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575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-SSA

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***W.4.3.3.B STRATEGIES AND TOOLS THAT
STIMULATE CREATIVE THINKING IN MUSEUM
PRACTICE***

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Co-funded by the
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Module:	Creative Thinking Skills
Unit:	Creative thinking matters for museum workforce
Learning Object:	Strategies and tools that stimulate creative thinking in museum practice
Authors:	Ana Carvalho, ICOM Portugal
Keywords:	Creative thinking strategies, thinking outside the box, problem solving, mind mapping, brainstorming, SCAMPER, observation
Abstract:	This learning object presents several strategies and tools that stimulate creative thinking in museum practice



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of the European Union

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The document created in 2018 for the project Mu.SA – Museum Sector Alliance, funded under the Erasmus+/KA3 programme (project number 575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-SSA).

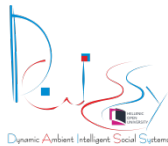


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Layout design:

DAISSY research group, Hellenic Open University (<http://daissy.eap.gr>)

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Aim and objectives

The aim is to introduce learners to several strategies and tools that stimulate creative thinking in museum practice.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, you will be able to indicate at least three strategies that stimulate creative thinking.

Keywords

Creative thinking strategies, thinking outside the box, problem solving, mind mapping, brainstorming, SCAMPER, observation



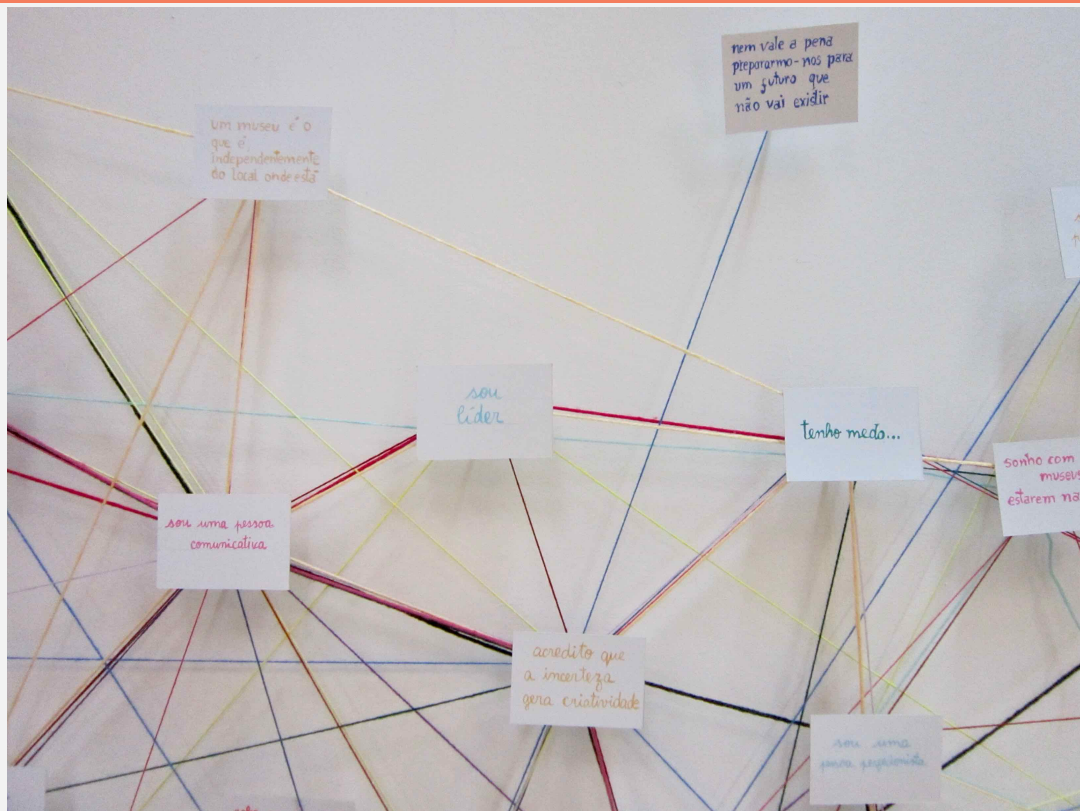


Figure 1 © Ana Carvalho

1. Strategies that stimulate creative thinking

There are many strategies that stimulate creative thinking that can be applied in museum practice. Here we will explore only five strategies that you can develop in your individual path. We will focus on the value of lifelong learning, divergent and convergent thinking, remixing and combining ideas, and the role of constraints and failure in the creative process.

