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# Devised theatre methodology to promote creativity in school

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the use of a devised theatre methodology to develop more creativity in the professional learning community and among students. Data from focus groups in an action research project in an upper secondary school in Norway have been thematically analysed. Using the practice architecture theory, we identified three different practices: 'creative practice', 'collective creative practice' and 'school practice'. The results show that devising methodology in the form of different production strategies, process orientation and a system of collective creative work promotes creativity in the professional learning community and for students. In addition, the methodology can be used to develop a teaching practice that promotes planning, imagination, and spontaneity in students, and contribute to a more equal guiding role in the form of guided improvisation from the teacher. The methodology can help teachers to foster discussions, understandings, develop concrete creative collaborations and promote democratic processes. The study points to tensions in teachers' development of 'creative practice' and 'collective creative practice' in the face of a traditional 'school practice'. The results are discussed using theories of devised theatre methodology, creativity, professional learning communities and practice architecture theory.

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Devised theatre; professional learning communities; creativity; upper secondary school; action research; practice architecture theory

## Introduction

In this study, we investigate how a devised theatre methodology from the world of theatre can contribute to the development of creativity in a professional learning community and among students. As a starting point, we elaborate on the concepts of professional learning community, creativity and devised theatre. Professional learning communities are described by Astuto et al. (1993, 2) as communities where teachers and school staff continuously share and seek learning and act based on new learning. Despite wide contextual variations within and between countries in Europe, the United States and Australia, theory about professional learning communities offers five fundamental principles for teachers' professional development: shared values and principles; collective responsibility; reflexive and exploratory dialogue; collaboration; and learning at both the group and individual level (Hargreaves and Fullan 2015). In schools, there is an expectation and requirement for collaboration between teachers (Vangrieken et al.

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2015). Against this background, there is a need to be able to develop and offer methods and tools to promote creative and innovative collaborations between teachers when schools are to be renewed and teaching improved. Using models that promote creativity from within professional learning communities is supported by research, indicating that these strengthens teachers' motivation for participation (Vangrieken et al. 2015).

Creativity arises in bottom-up collaboration and self-organised groups (Sawyer 2017). It is fundamental to what makes us human, and is recognised by politicians, educators, and business leaders as a crucial factor in economic success and solving environmental and societal challenges (Sawyer 2017). Creativity must be defined in a historical and contextual context, and in the West, the term is understood as the ability to create and produce contributions that are both innovative and useful, often with components that have quality (Kaufman and Sternberg 2019, 27). Sawyer (2019) highlights the need for teachers to develop their competence in creativity and collaboration to better facilitate learning in their teaching and understand their own role in a knowledge society. Experimental and creative learning processes have been shown to have a better effect on learning than instructive approaches if the learner is supported through appropriate structures and feedback from the teacher (Alfieri et al. 2011; Sawyer 2019, 36). Here, Sawyer (2019, 93–94) refers to recent research on how students learn creative knowledge through the pedagogical approach *guided improvisation*. In guided improvisation, students are activated through open-ended assignments where they have the freedom to improvise their own path through the academic material. Guided improvisation involves teachers facilitating and guiding students through creative and imaginative learning processes that are flexible and allow for dialogue and interaction. For students to benefit from explorative, creative and imaginative learning processes, teachers themselves need know how to work in this way and be able to facilitate the students' creative learning. Such learning is in line with the basic principles of devised theatre (Milling and Heddon 2015).

To 'devise' means to invent or think out and thus clearly has an innovative aspect. As methodology, devised theatre does not denote *a* single method, but is often understood as a system of different production strategies or production platforms that are adapted and recreated for each new theatre production. The methodology offers a framework or structuring principles to create progress, efficiency and an overview in a creative process (Milling and Heddon 2015. Devised theatre breaks with traditional production methods in theatre that are characterised by, for example, long-term planning of repertoire, strict functional division of all tasks and a pre-written text to be staged by a specific director (Kjølner 2009, 3). The devising process is open and dynamic and often starts with one, or more, individuals having an idea of what they want the theatre to be about, without a specific script as a starting point (Milling and Heddon 2015). In other words, participants create or find the material. The performance will, along the way, consist of using, for example, text, images, media expressions, sound/music and improvisations that can be put together in many ways. In devising processes, both resource and process should be visualised by using different walls, such as an inspiration wall, research question wall, experiment wall and assembly wall, where the material can be hung so that everyone has access to both the parts and the whole (Parsons 2010). Devised theatre is often developed based on collective processes and ensemble work but can also be individual work.

The processes can be organised into different hierarchies; they can be leader-driven or collective with a flat structure (Kjølner 2009, 19). Collaborative processes are based on trust and dedicated participation where all participants are involved from start to finish. In this process, participants contribute meaning within their own cultural and social context (Milling and Heddon 2015). The experimental approach implies a certainty that everything can be discarded, and the possibility of starting from scratch again focuses on the creative work rather than a goal or outcome (Oddey 1994, 168). From this background, we understand that devising as a methodology promotes freedom and possibilities that can safeguard teachers' autonomy and competence in their work. This is because in devised theatre processes, issues, targets, measures, work methods and methods would be planned, initiated, and created by the participants themselves, which also corresponds with the principles of action research (Grandi 2022).

