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Thinking Through Drawing in Nature: Accessing the bloom space of potential

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Abstract

Thinking Through Drawing in Nature: Accessing the bloom space of potential

Time in Nature was a funded staff development opportunity for Hourly Paid Lecturers across University of the Arts London (UAL) organised by Dr Heather Barnett, MA Art and Science at Central Saint Martins together with the Climate Activists in 2023. The author will contextualise the development of these workshops through Academic Support at University of the Arts London and discuss the initial pilot phase as well as how these workshops subsequently changed over the next few academic years (2023-2026). Recurring anecdotal evidence from students attending the workshops have informed the author of the main themes, which include walking, attention, cortisol levels, and affective bloom spaces.

Keywords

Drawing, diagramming, nature, workshop, pedagogy, possibility

1. Introduction

This visual essay illustrates Thinking Through Drawing in Nature, a series of workshops developed following an invitation to join Time in Nature, a funded staff development opportunity at Central Saint Martins in 2023. I will contextualise the development of these workshops through my working environment, UAL-wide Academic Support at University of the Arts London and discuss the initial pilot phase as well as how these workshops subsequently changed over the next few academic years (2023-2026). Recurring anecdotal evidence from students attending the workshops have informed me of the main themes, which include walking, attention, cortisol levels, and affective bloom spaces.

2. Context and UAL-wide Academic Support

Drawing has been a part of my practice for 20 years, I have found it satisfying as an activity, both as an artist and educator. Sketching is an absorbing process, mindful and connected to the self. I operate well in the territory of not-knowing, as a facilitator of process, helping others access new knowledge. I make workshops and methods. I give people the tools and practices for empowerment. The materials I use are paper and pen, lines, marks, shapes, and words; a table in a room with a group of people coming together. My approach is open, exploratory, experimental, and qualitative; emergent. I have become a good communicator "you are very good at what you do," (student feedback) my experience level is high. The workshop becomes an experimental and knowledge-making space of affective learning.

My work has always been intuitive and practice-led, based on listening, responding, testing, and tweaking: I have lived research, but I did not know it as such at the time. I started teaching drawing in 2007, developed a method, and wrote a book *Sketching Perspective* (2021), but in pedagogic experiments I facilitated drawing to

generate new knowledge in participants' understanding of their world. It was this practice that brought me to Academic Support at UAL, Associate Lecturer for UAL-wide Academic Support since 2015. My role involves creating high quality Academic Support learning opportunities and resources that anticipate students' learning and curriculum-oriented needs. Teaching both disciplinary and trans-disciplinary groups and levels of study, also providing both academic and pastoral support to students, I develop spaces (in person and online) that encourage, promote and support inclusive practice among all students and staff. I have worked with hundreds of students across all colleges and disciplines at UAL, predominantly BA and MA, but also PhD students, as well as members of staff.

3. Time in Nature staff development

Time in Nature was a funded staff development



Figure 1. Balan, T., Barton, G., Blake, J., Leimanis, I., McGovern, D., Phillips, L., Monedero-Chaves, A., Ramejkis, A., Sabatini, N., Sagoo-Reddy, S., Sarkar, J., Salmon, V. and Thrippleton, P. (2024) 'Arts learning development': 10 years of UAL-wide Academic Support. In: UAL: EdEx 2024, 9 July 2024, Central Saint Martins, London.



Figure 2. The session in Regent's Park, June 2023. Time in Nature was co-developed by Alejandro Martínez, Ilan Valdes, and Wing Hei Calesta Ng (UAL Climate Advocates) working with Dr. Heather Barnett (Pathway Leader MA Art and Science and co-director of the Living Systems Lab, CSM). June 2023

opportunity for Hourly Paid Lecturers across UAL organised by Dr Heather Barnett, MA Art and Science at CSM together with the Climate Activists in 2023. Lecturers attended an outdoor training session in June 2023 and were invited to develop and test learning experiences with students over the next academic year.

There were three phases to this project:

Step 1: Staff Development Day (29 June 2023)

The selected participants met for a staff development session in Regents Park and were introduced to a range of activities, methods and considerations for exploring how learning experiences can observe, interpret and respond to natural spaces and the materials that we find there.

Step 2: Developing and testing methods across courses (October/November 2023)

Following the workshop each participant was invited to adopt and adapt some methods to apply within their own teaching context during Autumn 2023 term, testing out ideas in different courses and disciplinary contexts (considering seasonal changes and daylight hours).

Step 3: Sharing and evaluating (Thursday 30 November 2023).

Each participant was asked to share the processes and outcomes of the learning experience tested in an online group discussion.

4. Thinking Through Drawing in Nature

In the autumn of 2023, I piloted Thinking Through Drawing in Nature, a variation of the workshop I had been facilitating in the university for a decade: Thinking Through Drawing, a method I developed to help students think through their ideas with a process of quick sketching, "potential happens in process." As a member to the university-wide Academic Support team, this was in line with its commitment to create multidisciplinary spaces that encourage self-enquiry and cross-University interdependent study. These workshops are open to all students at all levels of study as spaces of curiosity, enquiry and practice development leading to increase in confidence, motivation and attainment. Thinking Through Drawing in Nature was an opportunity for students to learn with nature, observe quietly while drawing, and feel differently in a new environment. I was curious to investigate if movement and observation outdoors, can build concentration, invigorate and stimulate to then explore sketching as a bloom space for potential?

Building on the work I had done previously with different areas of recent research, I was hoping to develop a workshop that brought together the themes of walking, connection, and observation, with some of the previous projects I had initiated such as *Drawn in London*, a group I ran for a decade in London meeting in different locations for focussed observational drawing. My participation in the walking research group *Refugia* broadened my understanding of walking and the project I developed in that context was a subtle but powerful form of synchronous connection.

