

CREATIVE LEARNING METHODS IN PRACTICE: EXPERIENCE OF LATVIAN EDUCATORS

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Abstract. Creativity is seen and described as crucial skill for young people as society and economics have gone through significant transitions recently. Creative thinking and action are considered as a tool to adapt to the labour market and rapid changes taking place in society. Educational system is that particular social institute that develops creativity through implementation of creative learning methods. However, as sociologists claim, the development of creativity is always rooted in social, economic, political, cultural system of the society that can force or block this process.

Authors of the theses were involved in the project "Looking@Learning"¹ (2015-2016) and conducted research during the implementation of creative learning methods both in formal and informal institutions of education. The aim of the thesis is to describe the experience of educators during implementation of creative learning methods highlighting contextual factors of the process. Qualitative analysis of educators' diaries was conducted. Results of the research show that the use of creative learning methods triggers positive functions both at individual and community level; good practices spread among formal and informal agents of education promoting collaboration. Social system is rather free to come in and develop new approaches to education; however the weakest point is almost absolute responsibility of individual teachers in the installation of creative learning methods. This process should receive some support for further institutionalisation process.

Key words: creativity, creative learning methods, social context.

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Introduction

Topicality and novelty of the theses are grounded on a set of deep changes and challenges both on global and local scale. Societies and economies have experienced a profound transformation from reliance on an industrial to a knowledge base. The major trends in societies and economies are increasingly focusing on the demanding kinds of learning that is called as "21st century competences". Young people should acquire deep understanding of complex concepts, gain media literacy, the ability to use advanced information technologies; also team work social and communication skills are crucial (The Nature of..., 2010). Europe faces a number of challenges that can only be met if it has innovative, well-educated, and entrepreneurial citizens who, whatever their walk of life, have the spirit and inquisitiveness to think in new ways, and the courage to meet and adapt to the challenges facing them (Entrepreneurship Education at..., 2012). Also employers argue that the current educational system "teaches yesterday's skills to tomorrow's graduates." Employers are concerned that many new job applicants lack "soft skills," such as interpersonal

communication and analytical thinking (Broek, van den, J., 2016).

During the 20th century, the concept of learning underwent important developments. Today, the dominant concept is socio-constructivist – in which learning is understood to be importantly shaped by the context in which it is situated and is actively constructed through social negotiation with others. On this understanding learning environments should be where: constructive, self – regulated learning is fostered; the learning is sensitive to context; it will often be collaborative (The Nature of..., 2010).

Therefore, educationalist Ken Robinson emphasizes that national educational systems are trying to determine how to educate children so that they can find their place in the economies of the 21st century and that one of the biggest challenges for national education systems is how to educate children that they have sense of cultural identity, they can pass on the cultural genes of our communities while being part of the globalization process (Robinson K., 2010).

Education as a social institute is viewed as a key element for driving above mentioned

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individual qualities. The way to respond to present challenges is creativity and implementing of creative learning methods. As theorists emphasize, there are three connected (and partially overlapping) areas of human activity related to any kind of development: creativity, problem solving and design. Creativity is the process of generating something new that has value. Problem solving is the process required when we seek some kind of a resolution, such as removal of a drawback or achievement of a specific enhancement or improvement. Problem solving usually includes creativity as a part of the process. Design activity is necessary when we are dealing with any kind of a project. The design process can include problem solving and, if necessary, creativity (Zusman, 1998). It also calls for willingness and adequate skills of teachers as teaching is a creative practice that requires the kind of open-minded, whole-hearted, flexible, improvisational (yet knowledgeable), and performative orientation. Fostering such a mindset amongst preservice teachers can be challenging, since they often see their future teaching-selves as altruistic yet authoritarian subject matter experts (O'Brien M., 2012).

Creativity is seen both from the individualist approaches (psychology, biology etc.) and from the contextualist approaches (sociology, history etc.) (Sawyer K.R., 2006). Sociological systems approach identifies multiple contextual factors – material, social, normative, economic and political – which play a role in driving, facilitating, and realizing creative initiatives, on the one hand; or, constraining or blocking creative processes and developments, on the other hand. The most obvious sociological instances of creativity are found in innovative groups and communities. But even "individual" innovators are located in culturally and socially established fields which provide symbols, concepts and models, established rules and norms, technologies and material resources as well as

creativity strategies and production functions (Burns T.R., Machado N., Coerte U., 2015).