The purpose of the article is to investigate devised theatre as a methodology for promoting creativity, and the first author has participated as a teacher and action researcher at a music and drama department at an upper secondary school. Inspired by Kalleberg's (2009, 265) 'template' for a constructive research question, this study queries: *How can and should upper secondary school teachers apply a devised theatre methodology to develop creativity 1) in students and in 2) professional learning communities?*

The article is further structured as follows: First, we explain the practice architecture theory, which contributes concepts to our analysis and is used to discuss the results. Next, we present the methods applied and the action research process. We then present the results before discussing them and reaching a conclusion.

## *Practice architecture theory*

The practice architecture theory helps us to analyse and understand the use of devised theatre as a methodology in an already established school context. It describes how traditions and local conditions act as 'invisible actors' and influence new and old practices without necessarily being conspicuous (Kemmis et al. 2014). It also contributes to understanding what enables or hinders development in a particular practice in educational organisations (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). To change something, 'a first step will therefore be to understand practice, what happens, and what shapes, supports and constrains it' (Kemmis et al. 2014). The theory understands practices as situated in a social context, shaped and sustained by *arrangements*, which can be understood as structures or relations that are bound together in different ways (Kemmis et al. 2014). The arrangements are expressed through sayings, doings, and relations (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). The sayings are mediated through *cultural-discursive arrangements* such as language, discourses and thought, whereas doings are influenced by physical *material-economic arrangements* such as buildings, books, technology, and curricula. Relations, on the other hand, are mediated by *social-political arrangements* such as hierarchies, solidarity, and power relations (Kemmis et al. 2014). These three *arrangements* (cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political) are intertwined and also termed as a project of practice (Kemmis et al. 2014).

A project with devised theatre as a methodology in the school will consist of new forms of understandings (sayings), different doings and relations between the participants.

These practices influence and are influenced by the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements in and beyond the individual school. The practices do not emerge in a vacuum but are shaped by established arrangements such as national laws and rules and traditions (Kemmis et al. 2014). The architectures of practice that enable and constrain devised theatre as a methodology in schools include all the conditions that shape how a particular practice unfolds in a particular place with that school and these teachers.

## Methods

### *Study context*

In Norway, most schools are publicly owned, and traditionally, teachers have had considerable autonomy in deciding how to teach and participate in development activities in schools (Blossing and Ertesvåg 2011). Results from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD 2020) show that Norwegian secondary-school teachers collaborate more than others. In fact, a curriculum reform was introduced in 2020 to promote more deep-learning and creativity for students (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017).

### *Action research*

Action research should not be perceived as a specific method or distinctive type of data, but as a holistic research scheme of a constructive nature where the researcher actively participates in improvement processes in the studied field (Carr and Kemmis 1986). The researcher in this study is also a teacher in the context and a colleague of the participants. This is different from researchers who come from outside – such as from a university – and thus are not colleagues who converse daily with the participants. In this sense, this study's design is simultaneously inspired by 'the teacher as a scientist' tradition, as argued in classics such as Stenhouse (1975).

### *Focus groups*

Data are collected in focus groups that initially comprised four subject teachers, including the first author, from a single team. During the action research, two teachers from another team were also included. The teachers were recruited through informal conversations. They were formally invited to the focus group via email with brief information about the topic and the process. The focus group met six times for 60–90 minutes over a period of nine months. The data material consists of field notes from the focus group meetings and transcribed audio recordings of focus group meetings 4 and 5.

In the focus group, participants have planned and tried out devised theatre as a methodology and discussed views and experiences with each other. The researcher used the focus group to gain knowledge rather than show interest in the group's interaction (Wilkinson 2004). Accordingly, in the focus groups, the

action researcher gained access to the teachers' ideas and experiences. This contributed relevant data including concrete examples from teaching and more general reflections on creativity, collaboration and learning in the school.

The action research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) with reference no. 639297. The participants in the project signed a declaration of consent in which the action researcher was given permission to make notes and audio recordings.

## *Four phases of action research*

The project was organised into four phases: 1) establishment and exploration, 2) implementation, 3) evaluation and 4) revision in line with the action research spiral (Carr and Kemmis 1986; McNiff and Whitehead 2011).

### *Establishment and exploration*

***Focus group meeting 1: Who are we and what do we want?.*** The first author presented the idea for collaborative development work and the teachers responded positively. We then conducted a collective brainstorming exercise taken from Oddey (1994), where a teacher wrote down ideas, and responses to the ideas, on the board. The exercise opened a new democratic discussion after which the group formulated a common action and agreed to work together to create a devised student project with an abstract theme: time. The objectives were as follows: a) Students should experience better coherence between the various drama programme subjects; and b) the teacher group should explore devised theatre as a methodology to promote creative learning where students participate actively and creatively throughout the process.

