

Creative Educational Experiences in the Narratives of University Students^{*}

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ABSTRACT

Creative experiences are novel encounters between people and the world. In an educational context, it is important to encourage creative experiences. This study aims to analyse creative experiences in formal and non-formal educational institutions from the perspective of university students. The aim is to understand the particularities of these experiences and how creative learning is constructed. This qualitative study employs a phenomenological methodological approach to understand creative experiences from the students' perspective. A questionnaire, consisting of open-ended questions, was used to collect qualitative data. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to describe a creative educational experience. A convenience sample of 125 students from the National University of Río Cuarto was selected. A thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti. The analysis's quality was ensured through inter-researcher triangulation and communicative validity. Three general categories were constructed from the coding: particularities of experience; arguments about creativity; and learning outcome. A comparative cross-sectional analysis is also presented.

Creative experiences promote autonomy and the development of agency, facilitating decision-making, exploration, product creation, and problem-solving. These experiences draw upon diverse knowledge and promote collaborative work. The analyses revealed two cross-cutting themes: the articulation between theory and practice, and the value of emotions in creativity. University plays a pivotal role in fostering creative learning experiences. It is crucial to develop systematic educational innovations that encourage creative learning throughout undergraduate education.

KEYWORDS:

creativity, university, experience, education, agency

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INTRODUCTION

International organizations emphasize the importance of fostering creative thinking in teaching and learning environments. UNESCO (2023) considers creativity to be a fundamental 21st-century skill, as it facilitates problem-solving and the generation of alternatives in various situations. Creativity is not exclusively linked to the arts; it is a cross-cutting skill that enhances learning in various fields of knowledge. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has also emphasized the importance of fostering creative thinking in educational institutions. In line with this approach, amid criticism and challenges (Barbot & Kaufman, 2025; Valqueresma & Zamana, 2025), the 2022 PISA tests attempted to evaluate students' creative processes in artistic, social, and scientific areas. Several studies have analysed the impact of creative programs on student creativity (Davies et al., 2013; Ruiz-del-Pino et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2004). While these studies reveal intriguing findings, they rely on definitions of creativity that focus solely on components of divergent thinking, overlooking the experiential nature of creative processes in educational settings.

The meta-analysis conducted by Sio and Lortie-Forgues (2024) and based on 169 creativity training studies from the past five decades indicates the positive effects of such training. However, these studies only consider modifications to the cognitive components of creativity, specifically based on measures of divergent thinking. The present research focuses on another important aspect of creativity research in educational contexts: students' perceptions of creative experiences. The study takes a subjective approach to these experiences, based on the meanings constructed by the participants. It aims to analyse, through narratives, the impact of these experiences on knowledge construction processes.

We argue that creativity encompasses more than the cognitive factors associated with divergent thinking and emphasize the importance of subjective experiences in creative processes. Glaveanu and Beghetto (2021) propose a non-standard definition of creativity, defining creative experiences as novel encounters between individuals and the world, based on meaningful actions guided by principles such as openness, non-linearity, multi-perspectivity, and future orientation. This approach transcends the standard view of creativity by merely producing novel and effective results. Instead, it emphasizes the subjective, dynamic, and experiential aspects of the creative process itself. It suggests that creativity is not only about the final product, but also about the continuous and often unpredictable process of interacting with the unknown.

Beghetto and Zhao (2022) believe that providing spaces, activities, and resources that foster creative educational experiences is crucial for the transformation of educational institutions. Such experiences are based on novel and meaningful actions and interactions between people and learning contexts. Creative experiences are characterized by openness, non-linearity, multi-perspectivity and a focus on the future. Fostering such experiences is not about training young people to be creative; rather, it is about providing them with opportunities to generate and realize new, potentially transformative possibilities for their own learning, lives and the lives of others. Here, creative educational

experiences refer to a wide range of learning experiences, including supporting young people to identify and solve complex problems and issues that matter to them and their communities.

The types of problems, issues and challenges that young people encounter in creative experiences differ from the routine tasks and problems typically faced by students in school. Providing students with opportunities to engage in creative experiences is particularly important in times of uncertainty, as uncertainty can render routine and habitual ways of thinking and acting irrelevant, obsolete, and potentially harmful. Creative experiences can complement academic learning by providing opportunities for young people to apply their learning and make creative contributions both inside and outside schools and classrooms (Beghetto & Zhao, 2022).

Pachucki et al., (2010) analyse narratives from university students and identify a wide variety of activities that the students themselves define as creative experiences. Their analysis reveals that students experience creativity in unexpected ways that deviate from the traditional domains of art, science, and invention. Several of the narratives describe creative activities involving playing musical instruments, dancing, photography, singing, poetry, decorating, designing, and programming. Students also describe being creative in science laboratories, engineering classrooms, and theatre design workshops. Some students indicate that they express their creative impulses through their choice of clothing, hairstyles, and shoes.

Many of the narratives describe creative activities carried out in the context of volunteering and social work projects. These creative activities primarily focus on social interaction; many students feel that they are making a unique and creative contribution when they help others, demonstrate leadership skills, organise events, and engage in conversation. The students' narratives of creativity clearly demonstrate their sense of difference, reinforcing the idea that creativity is connected to self-expression and individuality.

Pachucki et al., (2010) identify six types of creative experience. The first of these, 'networked creativity,' encompasses intensely social forms of creativity involving other people, such as event planning, active networking, group activities with friends, and other forms of interaction. The second type, 'Renaissance creativity,' reflects an interest in travel, an appreciation of the arts, and participation in sports. 'Fostering creativity,' the third type, includes elements related to interaction with children, volunteering, crafts, and spending time with friends socially. The fourth type, 'idealistic creativity,' includes responses that mention intellectual creativity, involvement in social justice issues and religion. 'Social networking' creativity involves interaction with media such as computers, website design, and various forms of written expression. Finally, 'gregarious creativity' includes references to conversation and humour, as well as general behavioural or dispositional traits. Responses in this category suggest an 'extroverted' element in sociability.

