creative methods in their work do it in accordance with

their personal understanding. This aspect can also be viewed as an advantage of the situation in Latvia, since teachers feel rather free in how and with what methods they manage to teach necessary topics. For the very same reason the teachers that use traditional, teacher-centred methods feel no need to change something, since creativity is not a mandatory requirement. Informants do not believe that it is possible to enforce creativity by repressive means; popularization of good practises, learning of new methods and informal sharing are much better means. Informants also emphasize that creative learning cannot be enforced through regulations or laws that begin in teacher's office: *„Law can attempt to correct us; we can write on the paper everything we need. I don't know if it can be enforced throughout the country...“*

Teachers have experienced that creativity is 'addictive' that good practices slowly but surely spread wider and wider. Informants think that the gap between theory and practice is maintained because of vague, indefinite definition of creativity, fear of change experienced by teachers and complex evaluation of creativity. Generally speaking, education policy at the national level is quite far removed from the real situation of schools.

The analysis of interviews indicates different factors that promote creative teaching environment and creative learning.

One of most important factor is physically accessible, positive, creative, emotionally supportive environment and work atmosphere where the chosen methods correspond with abilities, age, group size etc. of children and youth. It can be concluded that methods, their diversity and consistency are especially emphasized, because the result and assessment of particular activities are significant not only for children but also for teachers and experts. Positive experience, feedback as well as assessment which is especially important (peer assessment, leadership assessment) helps to

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-21 initiate new ideas, practices and cooperation at different levels (individuals, groups, schools, families, municipalities etc.) and between different social agents. Small schools, small classes and individual approach encourages creativity since it allows to create cosy atmosphere, to know one another, to see each other's needs and highlight best abilities of children and youth. Sometimes threats of school closure, small number of pupils and other difficulties are grounds for creative ideas and successful solutions: *„One school is taking a new direction in technologies and science that would not have been there if the school had 1000 children“.*

Teachers` desire and ability to develop individual talents of children, encouragement, empathy, emotionally supportive environment and creation of new opportunities is seen as a crucial point to promote creativity. It is the development of individual potential that must be put forward as the main goal; it cannot be lost under the influence of different hindrances. Human factor is mentioned in interviews as something that can both encourage and hinder creativity. Personality, activity, attitude and willingness of a teacher, an expert, and a partner to do something differently and to use different methods. *„If a teacher is active and wants to participate in all possible activities, then the children go along. This type of teachers usually has wonderful ideas!“* This situation can be changed by further training and individual growth. Creativity helps to stay 'on fire in profession' and reduces the burn-out risks for teachers and experts. All suggestions relating to creativity can be applied to all levels of education. A teacher, a lecturer, a head of interest circle – they should all be viewed as mentors and a guide.

Informants also stress the *“learn by doing”* principle. It is through practical operation and activity that new sensory experience; new knowledge and skills necessary for individual

development and growth can be obtained. Supportive (financially and morally) school, municipal, project leadership that cares for environment (outdoor and indoor), available technology and favourable atmosphere are the next ones factors. Opinions on the significance of environment are divided; some informants believe environment to be something not significant and place larger emphasis on the personality of a teacher who forms the environment; while others think that environment helps to release creativity. Environment plays a special role working with children and youth with special needs. So it can be concluded that creative physical and emotional environment is closely related to the willingness and interests of people in it: *„...creativity cannot be linked to finances, city, the countryside, nationality, because it is a skill. I do not use modern technologies, like a projector and the like but I do not feel disfavoured or unable to implement creative teaching methods“.*

It is also related with available financial resources and technical support. Although the informants see creativity as a way to 'manage' with available means, all of the interviewees point out that technical support is important as it allows to get results better, faster and often more effectively. Informants admit that environment has been organized thanks to the available EU financing. There is enough money at present for the organization of environment, purchasing equipment, especially if the needs are identified and expenses are planned timely. Modern technologies also is one of the things that allow actors to express themselves in different activities, for example, interactive board, technologies that causes various feelings, develops and stimulates them etc.

