

Matthias Schwabe:

PLAYFUL EXPLORATION

as a way to unfold
creative musical potential

Can Everyone Improvise? 26-28 March 2026 Graz



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musik
hochschule
lübeck

Ouverture (1)



Link to video file: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/jp80prw6o59gb0vqus669/exploring-sounds.mp4?rlkey=h1o0rmol8np4be2mchwkmnuk&st=omankx1s&dl=0>

Sound buffet in exploratorium berlin



Link to video file: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rwf9s6ld3ferfy2b7fo06/sound-buffet-in-exploratorium.MOV?rlkey=zbobsc5oclvo7pbikjsy8owvf&st=h9jzj1da&dl=0>

Game:
sounds in
space
Part I

(8–25
participants)

Part I: SEARCH FOR SOUNDS

1. Explore the space and find interesting sounds. You may use mallets and sticks, but no „real“ instruments.
Look for continuous or repetitive sound events without metrical structure
2. Decide on one favourit sound event.
3. Present the favourit sounds in the group, one after the other

Game: sounds in space

Evaluation of Part 1

Players are experiencing ...

- a world full of interesting sounds,
- experimental sounds (including noise) as basic material,
- exploration as basic approach.

Creativ impulses:

- There is no „common“ way of playing a space
=> finding your own way
- Creativity starts with small inventions / findings:
finding is close to inventing
(in German: Finden / Erfinden)
- Collective spirit of exploration:
mutual inspiration within the group

Game:
sounds in
space
Part II

Part II: LISTEN & SORT

1. Play all the sounds at the same time. Listen! Which one can be heard loudest? Stop it.
2. Listen again! Which one is the loudest now? Stop it.
And so on.
3. Feedback: Could you hear all stages? Maybe the process needs a repetition with more time to listen
4. Variation: One person („big ear“) stands in the middle and gives signs to mute the sounds in order of volume.
5. Feedback: How was the choice of the „big ear“ compared to your own choice?

Game:

sounds in
space

Evaluation of
Part II

LISTENING

- Listening to the group, listening to myself, comparing both: where is my sound positioned within the group?
=> communication
- Comparison between self-perception and external perception
- Note: This is not about the „correct“ order, but about sensitising the ear & sharpening your antennae!
- => Meta-aspects of listening
- There might be a useful discussion about the impact of pitch, density of sounds and other parameters on the subjective perception of volume.

Game: sounds in space Part III

Part III: MIXING SOUNDS

1. One sound mixer in the middle of the space.
All sounds are played at the same time.
The mixer can turn on and off the sounds to explore various mixtures.
The task is to create a convincing sound mix.
2. The final mix is played for about one minute to really appreciate it.
3. Question to the mixer: What is the special quality of this particular mix?
The facilitator might help finding out by making proposals:
Was it rather similar or rather diverse sounds? Was it transparent? Did you aim at a special atmosphere? Did you have inner pictures?
4. The same question is asked to the other players

Game: sounds in space

Evaluation of Part III

- Exploring „harmony“ with experimental sounds
 - *[Unlike in traditional music, there are no fixed rules or conventions governing harmony in experimental music. Consequently, different strategies are required when dealing with it.]*
- Reflection about various „aesthetic criteria“
- => No recipes/rules, but
 - increasing awareness of harmony
 - gathering experience with it
 - getting to know & learning to accept various tastes/preferences

Part III should be repeated with different mixers (and new sounds) and also be transferred to „real“ instruments: easily accessible small percussion or any instruments of the participants.

Game: sound garden

1. Chose one interesting instrument each and explore its sounds.
2. Distribute over the space and imagine to be sounding plants.
3. One person is gardener and switches the plants on and off by touching them, thus forming a musical process which starts and ends in silence.
4. Being switched on, a plant chooses a sound which fits to the others and stays with it until it is switched off. When switched on again, it might choose another sound.
5. Shut your eyes as long as you are not playing.