Keep learning

A fundamental strategy is to keep learning through your life, whether you are in the beginning of your career or not. The more you expose yourself to new information more likely you are to burst your creativity. For instance, if you are a digital strategy manager, you should not only seek new information inside your job, but also outside your job. Diversify your learning and be open to make unexpected connections.

Networking is also helpful. Make time to go to conferences in your area of expertise and outside your comfort zone. Join activities and discussion groups in your museum community that stimulate your professional development.

Remember: share with other colleagues around you about the learning and information you are exposed to. Such informal discussions may help you clarify the lessons learned and, at the same time, help disseminate ideas that might inspire others.

Find a balance: divergent and convergent thinking

Divergent thinking and **convergent thinking** are two valuable strategies in a creative practice.

As mentioned before, divergent thinking is producing as many and different ideas as possible. It is about “thinking outside the box”, looking for solutions that are unconventional or unlikely.

On the other hand, convergent thinking takes place when you have to narrow and focus on producing one best or right answer. It is especially important when you are in the phase of evaluating and implementing an idea.

Divergent and convergent thinking are, thus, both important, because there are phases where you have to be open to as many ideas as possible and other phases where you have to access your options and narrow it to one idea and implement it. A creative practice will require finding a balance between the two ways.

Remix and combine ideas

Creativity is also associated with combining and remixing ideas, whether in the perspective of your own field of expertise, the museum landscape, whether from many other areas of knowledge. Be open to a wide range of ideas and perspectives from different disciplines, and combine them as much as possible in your creative museum practice.

Remember that looking outside the museum field and expand your horizons is essential to your creativity practice.

Embrace constraints

Another useful strategy is introducing some constraints or limits in your creative practice, because unlimited possibilities can be an overwhelming challenge and, to some extent, freeze creativity.

In other words, adding limitations may help to inform the brainstorming process by inserting structure in your search for ideas.

These limitations or constraints can be structured in several ways. For instance, it could be inserting a certain budget amount in your project idea, stipulating a deadline, limiting the scope, narrow the theme, the objects selection, a specific target audience, and so on.

Make room for Failure

Failure is part of the creative process. Creativity requires hard work, trying again and again, experiment, and learn what works and does not work in the process.

Making room for failure in your museum practice can also be strategic. How?

One way is involving the team and other colleagues in the process of identifying the problems and the project idea weaknesses before the public phase of implementation. It is about testing the project in behind the scenes as much as possible. It is a kind of peer-review phase, where you can test and improve it with the help of your co-workers and peers. Remember that sharing the lessons learned with other museum professionals is also fundamental, whether inside your museum team, whether in your museum community at large.

Another way is to manage expectations: your expectations, but also of your co-workers, including third parties. Approach projects as experimentations that may not be perfect at first time, may even fail, but mostly be open to create space for improvements in next opportunities.