***The time between focus group meeting 1 and 2: We connect.*** The teachers were, over a period of two months, given an individual homework assignment with an accompanying guide (General Certificate of Secondary Education 2016). The task invited a practical approach where teachers were asked to bring an *initiator* as an introduction to the topic of time. An initiator was described as something textual, visual, auditory, or abstract based on different domains, such as personal experience, an object from the home, (local) society, art/culture, politics, and history.

***Focus group meeting 2: Research and exploration – a new way in.*** Three teachers presented their chosen initiator related to the theme of time, after which the others gave responses. One of the teachers brought an hourglass, which led to reflection on various aspects of time and how we perceive it. Another presented a lyric that evoked associations with the polar night and how light and darkness affect us. The conversation was engaging and helped to explore new connections and associations to the topic.

***Time between focus groups 2 and 3: More people connect.*** The group of teachers presented the project to the rest of the department. In this process, the last two music teachers were included, and the project became interdisciplinary involving both the music and drama departments. We decided that the project should end with a scenic,

theatrical, and musical product and be presented to an open audience in the school premises in late autumn and at a cultural event in the city.

### *Implementation*

***Focus group meeting 3: Facilitating a creative devising process.*** The topic was clarification of the organisation of the collaboration. The action researcher presented a progress plan to guide the implementation of the student project in line with the phases of the creative process in devised theatre. As part of the teachers' action learning project, in parallel with the student project, they were to observe, reflect and explore the collaboration in the ongoing creative process in the professional learning community by means of log writing. These logs were not shared with the action researcher, but experiences and ideas were later shared orally in focus groups.

***Focus group meeting 4: Reflective conversation.*** The teachers participated in an exploratory conversation based on the following questions that had been sent to them by email in advance: 1. What is creativity for you? 2. What needs do you have as a teacher and professional to work creatively and exploratively in collaboration with other teachers? 3. What opportunities and/or limitations do you see in working creative and exploratory work for a) the students b) you as a teacher and professional?

***The time between focus group meetings 4 and 5: This ship will land, but where?.*** For a period of six weeks, the teacher group worked on the student project, where each subject teacher facilitated devising processes with the students, aged 16–18 years, which were adapted to their subjects. The degree of freedom/openness in task formulation and the degree of instructive/communicative guidance were also adjusted according to the students' individual needs and coping ability. The students' works included theatrical, cinematic, and musical expressions in line with the specificity of the different subjects' curricula. Different devised theatre activities were applied, for example, play-based warm-ups, collective brainstorming processes, and improvisation exercises.

### *Evaluation*

***Focus group meeting 5: Done-Learned-Smart.*** As individual preparation, participants were sent a Done-Learned-Smart – form (cf. Tiller and Gedda 2017) with a brief description of its purpose and use. Here the participants were expected to document the experiences of their actions (Done), what they had Learned from them and what think would be expedient to do in the future (Smart). The form was used as a tool for a collective evaluation of our devised theatre methodology process. The teachers each chose two items each from their form and discussed them in plenary sessions.

***Focus group meeting 6: Revision.*** The topic was discussion of findings from the Done-Learned-Smart- form and suggestions for points to change and adjust routines for collaborative practice. First, we reflected upon experiences from individual and collective needs to be able to work with devised theatre as a methodology in the professional community and among the students. Then we discussed clarifying routines for further communication, frameworks, and the distribution of responsibilities in new collaborative projects.

### *Method of analysis*

The first author conducted a thematic analysis in six phase thematic analysis, inspired by Braun and Clarke (2012), where phases 1 to 3 took an inductive approach, focusing on coding based on the participants' statements. The first author conducted the analysis alone.

Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the content of the data set (cf. Braun and Clarke 2012). Here the first author listened to the audio recordings again while reading the transcripts. In this phase, she also read the data from the entire dataset, including field notes, highlighting interesting findings, and noting thoughts that emerged along the way.

Phase 2 was about generating initial codes that would be concise descriptions of the content of the data and relevant to the research question. The first author created a form in Word where she coded entire sentences and sequences based on the content. Most of the codes were descriptive descriptions, while some exceeded the teachers' opinions and were thus her own interpretations of the data. Examples of codes are 3.1.2 *Security in relations versus security in structure* and *4.1.3 Control versus loss of control in devising collaboration*. The coded transcripts were re-read to identify what was relevant to the various codes. Some codes were recoded, and overlapping codes were merged.

In phase 3, themes and sub-themes began to take shape, and the process was more constructive than exploratory. The themes intended to capture the meaning of the data set and represent something essential to the research question. Examples are *1. planning for improvisation and creative process* and 2. *goal-oriented and instrumental orientation for learning, collaboration and creativity*. The first author found themes that could stand alone, but also contrasted each other. Towards the end of Phase 3, the first author sorted quotations under the relevant themes and sub-themes in a table in Word.