From a qualitative perspective, we aim to understand how a group of students interprets the specifics of creative experiences at different educational levels. We use narratives to explore these experiences, attempting to understand them as complex wholes as remembered by the participants when asked to recount a creative experience. University students took part in the research and were asked to recount a creative experience in either a formal or an informal educational con-

text. This general guideline enabled us to identify the most meaningful and memorable educational experiences at the time of data collection. To compare experiences according to trajectories in university, we included students at different career stages in the sample.

In summary, this article presents the results of a qualitative study analysing the creative experiences described by university students. The aim is to understand the particularities of these experiences and how they vary depending on the students' trajectories in university (stage of the undergraduate program). It is also interesting to interpret these experiences from the students' perspectives, considering the learning they have constructed and the conditions that define them as creative. Unlike the study by Pachucki et al. (2010), the present research was conducted at a Latin American university and considers the particularities of this sociocultural context. Furthermore, it incorporates Beghetto and Glaveanu's (2021) theoretical framework on creative experiences as well as Beghetto and Zhao's (2022) arguments regarding these experiences in educational contexts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: CREATIVITY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

If we understand creativity as a broad experience, it makes sense to consider the conditions within educational contexts that facilitate such experiences. A series of factors conducive to creative learning have been identified in literature reviews on creativity and education (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Cremin & Chappell, 2021; Davies et al., 2013; Heard et al., 2023; Renzulli et al., 2022; Richardson & Mishra, 2018). In this study, we attempt to synthesise these conditions by considering the specific characteristics of institutional contexts, pedagogical tasks, and the interactions between teachers and students.

In terms of institutional contexts, flexible environments that allow for changes in planning and provide opportunities to experience learning outside of the classroom are identified as promoters of creativity. Davies et al. (2013) and Richardson and Mishra (2018), for example, emphasise the advantages of flexible use of space and time, access to a variety of educational resources, and opportunities for collaborative work within the institution. Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) also argue that flexible institutional contexts that promote activities in other environments and community spaces are necessary. These authors argue that creative institutions enable learning to extend beyond the classroom.

Creative classrooms have permeable physical structures that allow creative learning to spread beyond the classroom. Like Beghetto and Kaufman (2014), we interpret permeable classrooms as creative spaces for teaching and learning. They encourage interactions between individuals and sources of knowledge, both within and outside schools (Melgar et al., 2023)

In these classrooms, unexpected teachers (Elisondo et al., 2013) play a significant role. These persons act as teachers, but they are not responsible for the curriculum. Instead, they are community leaders, specialists, researchers, professionals, and members of the wider community, offering

diverse narratives, stories, and knowledge that encourage new questions and learning. Previous research shows that students value these activities as meaningful learning experiences linked to their future professional roles. Furthermore, unexpected teachers are seen as individuals who contribute diverse knowledge and new ways of understanding content and professional practices. Overall, the results suggest that students perceive activities in permeable classrooms and with unexpected teachers as novel opportunities to acquire diverse knowledge through concrete practices in real environments (Melgar et al., 2023).

About educational tasks, the importance of activities that encourage individuals to act and make informed decisions during the problem-solving process is emphasised by researchers. Complex, open-ended tasks based on broad projects are appropriate for developing creative thinking and action. Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) suggest designing activities that encourage generating multiple ideas, redefining problems, using analogies and evaluating processes continuously.

Similarly, tasks that motivate students to collaborate, hence constructing novel interpretations through dialogue with others, are necessary. Cremin and Chappell (2021) identify collaborative problem-solving with external partners on real and relevant issues as a defining feature of creative pedagogical approaches. Non-prescriptive task planning and a degree of flexibility in task development are also necessary. In terms of content, the authors emphasise the importance of designing tasks that draw on knowledge from various disciplinary backgrounds and address issues at the intersection of different fields (Elisondo, 2015, 2025; Cremin & Chappell, 2021; Davies et al., 2013).

It is also important that students recognise the future potential of the knowledge they acquire. In this sense, Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) recommend adopting a future-oriented perspective on creativity and learning (i.e., fostering projects that contribute to other contexts and enable students to recognise the relevance of this knowledge for their future careers). Creative educational experiences that are oriented towards the future also fall within this framework (Beghetto & Zhao, 2022).

Regarding relationships and the learning climate, the authors (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Richardson & Mishra, 2018) emphasise the need for respectful, collaborative, and safe environments where alternative perspectives can emerge. Renzulli et al. (2022) recommend allocating time to develop ideas, hence supporting new ideas, offering and encouraging peer feedback, providing opportunities for creative expression, promoting external evaluation of student work in competitions, and fostering innovative processes in diverse contexts. Cremin and Chappell (2021) observe that creative pedagogical approaches promote play, exploration, spontaneity, and freedom. Creating environments where risks can be taken and failures accepted fosters free expression and the development of creative ideas (Davies et al., 2013).

Henriksen et al., (2021) analysed narratives of creative educational experiences in different countries. The authors conclude that risk-taking is a fundamental pedagogical principle for fostering creativity and preparing students for the adaptations and flexibility they need in an era of unprecedented change. From a methodological perspective, they highlight the value of narrative

research for the comparative analysis of creative experiences. These narratives, as micro-examples, allow for establishing links between diverse educational theories and policies.