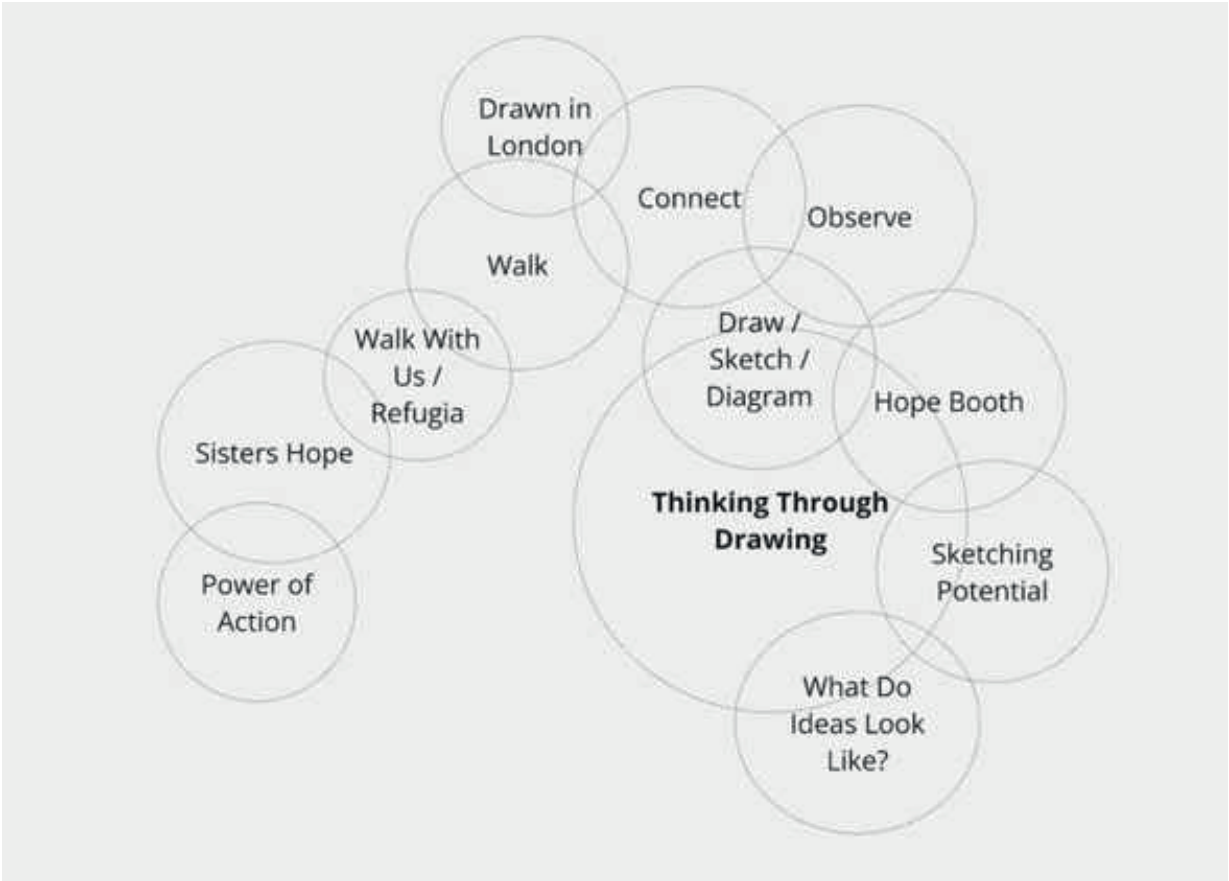

Figure 3. The interconnected themes and projects I have worked on which brought me to and informed the development of the Thinking Through Drawing in Nature workshop.

Collaborating with my sister Andra Kalnins, who had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, inspired me to look at my teaching practice through the lens of hope and I brought in some of the research from earlier workshops such as my longstanding Thinking Through Drawing, the *Hope Booth* and *Sketching Potential*.

The first two workshops piloted as part of Time in Nature took place in the Autumn term of 2023, first in Lucas Gardens across the street from Camberwell College of Arts on 11 October and then canal side at Kings Cross, a short walk from Central Saint Martins on 17 November.

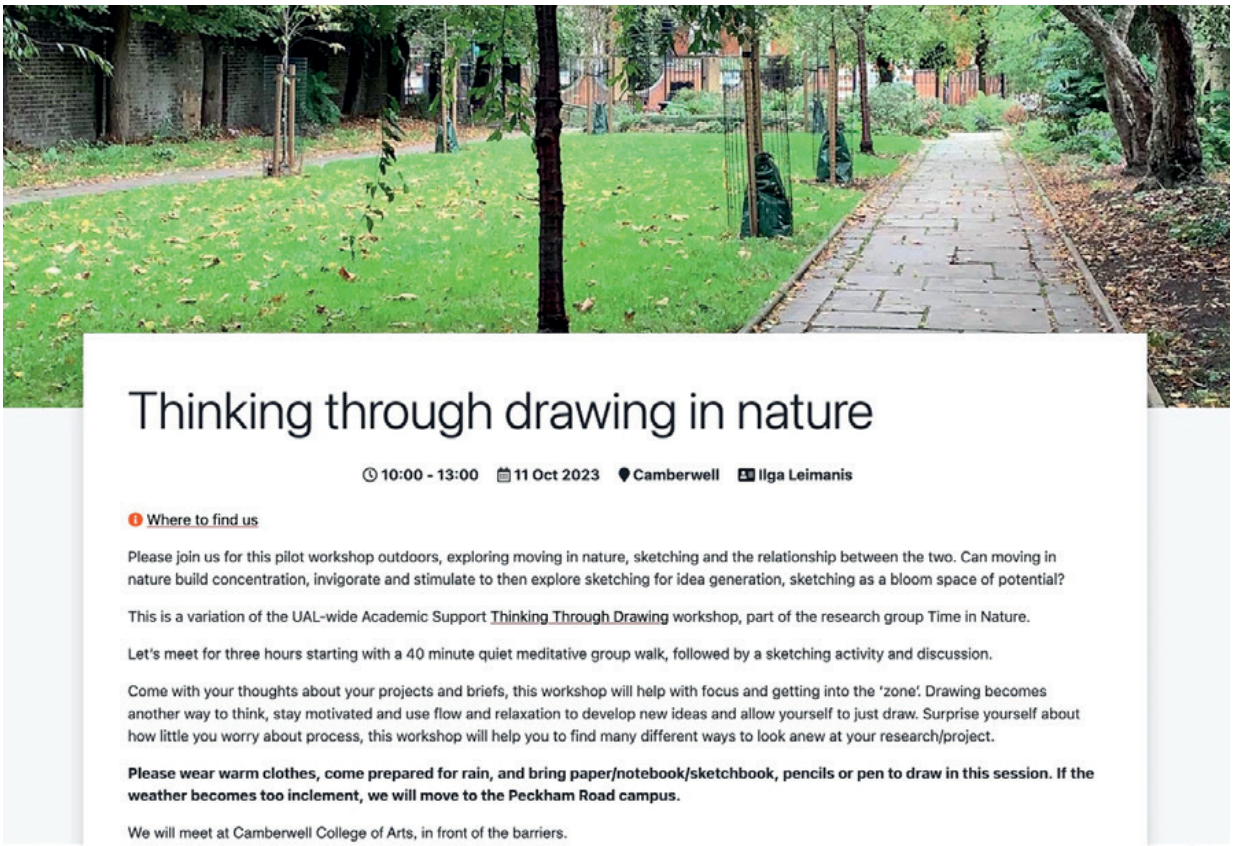

Figure 4. The invitation to attend the workshop was emailed to students via the Academic Support mailing list and the sign-up link to register for the workshop was found on this web page.