In phase 4, the inductive generated themes and sub-themes were revised and developed deductively by using concepts from the theory of practice architectures (cf. Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) as a lens to uncover sayings, doings, and relations in the material. The analysis included contrasts and tensions identified in the three themes 'creative practice', 'collective creative practice' and 'school practice'. For each of the main themes, three associated sub-themes were further identified, which are listed here and illustrated in Figure 1.

In phase 5, the themes were quality checked to see if they captured the data in a meaningful way in relation to the research question. The analyses revealed practice architectures that promoted or hindered creativity through the main themes 'creative practice', 'collective creative practice' or 'school practice'. This phase gave structure and headings to the results section, which is also recommended by Maxwell (2012, 107).

In phase 6, the deductive analysis with the practice architecture theory was further developed in the writing of the article. The teachers' names are fictive.

## Results

### *Creative practice – devised theatre methodology and students*

The results from the first main theme 'creative practice' describe the use of a devised theatre methodology for planning and implementing the creative interdisciplinary

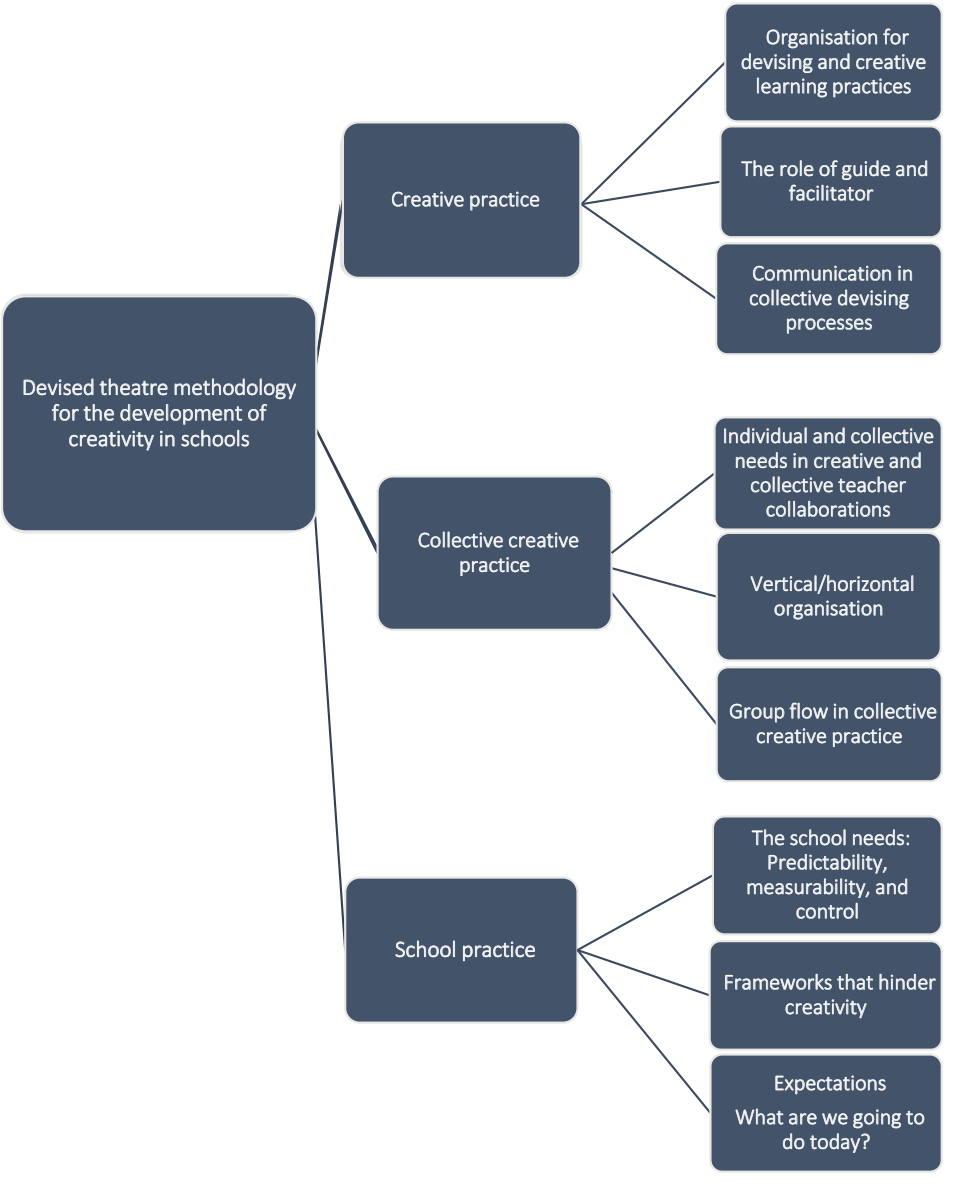


**Figure 1.** Key themes and sub-themes identified by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). The three main themes are listed in the centre box with associated sub-themes on the right.

project with the students. The teacher group concluded that an active participation in play-based warm-up, interaction and improvisation exercises with the students strengthened their relations and contributed to joint academic and social engagement. The quote from Nina is an example of creative teaching arrangements discussed in one of the focus group interviews:

> I took the desks away from the students. They were not allowed to sit. They were everywhere, wrote on walls and floors. And they looked at me as if I was. . . what on earth are you doing?

