



Approaches to pedagogical innovation: workshop developed in an Erasmus Teaching Program in higher education

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a pedagogical project developed at the University of Saint-Étienne School of Art and Design (ESADSE), in February 2026, as part of an ERASMUS+ higher education teaching mobility program, and outlines the next stage of this educational initiative based on the results obtained. The project began with meetings with representatives from the host institution's International Relations department, which allowed us to outline the objectives and prepare the in-person week. The implementation of staff mobility programs facilitate the establishment of significant educational exchanges and the strengthening of international cooperation agreements [1]. It's important to emphasize the significance of this type of program and the opportunities created through the implemented mobility: it creates opportunities for cultural exchange, leading to a cross-pollination of ideas from one institution to another. The project involved the implementation of teaching approaches in the delivery of a practical workshop on drawing, character design, and creation. This allowed us to understand how students apply concepts of creative and visual representation when developing a character within a specific framework [2]. The workshop promoted imaginative thinking among the students, by their defining of silhouettes and visually representing personality traits based solely on their understanding of an object as described by a classmate. Further educational opportunities that contributed to this understanding included the presentation of reference materials, monitoring and discussion with individual students, the promotion of communication skills, and the collection of student feedback from a survey. The monitoring and discussion along with the survey enabled the analysis of the contributions regarding the various dimensions and stages implemented. The preparation of the workshop results from teaching practice, based on the various methods and techniques of observation and representation used in the Drawing Curricular Unit (UC) of the Graphic Design degree course at the School of Design (ESD) of the Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave (IPCA), where research, analysis and drawing stages aim to produce an illustrative representation of a character design with distinctive characteristics. Key stages leading to the creative process were applied, and the results show that the students were able to apply them in the process of creating a character design, thereby developing their critical, creative and visual communication skills. Thus, it was found that the application of specific pedagogical practices, techniques and resources inherent to drawing, as well as assessment strategies, are important analytical tools for the continuous improvement of the pedagogical approaches used in the teaching of drawing.

Keywords: Pedagogical Approaches, Character Design, Practical Results, Erasmus Teaching Mobility

1. Introduction

The ERASMUS+ teaching mobility scheme in higher education facilitates significant academic exchange and strengthens international cooperation [1]. Recognizing these benefits, a teaching mobility initiative was proposed to develop a workshop at the University of Saint-Étienne School of Art and Design (ESADSE). In fact, the benefits associated with this type of mobility [3] [4] were successfully fostered, particularly in terms of professional relationships and intercultural connections with partners, which laid the groundwork for future collaboration on teaching programs.

Furthermore, it is important to note that such initiatives can play an important role in institutions' educational plans, in terms of "curricular innovation and the development of study programs, teaching methods, the dissemination of best practices in teaching and research, and learning through benchmarking"¹ (p. 121) [5, own translation]. These factors prompted us to reflect on and reorganize our teaching practices to enhance our professional development. According to Ivasciuc et al. (2025),

¹ Original Text: "Esta influência manifesta-se, segundo os inquiridos, sobretudo ao nível da inovação curricular e dos programas de estudos, dos métodos de ensino praticados, na difusão de boas práticas de ensino e investigação e na aprendizagem por benchmarking".



faculty exchange programs highlight these key areas: reflective, student-centered teaching; increased student engagement; and the development of directly applicable classroom techniques (pp.4-5) [3]. These elements proved to be extremely motivating and were therefore considered in the planning of the upcoming workshop.

The teaching mobility took place between February 9th and 13th, 2026, successfully fulfilling the project's primary objectives. These goals included strengthening the partnership with the University of Saint-Étienne School of Art and Design through site visits and a formal review of their drawing curriculum. A key focus was observing and understanding the pedagogical approaches used in drawing instruction, in direct collaboration with local faculty. To further our research, the program facilitated an exchange of teaching experiences designed to foster innovation. This included the development of a student project proposal and the opportunity to observe the learning processes firsthand at the host institution.

The project began with online meetings involving representatives from the host institution's International Relations department, providing an opportunity to align objectives and prepare for the onsite visit. During these initial discussions, we outlined the intent to develop an innovative pedagogical approach through a practical character design workshop. This workshop explored how students apply concepts of creative and visual representation and the session's structure was informed by ours prior teaching experience, specifically drawing from Graphic Design degree course at the School of Design (ESD) of the Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave (IPCA).

This paper presents the theoretical framework of the pedagogical approach, followed by an analysis of the workshop's process, the results obtained, and a discussion of future developments.

