



North Lanarkshire Council | Arts Development

Amplifying Artistry

Series 3, Episode 3 – “Arts as Teacher”

Transcript

00:00:02 Scott Fleming (Host)

Welcome to Amplifying Artistry, the podcast that turns up the volume on creativity in North Lanarkshire.

00:00:08 Scott Fleming (Host)

From right here in the heart of Scotland, we'll be looking at the creative spark that exists in all of us and the positive impact it can have on ourselves and those around us.

00:00:17 Scott Fleming (Host)

In this series, we'll highlight people from all over our communities, exploring how creativity can play a vital role in our connections, our outlooks and our well-being.

00:00:28 Scott Fleming (Host)

So wherever you are, wherever you come from, wherever you're going, join us in coory for the next wee while.

00:00:36 Scott Fleming (Host)

Hello, and welcome back to another episode of Amplifying Artistry. I'm your host, Scott Fleming, and today we're going to be diving into something that sits at the heart of what it means to be human, learning. Not just the kind that happens in classrooms or lecture halls, but the kind that happens every time we try something new, explore an idea, or see the world from a fresh angle.

And guiding us through all of that; creativity and the arts. In this episode, we're exploring how creative practice doesn't just decorate learning, it drives it. From helping young people grasp complex concepts to giving communities new ways to express identity, to opening up perspectives we didn't even realise we needed, the arts offer tools for understanding both ourselves and the world around us.

Whether it's a piece of music that makes an idea click, a painting that reframes a story, or a performance that challenges what we think we know, creativity has a way of revealing truths in ways that knowledge alone can't.

Coming up in this episode, we're going to hear from two North Lanarkshire-based artists about their experience of how creativity has helped them understand more about the world around them.

We'll have a moment of decompression time for you with some relaxing music and a beautiful piece of creative writing.

But first, our feature interview. We were lucky to catch up with Dr Marina Wimmer.

Marina is a leading expert in cognition, with a special focus on how our minds handle visual ambiguities, create mental images and even form false memories.

Marina co-leads the Centre for Mind, Creative and Environment Research, advancing how cognitive science can inform the way we understand and shape our world.

As research lead for psychology at Napier University, Marina supports early career researchers and is deeply committed to public engagement, having reached over 1,500 young people through national science and STEM events.

We picked Marina's brain all about how creativity and arts can be a valuable teacher.

Marina starts by talking about a course that she developed with her colleagues, all about implementing creativity with education.

00:02:45 Dr Marina Wimmer

So it's called Creativity Matters, *exclamation mark*. *laughs* So this is very important. And it was developed with my colleagues at Edinburgh Napier University with Dr. Rory McLean, who is a lecturer in psychology; Dr. Lindsay Caruthers, who is also a lecturer in psychology; and Doctor Peter Bewart, who is a lecturer in Arts and Design.

How this course came about was that: creativity is one of the most important cognitive abilities that we have as humans, and cognitive flexibility. It's something that I would argue AI can't do. It's uniquely human and it's been acknowledged by the OECD as a key transformative skill that should be focused on in the curriculum to train, if you will, the next generation of resilient people in the workplace and in the world.

And unfortunately, very often creativity is equated as doing some arts and crafts. And we felt, because we are psychologists...we look at creativity more as a cognitive process, a type of thinking that you do, and when you look at policies, they very often see the arts as a luxury subject and we think it's extremely important to focus on creativity. It's not a luxury subject, or the arts is not a luxury at all. We think creativity is indeed a key cognitive skill we should be focusing on. And we wanted to create a course that busts a few of these creativity myths but also gives teachers the tools to understand creativity as a cognitive process as opposed to an artsy product or something like that.

And to give them the confidence that what they might be doing already is great and give them, perhaps, little tweaks that they can implement into their daily teaching practices based on what they're already doing, and that has an evidence base behind it and give them the science and the confidence so they can implement that in their practice or to

be assured that what they're already doing has a good evidence base. And that was the idea of the course.

00:05:28 Deborah McArthur - REALITIES

My name is Deborah McArthur. I'm the Arts Development and Engagement Manager for North Lanarkshire Council and a community embedded researcher for REALITIES.