Brauer et al., (2025) conducted a systematic review of studies on creativity-fostering teacher behaviours in higher education. Their analysis of these studies revealed six dimensions: affectivity, cognition, behaviour, metacognition, creativity in action, and uncertainty. The affectivity dimension includes aspects related to psychological safety for creative exploration, student–teacher relationships, creative self-efficacy and emotional regulation, facing challenges in the face of uncertainty and discomfort, resisting conformity, as well as motivation, passion, and inspiration. The cognitive dimension refers to experience and technical skills (domain-specific), as well as curiosity and exploration (domain-crossing). It also includes openness to unusual ideas, new possibilities, and serendipity; paradigm shifts and breaking assumptions; idea generation and play; idea development and iterative analysis; idea incubation; and setting aside time for unanswered questions. The behavioural dimension encompasses teaching and learning creative processes, taking risks, experimenting, learning from mistakes, collaborating, co-creating, participating in communities of practice, receiving peer feedback, and fostering autonomy, agency, and initiative to empower individuals. Metacognitive processes involve reflecting on learning and creative experiences. Creativity in action is evident in contextualised and authentic learning experiences. The uncertainty dimension encompasses personalised learning, ad hoc teaching, and alternative assessments.

In the context of creativity-conducive conditions, it is important to understand the complexity of creative learning. Beghetto (2016) defines creative learning as a combination of intrapsychological and interpsychological processes resulting in new, meaningful understandings for oneself and others. It involves interacting with stimuli, combining concepts, and discussing personal understandings in groups to construct new interpretations.

Rabello-Mestre et al. (2025) conducted a configurative review of 112 articles on creative learning. The analysis revealed three key themes: creative learning as agency over the process; the notion of empowerment; and epistemic ownership. Agency is defined as a student's capacity to influence their own learning and their intellectual responsibility to contribute to the creation of knowledge. In this context, creative learning is described as 'agent-driven' and 'personally meaningful,' emerging from students' motivations, circumstances, and resources rather than from direct teacher instruction. This constructivist and interpretive approach to learning emphasises metacognition and the use of reflection to stimulate divergent, possibility-oriented thinking, and students' epistemic transformation with regard to learning and creativity.

The conditions analysed in this section are relevant for interpreting the creative experiences described by students and their impact on learning, the main objectives of this research. Within this conceptual framework, this study attempts to identify creative experiences from the perspectives of a group of university students. Its goal is also to analyse their particularities and potential for learning.

METHOD

The study adopted a phenomenological methodological approach (Creswell and Poth, 2007) with the aim of understanding the meanings constructed by students regarding creative educational experiences. Considering the characteristics of qualitative surveys as defined by Jansen (2010), this study seeks to explore the empirical heterogeneity of the properties of creative experiences, using an inductive approach to identify the properties and diversity of such experiences. According to Jansen (2010), one of the most used instruments in qualitative surveys is questionnaires that collect textual data. In this study, questionnaires with open-ended questions are used, including a request for a narrative account of creative experiences. In social science research, qualitative questionnaires are valuable tools because they enable researchers to obtain participants' views on a given topic through open-ended questions. They can be applied to large groups simultaneously (Braun et al., 2021). In this study, we used qualitative questionnaires in university classrooms. Specifically, the questionnaire asked participants to describe a creative experience in a formal or non-formal educational context. Participants were also asked to explain why these experiences were creative and what they had learnt from them.

In the field of creativity research in educational contexts, Heard et al., (2023) developed five resources to evaluate creativity in teaching and learning processes. These include a creativity thermometer, rubrics, transcripts, supporting examples, and reflective questionnaires. For this research, we adapted the transcript technique: the digital recording of a creative task or experience.

According to Chakraborty (2017) and Han (2025), narratives play a key role in studies of creative experiences, as they enable data to be collected on participants' processes, situations, and experiences, whilst simultaneously capturing events, actions, and assessments relating to specific social practices. This study aims to identify, from the participants' perspective, both the differences and similarities in their experiences and the conditions that give rise to them. Furthermore, the study seeks to capture participants' assessments and metacognitive reflections regarding the learning they have constructed.

The sample consisted of 125 students from the National University of Río Cuarto who completed a qualitative questionnaire about their educational experiences. Participants were enrolled in education-related programmes: Early Childhood Education, English Teaching and Psychopedagogy. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25, and the majority (90%) were female. The sample included students at various stages of their undergraduate studies: first year (22%), second year (20%), third year (19%), fourth year (18%), and fifth year (21%).

The groups and degree programmes were selected on the basis of convenience, as the author of this article is a member of the teaching staff on these programmes. The degree programmes selected have a high proportion of female students, which makes it difficult to access experiences from the perspective of male students. Given the possible differences in gender and academic background in perceptions of creative experiences, it is not appropriate to generalise the results.

All participants signed an informed consent form; the data were treated confidentially, and the identifying details of each participant were kept confidential throughout the research process.

We then conducted a thematic analysis of the textual data and narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was supported by the Atlas.ti software. Initially, open coding was performed on each of the narratives of creative experiences. Then, the textual responses regarding constructed learning and arguments about creativity were coded. Based on these codings, categories and subcategories were inductively constructed considering these three axes of analysis: creative experiences, constructed learning, and arguments about creativity. Using the software, textual fragments relevant to illustrating the categories were identified and are presented in the discussion of the results. Then, a comparative analysis of perceptions of experiences, learning and definitions was carried out between two groups of students: those in the first, second, and third years, and those in the fourth and fifth years.

To ensure the quality of the interpretations, the analyses conducted independently by three researchers were triangulated. Similarities were observed between the categories and subcategories constructed by the researchers. Communicative validity procedures (Flick, 2008) were also employed, whereby a group of fifteen participants was consulted to determine if the analyses accurately reflected their perspectives on the particularities of creative educational experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three general categories of analysis were constructed: particularities of experience; arguments about creativity; and learning outcome. Each category includes subcategories that account for the participants' diverse perspectives on each analysed theme (See Figure 1 below). Excerpts from narratives that illustrate each of the constructed categories are presented below. A comparative cross-sectional analysis is then presented, considering variations in the three categories according to students' perceptions at different stages of their undergraduate degree programme.

