

Promoting Student Engagement Through a Change of Scenery

Maryna Hattingh¹

ABSTRACT

Promoting student engagement by changing the environment can effectively refresh minds, stimulate creativity, and increase focus. A learning-centred approach works best when teaching creative arts, but space and creativity are imperative to move around. Creative arts are a social subject, and much group work occurs inside and outside the classroom. Using the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, we can answer how student engagement in the creative arts classroom can be promoted. It focuses on the interaction and collaboration of teaching and learning that encourages the students to interact with each other and the teacher. A traditional classroom setting limits creativity and freedom. Thus, the educator promotes cooperation and motivates the students by moving the lesson to an outdoor setting. The students find the change of scenery refreshing and look forward to seeing what will happen next. They actively participate in the lesson and participate in the classroom and frequently ask questions. Changing the scenery through physical movement or imaginative setups keeps learning dynamic and fosters higher engagement.

Keywords: Creative arts; classroom; outside; student engagement; Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

Article Information

Submitted: October 10, 2024

Revised: May 6, 2025

Accepted: May 9, 2025

¹ Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa, ORCID: 0000-0002-4454-3977, E-mail: HattinghMG@ufs.ac.za

INTRODUCTION

Creative Arts Education

Creative Arts Education encompasses teaching and learning in visual arts, music, theatre, dance, design, and media arts. It nurtures creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-expression through various art forms. This field emphasises experiential learning, where students engage in hands-on projects and collaborate on creative processes (Li & Mendoza, 2022).

Creative Arts Education in South Africa plays a crucial role in the development of learners, reflecting the country's diverse cultures, history, and socio-political context (CAPS, 2011). It has been shaped by efforts to use the arts for social transformation, personal growth, and identity formation, particularly in the post-apartheid era. According to Odendaal and De Jager (2018), creative arts play a vital role in personal and cultural expression, fostering skills and experiences that contribute to overall development. Educators can promote holistic learning by integrating creative arts into educational settings, encouraging students to explore their creativity, collaborate with others, and appreciate diverse forms of expression. The benefits of engaging in creative arts extend beyond artistic skills, enriching individuals' lives and fostering a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them (Saefurrohman, 2024).

In a creative arts classroom, lesson structures are often more flexible and dynamic than traditional academic subjects. However, they still follow a basic framework to ensure effective learning and engagement. Tishman and Palmer (2021) state that a creative arts classroom is student-centred, flexible, collaborative, and reflective for students and teachers. The classroom furniture should be adaptable to create dynamic learning environments, facilitating individualised instruction and collaborative group work. In traditional universities, it is often difficult to change the classroom setting as there are fixed desks; thus, educators should be innovative to make the lesson more engaging (Tishman & Palmer, 2021). This case study promotes student engagement by moving the class from

the lecture hall to outside the buildings in the open air.

Intermediate phase creative Arts curriculum standard

The intermediate phase creative arts curriculum standards are designed to provide a structured framework for teaching and assessing the arts in an educational setting. These standards vary by country and educational system, but they aim to ensure that students develop essential skills, knowledge, and an understanding of different art forms (Johnson, 2021). The standards cover a range of creative disciplines, including visual arts, music, drama, dance, and sometimes media arts.

Educators in the South African Creative Arts classrooms focus on four artistic processes where students are encouraged to create original artistic ideas and works (Craft, 2021). It might involve making a portfolio of original work in visual arts, or students studying music, drama, or dance performing for an audience to showcase their interpretation and execution of artistic work. In the visual arts, students may present their work in exhibitions.

Students must know how to analyse, interpret and critique artistic work (Johnson, 2021), such as critically examining the techniques used in a famous painting or the mood created by a particular piece of music. Lastly, according to Craft (2021), students should connect their artistic work with personal, societal, cultural, and historical contexts. For example, a student studying the influence of social movements on artistic expression or exploring the relationship between a historical event and a piece of music or art.

