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Interacting in Creative Ecosystems

Collective Agency Cluster

Cross-Cutting Theme: Exploring

Nominal Workload: 50-60 hours (2 ECTS)

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INTRODUCTION

In today's cultural and creative industries (CCIs), the ability to interact within creative ecosystems is a vital competence. Creative work unfolds within dynamic networks of people, institutions, tools, environments, and social processes. Professionals must therefore understand not only their craft, but how their work participates in broader interdependent systems of meaning, production, and impact.

A creative ecosystem is a living system composed of artists, designers, institutions, technologies, funders, audiences, policies, and environments that co-evolve to sustain creativity. It includes not only tangible resources, but also the relationships, values, and feedback loops that bind them. These elements influence one another; they do not operate in silos. Navigating these ecosystems demands relational thinking, ethical action, and a commitment to cultures of reciprocity and resilience.

This learning plan develops systems literacy—enabling learners to recognize interdependencies, identify leverage points for change, and contribute meaningfully to collaborative and sustainable creative practices. It cultivates the capacity to act within complexity while remaining attentive to social, cultural, and ecological consequences.

At the core of this competence is systems thinking: the ability to focus not on isolated problems but on the patterns and relationships that shape them. Humberto Maturana's systems theory offers a guiding lens, emphasizing that living systems sustain themselves through dynamic organization, not fixed structures. Creative ecosystems evolve by reinforcing shared rituals, infrastructures, dialogue, and collaborative norms.

This perspective also demands ethical reflection: creatives must ask how their actions sustain or disrupt the ecosystems they inhabit, becoming stewards of interdependence, collective agency, and regenerative futures.

KEY CONCEPTS AND ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

COMPLEXITY IN CONTEXTUALIZATION

In creative ecosystems, complexity and contextualisation are deeply interrelated. Navigating complexity isn't about solving problems from a distance—it's about understanding how they're shaped by overlapping cultural, institutional, political, and historical forces. Context is not neutral or static; it is constructed and contested, reflecting the perspectives and positionalities of those who frame it. Learners must be able to identify which narratives dominate, which are excluded, and how these choices shape creative outcomes.

Framing a project—such as “empowering youth” or “creative placemaking”—directs attention and resources, but may also obscure power imbalances or systemic issues like gentrification. Understanding this framing is essential. Contextualisation in creative work requires critical inquiry: Who defines the terms? Whose goals are prioritized? What tensions or exclusions are at play?

Mapping complexity becomes a key practice here. Learners should build stamina for framing and reframing problems iteratively, developing skills to visually represent relationships using metaphors like flows, feedback loops, or layered structures. Familiarity with systems concepts—emergence, leverage points, nonlinearity—supports this capacity. Tools like Miro, Kumu, and argument mapping become valuable, not as ends in themselves but as means of collective sense-making. Collaborative mapping also nurtures co-ownership and ethical decision-making, ensuring that the framing of complexity remains participatory and reflective.

By cultivating this critical awareness and these visual literacy skills, learners gain the capacity to act ethically and effectively within complex, evolving creative contexts.

CO-OWNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability in creative ecosystems is not only about ecological impact or financial viability—it is grounded in co-ownership, both structurally and affectively. Structurally, co-ownership distributes responsibility across diverse actors, reducing reliance on single leaders and enabling long-term continuity. Projects co-created by communities, institutions, creatives, and funders foster transparency, trust, and collective accountability. Even small acts—like shared framing or collaborative vocabulary-building—can deepen commitment and help sustain creative ecosystems over time.

Understanding co-ownership is essential for building collective agency. Learners must distinguish between symbolic inclusion and genuine co-creation, recognising that agency emerges through involvement in both the framing and synthesis stages of a process—not simply through participation at the end. Participatory design methods and shared mapping practices are key tools for creating ownership that is meaningful and durable.

Affectively, co-ownership grows through emotional investment and mutual recognition. When people feel their contributions matter and their presence shapes the outcome, they develop a sense of stewardship. This feedback loop of care, commitment, and continuity ensures that ecosystems are nurtured, not merely maintained.

Learners must practice designing engagements that allow diverse stakeholders to see themselves represented in outcomes, building the structures and affective ties that sustain creativity over time.

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TRANSLATIONAL COLLABORATION ACROSS BOUNDARIES

Creative ecosystems bring together diverse actors—artists, researchers, funders, communities—each with different values, vocabularies, and worldviews. Successful collaboration across these boundaries requires more than clear communication; it requires translational competence: the ability to surface, navigate, and negotiate meaning across disciplines, institutions, and cultures. This involves working with "keywords"—terms like "participation," "impact," or "value"—which hold layered meanings depending on who uses them and in what context.

Translation in this sense is not about simplification or reaching consensus. It is about surfacing differences, holding space for complexity, and building relational bridges without erasing nuance. It requires understanding the infrastructures of knowledge and communication that mediate meaning between stakeholders.

