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METHODOLOGY FOR USING INDIVIDUAL LEARNING TRAJECTORIES IN DEVELOPING THE CREATIVE INDEPENDENCE OF FUTURE FINE ARTS TEACHERS

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Abstract. The article presents a methodology for using individual learning trajectories to develop the creative independence of future fine arts teachers. Creative independence is interpreted as an integrated professional quality that combines intrinsic motivation, the ability to find and formulate artistic problems, visual and technical fluency, self-regulation, and the capacity to design original learning situations for school students. The study is conceptual and methodological: it relies on an analysis of the psychological and pedagogical literature and on the design of a six-stage model. The model, its principles, a set of teaching methods, and a criterion-based assessment scheme are described. The article argues that a trajectory co-designed by the student and the mentor, and supported by regular reflection and formative feedback, moves a future teacher from reproductive work towards genuinely independent creative activity.

Keywords: individual learning trajectory, creative independence, fine arts teacher education, reflection, portfolio, formative assessment.

Modern art education requires a teacher who is not only a skilled performer but also an author, a designer of learning situations, and a reflective professional. A graduate of a pedagogical university must be able to react to the interests of children, to renew content, and to defend his or her own artistic position. Yet in many programmes the training of future fine arts teachers is still organised around uniform assignments, a common pace, and a single model of "correct" execution. Such an organisation develops accuracy and discipline, but it does not always develop the ability to choose a topic, to take a risk, or to justify a creative decision.[1]

An individual learning trajectory is one of the most promising means of resolving this contradiction. It allows the content, the sequence of tasks, the working methods, and the forms of assessment to be adapted to the student's starting level, artistic interests, and professional goals. At the same time, the term is often used loosely, as a synonym for "individual work" or "differentiated tasks". The aim of this article is therefore to substantiate and describe a methodology in which the trajectory becomes a deliberate instrument for developing creative independence. The tasks are: to clarify the concept of creative independence; to define the trajectory as a pedagogical category; to present a model of its implementation; and to propose methods and criteria of assessment.[2]

The article is not a report on an experiment. It is a methodological study, and the conclusions are formulated as a justified proposal that requires further empirical verification.

1. Creative independence of a future fine arts teacher

Creativity is usually described as the production of work that is both novel and appropriate to its context. Independence adds a further dimension: the person sets goals, chooses means, and takes responsibility for results without constant external control. In this article creative independence is understood as a stable professional quality that appears when a future teacher can initiate artistic ideas,

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plan and carry out their realisation, assess the outcome critically, and transfer his or her own creative experience into teaching.

Three interrelated components can be distinguished. The first is the motivational and value component. According to self-determination theory, lasting engagement grows when people experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness.[3] A student who is allowed to choose a theme, a technique, or a genre is more likely to develop interest that comes from within. The second is the cognitive and operational component: visual thinking, mastery of materials, knowledge of art history, and the skill of finding problems rather than merely solving given ones. The third is the reflective and regulative component, which covers planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment. For a future teacher a fourth, professional and pedagogical dimension must be added. It is the ability to translate personal creative experience into lessons, for example by turning the experience of searching for a composition into a task for a school class. This dimension distinguishes the teacher-artist from the artist alone and explains why creative independence should be developed in the context of pedagogical training, not only in the studio.

2. The individual learning trajectory as a pedagogical category

In this study an individual learning trajectory is a personally meaningful and flexible route through the content, methods, pace, and assessment of a programme, which is designed jointly by the student and the mentor on the basis of diagnosis and is regularly revised in the light of reflection. Four features follow from this definition. The trajectory is variable, because its elements can be replaced. It is chosen, because the student participates in decisions. It is reflexive, because it is built on analysis of one's own progress. And it is supported, because the mentor provides scaffolding that is gradually withdrawn.

The idea has several theoretical roots. Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development explains why tasks must lie slightly beyond what the student can do alone and why guidance matters. The concept of self-directed learning stresses that adult learners diagnose their needs, formulate goals, and evaluate outcomes. Differentiated instruction offers a practical logic for adapting content, process, and product to the learner's readiness and interests.[4] Finally, Kolb's cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation fits the rhythm of studio work almost perfectly.