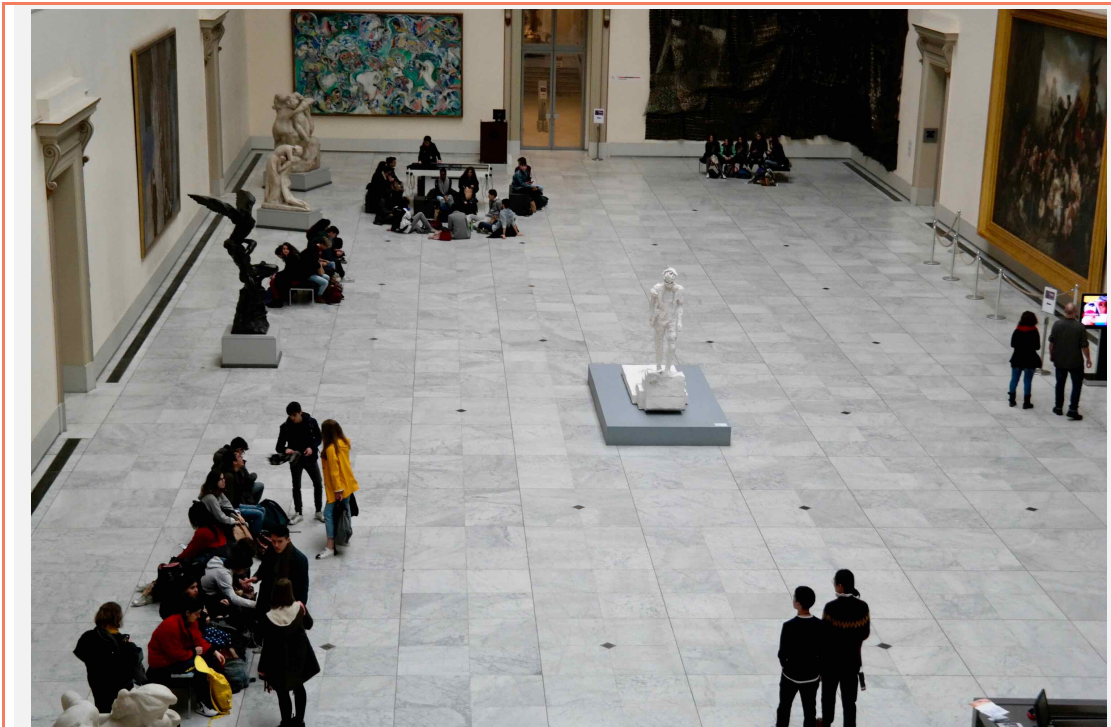


Figure 2 © Ana Carvalho

2. Tools to start your creative practice

Now that you have learned some key strategies to help you build your creativity practice it is time to guide you with specific tools or activities.

Note that there are many tools available, here we will look just at four: observation, mind mapping, documenting your creative practice and SCAMPER.

Observe

Good observation skills are likely to help improve your creative practice. If you are more aware about the environment around you, whether in your museum, whether outside your museum, it's easier to grasp the problems you want to solve and generate new ideas.

As Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale suggest in the book “Creativity in Museum Practice”: observe the ordinary, try everyday observations, at least once a day. Be open to change your point of views.

For instance: leave the backstage office and walk through your museum, try different routes you usually don't take, at different hours, watch people, how they use space, how they react to objects in the exhibition, how they flow in the museum space, look for patterns in your surroundings and produce new ideas from them.

Take notes from your everyday observations: use a notebook (or the note function in your smartphone), draw or take photographs, or use any other tool you like.

Mind Map

A **mind map** is a way to brainstorm your ideas and thoughts around a certain issue or problem using informal drawings. It helps you structure information, analyse, synthetize, memorize and generate new ideas.

Generally, a mind map starts with writing or drawing a theme, problem or question at the center of a blank page, and all related subtopics are connected to the central topic in various directions and shapes.

Mind maps can look very different, they can be more or less complex, small or big, use simple drawings or more sophisticated, use colour or not, use symbols or not, and so on. There is no specific rule and you don't need to be an artist to do it.

So, how does a mind map look like? Let's introduce some examples:

This mind map (fig. 3) is about creativity itself. The author, Inês Ferreira, drew a mind map to help her organize ideas while researching about the topic for her PhD in museum studies.