> [. . .] Here, Nina shared an experience from a teaching session using a new method for brainstorming that affected the relationship with the students in the classroom, to which Viktor responded a little further into the conversation: So positive that the students met someone who pushed them, who stood their ground, who said 'Let's meet and create something here and now.'

The quote shows how a new organisation of the classroom (doings) supported a creative practice and opened new spaces of expression and action where students were activated cognitively, linguistically and physically. The change made by the teacher thus affected the teacher -student relations when the teacher broke with the students' expectations. The teacher's role as facilitator and guide also affected the relations between the teacher and students. Student-led and creative learning processes, where the teacher guides through 'guided improvisation' (Sawyer 2019), are exemplified by Nina's statement:

> I have experienced working closely with the students as tutor in this project. I have experienced and received feedback that they have been engaged in the process itself. At least in the sense that when they have control and ownership of the task, they take more responsibility in the process. In that sense, I may have learned a lot from the students in this process.

The quote shows that the teacher experienced an approach towards a more equal relationship between the teacher and the students (relations), where the students responded through increased involvement in the work (doings). The teacher and students could work together to design the project and process, and in addition, the teacher reflected on learning something from their students. One of the teachers, Sara, described in the evaluation how the process orientation of the devising methodology engaged a previously passive student to discover academic connections (sayings) between the theory from another programme subject and the practical work they were working on the floor. The description showed how the teacher guided and scaffolded the learner's process, and all teachers described scaffolding as central to their guidance. When the teachers and students created and developed the devised performance (doings) together, it was a matter of continuously building on each other's offerings in an improvised process. This required skills such as sensitive listening, attention, and flexibility (sayings). The group of teachers expressed that devised theatre created motivation in the students, but also expectations of being allowed to decide.

The role of guide and facilitator affected the relations and social space between teachers and students. Teachers reported the dilemma of opening all possibilities and then setting the limits for the students. The same applied to changing from open dialogue-based guidance to more instructive guidance in cases where the students needed it. The original 'contract' for a student-led project established between the teacher and the class at the start was broken when the teacher took on a more instructive role. In the evaluation, metacommunication (sayings) about the process, clarification of roles (relations) and expectations, clarification of the project's objectives and joint development of quality criteria together with the students (doings) were highlighted as measures to strengthen relations in devising projects.

During the devising process, the teachers had joint sharing and reflections, where several described the need for support from colleagues and management (social-political arrangements) to try out new creative ways of working in teaching.

### *Collective creative practice – devised theatre methodology in the professional learning community*

Results from this second main theme 'collective creative practice' denote the teachers' creative collaboration in their teams. In the evaluation, several of the teachers described how practical exercises from the devised theatre methodology activated the body, senses, emotions and imagination, as well as strengthened the awareness of both their own and others' contributions to the collaboration. This can be exemplified by a quote from Sara: 'The stories the exercises, based on an abstract theme such as time, were more personal and sensory- based than the ones we usually share in meetings.' The teachers considered that participating in such an exercise gave them access to different perspectives and ways of exploring the topic as well as experiences of how they could initiate such work with the students in practical terms. In the evaluation, Sara further reflected on the possibility of developing the collaborative practice within the team:

> We can handle a topic in different ways. We could explore something thematically based on music, lying on the floor drawing mind maps, as you say, or making a tableau, right? Sitting and talking may not be the best way into a project.

This example shows how the teacher expressed her own thoughts and ideas (sayings) for new ways in which colleagues work together (relations), with examples of practical, aesthetic, and collective ways of working (doings) according to the devised theatre methodology.

In the evaluation, the teachers expressed that actively participating in a collective idea phase with an open approach inspired them. Another consideration was that it was unusual to spend so much time on something that might not materialise. Most of the teachers expressed a clear desire to collaborate more, which is exemplified by Sara and Viktor's statements: 'It has been a bit like we walk around as competent heads separately" and 'We can't sit in separate camps; If we want to achieve something, we have to do it together.' A teacher also reflected on how the practical approach made them use a wider range of their own competences.

The teachers expressed different experiences with horizontal organisation (relations) in the devised collaboration through Kathrine's statement:

> I always really want to contribute, but at the same time I become uncertain when I don't have a concrete task, or a concrete area of responsibility, and then it's easy for things to just fly by.

This quotation exemplifies an experience of trying out new practices (collective creative practice), but also tensions in the form of uncertainty that arose when the new practice met the traditional hierarchical organisation of collaboration. One assessment was that the relations supported creative collaborations (doings) through spaces for open and critical dialogue and encouraging, motivating and supportive feedback (sayings) in the professional learning community. Another assessment was that maintaining and further developing the social-political arrangements required training and continuous work to succeed.

