

Scattered Energy: The Hidden Enemy of Creative Flow

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Abstract

Creativity demands significant mental and physical energy, yet the realities of academic life often scatter this energy across competing tasks and responsibilities. This article introduces the concept of *scattered energy* to describe the fragmented attention, cognitive overload, and embodied strain educators experience as they juggle professional, personal, and digital demands. Written as an open personal reflection, it follows three dispersed academics as they examine their own practices and explore what it means to conserve, redirect, and reclaim energy in service of sustainable creativity. The piece argues that embracing slowness, setting intentional boundaries, and acknowledging the embodied nature of academic work are key to sustaining creative practice. As both reflection and playful provocation, it concludes by proposing a fictional—but resonant—course for educators on harnessing scattered energy to foster more intentional, free, and resilient scholarly work.

Keywords: Scattered energy, Creativity, Embodiment, Academic work, Sustainable practice

Introduction

Creativity requires a lot of mental and physical energy. Scattered energy might create a cognitive overload, resulting in an inability to distinguish what is of the essence from what is just clutter filling up our to-do list. That, in turn, could lead to creative, physical, and mental burnout. This short piece grew out of a conversation on embodiment in academia. It explores what it might mean to conserve, redirect, and reclaim our energy, offering a small proposal for doing things differently, more freely, and with intention. Written as an open personal reflection, the article follows three dispersed academics as they examine their own practices and consider what it takes to sustain creativity in a world that constantly pulls us in multiple directions. It argues that embracing slowness, setting boundaries, and recognising the embodied nature of academic work are crucial steps toward more intentional and sustainable creative practice. As a playful provocation, it proposes a fictional, yet very real, course for educators, focused on how to harness scattered energy in service of their own creative and scholarly work.

Scattered Energy

“Scattered energy” is a term we have coined to describe our everyday experiences as educators. It captures the fragmented attention and cognitive overload we face as we constantly juggle multiple tasks across professional, personal, and digital spaces. For us, it speaks to the challenge of being pulled in many directions at once; responding to emails while preparing lessons, engaging in research while attending meetings, and navigating the relentless, layered demands of academic life. While this scattered energy can feel overwhelming, and often does, it also reflects the dynamic, interconnected nature of our work and the unexpected creativity that emerges from working across disciplines, projects, and responsibilities. The question is: *how can we harness this energy in a way that sustains rather than depletes us?*

What the Literature Says

Ken Robinson (2006) famously asked, *Do schools kill creativity?* He argued that traditional education systems often suppress imagination, undervalue the arts, and fail to nurture the full potential of learners. Robinson called for a more holistic model of education, one that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and individual talents. And yet, in our day-to-day realities, we are often told that art, or creativity more broadly, can’t *really* change anything. That there’s no time, no space, and too many urgent demands, especially now as the world seems to be spinning ever faster. And often, art and creative subjects are scrapped from the curriculum. Some governments even suggest that arts and humanities shouldn’t be taught at the University level (Omer, 2023; Puffett, 2024).

However, Olivia Laing (2020), in *Funny Weather*, offers a more optimistic perspective. She suggests that art *can* change things, not always in immediate, measurable ways, but in how it shifts perception, reveals inequality, and imagines new ways of being. Art, she writes, helps us “bundle our energies.” It gathers what feels scattered and offers a space to reconfigure, to make meaning, to resist.

Art is one of the prime ways we have of opening ourselves and going beyond ourselves. That's what art is, it's the product of the human being in the world and imagination, all coming together. The irrepressibility of life in the works, regardless of the times, the histories, the life stories, it's like being given the world, its darks and lights. At which point we can go about the darks and lights with our imagination energised.

Thus, Ruha Benjamin (2024) reminds us in her work *Imagination* that in our collective imaginations, we have everything we need to make the world we want to live in. She insists that imagination isn't a luxury. It is an invitation to rid our mental and social structures of the tyranny of dominant imaginaries, and a guide for seeding new ideas grounded in solidarity, in which our underlying interdependence as a species and planet is reflected back at us in our institutions and social relationships. This returns her to creativity and play “...not simply as an escape from the harsh realities of the world but as a confrontation with unavoidable interdependence” (Benjamin, 2024, p. 97).

