



Visual Narratives

Bringing narratives to life through creative thinking and object-based installations

THINKING | Creativity

→ What you will need:

-  12-30, in subgroups of 4-5
-  Group
-  1.5 hrs preparation
-  4 hrs execution
-  Flip-over sheets, markers, a scent, additional objects for students

→ Menu:

- I. Overview
- II. Learning Activity
- III. Assessment
- IV. Key Advice
- V. References



→ Related Tools:



[Brainstorming with Eureka](#)



[Fostering Collaborative Creativity](#)



“Step into a creative challenge and explore stress and eustress by building collaborative art installations. Guided by artists and educators, this tool nurtures a creative mindset, encourages reflection and fosters teamwork.”

—Fleur Boelen & Michèle Gerbrands





I. Overview

Creative thinking thrives when students feel free to explore, take risks and reimagine the familiar. Introducing unexpected constraints can ignite new ideas and shift perspectives.

This activity is rooted in a collective narrative, shaped by individual reflections on stress—ranging from *stressors* such as academic pressure, social expectations and work–study balance, to *eustressors* such as new challenges, personal achievements and meaningful connections. It explores the complex role stress plays in student life.

Students collaborate in teams to create a visual installation from personal objects in a creativity challenge. Their starting point is a shared visual story on the theme of stress and eustress, which they translate into a physical composition that reflects their experiences and insights.

Throughout the process, students document the evolution of their installation through photographs. Several creative rounds, featuring prompts, feedback and surprise interventions, encourage them to stay open to new ideas, adapt to change and collaborate in new ways.

This hands-on activity invites students to experiment with unfamiliar approaches, develop creative thinking skills and explore challenges from multiple perspectives. The format is flexible and can be adapted to various teaching contexts.

Learning outcome

- ✓ The student is able to think creatively and apply both inter- and intrapersonal reflection to co-create an art installation





II. Learning Activity

Students use creative brainstorming techniques to develop a narrative around a relevant theme and translate this into a visual installation using meaningful objects.



1. Entering the Creative Space 45 mins

A few days in advance, ask students to:

- Complete the Preparatory assignment;
- Fill in the Creative Roles questionnaire to help you create teams ahead of time.

Refer to the Teacher Preparation handout for practical guidance on setting up the space, materials to bring and facilitating the activity.

In class, begin by introducing the creativity challenge. Briefly explain what students will be doing, and why this activity matters. Check whether everyone has brought at least five personal objects as instructed.

Using the Creative Challenge presentation, highlight some basic principles of open thinking, idea generation and embracing constraints. Transition into the theme of visual storytelling and perspective taking, and show a few examples of inspiring installations.

If possible, invite a guest artist or photographer to speak briefly about their creative process. Otherwise, show examples of art installations to inspire the students.

Then, encourage students to shift into a more open mindset in a 20-minute Scent assignment, using the provided handout for instructions.

Tip: the theme used here is *stress*, but you can easily adopt it to fit your course—such as identity, change, belonging or ecological emotions.





2. Mapping the Story 30 mins

Group students into teams of four to five, ensuring a mix of creative roles to ensure diverse perspectives. Hand each team a flip-over sheet to work on.

Each team begins by sharing the objects they brought and the short personal stories written during the scent assignment.

Next, instruct the teams to use Various brainstorming techniques or Rules for brainstorming to develop a shared narrative, organising their ideas in the form of a mindmap. Emphasise that not every object or story needs to be included, as it is about generating a cohesive and creative storyline.

Either you, as the teacher, an artist or a photographer supports the groups by guiding the brainstorming process where needed.



3. Build Your Installation 45 mins

Students select a location within the space to create their installation. Emphasise that the final result will be photographed, so perspective and composition matter.

Encourage students to document the process with photos, capturing how their narrative and design take shape. These images can be used later in their reflection. Each team presents their narrative and installation to the photographer, artist and teacher or teachers, who offer formative feedback using the provided Feedback suggestions. While one team receives feedback, other teams continue developing their installations.

After receiving feedback, teams have up to 15 minutes to engage in a short Feedback dialogue and discuss the input. They then refine and finalise their installation accordingly.





4. The Wildcard Twist 45 mins

Hand each team an envelope containing one of the surprise prompts from the Wildcard assignment. These prompts invite students to rethink and transform their installation in unexpected ways.