These four processes guide instruction and assessment across all grade levels, from early childhood through secondary education. However, how can we promote student engagement in the creative arts curriculum in alternative options?

Traditional vs collaborative learning environment

A **traditional classroom** refers to a structured learning environment where students typically sit in rows, facing the teacher at the front of the

room (Brown, 2020). Taylor (2020) states that this setting often follows a teacher-centred approach, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge, and students listen, take notes, and follow instructions. In a traditional classroom, key elements dominate, such as a fixed seating arrangement, teacher-centred learning, a standardised curriculum, minimal interaction among learners, and a focus on discipline and structure (Smith, 2020).

In contrast to a more flexible or collaborative learning environment, a traditional classroom setting can sometimes limit creativity, movement, and social interaction, which are essential for subjects like creative arts.

A **collaborative learning environment** is a student-centred setting where learning occurs through group interaction, cooperation, and shared experiences (O'Dowd, 2020). This approach encourages students to work together, solve problems, and actively engage with the material instead of passively receiving information. Key elements in a collaborative learning environment include group work, active participation in the classroom, shared responsibility amongst the learners, the teacher becoming a facilitator, dynamic seating and classroom layout, focus on communication and social skills, and problem-solving and critical thinking development (Millis, 2020).

According to Kuhlthau and Hiller (2020), learning becomes more engaging and interactive in this environment as students benefit from their peers' collective knowledge and experiences. It also aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, highlighting the importance of social interaction in cognitive development (Erbil, 2020).

ACTIVITY IMPLEMENTATIONS

Creative Arts classroom requirements

According to Allen and Pearce (2020), the classroom environment encourages exploration, self-expression, and collaboration in a creative arts classroom. Unlike traditional classrooms, the creative arts classroom focuses on active participation, hands-on learning, and creative problem-solving. A flexible layout is needed, and multi-purpose furniture must be used and arranged as required (Thompson & Murray,

2020). A collaborative environment is needed where group work is encouraged, and the teacher becomes the facilitator in the classroom. Hands-on learning must take place where experimentation is supported. Blended learning is encouraged to enhance understanding (Bruggeman, Tondeur, Struyven, Pynoo, Garone, & Vanslambrouck, 2021). Interdisciplinary learning is commonly used (creative arts are used in different subjects). Students must be allowed to express themselves freely, and a safe space must be created for self-exploration. The process is more important than the end product, meaning the student's experience is measured in an assessment, not just the end product of the evaluation (Johnson & Smith, 2020).

The creative arts classroom is a dynamic and stimulating environment that nurtures imagination, collaboration, and critical thinking (Wilson & Brown, 2020). Hence, a traditional classroom is too controlling to stimulate creative thinking. The answer to create a collaborative and expressive class in a fixed environment is to move the class outside where the students may have space to move, explore and engage more freely.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development emphasises the fundamental role that social interaction and cultural context play in the development of cognition (Ansari, 2020; Erbil, 2020). According to Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, learning is deeply embedded in social contexts. It occurs through individuals' interactions with their environment, including peers, teachers, and cultural tools (e.g., language and symbols). Vygotsky argued that cognitive development is a social process (Erbil, 2020; Khadijeh & Yaghoubi, 2019). Children learn through interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as parents, teachers, and peers. These interactions help them internalise knowledge and develop new cognitive skills. This becomes a good scaffolding tool in the classroom where the lecturer or teacher helps learners perform tasks they cannot do independently (Chen & Huang, 2019). The support is then gradually removed as the learners become more proficient and can complete the task without assistance.

Application in Creative Arts Education

Collaborative Learning: Vygotsky's theory supports group work and peer collaboration in the classroom, as students can learn from one another (Erbil, 2020; Johnson, 2014). This is particularly important in Creative Arts as it is a very social subject. Collaboration and group work are encouraged. In this study, the students completed a group work assignment in an outdoor setting. The students were divided into groups of 10. Moreover, they had to work together to complete their assignment and overcome any obstacles from the group.