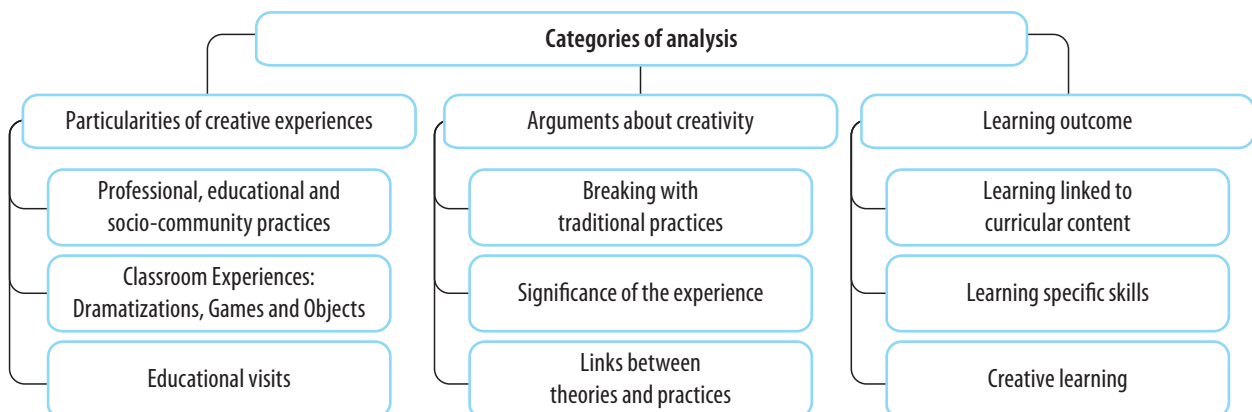


Figure 1. Categories and subcategories of analysis.

Source: Author's own elaboration

Particularities of creative experiences

The thematic analysis of the narratives indicates three types of experiences: professional, educational, and socio-community linkage practices, classroom experiences that involve dramatizations [class simulations, play activities (role-playing games, cooperative games, regulated games, etc.)], constructions of novel products (objects, audiovisual resources, texts, fairs, gardens, etc.), educational visits that refer to actions outside the institution (museums, historical buildings, camps, etc.), and activities with unexpected teachers (conferences of specialists, talks by community leaders, classes with teachers from other institutions, fairs, etc.).

Professional, educational and socio-community practices

Several participants highlighted the professional internships within their degree programme as creative educational experiences that allowed them to engage with real-world professional situations such as career guidance and pedagogical counselling. Some participants referred to teaching-related internships, involving activities such as lesson planning, delivering course content, and designing educational resources.

I consider the practicum in vocational guidance, which involved providing vocational and occupational mentoring to a group of adult students, to have been a creative learning experience. This involved generating ideas, planning, resolving various situations and applying the concepts learnt in the theoretical classes. This experience was very significant for me as it enabled me to apply my knowledge practically and develop both personally and professionally. (N 43)

Community-based practices were the most frequently cited creative experience in the analysed cases. According to the students, these practices provide opportunities to interact with diverse groups, promote learning through practical activities, link theory and practice, and reinterpret the theoretical content of their degree programmes. They also serve as spaces for collaborating with others and specialists from different disciplines. Analysis of these experiences indicates engagement with various social and educational organisations that collaborate with the university, such as community centres, adult education programmes and schools. Furthermore, experiences in community contexts enable the development of innovative activities, games, projects, and artefacts that are recognised as creative. Participants also recognise the significant contributions of their practices to the groups and contexts in which they are carried out. Several participants emphasise the importance of fostering meaningful experiences and collaborative learning with others.

The creation of our educational support project for children and adolescents in a peripheral neighbourhood of the city of Río Cuarto is a creative experience. This community experience is creative in three ways. Firstly, it is a community-based construction that arises from dialogue between the neighbourhood association and a group of student activists who campaign for the right to education. Secondly, it is extremely valuable because it enables us to develop collective strategies to address local issues. Thirdly, it is highly creative because we see ourselves as politically engaged students who are willing to go beyond the classroom to learn. (N12)

This first typology of creative experiences emphasises the importance of shared learning in different contexts based on interaction with others. Rather than focusing on individual learning, it emphasises collaborative experiences through which diverse knowledge and skills are acquired by articulating theory and practice. Students also recognise the potential contributions of these practices to social environments and value them as beneficial to their overall development. Writings on the conditions for creativity in educational contexts (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Davies et al., 2013; Renzulli et al., 2022; Richardson & Mishra, 2018) also emphasise the importance of links with other organisations, developing concrete, systematic practices, and engaging in extracurricular activities.

This result is linked to one found by Pachucki et al., (2010) in student narratives, which demonstrate that the university provides opportunities for creativity through volunteering and social work. It is also related to studies emphasising the value of collaborative and dialogic learning in creative experiences aimed at promoting the well-being of others. Specifically, these experiences relate to the typology of fostering creativity in others (Pachucki et al., 2010).

Classroom Experiences: Dramatizations, Games, and Objects

This typology encompasses a variety of classroom activities involving student participation in performances, audiovisual productions, games, design exercises, and the creation of objects, products, and projects. Several of these experiences involve dramatizing theatrical and cinematic scenes, which are then systematised through audiovisual productions. These activities encompass various actions related to writing, acting, editing, and communicating the resulting productions.

Participants also highlight the importance of creating games for others and participating in playful classroom activities. These experiences are associated with joy, fun and pleasure. Narratives often describe the creation of new products, such as objects, texts, audiovisual material, games, plays, magazines, gardens, and libraries. The creation of something new is emphasised as a creative process involving the integration of various actions and knowledge, with some narratives explicitly describing interdisciplinary work.

One such experience I had was at high school, when my classmates and I were tasked with designing a magazine for which we wrote news and updates about the school and our town. We also designed games, added photographs, and created the magazine cover. (N56)

This typology incorporates several of the conditions that the authors have identified as conducive to creativity. Several of these activities promote student agency and autonomy (Richardson & Mishra, 2018), involving informed decision-making in the development and production of something new. Similarly, Cremin and Chappell (2021) highlight the value of play-based activities for creative learning.