2. Pedagogical Approaches for the Workshop

Within drawing courses we teach, pedagogical activities are structured around the core competencies students must acquire: the formal language of drawing, representational techniques, and the communicative strategies essential to a designer's workflow. Accordingly, the curriculum is organized into distinct stages that guide students through foundational observation and representation, transitioning into complex exercises that demand advanced creative and communicative skills. Each student's progression is intentionally structured, ensuring that learning is evidenced by cumulative developmental responses and documented growth over time. Educators must therefore consider a variety of pedagogical strategies to determine which best facilitates the student's learning of the core content. In this regard, we have conducted research on this topic with the aim of analyzing, in a first phase and from a broad perspective, the impact of applying these pedagogical measures on student learning [6]; and, in a second phase, more specifically, on drawing-centered learning in higher education design courses.

In this regard, it is worth noting the study conducted by Suyo-Vega, Fernández-Bedoya, and Meneses-La-Riva (2024), whose primary objective was to "synthesize innovative pedagogical best practices within the university context" (p.1) [7], stating that:

"Its importance lies in its direct impact on the quality of university education. These best practices not only enhance the student learning experience but also strengthen the ability of academic institutions to adapt to student needs. By understanding these practices, it is possible to promote and/or improve certain strategies, thus enhancing the quality of higher education" (p.3) [7].

With a focus on this aspect - improving the students' learning experience [8] - and recognizing that student-centered learning offers benefits "such as intrinsic motivation, personalized learning experiences, and active participation," (p. 352) [9] the goal was to contribute to this effort. Consequently, it was recognized that it is very important to continuously evaluate the pedagogical practices used in teaching drawing and the ways in which they impact the learning process. Turning to more specific content, it is worth mentioning the research by Zimmermann and Coutinho (2020), which proposes an approach to teaching drawing "based on the design process and interdisciplinary relationships"² (p. 157) [10, own translation], noting that such an approach involves "thinking of drawing as part of a design process, interconnected with the conception of ideas, communication among the various professionals involved in the process, as well as its relationship with users"³ (p. 166) [10, own translation]. These new approaches can be explored at various levels, manifesting in drawing exercises that center on a defined "design problem", involving the following creative processes: "Perception, Communication,

² Original Text: "abordagem de ensino do desenho baseada no processo projetual e relações interdisciplinares"

³ Original Text: "pensar o desenho como parte de um processo projetual, interligado à concepção de ideias, à comunicação de diferentes profissionais envolvidos no processo, bem como sua relação com os usuários".



Investigation, and Action”⁴ (p. 167) [10, own translation]. In a way, the presentation of the assignment, along with the analysis of the students’ results, illustrates the work process and the learning that took place.

In terms of the practical side of the project – workshop - was instrumental in fostering *student-centered learning* [8, 9], focused on a specific drawing problem to be solved. It is important to note, however, that the “correlation between teaching-learning methodologies and learning outcomes” (p. 121) [8] was analyzed with a view to the content to be covered in the workshop, the intended learning outcomes, and the time allotted for its implementation.

Accordingly, the workshop’s work plan included an initial phase of research into how pedagogical dynamics could be structured with a view to the drawing exercise to be carried out by the students, which would involve the illustrative depiction of a character with distinctive traits [2]. In developing critical, creative, and visual communication skills, the challenge focused on depicting an animal figure, followed by an exploration of human expressions adapted to the context of the created figure. The steps were defined with the following learning practices and objectives in mind:

Practice to be implemented	Learning objectives
<i>Present a challenge to be interpreted through drawing</i> <i>Encourage the practice and exploration of drawing, cutting, and collage</i> <i>Present new questions and steps to be addressed through drawing that encourage research into themes</i> <i>Present examples as guiding elements for the draw</i> <i>Raising students' awareness to be developed</i> <i>Give students space to ask their own questions</i>	Foster imagination and creativity through drawing Develop analysis of a specific topic Promote free and capable exploration through practice Develop exploratory practical exercises Encourage students to take the initiative as independent learners to research and solve the problems presented Promote research on a specific topic Provide a broader understanding of the subject Encourage research and the search for references
<i>Promote collaborative and group work</i>	Enable students to manage their own autonomy in their projects Allow students to voice their questions for discussion Share their doubts and questions Foster a sense of trust and well-being among students through collaborative sharing and peer support Promote motivation and inclusion for everyone
<i>Create an opportunity for a group drawing exhibition</i> <i>Collect feedback through an anonymous questionnaire</i>	Provide insight into the group’s overall work Create a discussion around the various ideas presented Create an opportunity to voice students’ criticisms Provide an opportunity to indicate perceived difficulty levels Make available the option to be heard and offer suggestions for improvement