The results showed that the characteristics of collective creative practice in the professional learning community were involvement, commitment, participation and open

communication, as well as flexibility, improvisation and flow. Teachers expressed different needs and preferences for structure and predictability in collective creative collaboration. Nevertheless, there was broad consensus that the phases of the devising methodology helped communicate a system for working and progressing with creativity (cultural-discursive arrangements). The teachers had to communicate the development of the work and the decisions made in class to the other teachers involved in the project, who together agreed on the next steps. Several of the teachers expressed that it was challenging to achieve this communication flow effectively. Procedures for use and clarification of where and when information about new decisions or sudden changes in the devised project should be shared was concluded as an area for improvement. Project size and participants' needs and preferences for communication were factors that should be considered before initiating new projects.

The individual commitment to participation was also promoted as crucial to the success of creative collaborations and devising methodology. The material-economic arrangements were characterised by the co-location of departments and teams in the offices, which strengthened the opportunities for collaboration within the department. Most of the teachers highlighted that the mapping of resources in the devised project had not been satisfactory, and that there was a need for more coordination in terms of material resources such as space and equipment next time. This also included a clarification of expectations and responsibilities in collective collaboration.

### *School practice – devised theatre methodology in schools*

Findings from this third main theme 'school practice' show how the school's traditional practice contributed to constraints for working with a devised theatre methodology in the professional learning community and among students. In the project, the teachers pointed out how tradition has shaped and continues to shape practice in schools at several levels. The school practice is characterised by cultural-discursive arrangements aimed at producing measurable products and where the process is directed towards predetermined competence goals, as Nina illustrates:

> I get very locked into a way of doing things, because I don't have time to be creative in advance of having to find completely new ways to get to the goal. [. . .] I may feel that the goal and structure inhibit my creativity because the direction is to reach that competence goal there, right? Having to get through many competence goals were described by several teachers as the reason why they had experienced having to reject students' input for creative and alternative solutions: We have to, like, Okey phew! On to the next one.

The quote describes how the school's goal orientation and overall requirements guided teaching (cultural-discursive arrangements). The teachers experienced time and competence goals as a constraint to facilitating creativity in lesson planning. One assessment was that the pupils' learning practices are shaped by time pressure, including assignments from many different subjects that are linked to a long historical tradition of grades and performance focus in schools. Teachers further described how ambitions and planning for the student-led creative project conflicted with set performance dates and final products. The teachers generally expressed the need for allocation of time to ensure academic and pedagogical

quality in the creative process. Time was also an issue in terms of not being too ambitious with respect to allotted capacity. The material-economic arrangements that the school-based practice represented are characterised by the organisation of timetables, subjects, meetings, and physical settings that inhibited collective creative practice as exemplified by Katrine's statement:

> The timetable comes again as a challenge [. . .] when the management puts it the way they do and plan the whole year, they really decide that there is no room for collaboration here.

The teachers considered that the organisation of the timetable, different staffing percentages and the organisation of working hours and meetings only supported collaboration within teams. Further, the teachers expressed how time pressure limited the possibilities for devised theatre and creative learning in the school. For the group of teachers, the organisation of the collaboration was partly conditioned by different staffing percentages, which led to different conditions in terms of time capacity and presence (material-economic arrangements). An unintended consequence that became apparent through the devising project was an increase in the workload for the teachers, who spent time arranging and swapping lessons to ensure continuity and progress in the student project. Negotiations with other colleagues outside the project were often associated with a dilemma related to professional priorities that the teachers felt they had to defend alone. Periods of increased stress and demotivation among several of the teachers were a consequence of this. The evaluation expressed a wish for a strategy from the school to develop cooperation and relations across departments, subjects and grades (social-political arrangements). The school had theme weeks and subject days during the semester, which the teachers acknowledged as a step in the right direction. However, the evaluation revealed that larger projects tend to last over several weeks, perhaps months, and that the current timetable structure was inflexible.

Material-economic constraints also concerned room capacity and learning resources. Four of the teachers described how finding and negotiating the use of space and teaching materials, which in this case concerned a stage production, stage design, lighting, and sound equipment, required a considerable amount of time and effort and in some cases contributed to a demotivation of the creative project. Ingrid's statement highlights how the physical framework (material-economic arrangements) affects both the teacher and the students' room for manoeuvre:

> It falls apart a bit because what can we really do in that classroom? So that ruins it. The students have made something cool, but they have no proper place to play it, so it doesn't work. It falls apart.

Teachers also experienced tensions in the project as other teachers had expectations (cultural – discursive arrangements) of purposeful, predictable and recognisable practices (social-political arrangements), as exemplified in Katrine's statement:

> Yes, we come to the meetings, and then we expect our leader to chair it. And that we will go through an agenda that has been sent out in advance. It's the same thing our students have been used to. I did an internship in primary school, and every morning the teacher would stand there and write on the blackboard what subjects they were going to have in order, and for each lesson they wrote down two goals. If that's what they've been used to for 13 years, and so have we . . .