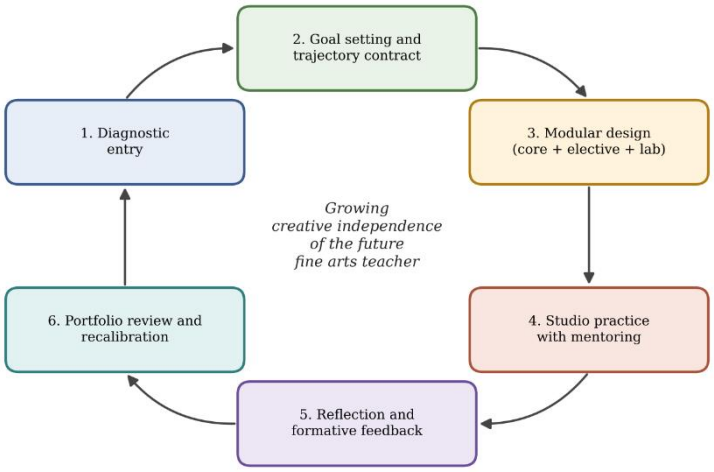
It is important to distinguish the trajectory from two neighbouring notions. An individual curriculum fixes the list of subjects and hours, whereas a trajectory describes the way in which a particular student moves through them. Differentiation is usually planned by the teacher for a group, whereas a trajectory is negotiated with the individual and changes as the student changes.

3. A model for implementing individual trajectories

Figure 1. A six-stage cycle for building an individual learning trajectory (author's model).

The proposed methodology is organised as a cycle of six stages (Figure 1). The cycle is repeated several times during the programme, and each repetition raises the level of student autonomy.

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Stage 1. Diagnostic entry. The mentor and the student determine the starting position: technical skills, artistic preferences, experience of teaching, attitude to risk, and habits of self-organisation. A combination of a portfolio review, a short interview, and a self-assessment questionnaire is used. Diagnosis is not a selection procedure; its only function is to provide a basis for the next decisions.

Stage 2. Goal setting and the trajectory contract. The student formulates two or three goals for the semester, for instance “to develop a personal approach to colour in landscape” or “to design a series of lessons on folk ornament”. The goals, the expected products, and the criteria of success are recorded in a short contract. Writing the contract develops responsibility, and it allows the mentor to check that the goals are realistic.[5]

Stage 3. Modular design. The trajectory is assembled from three kinds of modules: a compulsory core (drawing, painting, composition, methodology of teaching), elective modules chosen according to interest (for example, miniature, digital illustration, ceramics, or textile design), and a “creative laboratory” in which the student pursues a self-initiated project. The share of the laboratory grows from stage to stage, from roughly one fifth of the study time in the first cycle to one third or more in later cycles.

Stage 4. Studio practice with mentoring. The mentor works as a consultant rather than a corrector. He or she asks questions, offers alternatives, and demonstrates techniques only on request. The student keeps a visual and verbal diary, where sketches, failed attempts, and reasons for decisions are recorded. Such work supports the state of absorbed engagement that is characteristic of creative activity.[6]

Stage 5. Reflection and formative feedback. At fixed points the student analyses what was done, why it was done, and what should change. Reflection is structured by prompts that move from description to evaluation and to a plan of action. The mentor’s feedback is directed at the task, the process, and self-regulation, not at the person, since feedback of this kind has the strongest effect on learning.

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Stage 6. Portfolio review and recalibration. At the end of the cycle the student presents a portfolio, including finished works, process materials, and a written commentary. The presentation is discussed with the mentor and peers, and the results become the starting point for the next cycle: goals are revised, modules are replaced, and the degree of independence is increased.

4. Methods and techniques

The effectiveness of the model depends on the choice of methods. Table 1 summarises the methods that, in our view, correspond most closely to the logic of the trajectory and indicates the component of creative independence that each of them develops.