3. Practical Development of the Workshop

As mentioned before, the conceptual framework of this workshop is rooted in our drawing teaching practices. These practices emphasize diverse modes of observation and representation, where research and analysis culminate in the illustrative depiction of characters with distinctive traits. The exercises are designed to be demanding, intensifying investigative practices to push students toward diverse visual solutions. This approach fosters rapid development in sketching while encouraging critical reflection on the character’s movement, pose, and expression. While grounded in direct observation, the primary challenge lies in the transition: moving from a static study to representing a character from various angles and situating it within a narrative environment [11].

This staff mobility initiative allowed for an international exchange of methodologies coinciding with ESADSE’s Workshop Week. Approximately 60 first-year students participated, including a small cohort of exchange students. The information related to the workshop is organized into the following four chapters:

- 3.1: Introductory Exercise: Tactile perception and memory
- 3.2: Development of Silhouettes: Experimental collage and rapid iteration
- 3.3: The Final Idea - Character Design
- 3.4: Finalization and Feedback

⁴ Original Text: “percepção, comunicação, investigação e ação”.



3.1 Introductory Exercise: Tactile Perception and Memory

We started the first day visiting the school and exchange information about the workshop and its demands. The practical session began the next day, in the morning, with a "blind" sensory exercise: a random student was selected to describe an abstract wooden animal sculpture using only the sense of touch. While the teachers assisted in clarifying specific descriptions, the rest of the class attempted to sketch the object based solely on the verbal cues of tactile qualities: weight, shape, and texture.

This phase was made significantly more challenging by the language barrier; as Portuguese instructors teaching a predominantly French-speaking class, some specific technical terms were inevitably lost in translation. However, we viewed this not as a hindrance, but as a pedagogical opportunity. Since the objective was to serve as a foundation for original creation, the "miscommunications" allowed for more unexpected and diverse visual results. Interestingly, despite these linguistic hurdles, the final sketches produced in this first phase bore a striking resemblance to the actual sculpture, demonstrating the power of tactile and visual communication over verbal precision.

This phase forced an exchange between the students' own visual memories and the oral description provided. A primary observation during this stage was the difficulty students faced in translating verbal-tactile information into spatial and volumetric representations on paper (Fig. 1). At the end of the description, the object was revealed, and the students compared their initial sketches with the real piece, noting the divergence between their mental constructs and the actual object.



Fig. 1. The tactile interpretation phase: a student conveys the sculpture's form through touch, while the class translates the oral description into sketches and the first examples of sketches created by the students, based on the oral description provided.

3.2 Development of Silhouettes: Experimental Collage and Rapid Iteration

Building on the initial sketches, the next phase focused on the search for silhouettes based on the description once provided. This took place right after the oral description of the object, still during the morning. In the original curriculum at IPCA, this process spans several weeks; however, for this intensive workshop, the methodology was adapted to favor speed and experimentation.

We introduced a collage-based approach using magazines and scissors. Students were encouraged to gather images (Fig. 2), or even pieces of textured papers (Fig. 3), that echoed their initial shapes to create new, unexpected visual connections. While not all students chose to use collage, some preferring to stick to traditional drawing or a mixture of both (Fig. 3), the technique was proposed as a tool to bypass creative blocks and generate a high volume of silhouettes in a short time. This stage was highly influenced by the experimental approach of Pixar Art Director Deanna Marsigliese [12], focusing on the silhouette as the foundation of character recognition. To conclude the morning session, all work was displayed on the floor for a collective viewing and discussion.