Then, instruct the teams to finalise their installation. They have 20 minutes to decide what to keep, modify, or remove, including changes made in response to the wildcard.

Once finalised, each team presents their installation and narrative to the rest of the group. The photographer or a student takes a final photo to document the completed installation.



5. Collective Debrief 1 hrs

Allow the group an extended break, such as lunch hour, or reconvene the group on a separate day to give students time to reset and process the experience.

Afterwards, bring the group back together for a moment for Individual reflection.

Finally, refer to the provided handout to facilitate a Collective debrief.

Please note, after the debrief, you may also choose to ask students to submit an Individual reflection assignment to deepen their insights and consolidate their learning from the experience.





III. Assessment

Students receive feedback from peers and the artist or photographer during the creative process. Afterwards, they reflect through a group dialogue and an individual assignment to make sense of the experience and their role in it.



Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) aims to gather evidence and ongoing feedback on students' learning progress during the learning process.



Roles

Peer assessment & Teacher-led assessment



Characteristics

Self-regulated learning & Authentic



Materials

Feedback suggestions, Individual reflective questions and Individual reflection assignment





Assessment

Feedback suggestions

Provide feedback on the draft compositions created by student teams. Below are suggested focus areas and guiding questions you may use in your feedback. You do not have to address every topic; choose the element that you feel needs the most attention in each group.

Keep the feedback short (up to 5 minutes) and focused, to allow students time to process and act on your input. Consider appointing one or two people to deliver feedback per team and rotating this role among the teacher team.

1. Creativity in the composition

Are students truly exploring creative possibilities, or are they relying on familiar ideas and tropes? Questions to consider:

- What's the most unexpected idea or material you've used so far?
- Is there something you added just to see what would happen? What did it lead to?
- What have you experimented with, visually or narratively?
- Was there something you planned during your brainstorm that changed during the process?

2. Narrative

What are students trying to communicate through their installation? Is the message clear, and how might others interpret it? Questions to consider:

- What story or message are you trying to express through this installation?
- How does the composition help communicate that message?
- How might someone outside your team interpret your work?
- What do you want a viewer to feel, see or understand when they first encounter the installation?

3. Attractiveness of the composition

How effective is the composition from an artistic or design perspective? Is it visually coherent? Have they considered elements like color, layout, lighting and spatial perspective? Questions to consider:

- Have you looked at your installation from different physical angles or emotional perspectives?
- What would happen if you rearranged some of your objects, visually or thematically?





4. Team process

How well is the group collaborating? Are they managing time effectively and incorporating each other's ideas? Questions to consider:

- How are you making choices to stay focused and use your time wisely?
- Is your visual concept or story becoming clearer as the work progresses?
- How did you include each other's input into story and design decisions?
- Has someone's personal object or story shaped the overall direction?





Assessment

Individual reflection questions (Step 5)

Take a moment to write down your responses to the following questions:

- What was your overall impression of this challenge?
- Did you learn something about yourself during this process? If so, what?
- List a few 'critical incidents' that stood out to you. These will be explored further during the collective debrief.

Examples of critical incidents include:

- A moment when something went particularly well
- A moment when something didn't go particularly well
- A situation you found especially challenging
- An instance where your perspective shifted
- A moment that increased your awareness of your values or assumptions





Assessment

Individual reflection assignment

Use the questions below to reflect on your participation and learning during the creative challenge. You are free to use any format to capture your reflections, such as a video, audio recording, moodboard, written report, illustrated journal, or another creative form.

1. Creativity

- What did I learn about working creatively?
- Is there something I would approach differently next time?
- Which part of the installation reflects my most original contribution?
- Did I allow myself to take creative risks or try something unfamiliar?
- How did I respond to moments of stress or unexpected challenges?
- What helped me stay positive or adapt during the process?

2. Narrative

- Did my contribution clearly express what I intended?
- What helped me communicate my message most effectively?
- How might someone from a different background interpret the installation I contributed to?

3. Team Process

- Did I manage my time efficiently throughout the challenge?
- When did I feel rushed or lost time? How might I handle that better next time?
- When did I truly listen to others' ideas? How did that influence my contribution?
- Was there a moment when active listening helped improve the final outcome?