So... what might it look like to embrace our scattered energy, not as a flaw, but as a resource? What if, instead of fighting fragmentation, we started to read it differently, as a map of our commitments, our care, and our capacity to create, even in the midst of chaos?

Our Personal Experiences: Vignettes

Through personal vignettes, we explore what it means to live with scattered energy, how it shapes our daily rhythms, and what small acts might help us reclaim focus and calm amid the chaos. These vignettes capture personal experience and voice, offering reflections that are intimate and authentic—appropriate to the topic, yet not traditionally academic. Together, they outline what we live through as educators, how we navigate the many demands thrown our way each day, and where possibilities lie for positive change that fosters creativity, innovation, and holistic wellbeing. As such, this piece could be seen as a “free text” (emerged from free writing - viz. Elbow, 1973) where words, sentences, and paragraphs flow organically—allowing space for nuance, emotion, and fragmentation that mirrors the very experience of scattered energy.

Our Stories

Magda

Over the years of running my art practice, I've learned that my key objective is to foster the right environment to run a lifelong, sustainable art practice. Hence, I need to

make sure I avoid situations that put me and my creativity in harm's way. This usually happens due to an unsustainable workload, which causes burnout.

The pandemic and my return to higher education have been pivotal in expanding my abilities to holistically care for my creative health and self.

Since 2020, I've adopted many different ways to stay connected to my creative self (viz. <https://www.youtube.com/@MagdaOlchawska>). This is a massive undertaking for me, as being flexible isn't easy for this neurodiverse creative. My neurodiverse brain gets lost, overwhelmed, and anxious when I don't have clear plans, so knowing what I'm doing or going to do is important to me. Figuring out what steps to take takes up a lot of my energy.

But if I don't give myself grace and time, I can easily slip back into my old, destructive habits that don't belong in my art practice any more.

What strategies do you have in place to protect your creativity?

Sandra A

I am not artistic; however, I am creative—and I love creating, especially in collaboration with others. Over the years, I have become bolder in bringing my creative self into my academic work. I now embrace creative, embodied teaching and research methods, and I actively advocate for creative practice.

For me, creativity is more than simply *doing*. It is daring to imagine—and to hope. Yet I admit that it can be hard to sustain that hope and creative spark in challenging academic times, where output-for-money is valued more than collaboration, experimentation, or new ideas. The pressure to produce in measurable ways can slowly erode the space needed for imaginative thinking.

I have learned, however, that creativity is what keeps me going. It is my passion and the part of my academic identity I most want to nurture. To protect it, I have had to find ways to step back. I take deliberate time-outs—moments where I disconnect completely. Sometimes this means digging in the garden dirt until my hands are muddy, other times it's walking the dogs and letting my mind wander. These pauses are not a luxury; they are essential. They allow me to return with renewed energy, perspective, and a sense of possibility.

Creativity is so deeply needed in this day and age. I want my work—and the people I work with—to feel that same spark, to have the courage to imagine and to collaborate in ways that go beyond what is expected. For me, that is the real measure of success.

Because in the end, life is not a ledger to be balanced. It is a canvas—unfinished, imperfect, and alive. Each act of creativity is a brushstroke, shaping not only the world we see, but the one we hope for. And perhaps the meaning of life is simply this: to keep painting, together, until the picture is more 'whole' than when we began.

Sandra S

I've always loved reading—literature—and the studying of literature. Art not so much—at secondary school they squeezed that out of you... But somehow I kept drawing in the sciences: drawing what you could see down the microscope, drawing the equipment, drawing the physics stuff ... So when I went to work in a laboratory for some reason I felt it was okay to draw. I drew gentle cartoons of my workmates, and when a really good friend moved a long, long way away, I found myself illustrating the letters I wrote.

