ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Comfort, stretch, panic: Managing affect to support creative learning in complex problem-solving

David Robertson, Lisa Grocott, Annette Bos, Ilya Fridman
Monash University

Universities are increasingly encouraged to engage students with complex real-world problems, such as those characterised by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Schmitz et al., 2026). Doing so leverages their emerging disciplinary knowledge and requires the development of broader competencies that are relevant to industry and other non-academic contexts (Brundiers et al., 2021). However, confronting real-world problems can be a more intimidating and emotionally charged learning process than disciplinarily bounded or pre-prepared case study work. These problems lack clear boundaries, have rich but always-incomplete information available to characterise them, are dynamic, and students may feel directly entangled with them via their everyday lives (Veltman et al., 2021; Wickson et al., 2025). Addressing complex problems requires inner transformation by educators and students to align their emerging skills and externally oriented knowledge development (Ives et al., 2023; Stein, 2021). When engaging in real-world-problem inquiry, digital tools including web search, databases and GenAI make massive quantities of information available. However, quantity is not necessarily paired with credibility, quality, and contextual relevance, and this amplification and ease of access may paradoxically increase student uncertainty and undermine creative confidence (Jose et al., 2025). This digitally-broadened information landscape, when combined with the inherent complexity of real-world problems, can trigger feelings of anxiety, disengagement or lower motivation, placing strain on classroom relationships, such as educator–student and team connections, and requiring strategic educator management.

This poster will share preliminary results from a practice-led doctoral study framed by the research question: *How can an educator creatively manage affect in a learning environment to support students' creative development?* The research draws data from two iterations of a 60-student interdisciplinary master's unit at a large Australian university. In the unit, students work to create innovative projects to address local real-world systemic problems, with significant openness in the boundaries of the brief and range of solution options framed as viable. The presentation will share highlights of a reflexive thematic analysis of students' short, written reflections on affective experience during the solution prototyping and final proposal stages of the creative process. Students experienced strong but mixed emotions, which temporally varied at an individual level and were often held simultaneously. For example, during prototyping, students commonly reported experiencing feelings such as frustration or uncertainty, and at the same time, pride or confidence – that is, positive and negative affect coexisted within individual students, and the cohort, simultaneously. These complex affective dynamics required careful educator management to encourage student progress. The poster will then feature an emerging typology, with examples, of human-centred teaching strategies deployed to support and enable students to work with and reflect on their emotional responses while seeking to creatively express ideas. These strategies ranged from whole-of-class, to small-group, to peer-to-peer, and student-to-GenAI approaches. Educator-researcher evaluations of the efficacy of these strategies will be offered, along with provocations to drive further dialogue on this topic.

Keywords: Creativity, affect, emotion, complexity, uncertainty, sustainability

References

Brundiers, K., Barth, M., Cebrián, G., Cohen, M., Diaz, L., Doucette-Remington, S., Dripps, W., Habron, G., Harré, N., Jarchow, M., Losch, K., Michel, J., Mochizuki, Y., Rieckmann, M., Parnell, R., Walker, P., & Zint, M. (2021). Key competencies in sustainability in higher education—Toward an agreed-upon reference

framework. *Sustainability Science*, *16*(1), 13–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00838-2

Ives, C. D., Schäpke, N., Woiwode, C., & Wamsler, C. (2023). IMAGINE sustainability: Integrated inner-outer transformation in research, education and practice. *Sustainability Science*, *18*(6), 2777–2786. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01368-3

Jose, B., Cherian, J., Verghis, A. M., Varghise, S. M., S, M., & Joseph, S. (2025). The cognitive paradox of AI in education: Between enhancement and erosion. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1550621

Schmitz, D., Lorenz, L., & Ortloff, J.-H. (2026). Moral dimensions of wicked problems in higher education teaching and learning. A scoping review. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *13*(1), 556. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-07394-7

Stein, S. (2021). Reimagining global citizenship education for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *19*(4), 482–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1904212

Veltman, M. E., van Keulen, J., & Voogt, J. M. (2021). Using problems with wicked tendencies as vehicles for learning in higher professional education: Towards coherent curriculum design. *The Curriculum Journal*, *32*(3), 559–583. https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.100

Wickson, F., Lambert, L., & Bernstein, M. (2025). Growing through transformation pains: Integrating emotional holding and processing into competence frameworks for sustainability transformations. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, *74*, 101525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2025.101525

Robertson, D., Grocott, L., Bos, A. & Fridman, I. (2026, Nov 29 – Dec 2). Comfort, stretch, panic: Managing affect to support creative learning in complex problem-solving [Poster]. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 56–57). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3423

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.
The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.

© Robertson, D., Grocott, L., Bos, A. & Fridman, I. 2026