REALITIES is a research project funded by the UKRI mobilising community assets to tackle health inequalities. We're researching broken systems causing communities health inequalities, and we're using creativity as a research tool.

REALITIES is a three-year research project, and in this series of Amplifying Artistry, we will be checking in on what's happening on the ground across North Lanarkshire.

In this check-in, we were grateful to catch up with Ellie Birch, whose work with the REALITIES project helped break new ground and break down barriers for new Scots, implementing artistic practice alongside traditional education to build confidence and foster a sense of belonging.

00:06:18 Ellie Birch

Yeah, so I'm the Resettlement Project Officer, so my main role is to support the young people that we bring in. This can be young people that have come with a settled family, so recently Ukraine would be a big one, or we've got projects that have been running for 10 plus years like Syrian families, and of course we've got our UASC, which stands for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

This is children that have come over completely on their own from countries like Sudan and Afghanistan...people that are facing war, maybe there's an issue at home, they wanted a safe place to come.

So my role would be to support them. That can be through ESOL, which is our English classes. There's youth groups that run, these are to build confidence, to build relationships and to break down trauma. And also any other support that young people feel they might need that tends to come out as their journey with us continues.

We never stop seeing young people, from the moment we meet them, we're always there to support them on their journey to what they need.

00:07:06 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah, brilliant. And so, the REALITIES project, you worked side by side with them.

00:07:10 Ellie Birch

So REALITIES approached us and they were great for us. We ran a 6-8 week programme where, through music and arts, we were able to bring a lot of our young people out of their shell and to just find stuff that they were really interested in.

So a lot of our young people might have thought that they didn't have any particular skills and through the REALITIES Project we were able to see that actually they did have skills or they did have interest in stuff they would like to further. And so even though REALITIES Project was a short-term project, they then went on to succeed with this. They might have went to college to do it or they might have went to a club or something like that we've helped them to find but REALITIES was really good in finding their skills and making them feel like they had something special that they might not have before.

00:07:50 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah fantastic. So what was REALITIES' role within it? Did they have music and drama tutors to do lessons with the kids?

00:07:57 Ellie Birch

Yes so they actually managed to do it through ESOL which was really interesting for us and it wasn't something we knew was there. They managed to do music through English so as they taught the English language, they would bring in instruments and so young people whose English wasn't as confident, they were able to use the musical instruments to speak to other young people. It sounds crazy but we always say it with like football...football's universal, everyone can play football, and it was that kind of same thing with music and art. It doesn't have to be an amazing English speaker to just draw and to put your feelings pen to paper and I think REALITIES was really good at showing us this and we've used it since because the tutors would come in and it wasn't

“tell us your name” and all this stuff that our young people were like, “I can't do that”, it was very much just “here's a pen and paper, do you want an instrument?” “Express yourself”, and you could see their confidence grow and the tutors were really helpful with that they were actually really good at kind of getting out of them what they wanted without sitting them down in the room and saying oh can you do this can you do that it was very natural.

00:08:54 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah that's amazing so did you notice a difference then in their English, for example, progressing alongside the sort of musicianship?

00:09:02 Ellie Birch

Yeah absolutely, I think it wasn't so much that their English just jumped up a level and they were able to name all...but when you think about music, obviously like a guitar for example, the strings are different letters, so even for our young people the alphabet can be tricky, and so the way the music tutors were teaching to remember the strings, little rhymes, you could see that their brains were going “actually this works” and it gave a different outlook to it than sitting down and learning English off a workbook and so they were able to learn little rhymes or just from learning music notes they were like C, E and then when we went back to the classroom it was “okay, I remember this alphabet”, so you could see it floating in and out, it was transferable and that was really interesting for us. It showed us that it doesn't have to be black and white on paper, that it could actually come from music. Even with art as well, they were using different techniques to draw the alphabet, which sounds dead easy to me and you, but it was really interesting to see that was how they interpreted their art.

00:09:58 Scott Fleming (Host)

It's things that you don't really think of as well. That's amazing. So, to ask a big question, why do you think the music and the visual art helped with the integration for their learning?