Game:

sound
garden

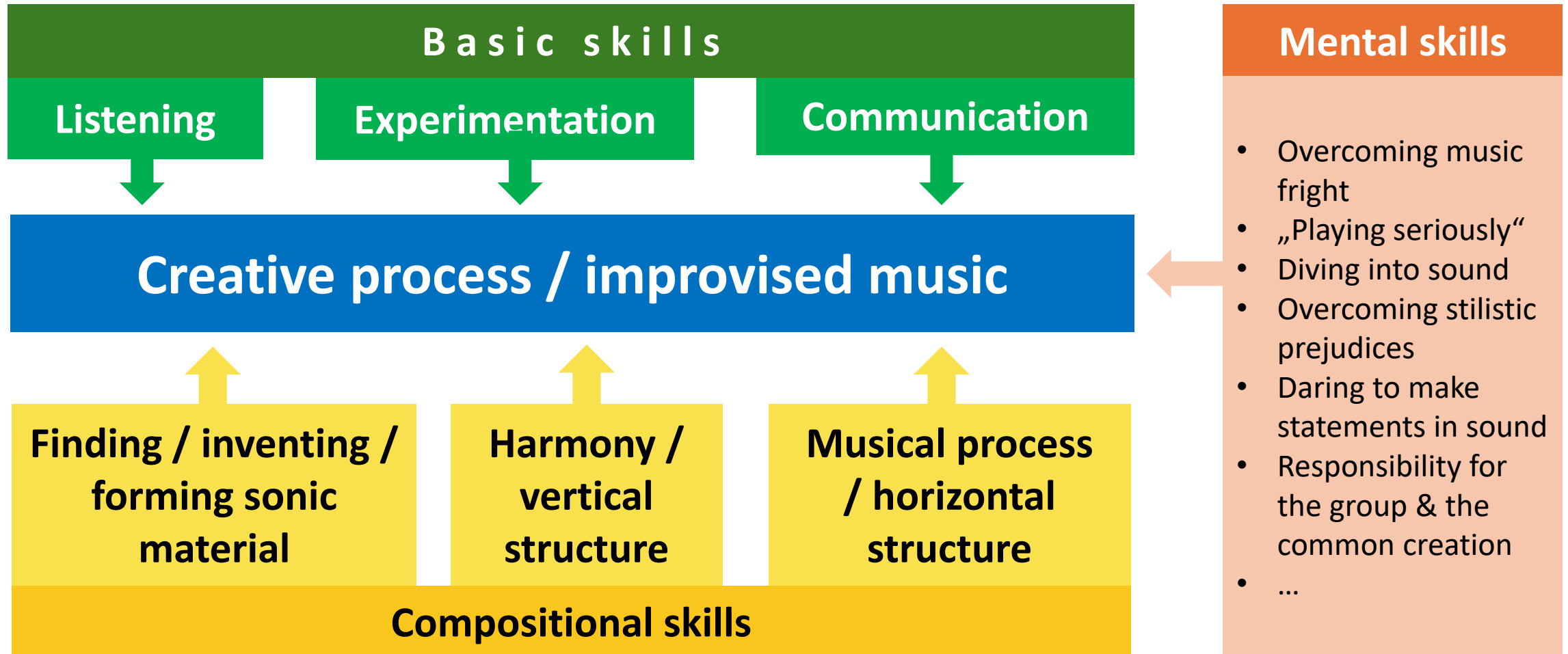
Evaluation

- Creation of a musical process as a group ...
- ... while choosing „harmonic“ sounds.
- NO real conduction, instead shared responsibility: the gardener decides who plays and when, the plants decide what they play
- Closed eyes for focus on listening instead of looking

Variation:

- The same process without gardener. All players have complete responsibility about what, when and how long they play.
- => (nearly) free improvisation in a large group (possible after 2–3 hours workshop)