Learners must develop knowledge translation and interfacing capacities: translating complex ideas into accessible formats; bridging across disciplinary languages; and designing communications that support collective decision-making without oversimplifying complexity. Visual and verbal literacy become critical—ensuring that translation is not just functional but inclusive, reflective, and sensitive to power dynamics.

Raymond Williams' insight into language as a shifting cultural practice supports this view: translation is relational, iterative, and political. Learners trained in translational collaboration can better sustain dialogue across creative ecosystems and enable shared meaning to emerge through careful negotiation, not imposition.

ETHICAL SYSTEMS ENGAGEMENT

Ethical engagement in creative ecosystems demands more than individual moral conduct; it calls for systemic, relational, and historically aware ethics. Learners must move beyond narrow notions of fairness or professional codes to interrogate how colonial legacies, extractive logics, and systemic inequalities continue to shape creative systems today.

Rather than fitting marginalised perspectives into dominant frameworks, ethical systems engagement calls for rethinking the frameworks themselves. Drawing inspiration from pluriversal design and concepts like Buen Vivir, learners are invited to center relationality, reciprocity, and collective well-being over market-driven models of innovation.

Reflective and ethical practice becomes a central mode of action. Learners must examine their positionality, surface their assumptions, and anticipate the potential unintended consequences of their creative interventions. Ethical reflection should be integrated from the earliest stages of project development—not applied only as retrospective critique.

Sustainability, inclusivity, and long-term relational value must guide creative decision-making, even when this requires challenging norms of efficiency or success.

Ultimately, ethical engagement is a practice of humility, reflexivity, and care. It shifts creative agency toward cultivating futures that are not only imaginative but also just, situated, and ecologically embedded.

CREATIVE ADAPTABILITY

Creative adaptability is the capacity to navigate uncertainty, respond to change, and adjust one's practice without losing purpose. It differs from passive flexibility by being strategic, relational, and future-oriented. In creative ecosystems—where conditions are often unstable and actors diverse—this competence is foundational for sustaining relevance and resilience.

Adaptability begins with awareness: the ability to sense shifts in political, technological, social, or ecological conditions. It requires learners to interpret these signals, reframe their approach, and prototype new pathways in response. Anticipation plays a key role here—not simply predicting the future, but using creative tools like storytelling, speculative design, and scenario building to explore emerging possibilities.

Importantly, creative adaptability is relational. It asks: how are others being affected by these changes? What values are at stake? How can responses build solidarity rather than reactive fragmentation? When practiced well, adaptability strengthens not only individual practice but the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

Teaching adaptability involves rehearsing change—through rapid prototyping, reflective iteration, and collective foresight. In doing so, learners develop not just survival skills, but the ability to shape more just and imaginative futures. It becomes a means of navigating complexity while staying rooted in care, creativity, and purpose.

METHODS

PHASE 1: CONTEXT AWARENESS & FRAMING

CONTEXTUAL FRAMING WORKSHOPS

These sessions train learners to explore not just the 'what' of a problem, but the 'why,' 'who,' and 'where' behind it. Tools like stakeholder maps and environmental scans are used to position issues within broader cultural, political, and systemic frames.

Reflection prompt: How might my framing of this issue limit or expand what becomes possible?

Learning Objectives:

- Develop the ability to critically frame problems within larger systemic and cultural contexts.
- Practice using stakeholder identification and environmental scanning tools.
- Recognize how framing influences perceived ownership and inclusion.

Theoretical Support: Donald Schön's 'Reflective Practitioner' model; first stage of the Double Diamond process (Discover/Define).

ACTOR-NETWORK MAPPING

Learners identify all human and nonhuman actors in a project—people, technologies, policies, tools, spaces—and map their interactions and influence. This reveals distributed agency and unseen power structures in creative ecosystems.

Reflection prompt: Which actors are shaping this system without being seen or named?

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the concept of distributed agency in creative systems.
- Develop skills in identifying and mapping human and nonhuman actors.
- Reveal hidden infrastructures, tools, and values influencing creative processes.

Theoretical Support: Actor-Network Theory (Latour, Callon); systems thinking and distributed cognition.

PHASE 2: VISUAL AND COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING

COLLABORATIVE MAPPING SESSIONS

Participants co-create system diagrams, journey maps, and argument trees using tools like Miro or Kumu. Mapping is not done by experts but collaboratively, supporting co-ownership and alignment across diverse perspectives.

Reflection prompt: Who is included in this mapping—and who is missing?

Learning Objectives:

- Co-construct shared visual models of ecosystems with diverse contributors.
- Develop visual facilitation skills using digital whiteboards and mapping tools.
- Foster shared language and alignment among interdisciplinary teams.
- Identify and include marginalized or overlooked system elements.

Theoretical Support: Systems thinking (Meadows); participatory design and collective sensemaking (Senge, Kolko).

VISUAL LITERACY STUDIOS

These practical sessions build learners' fluency in visual grammar—spatial logic, composition, metaphors, and typographic clarity—to ensure that their diagrams and models communicate effectively across disciplines.

