Vol 13 | Issue 1 (2025) | pp. 285-290

JOURNAL OF
Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

https://jpaap.ac.uk/

Creativity, health and sustainability: A wholearchy of learning

Laura Bissell, Emily Doolittle, and Laura González, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Abstract

In order to create a learning environment which prioritises health and wellbeing, we propose a focus on creativity over content as an approach to structuring support and skills development. Building on our collective experience in devising engagement activities and training programmes for students and staff at universities, art schools, and conservatoires, we suggest ways of embedding a creative approach at the outset. Our context is performing arts education, but we offer these reflections on creative health and sustainability to be considered across disciplines.

In this creative-critical paper, we offer reflections on forms of learning that grow organically, and where all elements are embedded in the system and support each other as a *wholearchy* rather than a hierarchy. This is learning that grows like a body, from the inside, all parts at once. Underpinning this is what we perceive to be the threefold contribution of the performing arts to the wider field of knowledge: a grounding in embodied practice, collaboration as the main way of relating and an orientation towards adaptability to prepare practitioners for a continuously changing professional landscape. What we have learned from teaching in the arts can be useful for people in all educational contexts.

We draw on contemporary performance literature that focuses on practical knowledge and how this knowledge emerges. We explore ideas around creativity, especially in its everyday version, as a practice that enhances wellbeing. We reflect on projects around our key themes of embodiment, collaboration and adaptability, all of them situated in the performing arts. Our interdisciplinary and practice-led approach cuts through the work we are presenting, as these projects allow for rich conversations across differing disciplinary positions.

We ask how considerations of our own creative health, and the creative health of our discipline, can be entangled within our teaching and learning context, offering recommendations for future curricula (and the challenges they raise). In doing so, we examine how the performing arts are uniquely placed to provide spaces of healthy creativity for an uncertain future. In the context of disappearing arts funding and the demise of course and institutions, access to creative education becomes even more urgent.

Keywords: creative health, artistic research, embodiment, collaboration, adaptability, arts education

A wholearchy of learning

One of the aspects of academic life that the 2020-2021 COVID-19 period brought into sharp focus is the need to enhance health and wellbeing for staff and students at all levels, from undergraduate through professional, and across all our activities, curricular and extracurricular. For us, this aim did not simply encompass physical and mental health – important and challenging though these are in higher education contexts – but also creative health: the vitality of our inspiring influences that allow us to make new work, communicate and receive ideas and build communally towards a more vibrant future.

In devising activities – those in the past, those we are currently working on, and our future dreams – we have looked for underpinning principles, an ethos that will act as a foundation on which to explore diverse

themes. We have sought wholearchic models where, instead of focusing on stages, or milestones – although we acknowledge these are necessary too – we invite learning that grows like a body, from the inside, all parts at once. Wholearchy (also spelled holarchy) is an adaptation, or a different way of expressing, holacracy, a form of decentralised governance. It is a concept mainly used in business studies (see, for example Schell and Bischof, 2022) but it has also been adapted for activist practice. Here we are introducing it in education.

In order to realise, and to explore possibilities that are not yet in the realm of reality, we extend a specific invitation to a heuristic mode of enquiry, where we try things and allow ourselves to get them wrong. Failure and its potential is an essential and positive part of learning and creativity: if we only try things we know will work, there is no room for discovery or growth. We thus must not only accept but also embrace the possibility of failure.

COVID-19, and the ensuing political, economic, social, environmental and ongoing crises, had a number of impacts causing this period to be defined by Zuleeg et al. (2021) as permacrisis: an "extended period of instability and insecurity" (n.p.). As well as getting us out of practice with daily interactions (which include failures and successes), the periods of lockdown restrictions made us more anxious and more afraid of failure (see for example, Deng et al., 2021, Sipeki et al., 2022). So perhaps we need more targeted creative interventions, more specific permission to try things and get them wrong than we did before to counteract the existing rigidity of thinking, feeling and being. Embracing creativity in our daily lives – not just in the creation of grand or celebrated works of art – can help us with that.