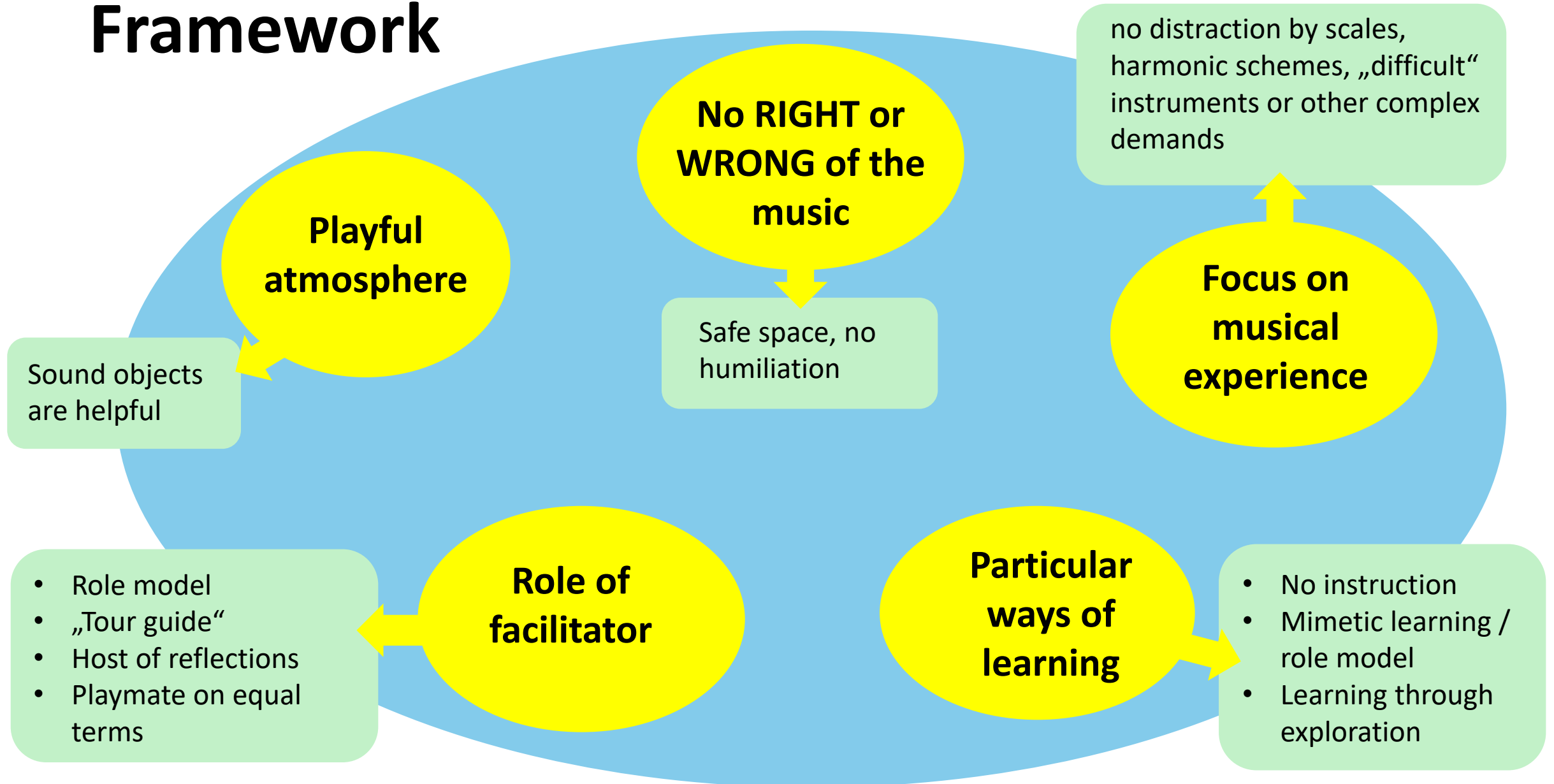
Skills to be unfolded and intensified



Example of "Diving
into sound"