Teacher as a Facilitator: In a Vygotskian classroom, the teacher's role is guiding and scaffolding learning rather than simply imparting knowledge (Johnson, 2014). Creative arts is a very interpretative subject, where everybody's perspectives and interpretations differ, and no right or wrong interpretation can be found. The teacher facilitates the learning process, but ultimately, the students are responsible for their learning outcomes (Johnson, 2014). In this study, the teacher gave the necessary information to the students to get them started with their assignment. The learning process was in the hands of the group, who had to look at the creative arts intermediate phase curriculum and design a lesson plan for a dance based on the grade 6 work. Guidance from the lecturer was provided when needed, but ultimately it was in the students' hands.

Culturally Relevant Teaching: Understanding that students' cultural backgrounds influence their learning processes, educators can integrate culturally relevant materials and practices to make learning more meaningful (Johnson, 2014).

In summary, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises that cognitive development is a collaborative process influenced by social, cultural, and environmental factors (Erbil, 2020). Learning occurs best through interaction, guided support, and the integration of artistic tools. Social interaction is an essential part of Creative Arts, and by applying Vygotsky's theory, we strengthen the students' understanding and engagement (Erbil, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The educator applied a qualitative research case study design to explore and understand the participants' experiences when changing the lecture setting (Ramani & Mann, 2016). The educator investigated the difference in students' marks by changing the lecture setting and assignments when moving the class outside. The educator observed the students for both activities to obtain an objective experience of the students' performance.

The third-year creative arts students (320 students) were selected for the case study as they prepare to start their teaching practice experience at schools. Two similar assignments were given in different settings to observe whether the marks improve from inside the lecture hall to outside in the open air. For the first assignment (a drama assignment), the students had to work in groups where they had to present a lesson on improvisation with examples. The students conducted this assignment in the lecture hall, with minimal space because of the fixed desks and chairs. For the second assignment (a dance assignment), the students had to create a lesson plan where they had to teach how to choreograph a dance with examples. This assignment occurred in the open parking lot, where the students had ample space to move and do their presentations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Moving the Creative Arts class outside

Mannion and Lynch (2018) posit that moving a creative arts class outdoors can offer unique benefits and new learning opportunities, engaging students with their environment while fostering creativity. The natural setting provides a change of pace from the traditional classroom, sparking inspiration and encouraging hands-on, immersive experiences. Nicholson (2018) states that learning outside can be an enriching way for students to investigate questions, apply concepts, and engage beyond the barriers of a classroom. Learning outside can help enrich a student's educational experience by showing them real-life applications of theories they learn at school (Blair, 2018).

There are a few benefits to teaching outside. It is healthy; it is easy to be cramped up indoors

all day without a chance to see the sun and breathe the fresh air; getting outdoors, even for a short while, can improve health and well-being and help one recover from mental fatigue (Kemple & Spearman, 2018). It offers a change of pace from the usual routine: a chance to reinvigorate the subject and increase students' motivation to learn (Nicholson, 2018). Teaching a class without a PowerPoint or immobile desks allows one to incorporate different active learning techniques that might not be practical in the classroom.

Outdoor creative arts classes provide a unique opportunity to engage students with their surroundings in new and inspiring ways (Hursen & Islek, 2017).

Outdoor lesson motivation

At universities, most classes take place in lecture halls suitable for creative arts theory classes, but not for the practical sessions, because of limited space. A lecture hall has fixed desks and chairs with a podium in the front, making it difficult for the learners to showcase their work practically. For the drama assignment, the students completed it in class in the lecture hall with limited space to express themselves, resulting in them presenting in an uncomfortable, slightly robotic style.

Moving the class outside for the dance assignment gave the students the freedom to express themselves creatively and more opportunities to collaborate with fellow students and the teacher. There was more space to do their demonstrations without obstacles, and the whole class was very open to the experience. This outdoor session created a fun experience where all students participated and engaged throughout the session. The session boosted their confidence, and they had fun doing the assignment. In contrast, the drama lesson assignment in the lecture hall made the students appear awkward and restricted. They were not as engaged in the class, and there was no real enjoyment.