Figure 5 (next page)**.** After meeting at the university campus, we walked across the street to Lucas Gardens where I told students to put their phones away, to fully experience the walk and observe the nature around them.



Figure 6. After walking, the students came together and self-organised into a circular seating arrangement. It is here that they drew. My intention was to get them to work differently but I was able to go with their flow and guided them through the first drawing exercise. They shared their drawings in small groups with the people sitting beside them.

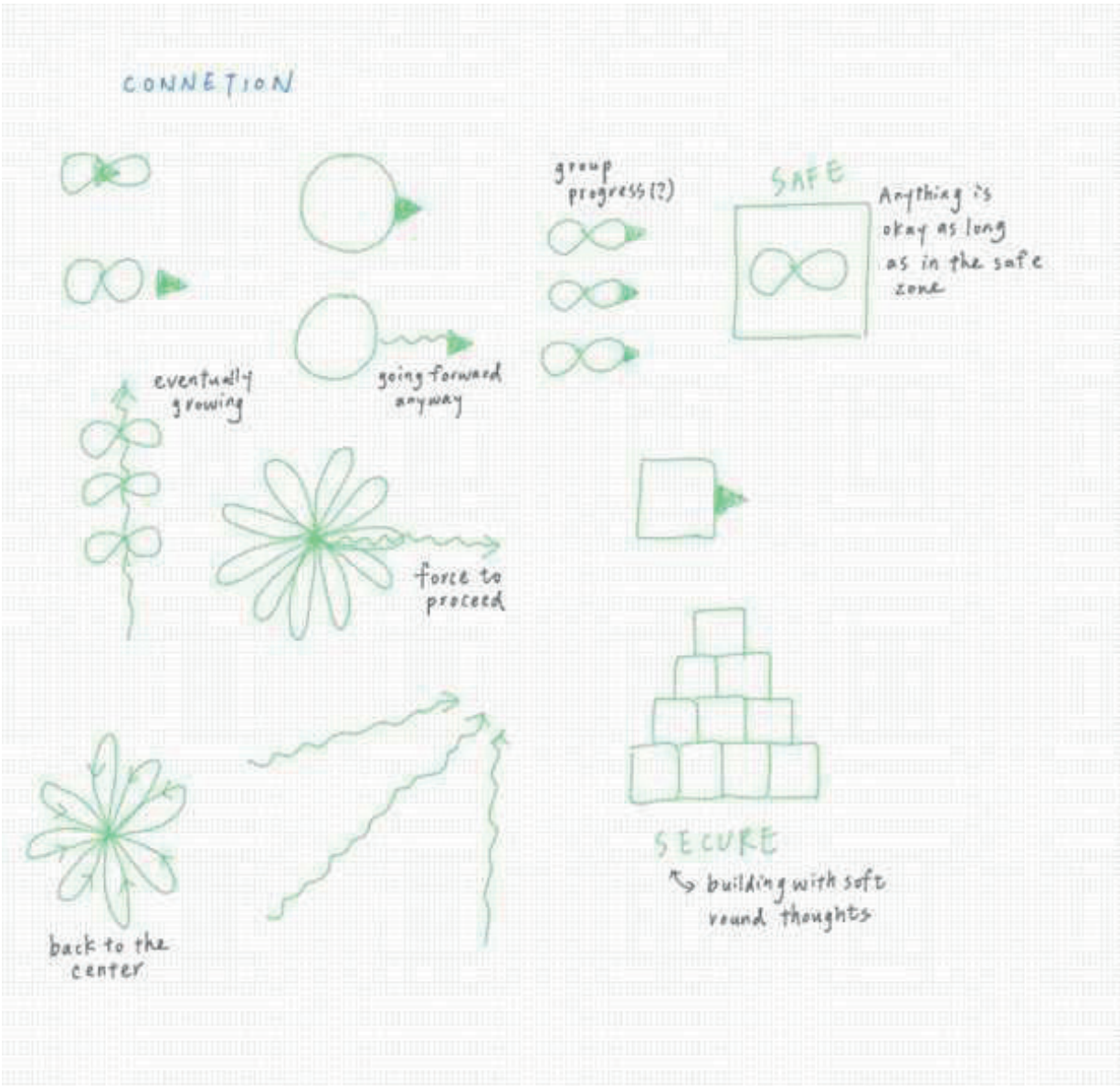

Figure 7. After the initial drawing from observation, I asked them to take inspiration from this experience, their drawings and the feelings conveyed, to bridge them to their own practice. Connie Chen, MA Service Design London College of Communication, made these diagrams of process inspired by her drawings of nature from observation and understanding of concept of connection found within. She said that the outdoor classroom provided "distance from daily tasks experiencing less anxiety than sitting at your desk."