Table 1. Methods used within the trajectory and the components they develop

Method	Essence	Component developed
Open-ended studio brief	A task defined by a problem or theme, without a prescribed solution or technique	Problem finding; intrinsic motivation
Visual and verbal diary	Systematic recording of ideas, sketches, doubts, and decisions	Reflection; self-planning
Mentor's Socratic dialogue	Questions that lead the student to see alternatives instead of giving ready answers	Cognitive independence; reflection
Creative laboratory (self-initiated project)	A long project proposed, planned, and defended by the student	Self-planning; responsibility
Micro-teaching	Designing and teaching a short fragment of a lesson based on the student's own artwork	Pedagogical design
Peer critique circle	Structured discussion of works by a small group using agreed criteria	Critical thinking; relatedness

Two principles govern the use of these methods. The first is the gradual transfer of control: in the first cycle the mentor proposes most of the structure, and in later cycles the student takes over planning and evaluation. The second is the protection of the right to make mistakes. Creative independence cannot develop where every unsuccessful attempt is penalised, so risk-taking should be rewarded in assessment.

A national dimension can also be built into the elective modules. The traditions of miniature painting, ornament, and applied art offer rich material from which students can develop contemporary personal interpretations instead of imitating canonical samples. In this way the trajectory links creative independence with cultural identity, which is especially valuable for teachers who will later pass this heritage to schoolchildren.

5. Assessment of creative independence

6. Assessment should serve the trajectory and not replace it. We propose a criterion-based scheme with four-point scales for six indicators: intrinsic motivation, problem finding, visual and technical fluency, self-planning, reflection, and pedagogical design. The same scale is used at the

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diagnostic stage and at the end of each cycle, so that changes can be seen on a profile (Figure 2). Formative assessment of this kind is more informative for the learner than a single final mark.[7]

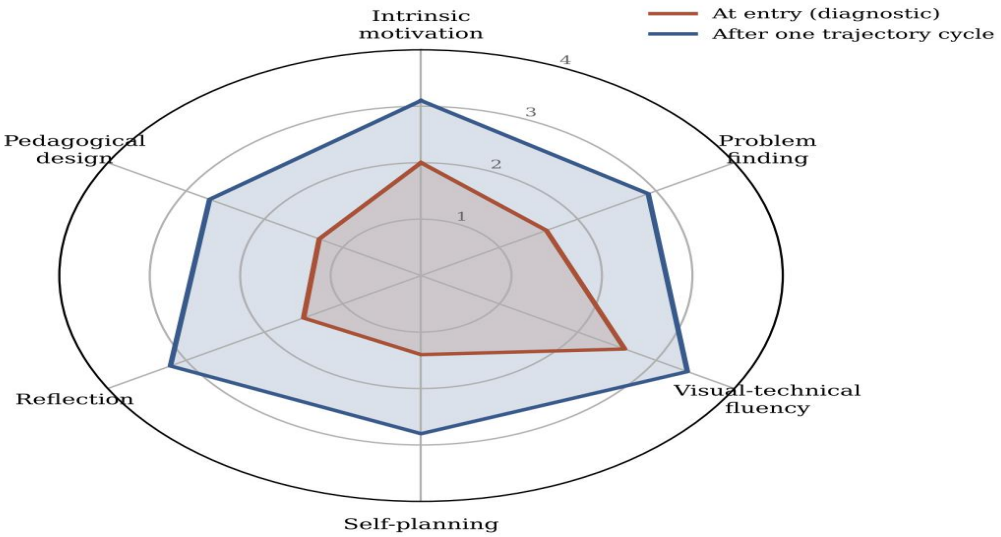


Figure 2. An illustrative profile of creative independence at entry and after one cycle. The values are hypothetical and serve only to show how the scheme is read.