4. Feedback

- What feedback helped me improve my work or thinking?
- What kind of feedback would I still like to receive?
- What did I learn from observing how other individuals or teams approached the challenge?





IV. Key Advice

The **Preparatory assignment**, **Creative Roles questionnaire**, **Teacher Preparation handout**, **Creative Challenge presentation** and **Scent assignment** (Step 1) can be downloaded below.

It is recommended to invite a local artist to discuss the documentation process (Step 2). If that is not possible, use local art examples to inspire discussion on how stories can be captured and shaped through images.

The **Feedback dialogue** (Step 3), **Wildcard assignment** (Step 4) and **Collective debrief** (Step 5) can be downloaded below.





Key Advice

Preparatory assignment

Life as a young adult can be intense. You juggle studies, work, social life, professional and personal growth—and all of that while navigating a world in transition. In the upcoming activity, you'll explore this complexity with your peers in a playful yet meaningful way.

To get started, you'll need to bring at least five objects with you. Collect these objects inspired by this saying: *'Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue, and Something Not Blue.'*

Each object has symbolic meaning:

- **Something Blue**
Represents a stressful situation to you. This can be anything from personal anxiety to academic pressure, world news or social expectations. It doesn't have to be blue, but it can be.
- **Something Not Blue**
Stands for something that you feel or experience as positive stress (eustress): excitement, motivation or a strategy that helps you navigate pressure.

You could view 'Blue' and 'Not Blue' as representing the extremes of the stress spectrum. However, most situations in life are much more nuanced, involving both negative and positive emotions and experiences of 'stress'. Think of things you are extremely nervous about, but turn out to be valuable and uplifting, or the ups and downs of all types of relationships.

- **Something Old, New and Borrowed**
These three objects symbolise the mix of emotions and challenges that fall somewhere in between the extremes. Use your imagination.

There's no "right" interpretation. We're curious to see how *you* make meaning of these.

Preparation guidelines

- Bring at least five physical objects.
- Choose items that are small, easy to carry and not too precious or fragile. You'll need to take them back home after the workshop.
- Bring a notebook and pen – no digital note-taking during this activity.





Creative Roles Questionnaire

In any creative process, different roles are essential to move from inspiration to realisation: Explorer, Artist, Judge and Warrior. Read the descriptions of each role below and reflect on how comfortable you feel taking on that role.

Rank the four roles from 1 to 4, where 1 means “this suits me best” and 4 means “this feels least like me”. Please note, there are no right or wrong answers; your responses help form balanced and diverse teams.

Name _____

The Explorer

Ideas don't appear out of nowhere. They're built from raw materials: facts, concepts, experiences, memories, observations, knowledge, emotions. Gathering those materials is the Explorer's role.

The Explorer is endlessly curious. They seek out new input from a wide range of sources, never limiting themselves to one area of knowledge or perspective. They read, observe, listen and ask questions, always looking for patterns, insights and inspiration.

To come up with original ideas, you first need plenty of 'dots' to connect. The Explorer provides that essential fuel for creativity.

Rank #: ____

The Artist

The Artist turns raw materials into new ideas. Building on what the Explorer has gathered, they combine elements in original and imaginative ways.

When people talk about someone being “creative”, they're often thinking of the Artist. This role thrives on experimentation: rearranging, flipping and reimagining things. The Artist follows intuition, explores multiple angles and embraces the unexpected.

Playful and open-minded, the Artist isn't too concerned with what others expect. Their focus is on possibility, not perfection.

Rank #: ____





The Judge

The Judge is all about keeping things grounded. Their job is to assess whether the Artist's bold ideas are workable in the real world.

The Judge asks critical questions, weighs up options and analyses feasibility. They challenge assumptions, spot weak spots and make the tough calls. Even if the Artist's idea feels exciting, the Judge looks at the evidence and decides whether it's worth pursuing.

This role often gets a bad reputation, mainly because it's brought in too early. Judging an idea too soon can kill creativity. But done at the right moment, the Judge plays a vital part: helping filter out the unworkable and sharpen the promising.

Rank #: ____

The Warrior

Once an idea is ready to be put into action, you'll quickly discover that the world doesn't always welcome new ideas with open arms. Challenges may come from outside, e.g. competition, scepticism or misunderstanding. But often, the biggest obstacles are internal: resistance, excuses or fear of failure.