But, no—I never felt creative or artistic—it was just something I did—and then something I did not do...

When, quite randomly, I was asked to teach something called “study skills” whilst delivering discussion-based English Literature A’Levels in evening classes, I found myself using poetry and prose in class. We would read and discuss—and I would ask my students to write something of their own each week. At the end of the course, I printed everything off and we had a collection of the students’ work—and we all felt such pride—and I realised later that we had created a space for exploration, analysis, voice—all the good things.

Later still, I found myself taking art-based MOOCs (massive open online courses): I found myself ‘blind drawing’ as a daily meditation—making collages for reflection and exploration—playing with animation—and each week I would reflect and think about how to apply what I was learning in my teaching practice. And things changed!

I did not do this alone—I taught with a wonderful partner, Tom, and an amazing colleague, Sandra A., and a whole new teaching life opened up together with them. I found my creative self by bringing active, playful, and arts-based activities into my teaching, research and assessment practices - and also in the collaborative writing I have done about that...

And the big realisation that I was not even looking for was that we all need to be creative to be whole. Education knocks it out of you—makes you doubt yourself—makes you lose yourself. Convinces you that you are NOT... So now I fiercely advocate for creative practices not just because they are adventurous, playful, and successful—but because as human beings we are not our whole selves otherwise.

Lessons Learned

Through in education, energy can often feel like a puzzle with missing pieces scattered, fragmented, and difficult to gather into a cohesive whole. In those moments, the constant demands of the educational everyday pull educators in multiple directions at once, leaving their minds restless and their bodies drained.

For us, the authors, this is not an abstract notion but a lived reality. We have each known the days when our creative spark flickers under the weight of endless meetings, urgent emails, and institutional pressures. Yet, we have also found that energy can be reclaimed—not in one grand act, but in small, deliberate moments. Running a sustainable, personal art practice. Long walks and days in the garden. Art-based MOOCs and blind drawing.

We have learned to treat energy not as an infinite resource, but as something to be tended, replenished, and even protected. This means pausing when the system tells us to rush, saying no when our plates are already full, and creating spaces—both physical and mental—where curiosity and collaboration can thrive.

Because in the end, the puzzle is never meant to be perfect or complete. It is in the gaps that imagination slips through, in the spaces between the pieces that relationships are built, and in the act of piecing it together, again and again, that we rediscover our purpose as educators.

What Could Be Next? The Journey

We make the case for carving out deliberate time and space—not just in our private lives, but within the structures of the educational system itself. We imagine, propose, and advocate for a course that educators could take *with joy*—a space to recharge their batteries, not another task to add to an already overloaded schedule. This is not a tested, “evidence-based” program, but an imagined one, grounded in our personal experiences and informed by similar initiatives we have led in various settings, with different groups of people. Perhaps our vision will spark something for you—an idea to adapt for yourself, your colleagues, or your own institution.

So, consider the proposed course as a journey, where each module guides you toward creating your personalised *Energy Blueprint*. This blueprint will help safeguard your time, creativity, and focus. In a world that frequently imposes unrealistic demands within increasingly limited timeframes, the course we propose will assist you in slowing down and reshaping your narrative to align with your individual needs, rhythm, and energy. And, one day, we hope that this blueprint will not only sustain your creative practice but also inspire new ways of working—more intentional, more balanced, and more free.

Learning Objective Overview

By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Recognise and reflect on personal patterns of scattered energy and identify how these patterns impact their creative and academic focus.
2. Apply intentional disengagement techniques to reset cognitive and creative energy, which include distraction-free movement and mindful breaks.

3. Evaluate the relationship between nutrition and mental stamina, and create a personalised dietary approach to support creative flow.
4. Establish digital boundaries to protect attention and reduce cognitive overload, incorporating detox strategies and notification management.
5. Identify personal rhythms of deep work and restructure daily routines to align with peak creative hours.
6. Set and maintain boundaries that safeguard time, energy, and creative resources, including learning to confidently and clearly say "no."
7. Experiment with restorative habits and practices that support long-term creative sustainability, such as meditation, reading, and grounding activities.
8. Design a personalised Energy Blueprint that incorporates insights from all modules into a cohesive and actionable plan for enhancing creative and academic vitality.