00:10:10 Ellie Birch

Yeah I think what it was is that I think for a lot of our young people there is a big confidence issue and I think when you're in a classroom if they're not picking stuff up they feel like they're hitting a wall and they just can't get over that wall of "I'm not learning so I'm not very good" and I think showing them that there was other things that they could be good at, it's not as black and white as "if you're not really clever and go to university that's your life" because a lot of them do have that and especially girls that we see come in because their role in their own country is; you'll be in the kitchen you'll work from home. That's not the case for all countries, but we do see that a lot, that they're just the wife that stays at home and has kids. And I think for them to see; actually, I might not be amazing at maths, and I might not be amazing, and I might not want to go to university, but here's an outlet I'm really good at. And I think it was seeing that there was other things that was the real turning point where we would say, well, people can be artists. And I think REALITIES are really good at saying, you know, artists, you can be good at drawing. That doesn't just mean you have to go and be an artist. That could be that you go into all these different roles in television, you could be a scriptwriter, it was all these different things they were showing and going "actually it's not just one branch it can be a million different things" and that was when they all started to think so this could actually be a career, that's really good to know, I thought I would never amount to anything and I think that's why the music and the art really made the difference was the seeing that "oh I don't have to play in a band but what I could do is I could play and tutor other young people" and it was that different branch that they thought "this is suddenly interesting".

00:11:37 Scott Fleming (Host)

So have you checked in with any of the young people, have some of them went on to then pursue these sorts of careers.

00:11:42 Ellie Birch

Yeah, we've got one young person that's doing art alongside their current college course because they had such an interest in it. We've got two young girls who were very shy when they first came, they'd done the REALITIES Project and they now do yoga therapy because they found that and art therapy. So even though it's not, right now it's not a job,

it's not something they're pursuing that way, it's still helping them mentally and I think that's been really good. They've been using it to just come together with a tutor and just do some art and to feel through their emotions that they've got bottled up, but it not be in the sense of talking to a therapist one-to-one. It's through visually learning. So that even came from that project, so it is really good.

00:12:22 Scott Fleming (Host)

Amazing, amazing.

00:12:23 Deborah McArthur

We're really grateful for this insight, which goes to show that by creating accessible opportunities, doors can open up and a sense of belonging can be achieved. The REALITIES Project continues to work with communities who need these experiences most, and continues to explore how barriers can be broken down and systems reimaged.

00:12:42 Scott Fleming (Host)

And now back to Dr Marina Wimmer, who continues to discuss further how creativity can be embedded into the classroom, regardless of the subject.

00:12:51 Dr Marina Wimmer

That's exactly one of the reasons why we wanted to do that course. So one of our starter questions, where do you think...if you look at the subjects in the curriculum for excellence, you look at Literacy, Mathematics, Religious Education, where does creativity come into play or where does it matter? And the answer is, well, in all of them, because we argue it's a way of thinking. And so in Mathematics, for example, specifically, you know, if you have to learn the times table in primary school, from a creativity perspective, if you have different ways of getting pupils to learn the times table by, for example, using items in the household or whatever they can use and tackle a problem from different perspectives in an unusual way, in a novel way, in an original way, that gets them to understand the times table; that's a really good way of fostering cognition.

So you can apply it in all...or in learning addition or subtraction, or in learning more complex mathematical concepts. And the same applies to literacy, using multiple tools or means to...having a poem recited in different accents or in different ways or using different emotions. Those sorts of things are ways in which you can foster creativity and at the same time have them learn concepts more easily.

Or other small things are things like taking a break, or...this notion that you have to finish things quickly and then you can move on to the next thing, whereas we would argue that actually taking a break from a problem when you're stuck at it and then getting back to it will help you to unblock yourself.

So those are small tweaks that teachers can do based on what they're already doing or they might be doing it already. And in this course, we give them the confidence that what they're already doing is great and here's the evidence behind it.

00:15:12 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah, fantastic. So what results have you noticed? Have any of the teachers got back in touch, to tell you any changes that they've noticed in the classroom?