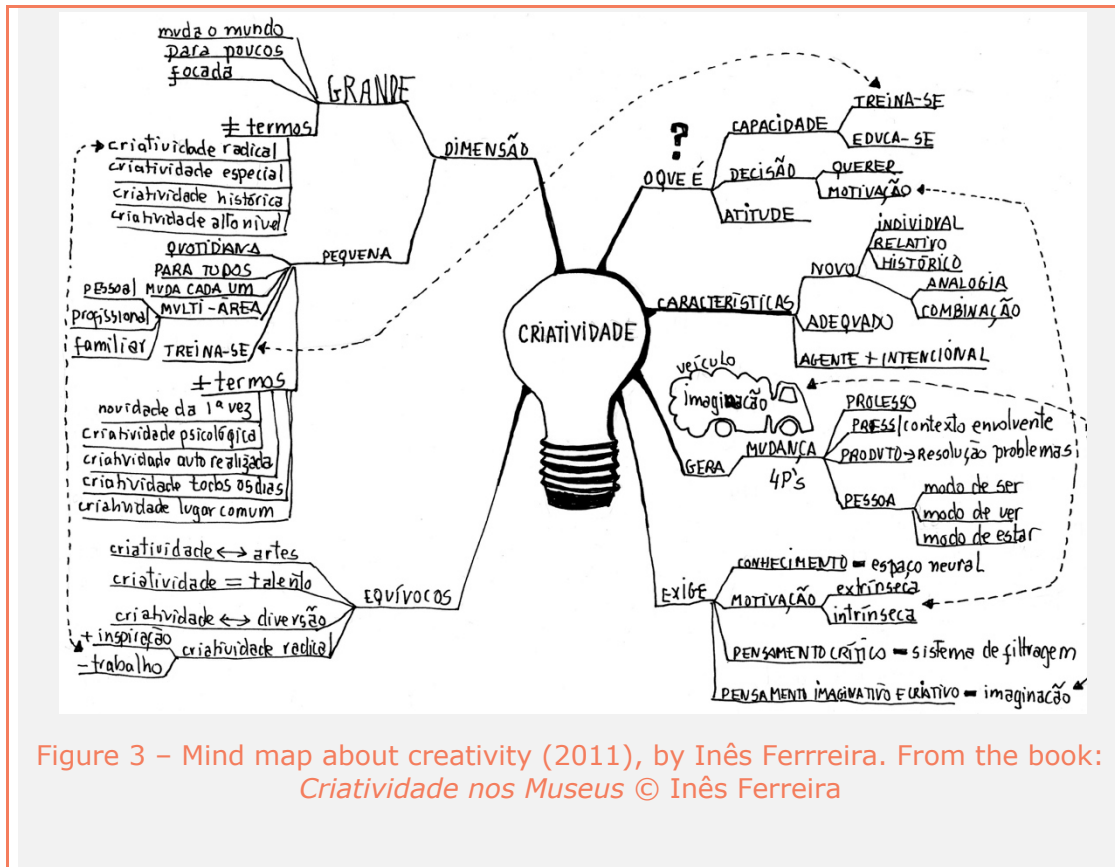


Figure 3 – Mind map about creativity (2011), by Inês Ferreira. From the book: *Criatividade nos Museus* © Inês Ferreira

Another example shows a mind map (fig. 4) that was helpful to synthesize information in a conference about cultural heritage, creativity and social change.