The Warrior's role is to turn ideas into reality. That means having a clear plan, staying focused and putting in the work, even when it's tough.

The Warrior keeps going. They show resilience, take initiative and adapt to setbacks. They know how to rally support, communicate their vision and do whatever is needed to get the job done.

Rank #: ____

Once completed, please submit this form to your teacher.





Key Advice

Teacher Preparation

In preparation for the in-class activity, take time to consider and arrange the following:

- **PowerPoint presentation**

Adjust the provided [Creative Challenge presentation](#) where needed.

- **Set the stage**

Create a safe and inspiring learning environment. Use the [Seven Golden Guidelines for a Safe Learning Environment](#) as a practical guide.

Choose a space that allows for both a plenary session to give instructions and for teams to spread out and build their installations. Ensure the environment is welcoming, spacious and supportive of creativity. For instance, you can organise the workshop near a thrift store or charity shop and provide each team with a small budget or voucher to purchase extra objects on the spot, or use a local community centre. These often have materials such as sofas, mirrors, board games and other items that can spark creativity.

Bring along a selection of additional objects that students can use freely during the assignment.

Encourage a creative mindset by explaining the difference between an open and closed mindset and opening with a short creative warm-up. Introduce the [Rules for Brainstorming](#) to foster respectful creative group work, especially important when dealing with personal topics such as stress and eustress. Optionally, you may use selected techniques from this guide to structure the creative process: [Instructions for various Brainstorming Techniques](#).

- **Scent assignment**

Choose a scent that you can bring to class that isn't immediately recognisable. For instance, an essential oil such as vetiver, cardamom, cedarwood or lavender, or something more unexpected like leather or black pepper.

- **Time management**

Aim for a healthy balance between the different activities. Alternating between theory and practice helps students engage more actively, particularly those who may initially be hesitant to participate in a creative activity.





Students often have low energy at the end of a creative workshop. A long reflective session at this point is not productive. Ideally, run the workshop in the morning, offer lunch, and then move into the debrief and individual assessment.





Key Advice

Scent Assignment (20 mins)

Preparation

Bring a scent that is not immediately recognisable. For example, essential oils such as vetiver, cardamom, cedarwood or lavender, or something more unexpected like leather or black pepper.

Background

This assignment is designed to help students shift from the “closed mode” typical of academic environments into a more open, creative mindset. By engaging the sense of smell, it creates space for playfulness, memory and associative thinking. This opens up their capacity for reflection and creative exploration, essential when navigating complex, interdisciplinary domains.

By connecting scent associations with personal objects linked to stress and eustress, students begin forming links between their lived experiences and broader thematic questions. In doing so, they gain insight into how creativity can serve as a tool for self-awareness and connection with others.

In-class instructions

1. Smell and feel

Let students smell the scent without revealing what it is. Ask them to spend one to two minutes fully focused on the scent. Encourage them to resist the urge to name or identify the scent and simply observe what it evokes.

2. Respond intuitively

Ask students to jot down their answers to the following prompts using keywords only.

Let the responses be intuitive rather than analytical:

- What color do you associate with this scent?
- What emotion does it evoke in you?
- Where in your body do you feel something in response to this scent?
- What memory or image comes to mind?
- If this scent were a sound, what would it sound like?





3. Write creative sentences

Have students look at the five objects they brought to class and choose three intuitively. Then, prompt them to write two or three short, disconnected sentences that weave together their scent associations and the chosen objects. Emphasise that they do not have to try to make it logical; let the associations flow freely.

Example: *The blue rubber band smells like metal and rain. My old keyring sings softly in the distance. Everything feels a bit like Wednesday.*





Key Advice

Feedback Dialogue

Use the questions below to have a feedback dialogue with your team after receiving input from the teacher. You can already begin asking yourselves these questions while working on your installation.

The insights you gather can support your individual reflection afterwards, so it is helpful to take notes during the conversation.

Instructions

Appoint a chair and timekeeper within your team:

- The chair selects at least three questions from each category below to guide the conversation. Don't hesitate to dig deeper and ask follow-up questions if you notice your answers are not fully aligned.
- The timekeeper ensures the conversation stays focused and does not exceed 15 minutes.