Following the dictum of performance artist Joseph Beuys (1978), we believe that "everyone is an artist". This is not to downplay the significance of expert arts practice, but to acknowledge that daily and mundane practices of creativity are equally essential to wellbeing. Everyday creativity can look like allowing ourselves (and inviting others) to try things a new way, to perceive a commonplace event differently, to explore a new area (geographic or conceptual), to throw oneself wholeheartedly into experiencing something new without any attachment to the results. Morning pages (a daily practice of writing three pages each morning as defined by Cameron, 1992), daily or regular photography, free-drawing, haiku and other creative writing and journaling practices can all enhance experiences of the everyday and can be regulating and rewarding encounters with our creative selves. This expanded concept of what it is to be an artist reduces the significance of the form or medium, instead foregrounding the creative potentiality that everyone has (if they are given the opportunity to practice it).

Many artists in the performing arts field have contributed to making what they do visible, for example Byron (2014), Gómez-Peña (2005), Gómez-Peña & García-López (2020), and Tufnell and Crickmay (2023). In the arts research domain this approach has sparked debates about methods, epistemology and validity (Barrett & Bolt, 2014; Biggs & Karlsson, 2011; Macleod & Holdridge, 2005; Nelson, 2022). Considering *how* we research and practice, at an essential level, can be beneficial to all fields, as Haraway (2016) argues, it matters "what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (p. 12).

Working in a performing arts institution has somewhat enhanced this thinking as we begin by highlighting what our disciplines are good at and what we can offer others, including those in the sciences and traditional humanities. We distilled this contribution into three key aspects: embodiment, collaboration and adaptability.

Embodiment

We know not only because we have seen or thought about something, but because we have done it. We learn from others who have done similar things before, or we create anew something no one has done quite the same way we do. We take something someone else has done and make it our own because it is filtered through our own bodies and ways of being.

Whether in the areas of production, film, performing or visual arts, the working life of an artist is grounded in embodied practice (Griffith, 2021). An embodied practice acknowledges that our physical existence is not separate from our mental and emotional lives, but rather an essential part of how we navigate the world. Embodied practice can often focus on individual experiences from a first-person perspective, highlighting how we engage with our environment through our bodies but it is not exclusively that. Our bodies influence our perceptions and interactions; they are a key aspect of our identities, shaped by cultural, social, and personal factors, including gender, race, disability, and how these are perceived and contested in society (Counsell & Mock, 2009).

Embodiment also recognises that cognitive processes of knowledge are often informed by physical states. This does not mean simply acknowledging that we have a body which we carry or carries us around but, as Spatz (2017) emphasises, that this embodiment is prioritised in our activities and is an area of investigation in its own right, instead of instrumentalised, or made transparent. An embodied approach can be fostered in almost any research endeavour: for example, González's (2021) extensive work on breath, which culminated in a performance piece titled *Breath at the end of the world*, addressing the climate emergency and the discussion at COP26.

While arts research foregrounds its embodied, practice-based nature, embodiment is in fact a part of all research, including sciences, social sciences or humanities, even if this is often not acknowledged or explored.

Collaboration

We believe that collaboration is an integral part of artistic endeavour. Even when artists work alone, they typically do so in dialogue, perhaps with a community, a tradition, materials, or an imagined audience, even if not with another person. Yet there can be a fine line between competition and collaboration. Artistic training too often includes an emphasis on graded exams, competitive auditions for further opportunities, and/or participation in contests, while professional artists frequently find themself, wittingly or unwittingly, in competition for scant (and diminishing) resources and opportunities (Banks & O'Connor, 2020; Borkert & Skinner, 2021). Those who develop strong collaborative networks and communities, however, are most likely to succeed in the long term. Collaborative networks and collectives can build the infrastructure needed to support artists, including running venues, building audiences, supporting the creation of new work, giving peer feedback, and perhaps even helping artists weather the vagaries of funding and employment. Collectives may even be able to lobby for creation or improvement of society-wide support for artists, including arts councils and funding bodies, artists' welfare/guaranteed minimum income, and recognition of the needs of freelancers and those with variable employment.

Collaboration that takes place within a discipline can further the specific needs of practitioners of that art form. For example, the Canadian League of Composers (2025) sets minimum commissioning rates for composers across Canada, making it (somewhat) more feasible for composers to contemplate earning a living as a freelancer, while Sound Scotland (2025a, 2025b) provides multiple opportunities for peer

mentorship for composers at all levels, building a sense of community rather than of competition. But collaboration across disciplines is equally valuable and can lead to unexpected forms of resilience and growth. Artists and researchers in different disciplines, across arts and non-arts fields, bring to the table not only different knowledge and experiences, but different kinds of questions, different ways of working, and different understandings of what it means to know something.