The availability and use of varied resources also emerge as an important component in the analysed narratives. Several authors have agreed on the need to create educational contexts that encourage the use of diverse resources and materials (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Davies et al., 2013; Renzulli et al., 2022). Like the study by Henriksen et al. (2021), this research emphasises the

importance of flexibility in task and participants' autonomy in decision-making and problem-solving processes. Drawing on the work of Brauer et al., (2025) in this latter sense, we observe affective components related to resistance to conformity, cognitive aspects linked to the search for alternatives, and actions related to experimentation and the creation of new objects.

Educational visits

Like the practices analysed in the first typology, educational visits involve outings from the educational institution. However, unlike the practices analysed in the first typology, visits refer to sporadic and non-systematic events. They are projects limited to specific trips, tours, and visits, generally carried out over one or two school days. They do not involve specific student practices, but rather specific educational activities in the visited spaces (observations, recordings, route analysis, etc.). This typology includes visits to other contexts, such as museums, companies and social organisations, as well as visits by professionals, social leaders, and community leaders to educational institutions.

One creative experience I had was in my first year at university. On the history of education course, we were taken on a tour of various historical buildings in the city. Afterwards, we had to complete a project incorporating this experiential aspect alongside the theory. We could include images, accounts from people involved, drawings, and other elements. I enjoyed the activity because it allowed us to see what we had studied in textbooks in real life. (N15)

Previously, permeable classrooms (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014) and educational trips (Muratore y Elisondo, 2020) have been identified as settings that encourage creativity. According to the participants, these experiences are creative because they provide alternative spaces for learning and constructing new knowledge through interaction with other people and cultural artefacts. We also emphasise the role of museums as informal learning spaces offering interesting opportunities for creativity (Melgar y Elisondo 2024). Specialists in creative pedagogical approaches also emphasise the importance of educational outings and contact with organisations and community members (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Davies et al., 2013). Considering the arguments of Brauer et al. (2025), it can be concluded that these types of experiences enhance cognitive processes linked to creativity, such as curiosity, exploration, and openness to diverse experiences in different contexts. They also provide students with opportunities to ask questions of others and engage in exchanges with specialists and key figures within organisations.

In summary, the narratives show a variety of creative experiences, both in and out of the classroom. These experiences address varied curricular content and enable the development of diverse skills through interaction with others and cultural artefacts. The narratives clearly demonstrate the sociocultural nature of these creative experiences; in all cases, they involve actions that connect people with cultural artefacts, as well as transformative activities mediated by language and social practices. Educational institutions and the programmes they offer are crucial for developing creative experiences. Therefore, it is essential to generate initiatives aimed at increasing educational opportunities in both formal and non-formal contexts.

Arguments about Creativity

In this category, we consider the reasons why these experiences are creative for participants. We have identified three main types of argument: breaking with traditional practices (originality, change, and flexibility); the significance of the experience (agency, participation, play, and fun); and the link between theory and practice (collaborative work, solving real-world problems and imagination).

Breaking with traditional practices

In this subcategory, we include arguments that emphasise the value of experiences as processes of educational change. Students highlight key components of these breakthroughs, such as originality and flexibility. These experiences involve novel and unusual proposals that allow for flexible changes during the development of the activities. Creative experiences represent something new and original, moving students out of their comfort zones and into unfamiliar territory, which they later recognise as valuable. The narratives also demonstrate that these experiences transcend the academic sphere, involving unconventional activities in other contexts.

It was a creative experience because it went beyond the traditional classroom setting, in which the teacher presents topics and the students take notes. It also involves active student participation, fostering critical and creative thinking (N 3). I consider it to have been a creative experience because it involved thinking of new ways to support students, adapting strategies to their needs, proposing original activities, and finding solutions to the challenges that arose during the process (N 91).

It was a creative experience because it combined writing, acting, teamwork, and physical expression in an original way. It was a different activity to the usual things we were used to doing (N 105).

From the students' perspective, breaking the routine is not just an added benefit, but a prerequisite for creating an original learning experience that encourages them to critically examine their own interpretations. Furthermore, it forces them to seek creative solutions and unconventional resources. Originality and flexibility encompass not only new and dynamic ideas, but also the application of strategies, tools, and approaches that challenge convention and encourage active participation. These two qualities are considered the driving forces of a creative experience because they involve taking methodological risks, such as using games or digital tools, adopting new perspectives through interdisciplinary collaboration, and inventing unexpected solutions.

They are also linked to the actions that Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) claim promote creativity: activities that encourage generating multiple new ideas, redefining problems, using analogies and ongoing process evaluation. Considering the dimensions proposed by Brauer et al. (2025), the students' arguments can be linked to the cognitive components of creativity, such as paradigm shifts, breaking assumptions, and demonstrating originality and flexibility when faced with new ideas or when searching for alternative solutions to problems. Regarding the affective dimension, these narrative fragments can be linked to resistance to conformity and the pursuit of change.

Significance of the experience

This subcategory emphasises the importance of the proposals in developing an understanding of practices and knowledge. Students indicate that the experiences are creative because they enable them to take ownership of their learning by making decisions, implementing changes, and building alternatives. Creativity is associated with the processes of creation, invention, and solving challenges independently or collectively. The significance of creative experiences is evident in both individual work and cooperative learning and projects. Meaningfulness is also associated with the challenges involved in decision-making, problem-solving, and exploring different ways to achieve a goal. Furthermore, the experiences are creative because of the emotions and experiences they facilitate. Several participants refer to the importance of play, enjoyment, and emotions in creative experiences.