00:15:20 Dr Marina Wimmer

So one of the things we've done; we've given teachers the course, obviously, and then we gave them a party bag of little activities that they can use. And they are across the whole...so for primary school teachers and for secondary school teachers. So there's a list of activities that they can use; an activity sheet, and it tells them exactly what type of creativity skill or what type of skill that fosters and the evidence behind it. So it's not just giving them the activity, but to reassure them this is based on evidence and we know this works quite well. And the feedback for this has been really good because I think...one of the main feedbacks we got from teachers is: the problem is time, and this is all very great, but time.

And that's why we wanted to create a course that is based on what teachers are already doing in their day-to-day practice as opposed to reinventing the wheel or giving them some complicated tasks that are extremely difficult to implement. So, for example, there's this whole idea at the moment about outdoor learning, which is fantastic, but it's

actually quite...can be quite difficult to implement in a school if you don't have the space or if you have to take the kids to the park...it's quite complicated undertaking. So we wanted to create a course that is based on what they're already doing on the day-to-day that gives them some small tweaks. And so that feedback has been really positive in the sense that it was quite easy to implement because it was based on what they were already doing and they're feeling more confident as a result of it.

00:17:11 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah, of course. And it comes back to what you were saying about creativity and adapting, because you're right, you talk about outdoor learning, but it could be as simple as it's raining that day and they're having to make adjustments and tweaks on the fly. And so I understand this course then gives them the tools to be able to do that. Is that right?

00:17:28 Dr Marina Wimmer

Exactly. So it also gives the teachers a bit more confidence in the sense that they...because the teachers are already doing all the great things and we just give them also the evidence behind it; if you do that, it's okay to take a break. I know it might be a bit tricky to fit in, but if you even can have something like a beanbag in a classroom or a book corner, or just give kids 5 minutes break and let them get back to a problem, rather than being fixated on finishing things off, that might be more fruitful in their learning.

So it's giving them the permission to do these things and the confidence, and that's really supported by the scientific evidence.

00:18:29 Scott Fleming (Host) DECOMPRESSION TIME

And now we invite you to take a minute for yourself and just listen.

00:19:05 Jenna Carney "Shadow Angels" by Jenna Carney.

Anything you feel around people is your feelings, it's all within you.

People are people, mirrors.

What you feel or see is how you feel inside.

If you see negative or feel negative thoughts, it's not strictly true in the person.

It's your feelings being triggered to awaken you.

Might come out the blue, but in turn, you'll become a new you.

These people are just healing facilitators if the healing needs to be done.

If you see people and they're all good, you're all good.

It's all growth.

Like divine angels put there, messengers to help you grow.

Maybe even a shadow angel.

They won't know it, but you do.

00:20:07 Scott Fleming (Host)

What you heard there was the poem “Shadow Angels”, written and performed by Jenna Carney; a participant at our monthly creative writing class.

Alongside that was the musical piece Pontefiure, composed by Dick Lee and performed at Summerlee Museum as part of our Music in the Museum programme.

And now, back to our interview with Marina.

00:20:27 Scott Fleming (Host)

We have very much have a motto in our work, which is “art is everywhere”, “art is for everyone”, and that doesn't necessarily...there's so many applications to that. And I think, one of the great examples...so you were kind enough to give myself and Aaron, my colleague, a tour of the facilities here at Edinburgh Napier, and one of the really cool things that we got to try was the Virtual Reality headsets and the Augmented Reality headsets. And, you know, they're both a very sort of, on paper, artistic endeavour. You know, you look at virtual reality, it's predominantly used for, you know, video games and things like that. But there's so many applications to that beyond...I mean, the educational applications that we discovered are endless.

Can you talk a little bit about that then, how it's not just an artistic practice, that it can be used for anything?