A recent example of cross-disciplinary collaboration involved the co-supervision of a PhD student by two biologists and a musician. The PhD student (now Dr) Alex South (n.d) combined his practice as a performer, improvisor, and composer with rigorous scientific training to shed new insight into rhythmic variability in humpback whale song. The embodied knowledge South gained through listening to and improvising with humpback whale recordings, the data gathered through field research, and rigorous statistical analysis played equal roles in South's discoveries. In addition to the main output of South's PhD – a written thesis and portfolio of compositions – his collaborative and interdisciplinary research has led to new ways of sharing scientific research with audiences, new ways of experiencing what (we imagine) it might be like to be a humpback whale, and new ways of thinking about the responsibilities of artists in relation to animals.

Adaptability

In a world that is constantly changing in terms of technical skills, evolving forms of language, fundraising and new areas not previously conceived, we argue that adaptability is a key skill required for creative health. Here we explore the willingness to try new ideas and new genres (video games, audiobooks, immersive experiences, multimedia performance) and dialogue between different art forms or interdisciplinary collaborations with, for example, sciences and humanities (Science, Humanities and Arts Research Exchange, 2024). While this does not work for everyone's creativity (intra-disciplinary work is also creative), remaining open and adaptable in an education setting can bring about future resilience as well as connections.

Since 2010, Bissell and Overend (Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Edinburgh) have collaborated as Making Routes, originally devising a network and online resource for researchers and artists working with creative mobilities, but expanding this work to include interdisciplinary creative research projects in fields of rewilding, multi-species collaboration, entangled practices, educational theory/pedagogy and creating diverse artworks and outputs including a co-authored book (Bissell & Overend, 2021), articles, a blog, performances, films, workshops, audio walks and many more. Being able to adapt and expand what Making Routes might mean and encompass, and who it connects and collaborates with, has been key to its longevity and sustainability.

Thoughts for the future

While developing programmes within the above framework, we have gathered a list of thoughts and considerations that will guide us as we journey towards the horizon of launching them. These are:

- Exposure to a wide range of art ideas and artworks, through diversity of staff. This might prompt fragmentation, as time is a finite resource, and might also compromise depth.
- Widen the range of ways of valuing and evaluating projects. This might pose the challenge that the worth of art cannot necessarily be measured objectively and might require consideration of how it fits into a particular context.

- No penalties for failure, which can be tricky within an educational context where work is assessed and marked against criteria
- Assessment based on growth and experimentation rather than perfection or attainment, which will pose the challenge of writing learning outcomes.
- Back and forth feedback and development, rather than grades as pronouncements of worth, which might require consideration of student numbers and staff capacity.
- Discussion of different possible purposes of art away from the idea of the tortured genius, for example, as personal growth, personal expression, community building, preserving cultural traditions, questioning social structures, protest, excellent, transcendent or spiritual experience, storytelling, humour, entertainment, development of a field or genre. No one metric applies to all and this raises issues of how this diversity can be managed and kept relevant.

- Recognition of creativity in all, not just those whose work is traditionally considered creative.
- Development and support of creative habits, an area often set aside by the need to acquire skills.
- Recognition of different learning preferences so that this creative pedagogy can thrive.

Even though all disciplines re-embodied, to a certain extent collaborative and need to adapt to constantly changing circumstances (as the pandemic showed), other areas can learn from what performance has to offer, since it considers these issues closely and as research topics in their own right. From an arts-based perspective, we want to highlight and to share these practice-based creative research strategies with others. By moving away from hierarchical structures and embracing all elements within a system – including darker or less productive ones – a wholearchy, where all parts are embedded, support each other and grow together, can emerge.