Considering all above mentioned, authors turn to exploring the process of implementing creative learning methods in formal and informal institutions of education in Latvia.

Theoretically, the development of individual creativity is intended in political documents and formal goals of development of society in Latvia. Thus, Development Guidelines of Latvia 2014 – 2020 set that general education will promoting creative thinking and problem solving; integrating the digital teaching/learning resources in the educational process; stimulating the individuality and the development of talents; implemented by young teachers who know well the teaching/learning methods of the 21st century (Izglitibas attistibas pamatnostadnes..., 2013). Practically, interpretations and real practices of implementing creative learning methods vary significantly among educators and institutions of education in Latvia and face serious limitations based on traditional understanding of learning process (Bite D., Kronberga G., Kruzmetra Z., Janmere L., 2016).

The aim of the theses – describe the experience of educators during implementation of creative learning methods highlighting contextual factors of the process. Tasks are related to describing theoretical aspects of creativity and nowadays challenges in education and analysing of empirical information.

Research results and discussion

1. Methodology of the research

The theses include the part of the research that was carried out in the framework of the project "Looking@Learning". The first part of the research was called the *State of Art* research with the aim to understand perceptions of creative learning and creative learning environment among agents of formal and informal education (2015). The second part of the research was developed in order to monitor and assess the process of implementing different creative

learning methods both in formal and informal institutions of education in Latvia. One of the research methods that was chosen and is included in the theses is the analysis of documents of qualitative approach where educators' diaries were viewed as documents. Educators filled in diaries from September, 2015 until May, 2016 and they reflected on the experience and subjective characterisation and assessment of applied creative learning methods. The thesis uses the content of 45 diaries dealing with about 40 applied creative methods.

2. Document analysis

Educators' diaries reveal various methods that are used in both formal and non-formal learning environment; these methods were used with trainees of different ages starting with pre-schoolers and ending with Master's students.

Educators' diaries present different experiences of environment as a part of creative learning process. Not all creative activities require especially equipped space. It is enough if there are bare necessities: a computer and office supplies. Trainees are able to express themselves creatively with the minimal equipment. Educators suggest using all available facilities, for example, a library in order to undermine belief that teaching/learning can only take place in classrooms. Moreover, traditional rooms can be made cosier in order to facilitate the comprehension of a theme, for example, trainees and trainers can bring coffee and refreshment to encourage informal discussion and sharing of experience. Or trainees might listen to music during creative lessons. Educators' experience has also shown the importance of certain materials (e.g. *Fair trade* coffee, recycled materials) in organization of creative activities.

The study results also reveal opportunities to diversify the learning environment, such as placing games, magazines and so on in the hallways during the lesson breaks to encourage young people's interest and provide opportunity to spend their free time productively. As a

positive example, we can mention classes organized in K. Valdemara elementary school to help trainees make the choice in which of the Student Council commissions to participate. Being outdoors and observing silence can be viewed as a positive factor: "*Students really liked to be outdoors. Before making their choice some of them lay down on the benches looked into the sky and thought*". Educator pointed out that the change of environment motivates and causes interest.

Creative activities provide opportunity to see the same environment from a different point of view (in different seasons environmental objects can be used for various purposes without giving advance instructions on the use of new objects), thus encouraging cooperation ("*one realizes opportunities and shows them to others*"), trust, self-confidence, finding of "new combinations". At the same time the room where the activity takes place must fit the number and age of participants, content of the activity, for example, providing a chance to do something alone if that is intended in the lesson plan. According to research results, various forms of innovation and creative expression in Latvian formal and informal educational institutions are currently rather topical. Educators and educational administration go on experience visits, cooperate with representatives of non-formal education and learn a variety of ideas for improvement of space and creative workshops for the organization of creative activities. One of educators acknowledges that the attitude of the management of educational establishment is the crucial factor in encouraging both educators and learners.

It can be concluded on the basis of educators' diaries that creative, attractive learning environment is not always the main prerequisite for successful running of creative activities. Good results can be achieved with minor changes. At the same time, educational institutions pay more

attention to making the environment friendly and pleasant for trainees.