Researchers identified several factors hindering creative environment and creative learning. The most visible is the lack of common understanding and team work between parts involved. There is a weak connection between

Jelgava, LLU ESAF, 21-22 April 2016, pp. 16-22 school subjects, topics, between training programmes and real life; teachers fail to share their experience (due to unwillingness to accept someone else's experience since there are different courses and seminars but the information presented at these events is used insufficiently). Teachers underestimate each other's creative expressions: "Teacher is not a robot; he or she wants to hear a thank you... that in itself is a motivation".

As it mentioned before, personal qualities of teachers, school staff and experts that can be observed by children and youth, including superficiality, inaccuracy, indecisiveness, uniform teaching methods and standardized evaluation. Just like in relation to personality, the problem usually is the unwillingness to learn and use new methods. There are situations when teachers are willing to learn new things for the sake of certificate and not the knowledge and its implementation. One of the most essential hindrances is teachers' poor language skills; teachers are unable to read international studies, publications, to exchange experiences with other teachers internationally, so they have to manage with the information available in Latvian which limits their understanding, hinders development and cooperation on various levels. Communication barriers and lack of cooperation are the factors that hinders creativity. There is a triangle of cooperation – teacher/expert, pupil and parent that requires active communication; whereas involved agents are not ready or willing to communicate or there is a lack of empathy, it causes conflicts: *"...we often demonstrate demanding communication where school presents its demands, parents – their demands and everyone stays in their position"*. High weekly workload and existing wage model forces teachers/experts to take up additional jobs. In general, creative learning requires teachers/experts to sacrifice their free time and draw on financial and moral support of their families.

Additional factor is pupils' resistance and disinterest in learning process, at least in the beginning; creative learning is harder since the main part is played by students, not by teachers or experts. This problem can be solved by revealing the opportunities provided by this type of learning: *"I also interviewed the students. They say that in the beginning it is very hard to get used to creative learning methods; it took a month of inner fighting and then we realized that things will not change, that it is easy and interesting, and then it starts working"*.

The lack of sufficient, budgeted finances is hindering creativity, since environment and technical support as well as different courses asks for finances. Rather often schools or children and youth centres must share their equipment, since there is a lack of equipment and materials and facilities and infrastructure are inadequate, - it limits the quality of activities. Informants stress also insufficient number of teachers in the areas that are interesting for boys (robotics, technology), lack of male teachers in schools and interest centres, the issue of aid for children and youth with special needs. At present, the state finances assistants for general education schools, whereas this service is not available for special schools (with an exception of some districts where local government pays for it) and the largest workload falls on teachers/experts.

As a general hindering factors informants consider social environment, attitude of society and various decision-makers towards teachers/experts and issues of teacher's prestige, wage policy and social accountability.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) In Latvia, creativity is defined as individual self-expression, ability to create new opportunities. Creativity is mostly developed by linking theory with practical activities, with everyday processes.
- 2) Creativity is believed to be mandatory skill necessary for every cycle of human life.

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Creativity is related to all individuals as attainable and developed skill.

3) Creativity is mentioned in goals and objectives of all levels of policy-making but there are no clear directions on how to promote it. School leadership and teachers have no clear understanding how to conceptualize creativity. Promotion of creativity is insufficiently institutionalized and structured which is often an obstacle to achieving the aims and cooperation between the parties involved.

4) Some local governments and schools implement creative learning methods independently of policy documents, mostly based on individual initiative. There are many good examples that testify of presence of creativity in the education process.

5) Creativity, creative learning and creative teaching environment encourage communication, emotional and physical development, thus causing changes not only in individual children or youth but also in classes, groups and families.

6) The main stimuli and initiators of creativity are different social agents in the environment of formal and informal education, local government, projects etc. that promote cooperation as essential prerequisite of creativity. These few 'key' people are essential, since they initiate and develop different activities, and different understanding of parties involved, acknowledgment and implementation of their opportunities and competencies are very important for the reaching of common goals.

7) The main obstructing factors are related to the lack of common understanding, goals and cooperation between parties involved.

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