00:21:16 Dr Marina Wimmer

Exactly. So especially I think virtual reality, there's this misconception that this is something really utopian or futuristic and you need to have enormous technical knowledge to deal with that. And it's actually; VR headsets are quite cheap, the basic ones, you know, they're not expensive and it's as easy to use as a laptop in a sense. And they have wide applications, but particularly where I think they come in really handy in an educational setting is when you, for example, deal with neurodiverse kids or kids who have big anxiety, for example, and you need to familiarize them with a new environment and you want to help them to, for example, become a bit more autonomous. So it really allows them to immerse themselves into an environment they might be experiencing or if they have a lot of anxiety or worry, for example, about going into a swimming pool or things like that, which can be a big deal if you're neurodiverse or if you're very anxious. And you can use VR to familiarize people with an environment and they can immediately get out of that environment. So, you know, you just remove the VR headset. So it helps to reduce anxiety. But also, sensory-wise, immerse yourself into an environment that you might be experiencing, so I think it has massive applications in that, but also in terms of...it's true, it's used for gaming a lot. But also in terms of...as an art form, creating your own environment, I think it has massive applications in that area. And we use it to test whether people are more creative and cognitively flexible in some environments than in others. So we put people in a nature environment or in a cafe environment, in an open-line office environment or just in a standard lab, and we measure people's creativity and cognitive flexibility. And we did find so far: so my PhD student, Iad Savafter, is doing that research, and he so far finds that objectively it doesn't matter in which environment you are, at least not with the tasks we've used. And we've really consistently found that no matter how we enhance or deprive the environment and make it boring or exciting...but what is key is that the subjective feeling of creativity and cognitive flexibility varies greatly, where people really prefer or feel they're more creative and cognitively flexible in nature and in a cafe than in an office, for example, or a lab environment. And that goes back to this whole debate of

should we be all working in the office? Are we most productive when we're at home or in the office? And we think it's important, your feeling of productivity or creativity or cognitive flexibility varies greatly depending on where you are. And we think that's quite important to factor into these discussions.

00:24:47 Scott Fleming (Host)

We're now going to check in with two of our North Lanarkshire-based artists, Siobhan Argyle and Hannah Doyle, who disclose some of what they've learned from their experience with the arts and how perceptions can be challenged and new connections formed.

00:25:04 Siobhan Argyle

Never, ever presume anything. So do not go in with an assumption. Do not go into any situation, I think, thinking that you know best. And the reason I say that is I remember one of the very early days of working with music in a therapeutic sense. And I went in; I was working in a home over...I think it was over near Paisley. It was with adults with profound and complex needs. And I remember having all this equipment and working with this individual and thinking "she'll like tinkly bells". Tinkly, tinkly, tinkly. And she sat and didn't respond to any of the tinkly bells that I was playing. And I don't know why I thought that, you know, she would really, you know, respond to tinkly bells more than anything else. And one day I tripped over the drum and I fell and there was this massive clatter. And she burped out laughing. And what I then quickly realised was that she was a big rock fan.

00:26:10 Scott Fleming (Host)

Right, okay.

00:26:11 Siobhan Argyle

So basically then I had all the technology, so we used switches and stuff. But every single session then was like this boom, boom, boom! And she laughed her way through it. And I don't think that she'll ever realise that, again, the profound message and learning that I got from that, which was never, ever presume a single thing. Never think that you know someone else's story or that you can anticipate what they're thinking or

anything else because in actual fact you've got no idea and you don't need to know. What you need to be able to do is to somehow or other find a way that you can have that dialogue regardless of how that dialogue looks, whether that's through art, whether that's through music, whether that's through facial expression, signing, whatever that happens to be. I think that's probably the biggest lesson I've ever been taught.

00:27:14 Hannah Doyle

The biggest lesson for me is just to follow your heart, as cheesy as it sounds. I think follow your gut, follow your heart, and actually go for what you want. Don't let things hold you back. Don't let society bring you down.

I think we get so caught up in just conforming and sticking to what you know or trying to live and create a job that is stable, and it's not always about that. You can still have a stable job if you want and do creative stuff on the side or tap into things that you used to love doing when you were younger. I think that is probably where I went wrong in life was just trying to kind of numb things and try to survive basically and I've done a lot of therapy and stuff so that probably helps with how I am now and obviously tapping into things that I used to love. Not everybody has that option to do that but I think once you actually start to find things that you used to enjoy when you were younger or if you *are* young carry on doing the things that you enjoy and don't let people stop you from doing that no matter what other people say or what other people think and just kind of go for it and put yourself out your comfort zone.