> Right? Of course, it's easy for us to be creative in front of our students when we have planned what's going to happen.

This quote exemplifies how the teachers expect a meeting structure at the departmental meetings characterised by relatively fixed routines and an agenda, and such expectations may hinder the possibility to implement more devised methodology in the whole school.

## Discussion

In the discussion we use the same three headings from the result section before we discuss the limitation of the action research.

### *Devised theatre methodology for the creative practice of students*

The results from the student project support using the devising methodology to help promote creative practice among the students in school. The decisions in the direction and design of the student project were made by the students in the different subjects as a part of the creative and collective process. Here, the practical exercises from the devising methodology for designing products (doings) were found to be a contribution to teachers in facilitating creativity and innovation in students through teaching, in accordance with the description of Kjølner (2009). The results also reveal how the collective and participatory perspective in devised theatre promotes equal participation and allows for an equal teacher-student positioning where the teacher acts more as a guide, facilitator, and collaborator than as a class leader and instructor (relations), promoting what Sawyer (2019) has described as guided improvisation. Devising methodology in our study proved to be well suited to developing creativity in terms of creating a performance since the system was flexible and dynamic while including phases such as thinking, planning and shaping ideas as well as imagination and spontaneity (sayings), in accordance with Oddey's (1994) description. The devised theatre methodology also contributed to offering us a system in which evaluations and formative assessments are developed collaboratively, as argued by Oddey (1994). This offers the potential to promote student participation and develop assessment practices, cf. Sawyer (2019).

### *Devised theatre for collective creative practice in schools*

The results showed that the use of devising methodology can provide a basis for promoting collective creative practice in the professional learning community. The teachers collaborated to promote creativity (doings) that included participation (relations) and sensitive listening (sayings), which research describes as fundamental to developing professional learning communities (Vangrieken et al. 2015). For the teachers, the practical and aesthetic approach in devised theatre provided an opportunity to provide a sensory, associative and personal approach to designing teaching and a concrete teaching programme in accordance with descriptions of the methodology (Milling and Heddon 2015). The devised theatre methodology could be used for joint reflections in focus groups related to overall professional, pedagogical and didactic themes and meta-reflections. The

devised methodology also proved to be a flexible system for the teachers in the project, which is fundamental to promoting creativity, according to Sawyer (2019).

Using the methodology, teachers were able to work with an open and constructive attitude where attention was focused on fellow teachers, leaders and students. Group flow and creativity were developed through active listening and full acceptance of the collaborator's contribution, which was then expanded and built upon. Such a process is described by Sawyer (2017) as an improvisation. The success of this required the process to be carried out collectively, cf. Sawyer's (2017, 57) description of 'blending egos', where participants give up their more ego-centred ambitions and ownership of the process to give authority and support to the group's decision-making process. One point that the teachers discussed was whether it was meaningful to spend time generating many ideas that were not going be used for anything. The number of possibilities create a discomfort that may lead groups to 'escape' into more concrete planning. The urge to make quick decisions early in the process is a classic trap to fall into, according to research on the development of creativity (Oddey 1994; Sawyer 2019).

## *Devised theatre methodology meets school practice*

The practice architecture theory (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) has helped to give us an understanding of how devised theatre can function as a methodology for the development of creativity, as well as an overview of the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that limit the possibilities of applying devised theatre in schools. Material-economic arrangements in the form of few and small meeting rooms were not conductive for this way of working. This indicates that the school's architecture can both promote and inhibit creativity and collaboration.

The teachers described a mindset about *my* project and *your* project in the collaborative practice at the school (cultural-discursive arrangements). Such an underlying dynamic could contribute to tensions and conflict with the overall intention and desire to create something together. Thus, the material-economic arrangements came to form a 'natural' hierarchy where the teachers with the most subjects and hours came closest to the project, and thus had overall responsibility for, among other things, the flow of information. These teachers also described the greatest sense of belonging and ownership of production development and the project. One consideration the teachers had was that in schools these positions are often, but not always, relatively stable. Teachers have the same subjects year after year with the same percentage of staff. The 'natural' or given hierarchies these patterns form can, if not approached consciously, inhibit creative and collaborative practice between teachers in departments and teams over time. For 'new practice' with new sayings, doings and relations to be enacted, Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) suggest that new or modified practice architectures that support these are necessary for the new practice to survive. The teachers also variously expressed expectations, needs and desires for clear leadership, division of roles and responsibilities (social-political arrangements) and fixed routines for meeting practice. In the teacher group, there was an expressed desire to improve practice in this area by exploring alternative ways of organising the meeting practice.