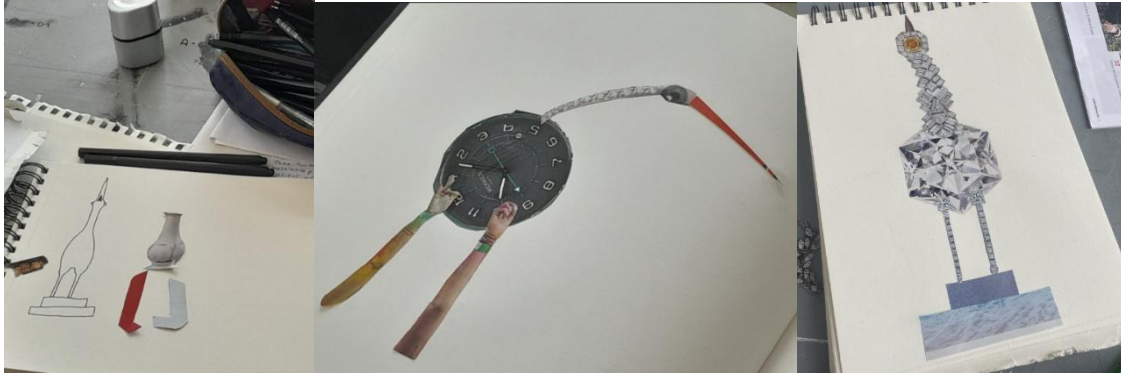


Fig. 2. Representation of the selection of different collages based on the shapes of the previous sketches and examples of collage approach created by the students.

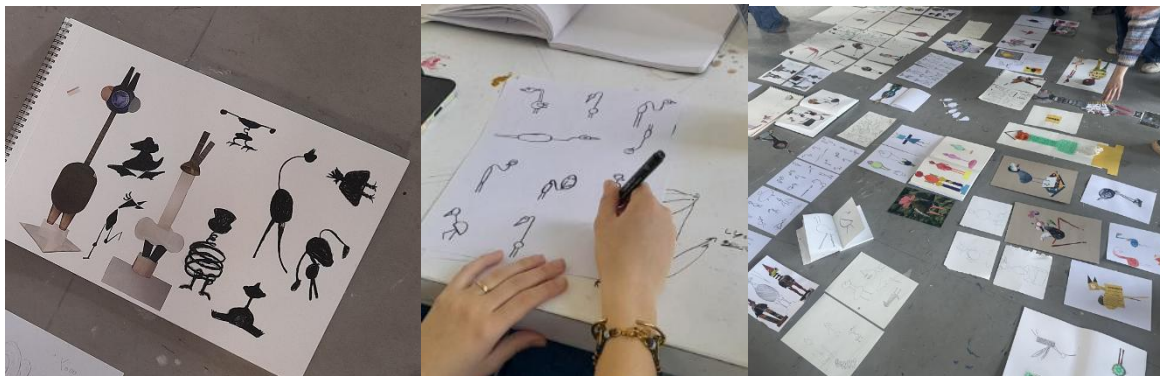


Fig. 3. Example of the mixture of both traditional drawing and other textured paper, and examples of drawing silhouettes experimentation with the work of the students displayed on the floor of all the silhouettes created.

3.3 The Final Idea - Character Design

The final three-hour afternoon session began with a presentation of professional authors and examples of work produced by students at IPCA. This sparked an interesting dialogue regarding institutional differences; notably, ESADSE students mentioned that character design is not typically a core subject in their bachelor's program, which resulted in high engagement and curiosity toward the subject. Following this, students selected one of their own silhouettes to refine. The objective was to move beyond the abstract shape and develop a finalized look, incorporating specific expressions and a deeper understanding of the character's anatomy. Students were free to use their preferred materials, with most opting for pencil and pen (Fig. 4). The workshop concluded with a final session of sharing the work on the floor, fostering peer-to-peer reflection on the different creative paths taken.



Fig. 4. Development of Expression, final looks of different characters, and Character Development with different poses and expressions, created by the students.

3.4 Finalization and Feedback

To conclude the study, a questionnaire was distributed to 60 participants to evaluate the methodology's impact. However, only 14 students provided detailed responses, around 23%. This lower engagement may be attributed to the post-event distribution of the survey; requesting feedback after the participants had already left proved less effective than anticipated. For future iterations, administering the questionnaire during the final minutes of the workshop would likely yield a higher response rate.

Here is a description of those results of the pedagogical approach: 86% of the students expressed high satisfaction with what they learned, with 93% stating that the level of difficulty was perfectly calibrated to their skills. Notably, despite the language barrier, 100% of respondents found the instructors' explanations to be clear, underscoring the effectiveness of using visual and tactile demonstrations as a universal teaching language.

The experimental "silhouette collage" technique, which was a specific adaptation for this 8-hour format, was particularly well-received, with 71% of the group finding the materials and methodology engaging. The final word clouds highlight that students most valued the "playful" and "experimental" nature of the project.