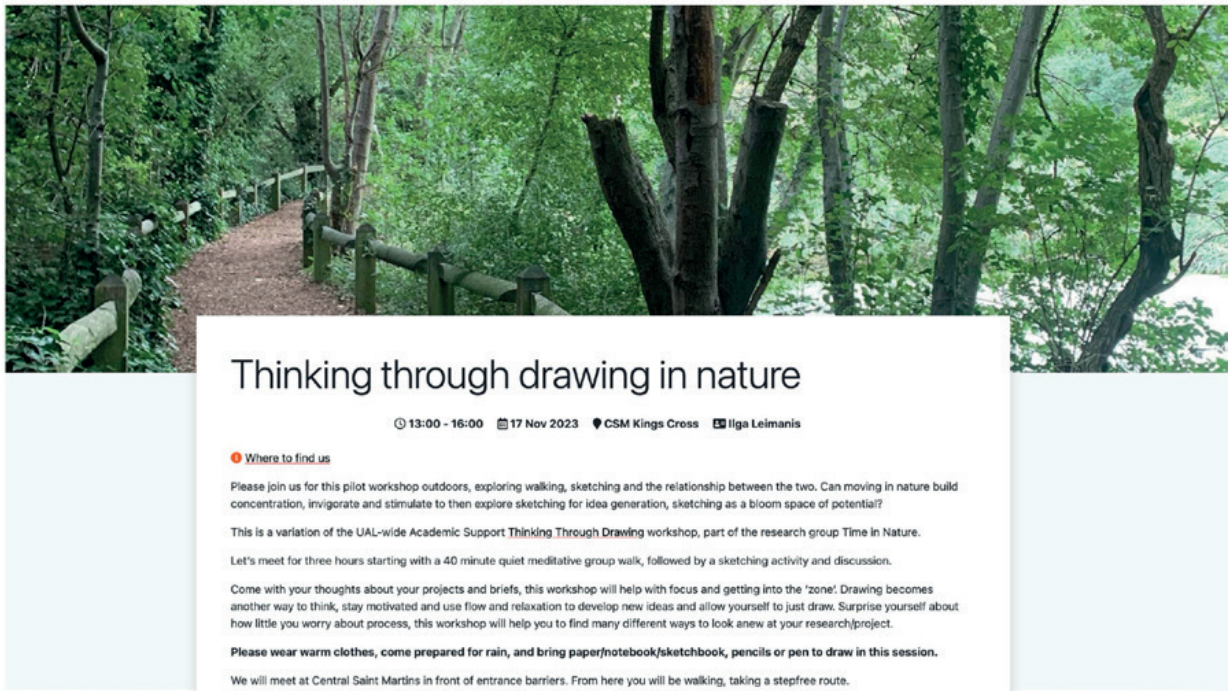

Figure 8. The mailout for the second pilot date at Kings Cross 17 November 2023.



Figure 9. After an initial walk and solo drawing experience, we came together to discuss what we saw. One of the participants formulated this thought about the drawing of the tree on the right: "we all start together (at the base of the tree), travel together in sync for a while, (up the tree trunk) and then go in separate directions."

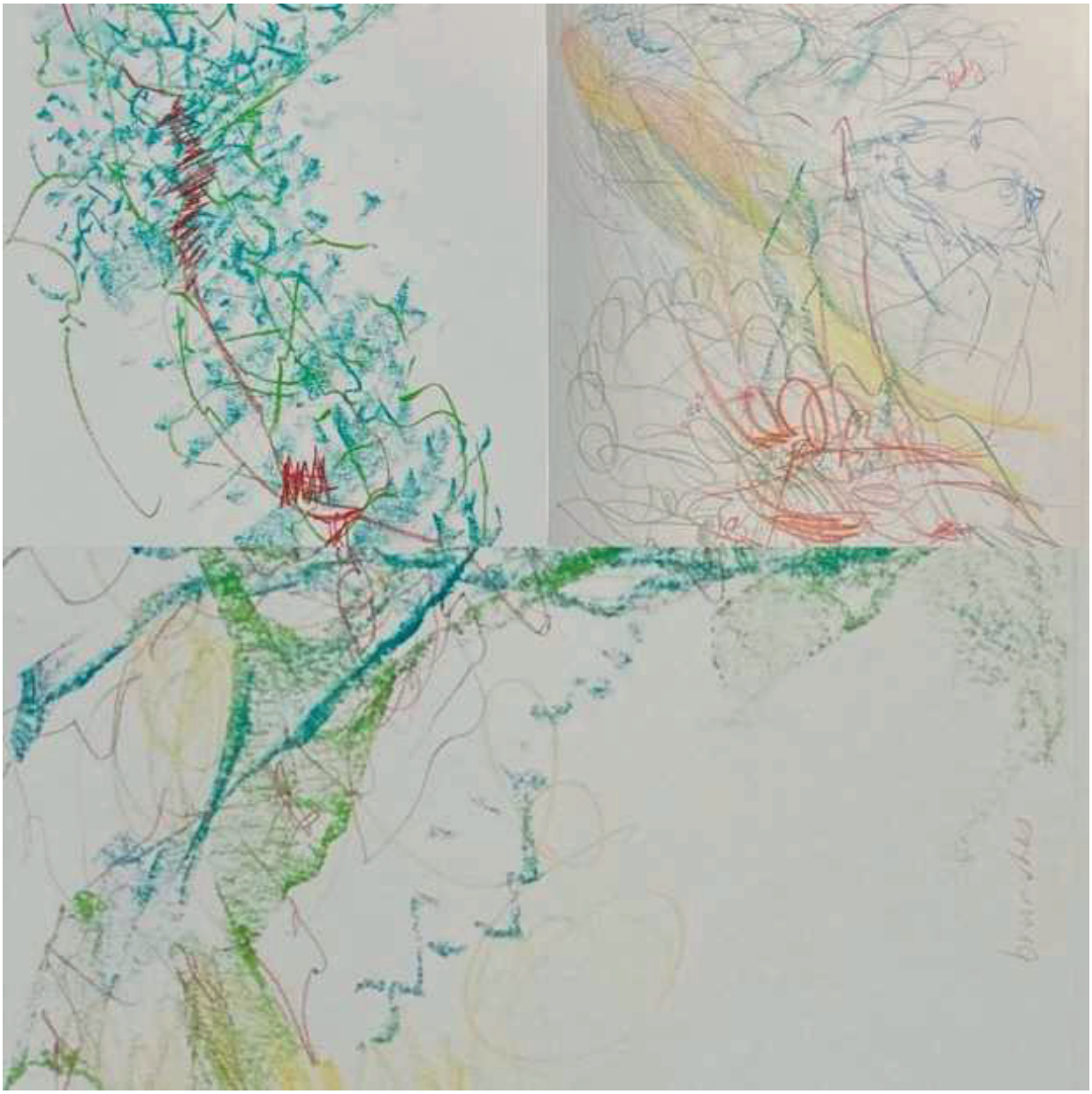

Figure 10. Thinking Through Drawing in Nature was an opportunity for students to learn with nature, observe quietly while drawing, and feel differently in a new environment. Does movement and observation outdoors, build concentration, invigorate and stimulate to then explore sketching as a bloom space for potential? Students observed that "it brings us to nature, drawing steps into conversation with the landscape. I felt the healing effect as very surprising. I felt very present while sitting and drawing together." Vicky Tang, Research Programme PhD, Central Saint Martins



Figure 11. I tested more variations of the workshop in the next academic term

5. More workshops

Over the course of two more academic years, I tested variations of this workshop in different locations. One of the changes I made was asking students to verbally describe their observational drawings in depth, finding words to describe both the subject of the drawing and the way it was drawn and what is communicated. These words were then connected to their practices, enabling students to jump into diagrams with the potential to bring both nature and observation, to whatever they are working with in their studio practice.