After every assignment, the educator asks the students to reflect on the assignment to adapt and change future assignments. Questions such as what went well with this assignment, what would you do differently, what did you learn from this experience, and what is your opinion

on the location of the assignment presentation were given to learners on the learning management system after completing their assignment. The students gave an overall positive response reflecting on the outdoor assignment. The following are some of the quotes from the students:

S1 - This was such a fun class, and I hope we can do it again in the future.

S2 - Having class outside creates such a relaxed atmosphere. We were learning while having fun.

S3 - It was fun!!! Something different.

S4 - Thank you for letting us work outside.

It was noted that the students performed better outdoors than in a similar assignment completed in the lecture hall. More students showed up for class afterwards, motivated to learn and hoping to do a similar session where they would have an outside class.

CONCLUSION

Promoting student engagement through a change of environment can refresh minds, stimulate creativity, and enhance focus (Hursen & Islek, 2017). It is imperative in the creative arts, where a learning-centred teaching approach thrives on flexibility and interaction. Creative arts demand space for movement, creativity, and collaboration, making it a more social subject that often involves group work inside and outside the classroom (Barrett, Creech, & Zhukov, 2021).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development underlines the fundamental role of social interaction in the learning process. Within this framework, knowledge acquisition occurs through meaningful engagement with peers and educators, fostering a dynamic and cooperative educational environment. However, conventional classroom structures often limit the spontaneity and creative exploration necessary for such collaborative learning experiences. By shifting the learning space to an outdoor setting, students engage in cooperative learning and find motivation through the refreshing change of scenery. This dynamic environment encourages spontaneity, which makes students eager to see what will happen next. The unpredictability of an outdoor lesson adds excitement, making students more actively

involved in the process. They are more likely to participate, ask questions, and interact meaningfully with the material, leading to deeper and more meaningful learning experiences.

REFERENCES

- Allen, M., & Pearce, H. (2020). Creating Spaces for Creativity: Design Principles for Arts Education. *Journal of Educational Design*, 6(3), 22–35.
- Ansari, M. (2020). *Theories: Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development*. Retrieved on 17 May 2023, from https://www.apsmcollege.ac.in/glassimg/thumb_album/1606930281-11.pdf
- Barker, S., Slingsby, D. & Tilling, S. (2002). *Teaching biology outside the classroom*. Retrieved 20 May 2023, from <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=21a060340b171a8e3de483e234c0b94fd42023a2>
- Barrett, M. S., Creech, A., & Zhukov, K. (2021). Creative Collaboration and Collaborative Creativity: A Systematic Literature Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 713445.
- Blair, M. (2018). Exploring the Intersection of Art and Nature: Outdoor Creative Arts Education in Practice. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 119(3), 130–138.
- Brown, A. (2020). Teacher-Centered vs. Student-Centered Learning: A Comparative Study. *Educational Research Review*, 34(4), 227–240.
- Bruggeman, B., Tondeur, J., Struyven, K., Pynoo, B., Garone, A. & Vanslambrouck, S. (2021). Experts speaking: Crucial teacher attributes for implementing blended learning in higher education. *The Internet and higher education*, 48, 100772.
- Burger, D., & Saunders, R. (2018). Creative Arts Education in South Africa: Overcoming Barriers to Access. *Journal of Education*, 73, 45–58.
- Carlow University. (2021). *Tips From Educators on How to Move Your Classroom Outside During the Pandemic*. Retrieved 20 May 2023, from <https://blog.carlow.edu/2021/05/17/tips-from-educators-to-move-classroom-outside/>
- Cevikbas, M. & Kaiser, G. (2020). *Flipped classroom as a reform-oriented approach to teaching mathematics*. Retrieved 20 May 2023, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11858-020-01191-5>
- Chen, W., & Huang, M. (2019). Collaborative Learning in the Vygotskian Tradition: A Systematic Review. *Educational Research Review*, 26, 30–45.
- Craft, A. (2021). Creative Thinking and Artistic Expression: Implications for the Creative Arts Curriculum. *Educational Perspectives on Creativity*, 9(4), 31-46.
- Department of Education. (2011). *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*. Grade 4-6 Life Skills. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Erbil, D.G. (2020). A review of flipped classroom and cooperative learning method within the context of Vygotsky's theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1157.
- Hursen, C. & Islek, D. (2017). The effect of a school-based outdoor education program on Visual Arts teachers' success and self-efficacy beliefs. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(3).
- Johnson, A.P. (2014). *Cognitive Development: Lev Vygotsky. Theories of Learning and Human Development*. Retrieved 2 May 2023, from https://www.academia.edu/12440703/VYGOTSKYS_THEORY_OF_COGNITIVE_DEVELOPMENT
- Johnson, L., & Smith, E. (2020). Impact of Classroom Design on Student Learning in Visual Arts. *International Journal of Arts Education*, 12(2), 45–59.
- Johnson, P. (2021). Equity in Creative Arts Education: The Role of Curriculum Standards in Promoting Inclusive Learning. *Journal of Inclusive Arts Education*, 11(3), 48–63.
- Kemple, M., & Spearman, M. (2018). Art in Nature: Planning and Executing Outdoor Art Classes. *International Journal of Art Education*, 11(2), 15–29.
- Khadijeh, M., & Yaghoubi, J. (2019). Revisiting Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Implications for Teacher Education. *International Journal of*