1. Creativity

- Have we explored more than one idea before making a decision?
- What's the most unexpected or original idea we've come up with?
- What new or unfamiliar concept have we tried today?
- Is there something we're hesitating to try, but could experiment with?
- How do we respond when something doesn't work right away?
- Have we run into anything unexpected? How did we deal with it?
- What can we do to stay flexible when things don't go as planned?

2. Narrative

- Is our concept clear to everyone? Can each of us explain it in one sentence?
- Which part of our message or story still feels unclear or underdeveloped?
- How are we using our objects and spatial setup to support the story visually?
- Whose perspective are we designing for? How might someone outside our team interpret it?
- Can we view our installation through someone else's eyes?

3. Team Process

- Are we staying focused and managing our time effectively?
- What should we prioritise to stay on track?
- Does everyone feel heard in this process?
- Have we taken the time to really listen before making key decisions?





Next steps

After your dialogue, reflect as a team:

- What feedback have we received so far, and how are we responding to it?
- Is there anything we're still unsure about? Could we ask for more feedback now?





Key Advice

Wildcard Assignment

This assignment introduces an unexpected twist to the creative process. Each team receives a sealed envelope containing one wildcard prompt. The group must adapt their installation based on the instruction inside, no swaps allowed.

Prepare one envelope per team in advance. Each envelope contains one of the following six prompts:

1. Minimalism

Which objects form the core of your story? Tell your story using a maximum of five objects.

- What happens to the story when you strip it down?
- Can you simplify without losing meaning?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.

2. Maximalism

What happens when you tell your story with more? Each team member adds one object from the shared table to the installation.

- How much can you add before the meaning gets lost?
- Do these additions shift the focus or message?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.

3. Dream sequence

Imagine your installation is part of a dream. Transform it into something surreal, exaggerated or otherworldly.

- How does this dream-like version change the installation?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.





4. Opposites

Flip the story. What is the opposite of the message or emotion you're expressing now?

- Rework the installation to reflect this reversal, e.g. calm becomes chaotic, stillness becomes motion.
- What changes in the narrative?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.

5. Human invasion

Add a human element to your installation. This can be an actual person or something that represents a human (a photo, clothing item, symbol, etc.).

- How does this shift the story?
- Does the focus or meaning change?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.

6. Shift in perspective

Play with scale. Imagine your installation is either miniature or enormous.

- Rearrange objects accordingly: move them closer or further from the camera, create depth, let some fall outside the frame.
- How does scale influence the message?

On your flip-over sheet, document how this change influences the story. Then, take photos of your revised installation.





Key Advice

Collective Debrief (Step 5)

Use the steps below to guide students through a deeper reflection on the creative challenge, with the aim of consolidating their learning from this experience.

This outline is designed for a one-hour session. If you have additional time, consider extending the discussions in Steps 2 and 3.

1. Recap the Goal of the Challenge (5 mins)

Begin by reminding students why they participated in this creative challenge. You might mention:

- To create space for personal and team-based reflection
- To explore new ways of working and thinking through a disruptive, creative assignment
- To develop skills relevant to their educational profile, such as flexibility, collaboration, and self-awareness

2. Critical Incidents (20 mins)

Instruct students to form **pairs or trios** within their teams, and discuss the *critical incidents* they identified immediately after the challenge.

Prompt them to also consider: *What is one key takeaway from this challenge that you'll carry forward into your studies?*

Encourage them to connect this takeaway to the incidents they experienced during the process.

3. Group Dynamics (15 mins)

In the same groups, prompt the students to reflect on how their team functioned, particularly in response to change:

You were asked to adjust your installation multiple times, especially in response to the wildcard assignment. How did you and your teammates respond to these shifts? What happened within the group?





4. Share (15 mins)

Ask each group to share one insight with the rest of the class. This could be:

- A critical incident that stood out
- A surprising group dynamic
- Their key personal or collective takeaway

5. Closure (5 mins)

Conclude by helping students link this experience to their broader educational context. For example, note that the critical incidents they have discussed today can be a good starting point for a reflection cycle. You may choose to instruct them to turn today's experience into a more formal reflection assignment.

Share your observations as a moderator and include positive remarks from the photographer or artist. Thank the students for their openness, creativity and willingness to reflect and give and receive feedback.





V. References

This tool was developed in collaboration with:

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Anna van Suchtelen – artist and writer who led the creative theory component and coached students during brainstorming and installation building

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