Figure 12. Sketching on location at the Story Garden, Kings Cross. Observational drawing becomes diagrammatic.

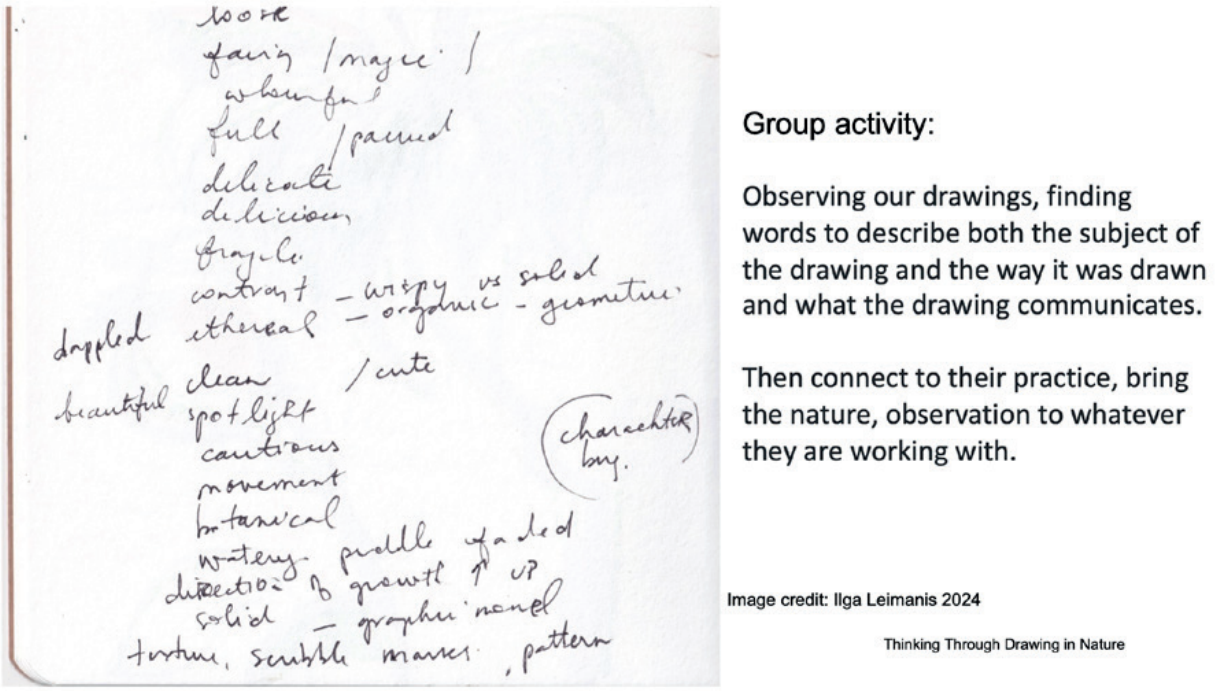

Figure 13. The list of words generated in a workshop session.

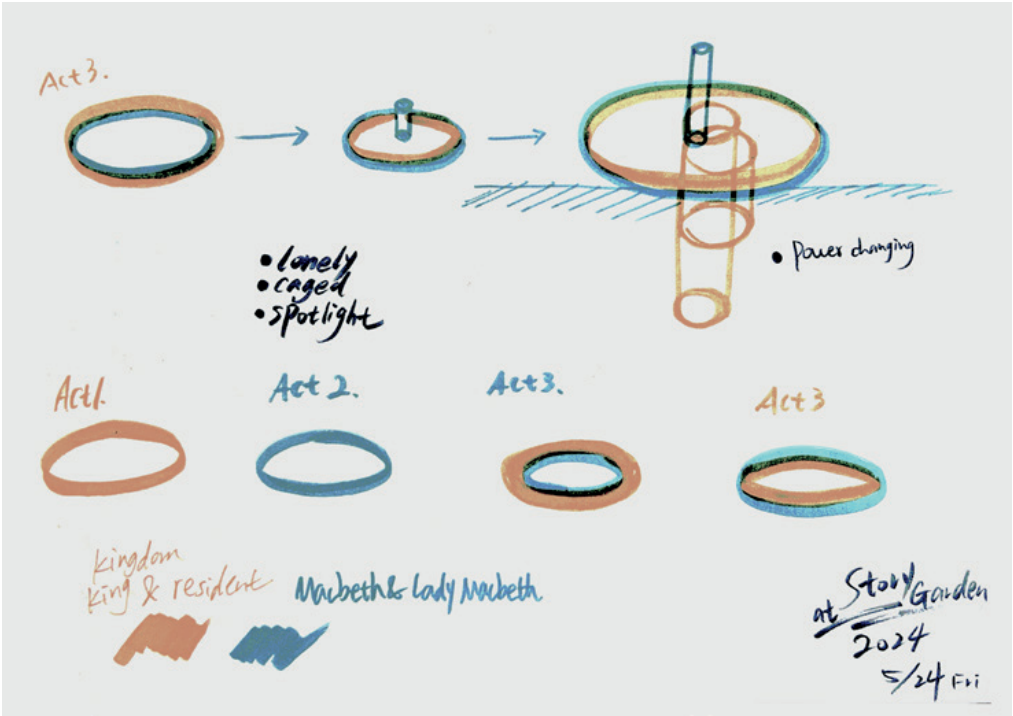

Figure 14. Danping Li, MA Theatre and Performance Design student at Wimbledon College of Arts, used words from her session, 'lonely', 'caged' and 'spotlight' to develop a set design problem she was working on for the staging of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. These simple diagrams served to evoke new ideas for the development of the design; ideas she would not have thought of had she not spent time drawing in nature and connecting to what was around her.