Trainees appreciate an opportunity to think, reflect, and speak of themselves, their goals, dreams and desires. This opportunity for trainees to generate and express ideas also motivates them to present and defend them. Educators point out that now and then some trainees astonish them with their ability to present their ideas and generally participate in the activities. The creative methods that are associated with opportunities for trainees to ponder about themselves, to acknowledge and formulate their feelings and ideas, are assessed as successful and expedient: *"During the learning process trainees need activities that create inner feelings, positive attitude towards something"*. Positively assessed are being those creative methods that allow trainees to know one another better (e.g. hobby game, praising one another), teach cooperation and mutual trust, respect towards one another's needs.

In order to discover which methods are the most useful and effective from the youth's perspective, a survey was organized in one of the schools where youth was asked to assess the methods used in different subjects. The results of this survey revealed that young people rather dislike classical teaching methods – lectures, presentations, summaries preferring freer methods that are closer linked to real life: discussions, museum visits, independent studies, abundance of examples in presentation of study materials, films etc. It is possible that students are looking for the easiest way for their learning, choosing not too sophisticated teaching methods; but it may also reflect inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the traditional teaching methods in the learning process.

It must be said that going outside the traditional framework of lessons is not easy and not always educators gain learners' approval. There are several possible reasons: laziness, some students admit, unwillingness to work hard

and the fear of going beyond normal boundaries: *"Everybody remained sitting at the desks the same way as before. It was obvious that students were afraid of doing something wrong"*. Similar experience is revealed by another educator who wrote that even trying to imagine their perfect learning environment learners' ideas were rather limited: *"Very few colours, rather traditional approach to fitting-out of the room"*. Thus, the creative methods initially encounter resistance, but gradually, with the support, encouragement, positive examples, learners may see their opportunities, choices and are able to look at things from a different point of view.

A thing that can contribute to creative thinking is a task where the result would be practically useful, for example, creating a bookmark or making a cuddly doll. As educators write, children and young people appreciate the methods, where the traditional teaching methods are interspersed with gaming elements making the study material easier to comprehend, as well as their links to the practical things of everyday life. Another motivating factor could be an opportunity to see the results of one's work in an exhibition or to incorporate initial ideas in school projects. For example, after a discussion about values, the youth in the town of Limbazi actively participated in the development of the plan for reducing specific problems in the school through the School Parliament: *"To present good example to the society and schoolmates, demonstrating that it is possible to live and behave differently, better"*. Educators also note as a positive factor the possibility of learners themselves to discuss an issue and come to their own conclusions.

Sometimes creative lessons give results that surpass the expected and give the so called synergy effect – mutual assistance, kindness, and understanding of one another. Youth easily breaks stereotypes (for example, boys do not want and are not able to sew) and unleash the better part of their personalities: *"Trainees sat in a circle around the worktable, shared their*

impressions and childhood memories... there was an atmosphere of kindness, helpfulness and support".

Educators and youth see limited time as one of the factors that hinder creative activities. Educators see unwillingness of youth to get involved in the proposed activities as challenging. They attempt to solve it by dividing trainees into groups so that every one of trainees would have some duties and no chance to avoid being a part. Lack of time is repeatedly mentioned in educators' diaries; furthermore, the possibility of fulfilling the plan slowly, talking about it, explaining the process, supporting young people, is considered as one of the success factors of creative lessons. Thus, several educators point out that it is better to organize a lesson where the emphasis is placed on living (experiencing) the process, instead of number of activities. It requires for the creative activity to be well prepared; trainers have to develop plan A and plan B (adjusting workshops to the age, gender of trainees, to premises and equipment, and especially to time framework), so that the situation could be adjusted if necessary. It is necessary in order to hold the student's interest and minimize the risk of them getting distracted, as well as give students time and opportunity to express their emotions. Perhaps, it would be good to respect those who do not want to participate and express themselves.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the combination of creative methods with traditional teaching methods and approaches. Educators' diary entries reveal positive experience with using creative learning methods in more difficult subjects, such as Latvian or English grammar. The experience of both educators and trainees tell of the effectiveness of the combined methods in learning of topics: *"Students liked the lesson; they often ask to repeat these types of lessons"*. However, diary analysis shows some signs that educators are trying to assess which expressions are creative and which are not. This is risky,

because this way creativity can be quite easily made into an ingredient of the traditional, authoritarian approach.