Furthermore, the data suggests a lasting impact on the students' creative interests:

- 79% of participants expressed a desire to continue developing their characters beyond the workshop.
- Students identified several paths for future development, specifically mentioning animation, 3D modeling, and the exploration of multiple poses and environments.

In conclusion, the feedback confirms that there is a significant interest in Character Design within the ESADSE students. The workshop succeeded in bridging the gap between abstract observation and finalized character illustration, providing students with a new set of tools for rapid iteration and creative expression. Also, the data collected in the questionnaire served as important analytical tools [13], thereby helping to consolidate the practice that had been implemented and encouraging its continuation in the future.

At the conclusion of the workshop, it was clear that the defined steps had facilitated a working process that enabled the achievement of the learning objectives initially set.

4. Future Developments

Building on the results of the initial workshop at ESADSE, the next stage of this initiative aims to transition from a short event focusing on individual drawing techniques toward a comprehensive, structured exchange program. By leveraging the Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Program (BIP) model, we intend to deepen students' drawing practice through a character-driven storytelling project, while maintaining the agile, collaborative nature of international mobility.

Regarding the program's theme, character design serves as an ideal interdisciplinary base for exploring drawing practices. It sits at the intersection of various fields, requiring students to synthesize anatomy, semiotics, narrative structure, and technical software proficiency. This multifaceted nature allows the program to bridge the gap between creative expression and professional design requirements, while having the chance to think about their creative work through differentiated drawing practices.



Regarding the structure, the transition to a BIP model is a pedagogical imperative. As noted by Ivasciuc et al. (2025), faculty and student mobility are critical for fostering reflective teaching and high levels of student engagement [3]. Extending the timeframe through a blended format will allow for a deeper exploration of project-based learning, where cultural exchange and collaborative practice become integral to the design process. This structural shift directly supports institutional goals, as mobility schemes are proven facilitators of curricular innovation and the dissemination of best practices through international benchmarking [1] [5].

Future iterations will maintain the spirit of graphical experimentation while introducing project-based constraints. These will challenge participants to evolve from experimental studies to a more structured design process, where drawing serves as the foundational skill for creativity, ideation, and communication. By introducing guidelines for specific outputs – such as animation, video games, branding, or mascot design – we enable students to explore the various dimensions of character creation, professional design processes, and the impact of characters on society. This extended timeframe allows for a deeper synthesis of creative expression and technical requirements, such as readability and functionality. Consequently, students learn to utilize drawing as an essential tool in their artistic education and future careers.

Ultimately, this program offers a dual benefit: it provides teaching staff with a platform for cross-institutional pedagogical reflection and curriculum development, while offering students an intensive environment to refine their artistic practice. This model ensures that the initiative remains responsive to both the creative interests of the participants and the evolving professional demands of the design field.

5. Final Considerations

The ERASMUS+ teaching mobility enabled the achievement of the objectives set during the workshop at ESADSE. It is considered that the benefits of this faculty exchange were realized, as evidenced not only by the academic mobility between institutions, but also, above all, by a useful and stimulating reflection on how to employ teaching approaches that promote student learning in a specific subject.

The work process developed during this professional and cultural exchange was extremely important and motivating, contributing to the teachers' professional development and to the establishment of cultural ties that open opportunities for future collaboration on teaching programs.

In the context of mobility, the workshop preparation focused on analyzing pedagogical approaches that could actively contribute to a process with structured learning objectives. Accordingly, the practical component involved several stages, and a work plan was developed that was initially presented during the initial online interactions with the higher education institution and then implemented during the in-person week.

The approach adopted focused particularly on a practical, *student-centered learning process*, with a drawing problem to be solved serving as the starting point. Creativity and the imaginative process were explored through defined stages, beginning with the creation of a character design based on a real object that was only revealed later. The defined practices were implemented with the primary goal of providing students with an experiential, collaborative, discussion-based, and sharing-oriented learning experience, and to assist them in this creative process.

The results show that the students were able to develop this creative and critical reflection process, as documented during the final presentation and in the feedback provided by the students in the questionnaire. Applying the questionnaire was undoubtedly a very useful strategy. However, expanding the questionnaire's reach to more students will be an area for improvement in the next phases of this project.

The aim is to continue this project by expanding the workshop into a Blended Intensive Program. This program will continue to promote interaction among higher education institutions, recognizing that the extended timeframe will allow for a deeper exploration of other contents and will continue to provide teaching staff with a platform for pedagogical reflection, with ongoing analysis of the application and impact of teaching practices on the learning process.

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