6. Case Study 1: Thinking Through Drawing in Nature, 28 April 2026 10.30-13.30 Crossrail Place Roof Garden, Canary Wharf (5 participants)

This was the first workshop of the season, and it was cold. The Crossrail Place Roof Garden in Canary Wharf is a covered space, both indoor and outdoor at the same time (good for rain shelter). We drew from observation individually for about 30 mins and then I asked the students to lead us to a spot they discovered, sharing the small details they noticed that others would pass by.

After we came together as a group, I sent them in pairs



Figure 15. Following the leader, April 2026, Crossrail Place Roof Garden.



Figure 16. Some of the details discovered and shared by the students taking part in this workshop.

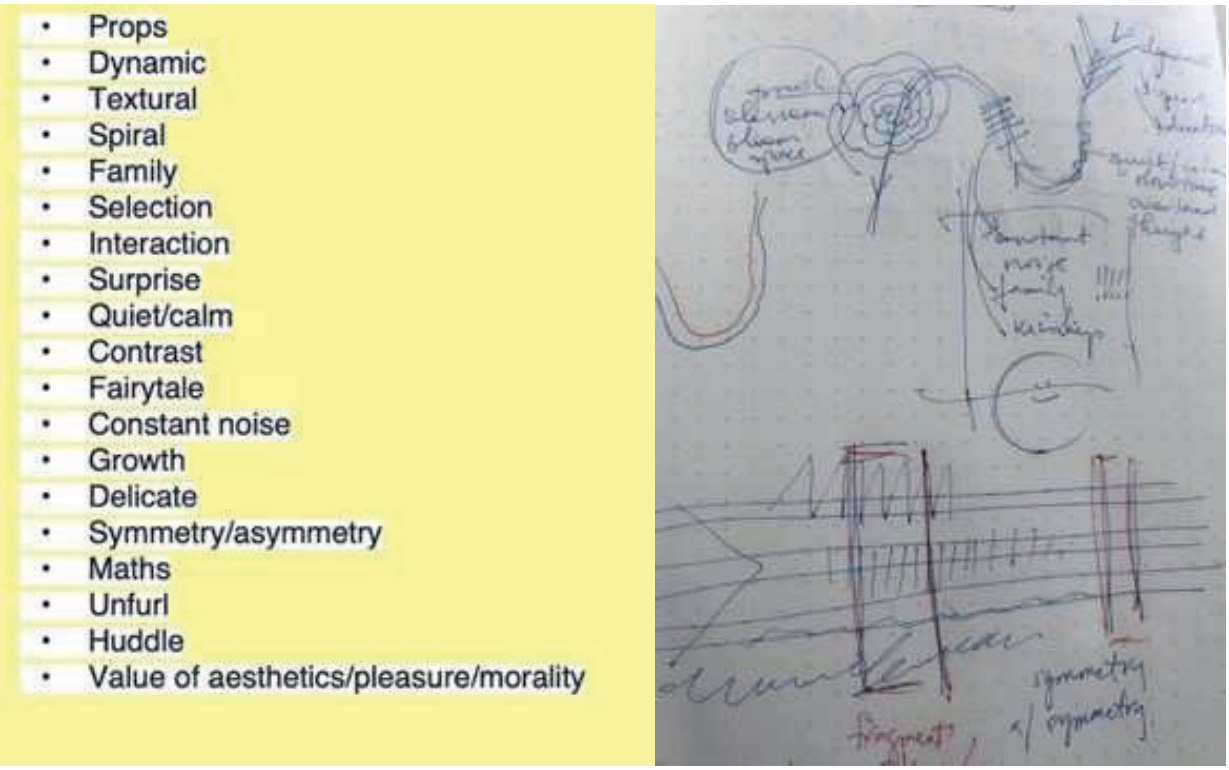

Figure 17. The list of words generated during this workshop and an example of a diagram bridging a current project with these words.

to look at their drawings, remember the experience of drawing and discuss the words that could be used to describe and process these thoughts. Some of the words we came up with that day include: props, dynamic, textural, spiral and family (see full list above).

I asked the students to jump or dive into diagrams to explore process, using the words on the left (Fig. 17) to unlock new potential in a project. Using my work as an example, my attention was focussed to just a few of the words. I was able to reveal new ways of developing my current unfinished project: using a long line to represent linear text, encounters with elements (concepts or feelings) along the length of that line, and below, a straightening of the line and separating its layers or components. Once drawn, I was able to see musical notation which opened another way of seeing possibilities. (Fig 17 right)

7. Case Study 2: Thinking Through Drawing in Nature, 5 May 2026 10.30-13.30 Crossrail Place Roof Garden, Canary Wharf (5 participants)

1) 5 mins. Walk, quietly, put phones away.
2) 40 mins. Draw one or a few drawings from observation.
3) Students take turns leading the group to share findings. What did you see? Find? Each person chooses something different and shares the reason why.
Break into groups to look at and discuss the drawings, describing them in words, both content and approach to drawing or emotional content. (If needed, use a thesaurus to help find more words.)
4) Share words with the group to create a master list.
5) Take 20 minutes to see how these words, images, diagrams and drawings can stretch what you know to be true about your project. Bring the observational into your practice.

Master list of words generated from this session: delicate / delicately purposeful / vivid / specific/ human organised

vs nature organised / boundary / pressure is different / messy / intuitive / feel the vibe / binds together / mixed into one shape / fill the space / many different directions