The results revealed tensions between the creative and imaginative approach of the devising methodology (Kjølner 2009) and a 'school' practice tradition, where the cultural-discursive arrangements promoted a goal and result orientation for the

students' learning outcomes from teaching. The teachers described how external pressures through heavy workloads and deadlines could affect classroom relations that were detrimental to creative learning practices. Yet, a product and outcome focus can be an accelerating driver in creative processes. The LTS study (Davies et al. 2013) indicates similar findings, which also problematise the impact of assessment requirements on creativity. Against this background, we would like to highlight that to successfully facilitate creativity in schools, politicians and school leaders must continue to prioritise the process-oriented development of creative skills in schools, as also argued by Sawyer (2019).

### *The limitation of the action research*

The ambition of an open and transparent process where teachers interacted collectively with full participation and decision-making authority was difficult to achieve. The action researcher's intention of flat organisation for teacher collaboration did not go beyond the first focus group meeting. In part, this may be related to how the time and content were planned and arranged in this first meeting. Here, the intention of the collective could have been emphasised more and thus possibly gained a greater common ground. A critical assessment in retrospect by the action researcher was that the new ways of working did not receive a thorough enough introduction and follow-up through the focus group meetings and may thus have hindered the creative and collective practice. However, our assessment was that a flat organisation required a time and space that the school's practice architecture did not have.

A disadvantage of the action researcher being the initiator was that she was implicitly given a position as a driving force or project manager. The action researcher's professional background and experience as an upper secondary school theatre educator may also have had an impact through prejudice and bias, influencing the other teachers and their sayings, and thus the validity of the study (cf. Maxwell 2012). This may have weakened the project's intention to promote development from within (cf. Carr and Kemmis 1986; Sawyer 2017). Nevertheless, the project was driven by an active and collaborative group of teachers. Most teachers expressed the perception of an organisation with a project manager, an artistic director, or a production manager as the most productive organisation for the collaboration. This can be seen in the context of the action learning project requiring additional work for the teachers in the terms of both organising and running teacher collaboration and at the same time planning, implementing, and evaluating student projects in a new way.

By also having the role of teacher, the action researcher found that it took time to get the necessary distance to the data. Nevertheless, the action researcher's knowledge and familiarity with the environment to be researched can be a great advantage in terms of understanding what is relevant to look for (Maxwell 2012). With the second and third authors having asked critical questions about the research design from a greater distance, the disadvantages of the action researcher's proximity to the data material have been somewhat offset.

## Conclusion

We initially asked: *How can and should upper secondary school teachers apply a devised theatre methodology to develop creativity 1) in students and in 2) professional learning communities?* We structure the answer based on Kalleberg's (2009) distinction between *can* and *should* and the distinction between the two research questions in the study. Thus, we have a four-part answer:

(1a) The results show that a devised theatre methodology *can* be used to develop a teaching practice that promotes planning, imagination, and spontaneity in students. The practical exercises *can* allow for a bodily, associative and personal, but also social and dialogic, approach to learning. Furthermore, the methodology can be used to enhance student involvement and responsibility and contribute to a more equal guiding role in the form of guided improvisation for the teacher in line with Sawyer's concept (2019).

(1b) To promote more creativity, policy makers and school leaders should prioritise process-oriented learning and the development of creative skills in students. Teachers *should* be encouraged and given the opportunity to gain more knowledge about devised theatre and try it out in their school context, especially in interdisciplinary projects where students should be in control of development and outcomes. The devised theatre methodology maintains the aesthetic and intersectional perspective (which includes factors such as race, indigenousness, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc.); this is about individuals, groups and communities identifying themselves. Thus, a devised theatre methodology strengthens teachers' ability to provide creative learning practices for their students.

(2a) The results of the study show that a devised theatre methodology *can* serve as a tool to promote creative collective practices in a professional learning community. The methodology can help teachers to foster discussions, understandings, develop concrete creative collaborations and promote democratic processes.

(2b) In the organisation of the interdisciplinary devised project, the analysis through practice architecture theory highlighted arrangements that affected the learning practice and *should* be challenged to work more with the methodology in teacher collaboration. The school practice promoted predictability, measurability and control that limited opportunities to work creatively with a devised theatre methodology in a professional learning community. Working with this methodology needed example time and space for creativity, slack in the timetable and teacher collaboration across subjects. Initiating devised methodology also needs flexibility in the professional community in the form of expressions, attitudes and relations.

The study indicates that promoting creativity for students and teachers has organisational implications for the school that require more research, and where practice architecture theory can be useful for gaining a broader understanding. Although devised methodology is a well-established practice in education, art, and theatre fields today (Grandi 2022), it is still one of the most underrepresented in academia (Parsons 2010, 185). There is also a need for more research on the use of a devised theatre methodology in professional learning communities

and in schools, for example, about inclusion or sustainability. Further research may also investigate how devising methodologies can be used in action research (Kunt 2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Author contribution

CSM: Conceptualisation; CSM: Project administration; CSM: Writing – original draft; CSM, YA, SEA: Writing – review and editing. All authors have approved the final article.

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