Biographies

Dr Laura Bissell is an Athenaeum Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Laura has published her research, life writing and poetry widely. She is currently writing a monograph on feminist performance and matrescence (Intellect, 2025) and co-editing the International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media (Matrescence and Media). Email: l.bissell@rcs.ac.uk

Dr Emily Doolittle is an Athenaeum Research Fellow and Lecturer in Composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. She has an ongoing interest in zoömusicology, which she explores in both her composition and through interdisciplinary collaboration with biologists. Recent works include (re)cycling I: metals, for found-object percussion instruments, and Los Bilbilikos, based on songs of and poetry about nightingales. Email: e.doolittle@rcs.ac.uk

Professor Laura González's work falls between medical humanities, psychoanalysis, performance, and Eastern thought. She is the author of 'Make me yours: How art seduces' (Cambridge Scholars, 2016) and 'The hysteric' (Routledge, 2023). She has published chapters on the seductive qualities of a lemon squeezer, inter-semiotic translation, her maternal line, and madness. Email: l.gonzalez@rcs.ac.uk

References

Banks, M., & O'Connor, J. (2020). "A plague upon your howling": Art and culture in the viral emergency. *Cultural Trends, 30*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2020.1827931.

Barrett, E. & Bolt, B. (Eds.). (2014). *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry*. IB Tauris.

Beuys, J. (1978). *Every Man is An Artist*. ARTIST ROOMS. Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/102682/joseph-beuys-every-man-artist

Biggs, M., & Karlsson, H. (2011). *The Routledge companion to research in the arts*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203841327

Bissell, L., & Overend, D. (2021). *Making routes: Journeys in Performance 2010-2020*. Triarchy Press.

Borkert, B., & Skinner, L. (2021). Arts under attack: A multinational perspective on creative arts education. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Public Policy, 2*(3).

Byron, E. (2014). *Integrative performance: Practice and theory for the interdisciplinary performer*. Routledge.

Cameron, J. (2020 [1992]). *The Artist's Way*. Profile Books.

Canadian League of Composers Commissioning Rates. (2025). *Commissioning rates*. https://www.composition.org/resources/commissioning-rates/

Counsell, C. & Mock, R. (Eds.) (2009). *Performance, embodiment and cultural memory*. Cambridge Scholars.

Deng, J., Zhou, F., Hou, W., Silver, Z., Yi Wong, C., Chang, O., Drakos, A., Kang Zuo, Q., & Huang, E. (2021). The prevalence of depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and sleep disturbance in higher education students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychiatry Research, 301*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2021.113863

González, L. (2021). *Breath at the end of the world*. https://www.lauragonzalez.co.uk/art/breath-at-the-end-of-the-world/

Gómez-Peña, G. (2005). *Ethno-techno: Writings on performance, activism and pedagogy*. Routledge.

Gómez-Peña, G., & García-López, S. (2020). *La pocha nostra: A handbook for the rebel artist in a post-democratic society*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322105

Griffith, A. (2021). Embodied creativity in the fine and performing arts. *Journal of Creativity*, *31*, 100010. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yjoc.2021.100010

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Macleod, K. & Lin Holdridge (Eds.). (2005). *Thinking through art: Reflections on art as research*. Routledge.

Neimanis, A. (2012). On Collaboration (for Barbara Godard). *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, 20*(3), 215-221. https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2012.703689

Nelson, R. (2022). *Practice as research in the arts (and beyond): Principles, processes, contexts, achievements.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90542-2

Schell, S., & Bischof, N. (2022). Change the way of working. Ways into self-organization with the use of holacracy: An empirical investigation. *European Management Review, 19*(1), 123-137. https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12457

Sipeki, I., Vissi, T., & Túri, I. (2022). The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of students and teaching staff. *Heliyon, 8*(4). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09185

Sound Scotland. (2025a). *Composers' helpline*. https://sound-scotland.co.uk/event/composers-helpline

Sound Scotland (2025b). *Covfefe: Online coffee chat for composers & musicians*. https://sound-scotland.co.uk/event/covfefe-coffee-chat-for-composers-musicians

South, A. (no date). *Alex South multispecies musicking*. https://alexsouth.org/

Spatz, B. (2017). Embodied research: a methodology. *Liminalities, 13*(2), 1-31. http://liminalities.net/13-2/embodied.pdf

Science, Humanities and Arts Research Exchange (SHARE). (2024). *Welcome to SHARE.* https://shareinterdisciplinary.co.uk

Tuffnell, M., & Crickmay, C. (2023). *Body space image: Notes towards improvisation and performance*. Triarchy Press.

Zuleeg, F., Emmanouilidis, J. A., Borges de Castro, R. (2021, March 11). Europe in the Age of Permacrisis. *European Policy Centre*. https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c