Reflection prompt: What meanings are shaped—or obscured—by the way I've visualised this?

Learning Objectives:

- Enhance understanding of visual structure and spatial relationships.
- Develop skills in designing inclusive and clear visual representations.
- Experiment with metaphors to express complex systems.
- Apply principles of visual storytelling across collaborative contexts.

Theoretical Support: Gestalt theory; semiotics; visual rhetoric and communication design.

SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTION CIRCLES

Raw data, quotes, and observations are collectively clustered, interpreted, and synthesised into insights. This stage helps learners recognize that synthesis is not objective—it frames meaning and guides future action.

Reflection prompt: What assumptions am I embedding in the way I group and interpret this data?

Learning Objectives:

- Practice interpretive clustering of qualitative data.
- Recognize the subjective and political nature of synthesis.
- Generate shared insights through dialogue and co-interpretation.
- Experiment with different models of synthesis (e.g., matrix, funnel, timeline).

Theoretical Support: Constructivist learning theory; strategic design; Schön's reflective practice.

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PHASE 3: STRATEGIC RESPONSE AND PROTOTYPING

CO-OWNERSHIP PROTOTYPING

Participants develop partial frameworks or visual drafts that others can adapt or extend. This makes the process of ownership visible, while testing collaborative sensemaking under real constraints.

Reflection prompt: Where is shared ownership emerging—and where is it being blocked?

Learning Objectives:

- Encourage active engagement through open-ended design structures.
- Foster deeper investment through collaborative prototyping.
- Expose learners to the dynamics of co-authorship and ownership in creative work.
- Build confidence and transparency in shared decision-making processes.

Theoretical Support: Participatory design; user-led innovation; Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

ITERATIVE CO-CREATION LABS

Over time, learners design and test creative interventions rooted in their system maps and synthesis work. Each round includes feedback, iteration, and stakeholder engagement.

Reflection prompt: How is each iteration reshaping both the outcome and our relationships?

Learning Objectives:

- Engage in cycles of testing, feedback, and iterative development.
- Practice responsiveness to stakeholder insights and evolving conditions.
- Explore process as a site of learning and emergence—not just execution.
- Refine creative interventions through structured experimentation.

Theoretical Support: Action research; iterative prototyping; social innovation labs.

PHASE 4: VALUES & GOVERNANCE

APPLIED ETHICS DIALOGUES

Using real-world dilemmas and speculative prompts, learners surface value conflicts and reflect on systemic ethics. Topics may include greenwashing, authorship, extractive methods, and design for degrowth.

Reflection prompt: *Whose values are centred in this process—and whose are sidelined?*

Learning Objectives:

- Analyze ethical tensions within collaborative and systemic contexts.
- Cultivate a practice of ethical questioning in early design stages.
- Engage with political and ecological implications of creative decisions.
- Strengthen relational ethics and values-driven facilitation.

Theoretical Support: Ethics of care; critical systems thinking; design justice frameworks.

TRANSLATIONAL FRAMING STUDIO

This method focuses on bridging disciplinary and cultural divides through shared language and metaphor. Learners work with contested terms (“impact,” “creativity,” “community”) and translate them across perspectives, using visual and rhetorical tools.

Reflection prompt: *What meanings are hidden in the words we take for granted?*

Learning Objectives:

- Surface and negotiate contested language in interdisciplinary settings.
- Develop reflective awareness of power and politics in framing.
- Use visuals and metaphors to bridge gaps in understanding.
- Create tools (e.g., shared glossaries) for relational translation across worldviews.

Theoretical Support: Raymond Williams’ Keywords; boundary objects theory; intercultural communication.

SUGGESTED LEARNING TOOLS & RESOURCES

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TOOLS

Miro / FigJam – Enable shared visual thinking and real-time co-creation, essential for building common ground across diverse collaborators.

Kumu – Supports systems thinking by revealing interdependencies, leverage points, and feedback loops within complex ecosystems.

Lucidchart / Coggle – Help structure logic, decisions, and argument flows, making complex reasoning visible and collaborative.

Glossary Boards (Notion, Miro, Google Docs) – Facilitate the negotiation of meaning and creation of shared language in interdisciplinary settings.

Canva – Enhances communication across stakeholders by turning complex content into clear, inclusive visual narratives.

Otter.ai / Fireflies.ai – Capture collaborative dialogue and support reflective synthesis of knowledge generated through interaction.

Padlet – Promotes horizontal participation by giving equal space to all voices in brainstorming and ideation.

Trello / Notion / Airtable – Make roles, contributions, and responsibilities transparent—critical for co-ownership and distributed agency.

OpenCollective – Provides practical infrastructure for financial transparency and shared governance in creative collectives.

Liberating Structures – Offers facilitation formats that redistribute power and foster inclusive, co-owned participation.

Strategic Design Toolkit (Namahn) – Equips learners to frame, map, and intervene in complex systems using systems thinking and futures literacy.

Action Research Toolkit – Supports iterative inquiry, testing, and community feedback to build transformational agency in co-creation processes.

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