- Research in Education and Science*, 5(2), 365-373.
- Kuhlthau, C.C., & Hiller, S. (2020). Building a Collaborative Learning Culture: Teacher Perspectives. *School Library Research*, 23, 1-18.
- Li, C., & Mendoza, M.G.C. (2022). Integrating Arts Education for Learning Result: A Bright but Tough Way. *Open Access Library Journal*, 9(9), 1-8.
- Mannion, G., & Lynch, J. (2018). Taking Arts Outdoors: Benefits and Challenges of Outdoor Learning in the Creative Arts. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 21(1), 39-52.
- Millis, B.J. (2020). Collaborative Learning: A Tool for Enhancing Learning Outcomes in Higher Education. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 20(5), 66-77.
- Nicholson, S. (2018). The Learning Environment in Arts Education: Practical and Theoretical Considerations for Outdoor Settings. *International Journal of Creativity and Innovation*, 5(1), 45-60.
- Nkoala, S. (2018). Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the South African Creative Arts Curriculum: A Case Study. *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 32(2), 110-123.
- O'Dowd, M. (2020). Collaborative Learning in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 32(1), 1-12.
- Saefurrohman, N. (2024). The Role of Art Education in Developing Creativity and Expression in Early Childhood. *Journal of Pedagogy: Journal of Education*. 1(3), 95-99.
- Scheurs, J., & Dumbraveanu, R. (2014). *A Shift from Teacher Centered to Learner Centered Approach*. *International Journal of Engineering Pedagogy* 4, 1 – 8.
- Smith, J. (2020). The Traditional Classroom: Strengths and Weaknesses in Contemporary Education. *Journal of Educational Theory*, 18(2), 115-130.
- Taylor, P. (2020). The Role of the Teacher in a Traditional Classroom: Authority and Engagement. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 47(2), 67-83.
- Thompson, R., & Murray, A. (2020). Flexible Learning Spaces for the Creative Arts: Supporting Innovation and Expression. *Learning Environments Research*, 23(4), 67-82.
- Tishman, S., & Palmer, P. (2021). Integrating the Arts in Education: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications. *Harvard Education Press*.
- Wilson, A., & Brown, J. (2020). Inclusive Practices in Creative Arts Education: Accessibility and Diversity in the Classroom. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(1), 30-4