Let's Begin

Each module in this course serves as a stepping stone, designed to help you observe, experiment, and build a personal toolkit for creative resilience. You will progress from taking time to nourish your body to setting digital boundaries and protecting your time. By the end of the course, you will have crafted your own Creative Energy Blueprint, a living document that supports your unique rhythm and creative flow.

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Our Proposal

Course: Harnessing Scattered Energy in Creative & Academic Practice

Course Description

In a world of constant stimulation and digital overload, maintaining focused, sustainable creative and academic energy is both an art and a discipline, which can be learned through establishing habits based on reflection and observation. This short course explores practical, holistic strategies to manage scattered energy, cultivate deep focus, and build a resilient creative routine. Through reflective practices, lifestyle adjustments, and boundary-setting, participants will learn how to protect their most valuable resources: attention and time.

Module 1: The Art of Stepping Away

Objective: Understand the importance of intentional disengagement to reset cognitive and creative energy.

- Practice: Daily 15/30-minute distraction-free walks (no headphones, no screens).
- Reflection: How does physical movement without input affect your mental clarity? Keep a diary/journal for at least a week.
- Discussion: The myth of “productive breaks” in front of screens.

Module 2: Energy Through Nutrition

Objective: Explore how dietary choices influence mental stamina and creative flow.

- Case Study: The impact of the Mediterranean diet on energy levels. If you are vegan, it's important to examine your diet for the amount of processed food you consume, as well as whether your vegan diet primarily relies on carbohydrates to boost your energy levels.
- Activity: Keep a 7-day food journal. Experiment with the food you eat throughout the day and note which foods make you feel creatively energised and which make you feel sluggish.
- Reflection: What foods support your best creative state?
- Activity: Make a list of the food and compose a 7-day menu to enhance your creative energy. Keep a diary/journal about the process.

Module 3: Digital Boundaries & Mental Space

Objective: Reclaim attention by minimising digital noise.

- Practice: Remove non-essential notifications and social media apps from your phone and your computer/tablet.
- Challenge: One-week digital detox from whatever content and app is the most distracting to you.
- Discussion: How does information overload affect your creative clarity? What have you learned during the 7-day detox from your digital distractions? How can you use that knowledge moving forward?

Module 4: Rhythms of Deep Work

Objective: Identify and protect your personal peak creative hours.

- Exercise: Map your energy levels across a typical day and throughout the whole week.
- Practice: Reserve your “golden hours” for high-focus tasks, such as writing or project/idea development.
- Reflection: What tasks drain vs. sustain your energy? How can you reorganise your work in such a way that deep work comes at the best time for you?

Module 5: The Power of Saying No

Objective: Learn to set boundaries that protect your creative resources.

- Workshop: Draft a “creative boundaries” manifesto.
- Discussion: How to navigate guilt and obligation in saying no. Give real-life examples when saying no was difficult, but you knew it was the best option for you.
- Reflection: Time as a non-renewable resource—what are you giving it to, and is your effort and time commitment worth it?

Module 6: Designing a Sustainable Creative Life

Objective: Build a toolkit of habits that support your long-term creative and academic vitality. Use a variety of mediums and creative tools.

- Practices to explore:
 - Morning meditation (10 minutes)
 - Reading before bed and upon waking
 - Gardening, cooking, or other grounding activities
 - Participating in spiritual or reflective circles
- Reflection: Which habits feel restorative vs. performative for you and in your practice? Which habits could become part of your toolkit?

Final Project: Your Personal Energy Blueprint

Deliverable: Create a personalised “Energy Blueprint” that outlines:

- Your peak creative hours

- How will you approach the food you eat?
- Your digital boundaries
- Your restorative practices
- Your “no list” (projects, people, or habits that drain your energy and creativity)
- Your weekly rhythm for deep vs. shallow work

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