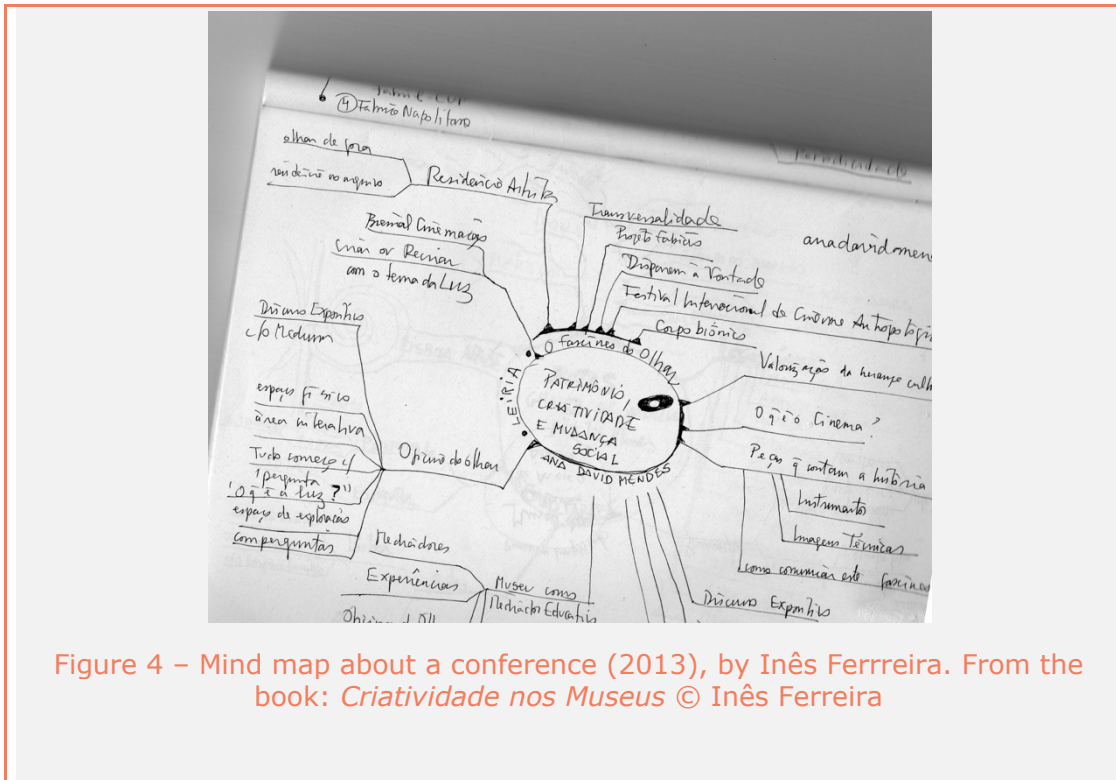


Figure 4 – Mind map about a conference (2013), by Inês Ferreira. From the book: *Criatividade nos Museus* © Inês Ferreira

Our last example is a mind map (fig. 5) that was useful to plan an oral presentation in a research project about museums and creativity.

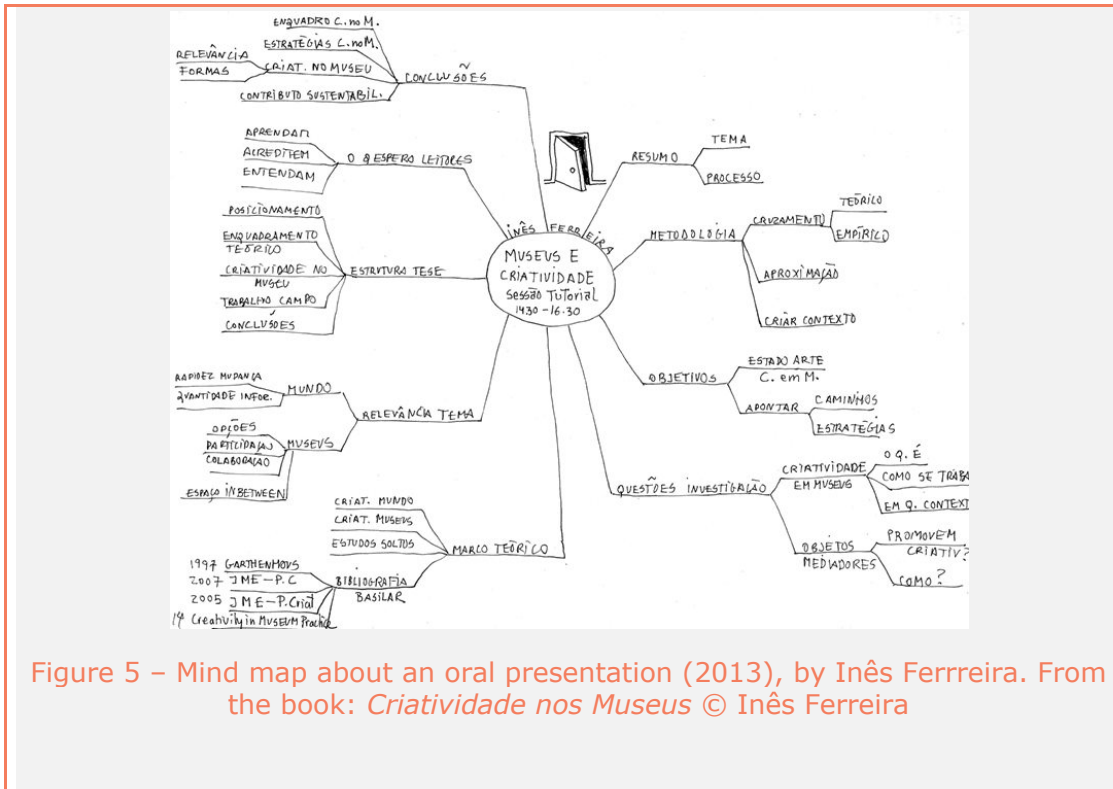


Figure 5 – Mind map about an oral presentation (2013), by Inês Ferreira. From the book: *Criatividade nos Museus* © Inês Ferreira

If you are curious to see other examples, do a simple Google image search and you will find many other mind maps.