Educators' diaries also describe a situation when creative activities are less effective if youth and their educators are forced to participate in them. It means that creative activities cannot be implemented mechanically, subjecting to school administration instructions, without co-ordination with concerned educators and young people. The attitude of the colleagues is also important while implementing creative activities. If the colleagues do not support implementation of creative activities, to youth it gives an impression that this lesson is not important. And vice versa – the involvement of educators becomes an expression of respect to their colleagues and youth. Educators' diary entries confirm the idea that the implementation of creative methods is gradual, and first of all it requires a change in thinking and attitudes of educators. Consequently, the practice of sharing of the knowledge among colleagues, playing games together and allowing for creative expression is welcome.

It is important to explain the importance of non-formal education methods, their interfaces with everyday life, as well as to allow time for reflection on the things done and experienced during the lessons: *„change the belief that this style of training is aimed at self-development, rather than „silly game playing“"*.

One of the teachers' diaries reveals a successful experience, which can be viewed as a good practice in promoting creative learning environments. Namely, children and young people (ages 7-16) were entrusted with the responsibility to organize a Valentine's Day event at school on their own. The description of the process and results shows that youth people appreciate being entrusted with responsibility and are enthusiastic in carrying out their ideas. It also facilitates cooperation and mutual trust: *"An adult wants to control children fearing that children won't do things as well as an adult. But*

when children are given freedom they surprise adults with interesting and sometimes extraordinary results". The idea of entrusting youth with more responsibility is expressed in other research diaries as well, for example, assessing his/her own work and the work of others: *"Students believe that the teacher will do the assessing, instead of trying to evaluate their work, attitude, skill level themselves, making informed judgement"*.

A similar experience is also revealed by the representatives of Limbazi organized race "Forest trot", where the most appreciated aspect was the opportunity to participate for individuals of all ages, to be together with classmates and family: *"I liked everything! Delicious soup and great people!"*. Educators write that young people welcome those lessons that promote mutual cooperation, make it possible to get to know one another better, make friends with other children and young people, trainers and parents. Also creative activities are a good way for young people to talk about the common human values - honesty, fairness, equality etc. and a tool to build a community to some extent.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Creative methods applied by educators are diverse and cover both formal and non-formal educational spheres. It is valuable that there is cooperation between formal and informal education agents in organizing creative workshops and exchange of experience.
- 2) Educators' experience indicates that the environment in itself does not ensure the development of creativity. It is more motivated by adapting the environmental to a given lesson, by using particular instruments and without having to wait until all the rooms will be furnished 'creatively'; teacher's willingness and personal motivation act as a trigger and play central role in developing creative learning methods. In order to maintain this approach teachers have to

receive support from colleagues and administration.

- 3) The research results reveal the successes of the creative approach in mastering complex study material. However, the greatest recognition, even admiration from the viewpoint of young people is observed in cases where the classes contributed to their reflections about their feelings, thoughts, attitudes towards various issues, their worth, etc. They need time to think, to realize what is happening, to formulate their attitude towards various issues, discuss it with others. If you are given the chance, young people become attentive and involved, regardless of age; it means that young people value creative learning methods because they give opportunity to reflect of themselves and important things that obviously is not offered by traditional approach in education.
- 4) It is important to stress that creative activity cannot be forced. There are cases when young people engage in it formally as educators or educational management make to do so, it however leads to hostility and resentment. Creative activities cannot be implemented formally, mechanically and using one's authority. Responsibility must be balanced out among all involved parties. The experience of individual educators shows that increasing the responsibility of young people is essential in both formal and non-formal educational environment.
- 5) The research results reveal the classic clash between the traditional and creative approach to education, where everyone involved originally expects knowledge "from the above" instead of having to search for their own answers and solutions; this idea is changing gradually when young people and teachers realize their own responsibility about things.
- 6) Overall, the experience of educators implementing creative activities shows that it makes sense to introduce and develop them in

spite of some difficulties and problematic aspects. The results of the research confirm that creative learning approach is gradually developing in Latvia; it brings positive functions for an individual, community, system of education in Latvia and society as a whole.

7) On the one hand, educational and social system in Latvia seems to be quite open to

implementation of creative learning methods as there are no formal restrictions in it; it also receives support from young people and community; on the other hand, implementing of creative learning methods is based on one's initiative and as such it becomes a rather fragile social practice. It asks for more institutional support.

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