I consider the experience to have been creative because it involved actively appropriating and transforming knowledge, rather than simply reproducing it. Creativity arose from the interaction between prior knowledge, personal experiences, and the new challenges presented by the practice. Learning did not occur in a linear fashion, but rather through exploration, reflection, and collaborative work. Each member contributed a different perspective and, through this dialogue, we developed a shared, meaningful proposal. (N 78)

There is also a growing emphasis on the importance of experiences and their value in facilitating new learning. In this sense, we link these expressions to one of the main components of creative learning: the meaningfulness of the processes involved in constructing knowledge and the memory associated with these meanings (Beghetto, 2016). Analyses reveal that meaningfulness and the ability to generate a lasting memory are indicators of creative experiences. When an activity breaks with routine and fosters active participation, as previously discussed, the resulting learning is deeply internalised, transcending the mere acquisition of knowledge. Experiences are considered creative because they offer a deeper, more contextualised understanding of the content. Following this line of reasoning, creativity is a means of achieving meaningful learning that is anchored in memory and relevant at personal and social levels. The significance of creative experiences is also associated with collaborative work and reflection on conducive learning processes in the narratives. Considering the approach to creativity in higher education adopted by Brauer et al. (2025), this dimension emphasises the metacognitive elements associated with authentic and collaborative learning experiences.

Likewise, meaningfulness is linked to the challenges inherent in certain educational approaches. These elements refer to situations that encourage participants to think differently (i.e., engage in divergent thinking) and solve problems in novel ways by stepping outside their comfort zone. In conclusion, creativity is not only about having new ideas, but also about taking action to implement them and overcoming personal and contextual obstacles and challenges. These approaches align with one of the conditions of creative pedagogies, which is to build environments where risks are taken and failures are accepted (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). In the narratives analysed by

Pachucki et al. (2010), it was also found that the ability to take risks in situations of uncertainty is one of the characteristics of creative educational practices.

Links between theories and practices

Some arguments suggest that theories and practices can be combined in creative experiences. It is argued that socio-community and/or professional practices provide access to new knowledge, which can then be integrated with the theoretical developments addressed in academic programmes. Arguments regarding the articulation of theory and practice emphasise collaborative work and the potential for constructing knowledge with others. Experiences that encourage interaction with others, including peers and professors from various disciplines, are regarded as creative. Similarly, experiences that address content from different subjects and promote interdisciplinarity are emphasised.

By leaving the classroom, we immersed ourselves in different realities and got closer to the children. This enabled us to propose different teaching methods and ways of participating, moving away from traditional approaches and implementing new strategies. (N 31)

I feel that this creative experience was useful because we were able to apply our knowledge of the unit and assigned chapter in a different way. (N 67)

At the intersection of theory and practice, imagination and the search for solutions to real-world problems and for building original collective projects are highlighted. Experiences are considered creative when they enable students to apply their learning and connect theory with real-world situations. Such practices encourage students to question their own interpretations, promoting conceptual changes and fostering creative learning through collaboration. Along these lines, Beghetto and Kaufman (2014) propose developing meaningful school and community projects through which students can contribute to other contexts and integrate diverse knowledge.

Cremin and Chappell (2021) point out that one of the defining characteristics of creative pedagogies is the stimulation of the collaborative resolution of real-world problems through the building of relationships with external partners. These approaches are linked to creativity in action, which Brauer et al., (2025) define as contextualised and authentic learning experiences. Similarly, the study by Pachucki et al., (2010) suggests that experiences involving relationships between theories and practices encompass the typology of networked creativity as well as the empowerment of creative processes in others. Overall, the arguments concerning the creative element of narratives are consistent with the views of Glaveanu and Beghetto (2021) and Beghetto and Zhao (2022) regarding creative experiences as novel and meaningful activities involving openness, non-linearity, multiple perspectives, and a focus on the future. This future orientation is particularly evident in activities that connect theories with professional practices.

Learning outcomes

The analyses indicate a variety of learning outcomes resulting from creative experiences. Within this category, three subcategories have been identified: learning linked to curricular content; learning linked to specific skills; and creative learning.

Learning linked to curricular content

This first subcategory includes narratives referring to the learning of specific curricular content within degree programmes. This encompasses diverse disciplinary content related to fields such as neuroscience, specific teaching methodologies, play as an educational tool, the design of pedagogical resources, and career guidance. Students indicate that creative experiences have enabled them to learn and understand this specific content in new ways. Creative proposals have facilitated an understanding of the complexity of certain subjects and processes through active experimentation and problem-solving. Collaborative work has also enhanced learning within the curriculum.

Through this experience, I learned that using English in real-life situations improves fluency and confidence when speaking. I also recognised the importance of researching and substantiating opinions, particularly when addressing sensitive subjects such as Asperger's syndrome. Furthermore, I was able to work as part of a team, sharing ideas, and reaching agreements with my classmates. This activity enabled me to practise the unit's specific vocabulary, develop my formal communication skills, and conquer my fear of public speaking. (N 8)

Through this experience, I learned the importance of planning, actively listening to the individuals we support, and being creative in our vocational guidance processes. I also realised that every group has its own characteristics and that flexibility and reflection are essential to provide the best possible support. (N 98)

The narratives show that many students believe that creative experiences enable them to approach the learning of specific course content differently. These new forms of learning emphasise the value of experimentation and interaction with others, and include cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional components. In this sense, connections are observed between the six dimensions of creativity in higher education, as defined by Brauer et al. (2025): affectivity, cognition, behaviour, metacognition, creativity in action and uncertainty.

Learning specific skills

The analysis reveals learning that extends beyond academic content, fostering the development of personal and interpersonal skills. This learning focuses on emotional management, adaptability, empathy, teamwork, and reflective thinking. Frequent learning experiences include developing skills for interacting and collaborating with others, and recognising the value of diverse perspectives. Several students indicate that they learned to work in teams, reach agreements, and value the contributions of others. These experiences promoted the ability to work with strangers and group work with students from other years fostered dialogic practices and collaborative exchanges.