Remember that mind maps can be valuable tools in your daily museum practice. For example, you might consider drawing mind maps of:

- Your museum mission and values
- A museum project that has finished, to understand the strengths and weaknesses, and the lessons learned
- Your museum digital strategy
- A new temporary exhibition theme and its goals
- Your online audience – what are your core audience and what are their needs? Which groups do you want to attract more?

- An interactive experience or solution for your exhibition
- Your job role tasks and responsibilities
- A new collecting policy: scope, goals and steps
- Your training plan ideas and goals for the next years

Document your creative practice

Documenting your creative practice is another valuable activity to enhance your creative self-expression. It is a way to capture ideas, make connections and trigger new ideas.

It is not only useful to record ideas, questions or events but also to stimulate a more reflective and creative practice.

You may use it to reflect on a theme, a project or an experience at your museum workplace, understand what is working and not working, and learn from it.

But, how to start? You may start documenting your creative practice by keeping a system of note-taking. One example is using journal writing, a notebook where you can freely write and reflect about your experiences. You can write observations, questions, quotes, include mind maps, but also drawings, photographs, stickers, collage, or any other visual or writing effects.

Remember, there is no recipe!

Here is an example (fig. 6-7) of using journal writing as a tool for creative and reflexive purposes in a research project in museum studies. Inês Ferreira, the author, used a journal to reflect on her observations about readings, questions and experiences during her PhD journey.



Figure 6 – Journal writing entry by Inês Ferreira, 2015. From the book: *Criatividade nos Museus* © Inês Ferreira



Figure 7 – Journal writing entry, using maps for each month, by Inês Ferreira, 2015. From the book: *Criatividade nos Museus* © Inês Ferreira

Another example is using journal writing as one of methods in a teaching class about “Museums and Museology” in the museology master’s programme at the University of Porto (Portugal).

Alice Semedo, the teacher, asks her students to write journals as a way of reflective and creative learning about museums theory and practice.

The assignment is usually structured to achieve specific goals, but the journals have many different styles and shapes. Let’s have a look at some examples:

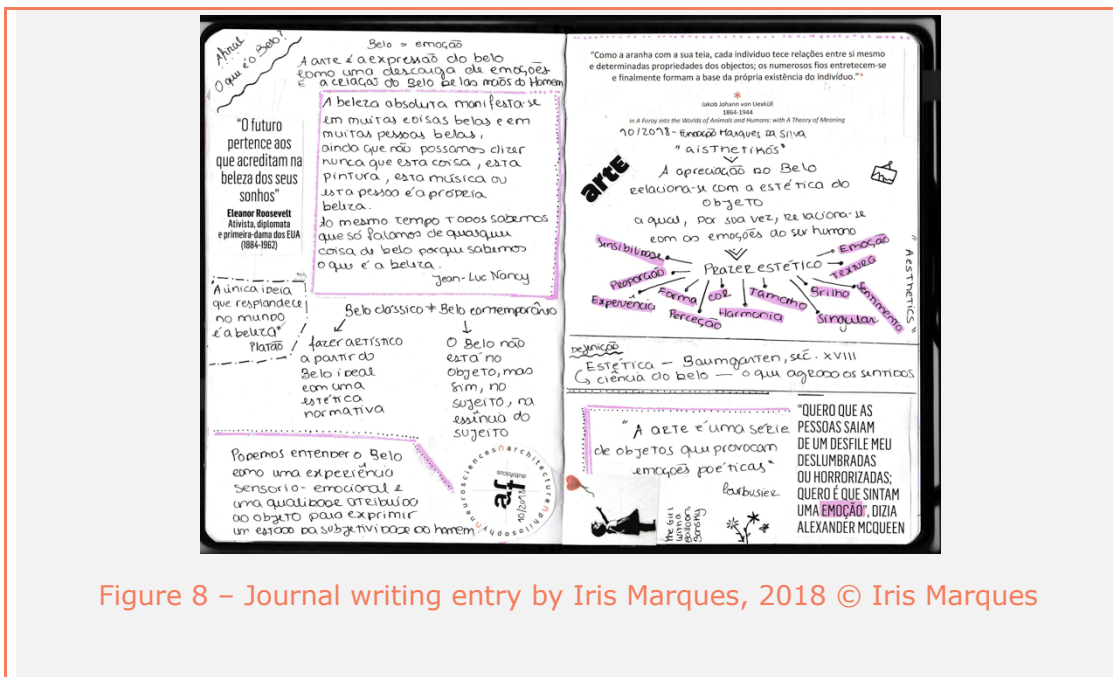


Figure 8 – Journal writing entry by Iris Marques, 2018 © Iris Marques



Figure 9 – Journal writing entry example, by Barbara Andrez, 2018 © Barbara Andrez