00:28:22 Scott Fleming (Host)

Thank you to Siobhan and Hannah for their insights. And now back to Marina for the final part of our interview.

00:28:27 Scott Fleming (Host)

Yeah, absolutely, because I mean, we talk about barriers as well and people that live maybe in more urban environments, they maybe can't...they don't have access to nature the way other people do. They can't just, you know, go out and be in amongst it. So these tools can really help ridge that gap and, as you said, foster that sort of creative thinking and cognitive flexibility.

00:28:50 Dr Marina Wimmer

Exactly, because if you think of...you're living in your environment, you've never left the area you live in and you have the outside world or the bigger picture might be quite scary or daunting, you might not even have a passport to travel. You know, you could use VR...you can use Google Earth, for example, in VR, and you can transport yourself to the other side of the world. We had a researcher visiting from Wellington in New Zealand and he just showed us where his Uni was and gave us a tour through his city. It was incredible. It was so immersive. It was as if we visited his university and it was incredible. It does open up the world, if you will. So I think it does have a lot of positive applications beyond the gaming side of things where it originated from.

00:29:50 Scott Fleming (Host)

Going forward, in a more sort of general sense, where do you see it going then, the correlation between creativity and education?

00:29:59 Dr Marina Wimmer

So I would like to see the two; creativity not being synonymous with arts. I would like to see that people see that creativity is everywhere and that arts is one part of creativity that should be focused on in the curriculum for excellence. That it's not a luxury subject. I think it's, you know, if you want my political stance on this, I think it would be detrimental for society, for universities, to narrow down on art subjects. I think this is a terrible idea. I think cutting the arts funding is a terrible idea. And all the evidence points towards, you know...if you foster creativity, this is something that is uniquely human, that allows us to be resilient and that is really important for a productive society.

So where I would like to see this going is the understanding that creativity is everywhere. It's in STEM, it's in the arts, it's everywhere, and it should be focused on in the curriculum for excellence. It's not a luxury subject. It's not an add-on. It's core to our cognitive resilience, processing, and it's the one that is uniquely human that no other species has. AI, in my opinion, does definitely not have creativity. And I think the direction of travel is worrying.

So one of the reasons also why we did this course was to really ensure teachers and the agenda, the curriculum agenda, that this is really the OECD report. We should focus on creativity in the curriculum as part of what is already delivered, as opposed to a complex add-on or a luxury subject. So that's the...yeah...

00:32:15 Scott Fleming (Host)

And that brings us to the end of today's episode.

We've heard just how powerful creativity can be, not only in helping us learn new skills or absorb new information, but in shaping how we interpret, question and connect with the world around us.

Thanks to Dr Marina Wimmer's insights into the inner workings of the mind, and to Siobhan Argyle and Hannah Doyle for their reflections of being an artist working right here in North Lanarkshire.

It's clear that the arts don't simply support learning, they really do transform it.

00:32:42 Scott Fleming (Host)

We hope that the conversations and moments of calm in today's episode offered you something to take away, whether that's a new idea, a shift in perspective, or simply a spark of curiosity to carry you forward.

As always, thanks for listening.

00:32:56 Scott Fleming (Host)

If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with someone who might need a bit of creative inspiration and stay tuned for more voices, more ideas and more stories that celebrate the power of creativity in our communities.

See you next time.

00:33:10 Erasme Kakogne

Amplifying Artistry is a podcast by the North Lanarkshire Council Arts Development Team.

00:33:14 Erasme Kakogne

To find out more about the team, the work that we do and how you can boost your creative health, search for North Lanarkshire Arts.

00:33:21 Erasme Kakogne

This episode was hosted and recorded by Scott Fleming, edited by Erasme Kakogne.

00:33:25 Erasme Kakogne

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00:33:32 Erasme Kakogne

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00:34:12 Erasme Kakogne

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00:34:17 Erasme Kakogne

You have been listening to Amplifying Artistry.

00:34:19 Erasme Kakogne

See you next time.

END OF TRANSCRIPT.

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