8. Student Feedback

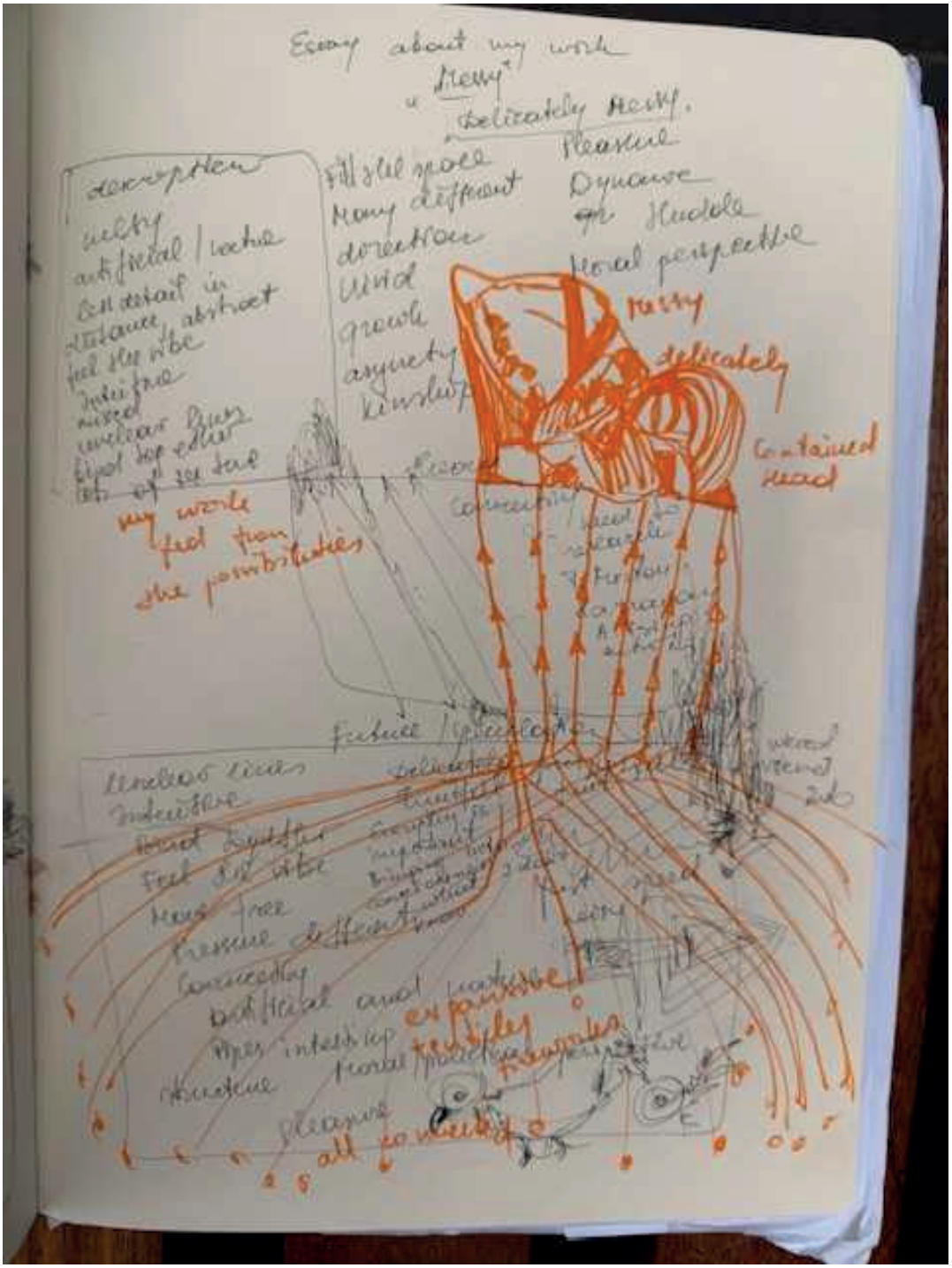

Figure 18. Dr Ruta Skrinskiene was working on an essay about 'delicate mess'.

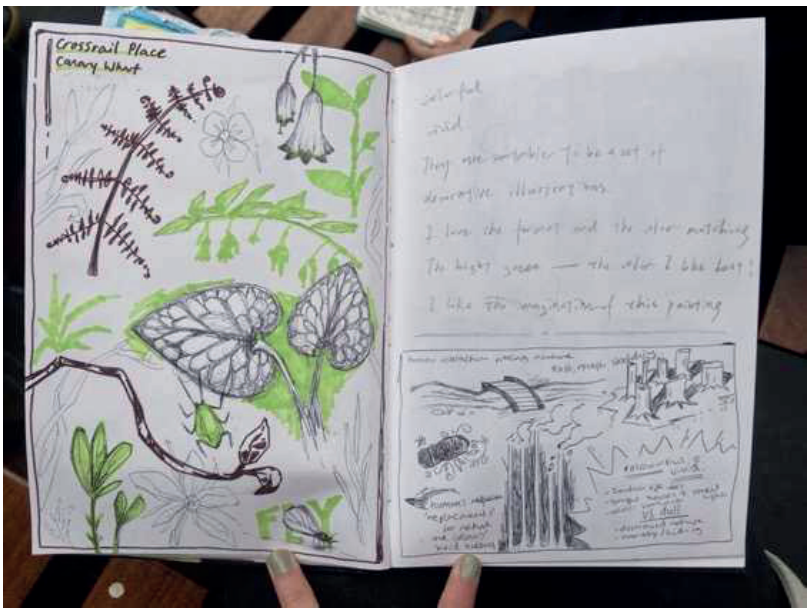

Figure 19. Calla Sawyer (2026) said this method is "a means to think deeper about something I would not have thought of."



Figure 20. Xibei Su's (2026) research project was about sleep and dreams. The progression from observational drawing to diagrammatic exploration of project themes.