Some people report developing the ability to solve problems flexibly by considering different alternatives and points of view. Learning related to coping with adverse situations and resilience in the face of obstacles was also observed.

I learned how important and captivating it is (at least for me) to work both collaboratively and individually to create something that represents our thoughts. (N 77)

It was a valuable experience that strengthened our teamwork and enabled us to develop original ideas. Personally, I don't enjoy acting, so it helped me step out of my comfort zone and grow in new ways. (N 66)

I learned that it's a long, cyclical process in which we can revisit previous steps several times to achieve a good result. The creative process doesn't always arise purely from personal thoughts. We also need to consult other authors, papers, and sources to stay informed and consider subtopics that will contribute to the development of the text. Although the general topic we must discuss in our texts is sometimes given to us, we can steer it towards something more specific that we want to learn more about. (N 55)

The specific skills mentioned in the narratives include the cognitive and emotional components of creativity (Brauer et al., 2025). The ability to solve diverse problems, originality, and flexibility are among the cognitive components that are emphasised. Regarding the emotional and relational components, the narratives mention skills such as overcoming obstacles, stepping outside one's comfort zone, and recognising emotions during the learning process. Taking risks, experimenting, and learning from mistakes are all behaviours highlighted by Brauer et al. (2025) as important for creative learning at university level. The authors also emphasise the importance of collaborative learning and participation in learning communities, which are also identified in the narratives.

Creative learning

Several participants reported that they had learnt through experience by interacting with diverse objects and other people. Analyses show that learning becomes meaningful when it engages the senses and involves action, challenging traditional methodologies. Learning extends beyond the cognitive: human connection and emotional bonding were identified as essential elements underpinning any developmental process, enabling deeper learning, particularly for future professionals and teachers.

Significant learning was also observed through the connection between theory and practice, as noted by a large proportion of students. University internships established a substantial link between theory and action, thereby transforming the meaning of the content learnt. Theoretical knowledge was applied in various activities, leading to a deeper understanding of the topics. This experience connected theory to everyday life, making the work, time and effort behind the products we consume more valuable. This shift in perspective imbues simple, everyday objects with new meaning, fostering a more critical and understanding viewpoint. Connecting with peers and other institutional stakeholders significantly enriched the learning process by promoting the exchange of ideas.

University experiences broadened students' perspectives on the world, work, and social realities. Participants learned to see things from different viewpoints and expand their thinking. This included gaining a broader outlook and relating classroom knowledge to real-world situations.

I learned that it's impossible to do it alone; I had to learn to trust my team and work in a transdisciplinary way. I learned to step outside the confines of the classroom. I learned to take a stand and build that collective vision together. I learned to see with the eyes of a child and to listen attentively to sharpen my listening and observation skills. I have transformed myself as a student and strive to be a different kind of educational psychologist to those I have read about in theory. I am constantly learning from the children, my classmates, community leaders, and others with whom I can build a network. Learning isn't about knowing and repeating; it's about dismantling and taking risks to build something different. (N 36)

Participants' reflections on what they learnt from their experiences can be interpreted based on Beghetto's (2016) theories of creative learning. In this sense, the initial stimuli and problems posed by the creative activities are described by the students as challenging them to combine them with other knowledge and seek alternatives.

Furthermore, their accounts reveal that these intrapsychological creative processes are involved in interpsychological activities, according to Beghetto (2016), to generate new interpretations of knowledge. At this stage, the students emphasise the importance of collaborative work, sharing and discussing ideas, and jointly constructing knowledge. Flexibility, disagreement, and different points of view are necessary for creative learning, as some participants indicate.

The emotional component of the learning experience is also emphasised, with enjoyment and fun considered central to these processes. These perspectives align with those that emphasise the subjective and emotional aspects of creative experiences (Beghetto & Zhao, 2022), as well as with studies indicating the value of activities that foster joy, exploration, spontaneity, and freedom (Cremin & Chappell, 2021), recognising the emotional underpinnings of creativity (Elisondo, 2025) and generating emotional and motivational conditions conducive to creativity (Richardson & Mishra, 2018).

In metacognitive reflections, the value of autonomy and agency in learning is also emphasised. Students indicate that the experiences they described have enabled them to take ownership of specific projects and play an active role in their learning, making decisions, and exploring different approaches. Several authors have also emphasised the importance of agency in learning and in creating creative educational contexts (Beghetto, 2016; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Heard et al., 2023; Renzulli et al., 2022; Richardson & Mishra, 2018).

In sum, creative learning emerges from the interplay of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and interactive components. The narratives demonstrate that creative experiences entail uncertainties and risks for both teachers and students. These characteristics foster flexibility, originality, the exploration of alternatives, and the formulation of questions, all within the context of interacting with various objects and environments. The dimension of constructed learning enables us to visualise diverse content, skills, and forms of interaction with objects of knowledge and learning environ-

ments. Creative experiences are not confined to the formal learning of specific curricular content, but rather promote complex, divergent, and open cognitive and metacognitive processes.

Creative experiences and educational trajectories in university: a cross-sectional analysis

A comparative analysis of students from different academic backgrounds indicates that experiences related to educational, professional and community-based practices feature predominantly in the narratives of students in the final years of the analysed programmes. First-year students' narratives predominantly feature experiences related to the creation of innovative products and educational visits, particularly at secondary level. Interestingly, the university offers curricular and extracurricular spaces for the development of creative experiences through institutional initiatives such as socio-community and professional internships, as observed in the narratives. In this sense, the university's role as a diverse educational space that enables the development of practices in different social contexts is emphasised. The students identified these practices as creative and conducive to integrating theories and resolving complex real-world problems. Participants also noted that socio-community, professional, and educational practices allow for the creation of innovative proposals and products, such as games, educational resources, lesson plans and audiovisual content.