Figure 10 – Journal writing entry example, by Barbara Andrez, 2018 © Barbara Andrez

SCAMPER



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Scamper is another method that can help you spark your creativity by guiding you in the process of rethinking a problem and trigger new ideas. How? By modifying and adapting ideas that already exist.

The name SCAMPER is the acronym of 7 questions that can be useful when addressing your initial problem or idea. They are the following:

S = substitute something

C = combine with something else

A = adapt something to it

M = modify

P = put it to some other use

E = eliminate something

R = reverse or rearrange

You can apply SCAMPER in many situations in your museum practice: a problem you want to solve, a new strategy, a service or a project you want to develop. It can be an individual exercise or you can do it together with other colleagues.

First, you have to identify the problem or idea you want to address, and then use SCAMPER as a guiding checklist.

Here are some ways to inspire you, adapted from the book “Creativity in Museum Practice”:

Substitute

Think about substituting things or parts of your idea. Instead of a written panel? Instead of a chronological sequence in the exhibition? What else can be replaced? What about substituting the

materials used (shape, colour, sound etc.)? Or use a different process and procedures? What about changing the name or title? What about replacing rules: touch objects, take photos, be noisy? What else can be replaced?

Combine

Combine your purpose with something else. Imagine combining different services. For instance, how you could combine work in an exhibition? Or how could you bring together different topics, objects or materials.

Adapt

Adapt ideas already applied in different contexts and fields. What could you borrow and incorporate that can be valuable in your museum or project idea?

Modify

Take an old idea into a new frame by changing something. For instance, change meaning, purposes, objects, usages, functions, dimensions, limits, colour or shapes.

Put to other uses

What else can your problem or idea be useful for? For example, can your museum activity or event do more: other functions or possible uses? Think about different visitors: how would a child imagine it could be used for? What about an older person or someone with different disabilities? Think also about contexts: how would people from different countries or cultures make use of it? What other new uses can you imagine?

Eliminate

Think what might happen if some parts of your idea are eliminated or simplified. What parts are necessary and what parts are not? Can some parts become smaller or simply reduced?

Reverse or rearrange

Reverse parts of your idea or do it in a different order; change the order. Another sequence, layout or pattern? Look up; Look down. Think about assumptions you are making and reverse them; reverse goals, ideas, uses, functions, and roles. What are the negatives – can you reframe them and make them into positives? Think about the results you want to achieve and consider them backwards.

Synopsis

In this presentation we started by looking at 5 strategies that can be used to develop your creativity in museum practice. We focused on the value of lifelong learning, divergent and convergent thinking, remixing and combining ideas, and the role of constraints and failure in the creative process.

We also introduced 4 tools or activities that you can start experimenting in your daily museum practice: observation, mind mapping, documenting your creative practice and SCAMPER.

Although we have focused on a limited number of strategies and tools, we hope that through this introduction, we have triggered your interest in further exploring the topic and keep developing creative habits in your museum practice.

Do share your opinions with us and your fellow learners about what you have learned. Do you have another strategy or tool to share?

List of references

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Glossary

Convergent thinking: occurs when you have to narrow and focus on producing the “best” or “right” answer. It is especially important when you are in the phase of evaluating and implementing an idea.

Divergent thinking: is producing as many and different ideas as possible. It is about “thinking outside the box”, looking for solutions that are unconventional or unlikely.

Mind map: is a way to brainstorm your ideas and thoughts around a certain issue or problem using informal drawings. Usually, a mind map starts with writing or drawing a theme, problem or question at the center of a blank page, and all related subtopics are connected to the central topic in various directions and shapes.

SCAMPER: is a method that guides the process of rethinking a problem and trigger new ideas. The name SCAMPER is the acronym of 7 questions: S=substitute; C=combine; A=adapt; M=modify; P=put it to some other use; E=eliminate; and R=reverse or rearrange.