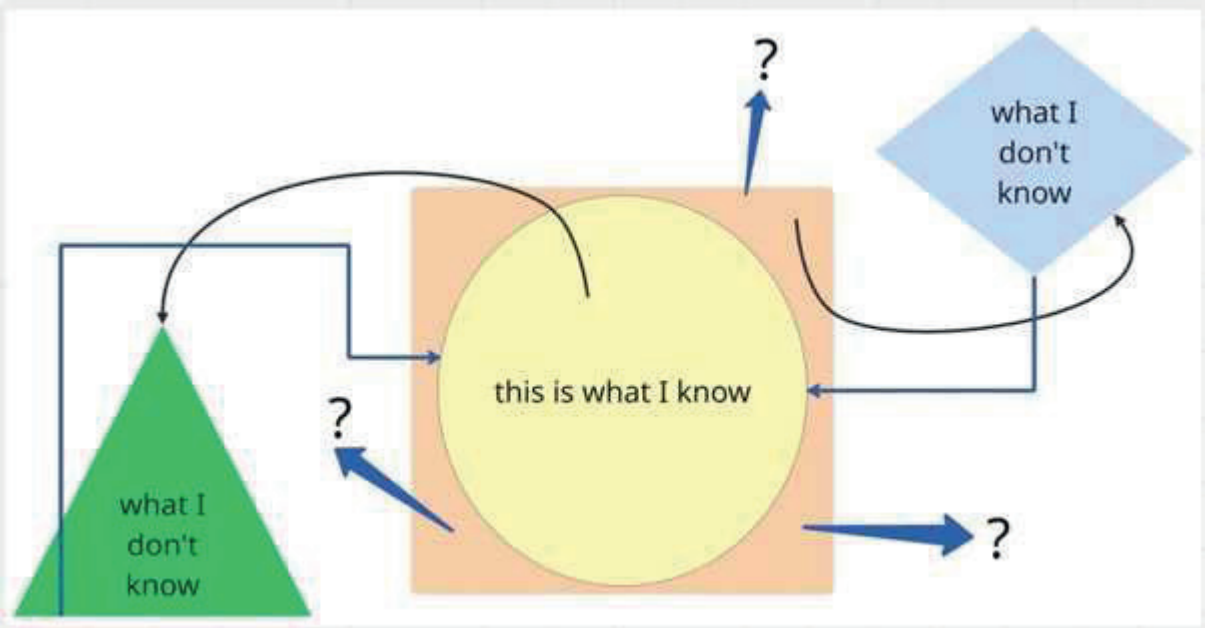

Figure 21. The examples by Skrinskiene and Su use diagrams to overcome literal mindedness. Diving with the pencil or pen into a diagram could be useful to first map the themes explored, and then to see what is possible if stretched using the found descriptive words. The distance between observation, textual description and analysis can be daunting. Start with what you know, then explore what you don't know to open the space of potential.

Has the session helped, and if so how?	Gave me space and time to reflect and explore - a new way of thinking about ideas.
If you would have liked greater emphasis or time on something, then please let us know here.	I'd love to do more!
In what way has this workshop helped you to communicate or articulate your ideas?	Great structure! Loved the flow!
At what point in the session did you feel most involved or distant?	The entire session. Appreciated the discussion at the end too
What do you intend to research as a result of the session?	More of this practice and apply to different projects

from students which I used to make changes next time.

9. Themes

Based on the student feedback and anecdotal comments

following each workshop, some of the recurring themes in this work include the importance of walking, focussing attention, a sense of wellbeing and calm, and access to the bloom space of growth and possibility.

9.1 Walking

Each workshop starts with a short walk, to detach from the day and connect with the new surroundings and the senses. It also serves to provide a meditative reset, setting conditions for a new beginning. "The repetitiveness of walking eliminates boredom, for, with the body active, the mind is no longer affected by its lassitude, no longer draws from its inertia the vague vertigo of an endless spiral." (Gros, 2014)

9.2 Attention

I ask students to focus their attention to the tip of the pens and the distance between what they are looking at and the drawing coming out of them on paper. "Sometimes the best way to glimpse meaning is to start small, to pay attention to detail, and give your deliberate attention to what is in front of you. To try and notice what happens. To make time. To choose to look." (Bell, 2020) Focussing attention is powerful, limiting distractions gives access to "a kind of productive, creative attention we need now. Being totally present with ourselves, and with each other, is an active form of hope." (Bell, 2020)

9.3 Cortisol levels

Most of the students informally comment on how this workshop makes them feel and its positive impact on their wellbeing. They say they welcome the move out of the university (out of the institution) into the park or the garden, which makes them feel calmer and more connected to themselves. Clow and Fredhoi demonstrated in a study of people visiting museums during their lunchbreak how quickly a different environment can impact cortisol levels: "the observed drop in cortisol was rapid and substantial; under normal circumstances it would take about five hours of normal diurnal decline for cortisol levels to fall to this extent." (2006) I have observed a similar response in my students after spending the 2.5-3 hours together in this workshop.

9.4 Bloom space

The playfulness at the heart of this workshop engages an action of doing, just drawing, testing new words and making a visual representation of it. Once on the page, a loop is developed as the eyes see what has been drawn and the brain makes new connections, associations and finds meanings, which prompts yet more drawing and/or diagramming. I see this process as accessing the bloom space of potential: "the bloom space is configured in a variety of ways: as excess, as autonomous, as impersonal, as the ineffable, as the ongoingness of process, as pedagogico-aesthetic, as virtual, as sharable, as sticky, as collective, as contingency, as threshold or conversion point, as immanence of potential, as the open…." (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010)

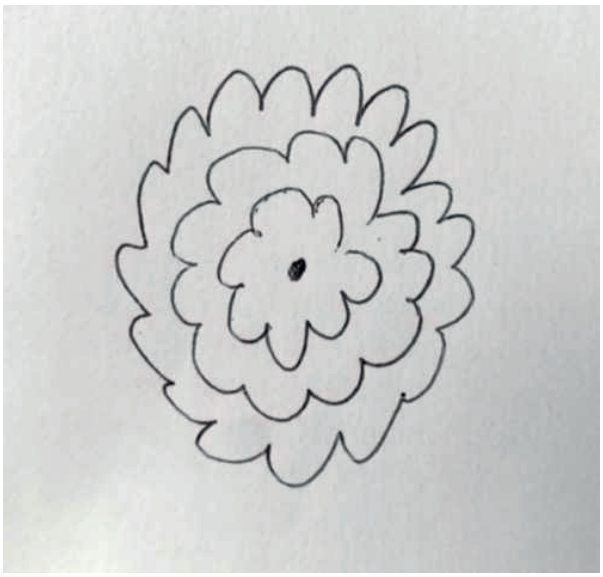

Figure 23. The generative Bloom Space begins with a centre and opens in 'bloom' the more you draw.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Heather Barnett for selecting me to take part in the Time in Nature research project. To Graham Barton, Head of Academic Support (until 2025) and to Shahzeena Ahmad (since 2025) for supporting this work and my ongoing research. Thanks to the students who have generously shared their work and their learning.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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UAL-wide Academic Support (Figure 1, 22)
Time in Nature (Figure 2)
Ilga Leimanis (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21, 23)
Connie Chen (Figure 7)
Vicky Tang (Figure 10)
Danping Li (Figure 14)
Dr Ruta Skrinskiene (Figure 18)
Calla Sawyer (Figure 19)
Xibei Su (Figure 20)

About the Author

Ilga Leimanis is a London-based, Canadian-born, artist, educator and author, of Latvian origin. She is a graduate of the Art Academy of Latvia. Her creative practice as an artist is often collaborative – recently she initiated a correspondence drawing project starting with the idea of the gift, both in giving and receiving. Associate Lecturer at University of the Arts London, her practice-led pedagogy, research and thought leadership (SFHEA) have brought her into contact with diverse groups of students for over a decade. Ilga facilitates workshops in sketching and diagramming, has developed a functional method for exploring the bloom space of potential, and she is currently writing about this practice.