Three levels of creative independence can be distinguished on the basis of the profile. At the reproductive level the student works by model, and decisions are made by the mentor. At the variative level the student chooses between known options and modifies them. At the creative level the student formulates his or her own problem, selects the means, and explains the choice in professional language. The aim of the programme is to ensure that by graduation the majority of the indicators reach the third level. Portfolio analysis and structured observation are complemented by the student's self-assessment, and any discrepancy between the two becomes a topic for discussion, not a reason for sanctions.

6. An illustrative example of a trajectory

To show how the model works in practice, consider a hypothetical third-year student whom we will call Student A. The diagnostic stage reveals confident academic drawing, weak interest in painting from observation, a strong attraction to book illustration, and almost no experience of designing lessons. These findings define the direction of the trajectory.

In the contract Student A formulates two goals: to develop a personal illustrative style based on motifs of folk tales, and to prepare a sequence of three lessons in which school students create their own illustrated stories. The compulsory core remains unchanged, but the elective modules are chosen accordingly: digital illustration and the history of the book. The creative laboratory is devoted to a series of illustrations for a tale selected by the student. During studio practice the mentor does not correct the drawings. Instead, he asks why a given colour was chosen, what would happen if the scale of the figures were changed, and which solution seems the least obvious.

At the reflection stage the student notices that many compositions repeat the same centred scheme and decides to experiment with asymmetry. This observation, recorded in the diary, later becomes the basis of a lesson for schoolchildren on the rhythm of a page. At the portfolio review the student presents the series, the diary, and the lesson plan, and defends the choices before the mentor

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and peers. For the next cycle the goals are revised: the laboratory now includes work with a real class during teaching practice. The example demonstrates that the trajectory does not lower the requirements; it changes their source, since the student gradually becomes the author of the requirements.

7. The role of the mentor

The success of the trajectory depends largely on the position taken by the mentor. In the traditional studio the teacher is the source of the correct answer; in the trajectory-based model the teacher is a partner who creates the conditions in which the student can find answers independently. This change can be described through four functions.

The first is the diagnostic function: the mentor observes, listens, and interprets the student's work in order to identify strengths and zones of growth. The second is the motivating function: the mentor helps the student to see the personal meaning of a task and to connect it with professional goals. The third is the organising function: the mentor helps to break a long project into stages, to set deadlines, and to find resources. The fourth is the critical function: the mentor provides honest, specific, and respectful evaluation, and thus protects the student from both self-deception and discouragement.

These functions require professional development. Mentors need to master questioning techniques, the principles of formative assessment, and the methods of group reflection. Regular joint seminars, in which mentors discuss cases from their own practice, are an effective form of such development. It is also useful when mentors keep their own creative portfolios, because the experience of working under the same conditions as the students makes the support more credible and more empathic.

Finally, the mentor's task is to prepare his or her own withdrawal. A trajectory is successful when, by the end of the programme, the student no longer needs an external supervisor to formulate a goal, choose a method, and evaluate the result. This is exactly the form of independence that a future teacher will later need to develop in schoolchildren.

8. Conditions and possible difficulties

Several conditions are necessary for the methodology to work. First, the mentors must be prepared for the new role: the shift from an instructor to a partner in dialogue is not automatic. Second, the schedule has to allow flexible time for studio work and consultations. Third, the institution needs a transparent system of credits that recognises elective modules and self-initiated projects. Fourth, the students need training in the basic skills of reflection and goal setting, because many of them have not been asked to plan their own learning before.

The analysis shows that individual learning trajectories can serve as an effective means of developing the creative independence of future fine arts teachers if they are built as a cycle and not as a one-time plan. The six-stage model, which includes diagnosis, a contract, modular design, mentored studio practice, reflection, and portfolio review, combines the principles of self-directed and experiential learning with the practice of studio education. The methods described in the article, together with the criterion-based assessment scheme, make the growth of independence visible to the student and to the mentor. The limitations of the study are evident. The model has been justified theoretically and has not yet been tested in a controlled pedagogical experiment. The next step is therefore an experimental verification with comparison and experimental groups, and the refinement of the diagnostic instruments. The authors of similar programmes may also consider adapting the model to continuing professional development of practising art teachers.

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