Students in the early years mainly describe these practices as creative because they break with traditional teaching methods. They also emphasize the importance of experience as a means of personal learning. In contrast, final-year students predominantly highlight the connection between theory and practice in developing novel projects or products that can solve problems.

In terms of learning outcomes, early-year students mainly refer to learning specific conceptual and procedural content related to their courses. Final-year students, on the other hand, refer more often to creative learning in the broad sense: learning that allows knowledge to be constructed in a meaningful way by integrating theoretical and practical perspectives in the production of new learning. This final group emphasises the importance of agency in learning, as well as the ability to make decisions and self-regulate processes during creative experiences.

When analysing the students' responses, a clear evolution can be observed in the complexity of their creative experiences and the depth of their learning as they progress in their careers. The nature of creativity evolves from being a means of 'learning content' in the early years to a tool for 'professional intervention' in the later years. In the early years, activities that break the classroom routine predominate, with a focus on sensory and manipulative experiences inside and outside the classroom. Learning focuses on acquiring basic tools and developing teamwork skills, as well as understanding that learning can occur outside the traditional classroom.

Among more advanced students, creativity becomes linked to professional practice. They design educational resources for others, such as games to teach mathematics or theories of development. They also carry out socio-community practices in vulnerable neighbourhoods or with the elderly and participate in complex professional role-playing simulations. For this group, learning

contributes to the development of professional identity and the acquisition of skills such as relationship building, empathy, institutional management, strategic thinking in unique situations, and autonomy in organising content.

Taken together, the comparative analyses demonstrate the development of progressive agency in learning. They highlight the importance of university educational experiences as opportunities for students to develop greater autonomy in learning. These experiences also contribute to the construction of professional identity, the development of possibilities for the future, and the formation of future plans.

We emphasise the importance of the university as an environment where students can engage in increasingly complex, diverse, and creative experiences. These experiences promote meaningful learning by fostering connections between different fields of knowledge and forms of social action. Because creative experiences can generate unpredictable individual and social transformations, it is important to recognise and promote them within educational settings.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysed experiences can be considered creative from both subjective and objective perspectives. Subjective perception of the experiences as creative is based on how they are perceived by the people who experienced them. Objectively, the analysed narratives correspond to the competencies that characterise creative environments, as defined by the authors in previous systematic studies (Cremin & Chappell, 2021; Davies et al., 2013).

A variety of resources and objects available in educational settings are observed to be used in alternative ways, reinterpreted, and reconstructed through the concrete actions of teachers and students. Experiences that promote autonomy and the development of agency are also evident, enabling decision-making, searching for alternatives, and problem solving. These experiences also emphasise the importance of knowledge, emotions, and collaborative work.

A cross-cutting theme that emerges from the analyses is the articulation between theories and practices, which defines both the creative practices and the learning that is constructed. Concrete practices in diverse environments appear to foster complex, meaningful, and creative learning, as illustrated in the narratives. Opportunities for collaborative learning and playful experiences also seem to promote creativity from both the students' and the authors' perspectives. In short, the analyses provide information on the specific characteristics of the experiences, the arguments surrounding creativity, and the learning associated with current approaches to creative pedagogies and contexts that encourage divergent thinking and creativity.

In some narratives, the emotional and interactional components of creative experiences are more strongly and impactfully observed. However, specific actions and behaviours related to problem-solving, object creation, and the search for alternatives are also highlighted. Experiences involving other people and the development of resources to promote creative processes predominate

in these narratives. In the words of Pachucki et al. (2010), networked creativity and the fostering of creativity appear as the most frequent typologies. Considering the arguments of Brauer et al. (2025), the narratives reveal a series of behaviours among teachers and students that are conducive to creativity in universities: experimentation, participation in diverse communities, educational visits, and professional internships. Furthermore, some narratives allow us to infer processes of agency and the promotion of autonomy based on teacher interventions and authentic, situated tasks.

However, the analysis of emerging data from qualitative questionnaires is a limitation of the study as it does not allow for dialogue and interaction with participants. A future line of research that complements the data collection and analysis process with semi-structured interviews is proposed. Furthermore, interpretations may be limited because detailed data about the experiences are sometimes unavailable. Future studies should refine their analyses and incorporate additional data collection methods to enable more detailed records of students' experiences and perceptions.

The research is also limited by its sampling method, which only included predominantly female students from three-degree programmes at a single university. It is not possible to transfer the results to more diverse populations. Future research could benefit from broadening and diversifying the sample to enable complex comparative analyses.

Nevertheless, this study makes a significant contribution to the fields of classroom planning and educational policy by offering insights into the value of creative experiences for student learning and professional development. We also draw attention to the methodological contributions of the study regarding the use of narratives as research tools for creativity in educational contexts. Like Henriksen et al. (2021) and Pachucki et al. (2010), we argue that narratives enable us to recall experiences and recognise the cognitive, emotional, and interactive elements of creative processes in educational settings. Furthermore, they provide opportunities for metacognitive reflection for participants, contributing to the fields of educational interventions in creativity and self-regulated learning.

The present study has some important implications for university teaching practice and educational policy:

- Promote projects that involve relationships between theories and practices.
- Encourage professional practice throughout degree programmes.
- Organise activities outside of the university and promote extracurricular activities
- Promote practices in diverse socio-communicative contexts.
- Recognise the emotional and identity-based foundations of creativity.
- Promote mini-creativities, possibility thinking, and the ability to ask questions.
- Propose tasks that encourage autonomy, self-regulation of learning, and free choice of alternatives.
- Promote interaction with different technological artefacts, languages, and fields of knowledge.

- Recognise the social nature of creativity and expand potential interactions.
- Work on content from interdisciplinary perspectives and at the intersection of scientific, artistic, cultural and popular knowledge.

The central role of educational contexts, including universities, in promoting creativity through meaningful learning experiences is emphasised by the participants and analysed by the authors. We emphasise the need for systematic educational innovations at different levels that enhance these types of experiences.

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