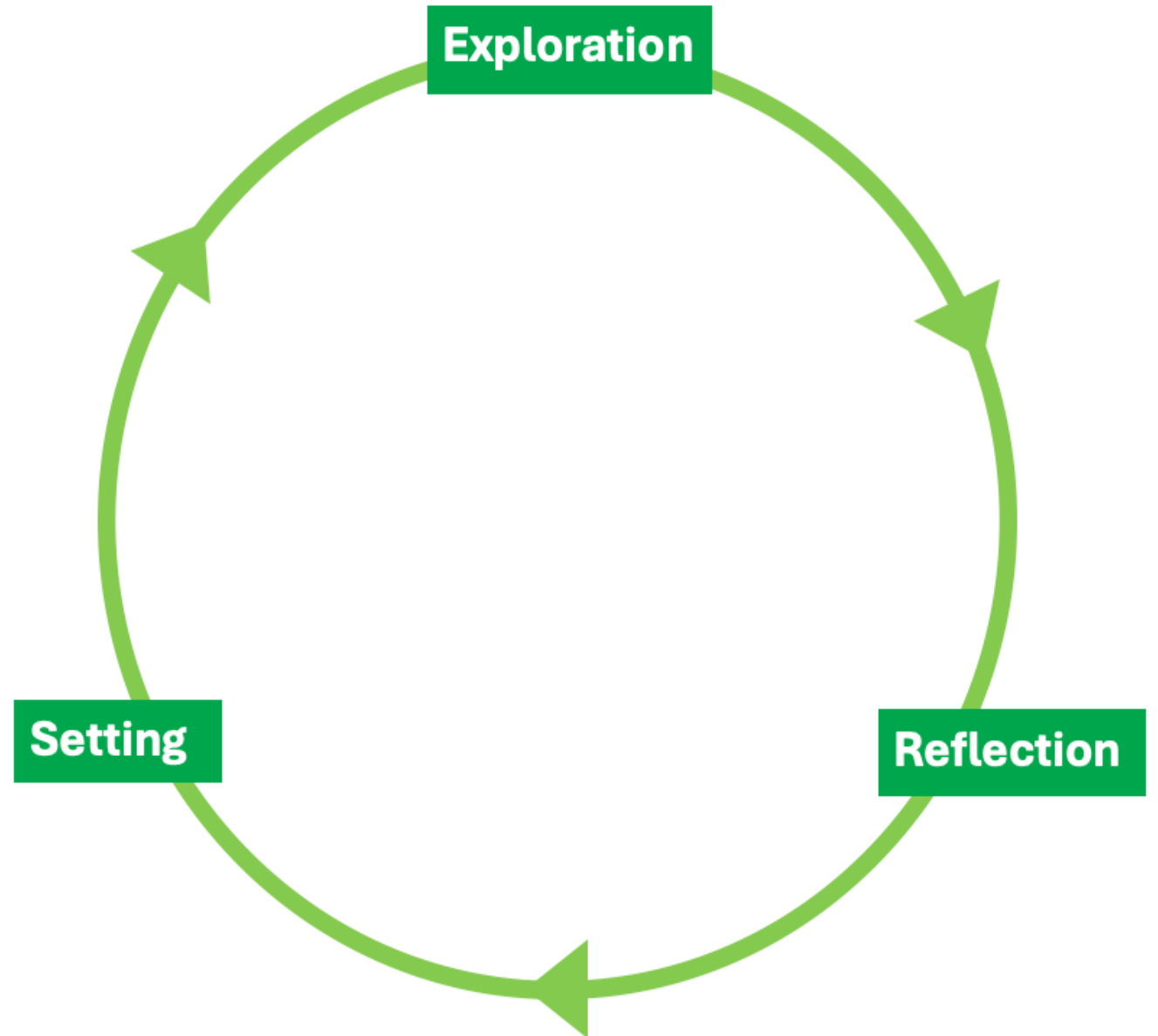


Framework



Learning through exploration

For more details see: Matthias Schwabe:
Exploring Improvisation – Exploring Music. In:
Reinhard Gagel, Matthias Schwabe (eds.):
Researching Improvisation – Researching by
Improvisation, p. 373 ff.

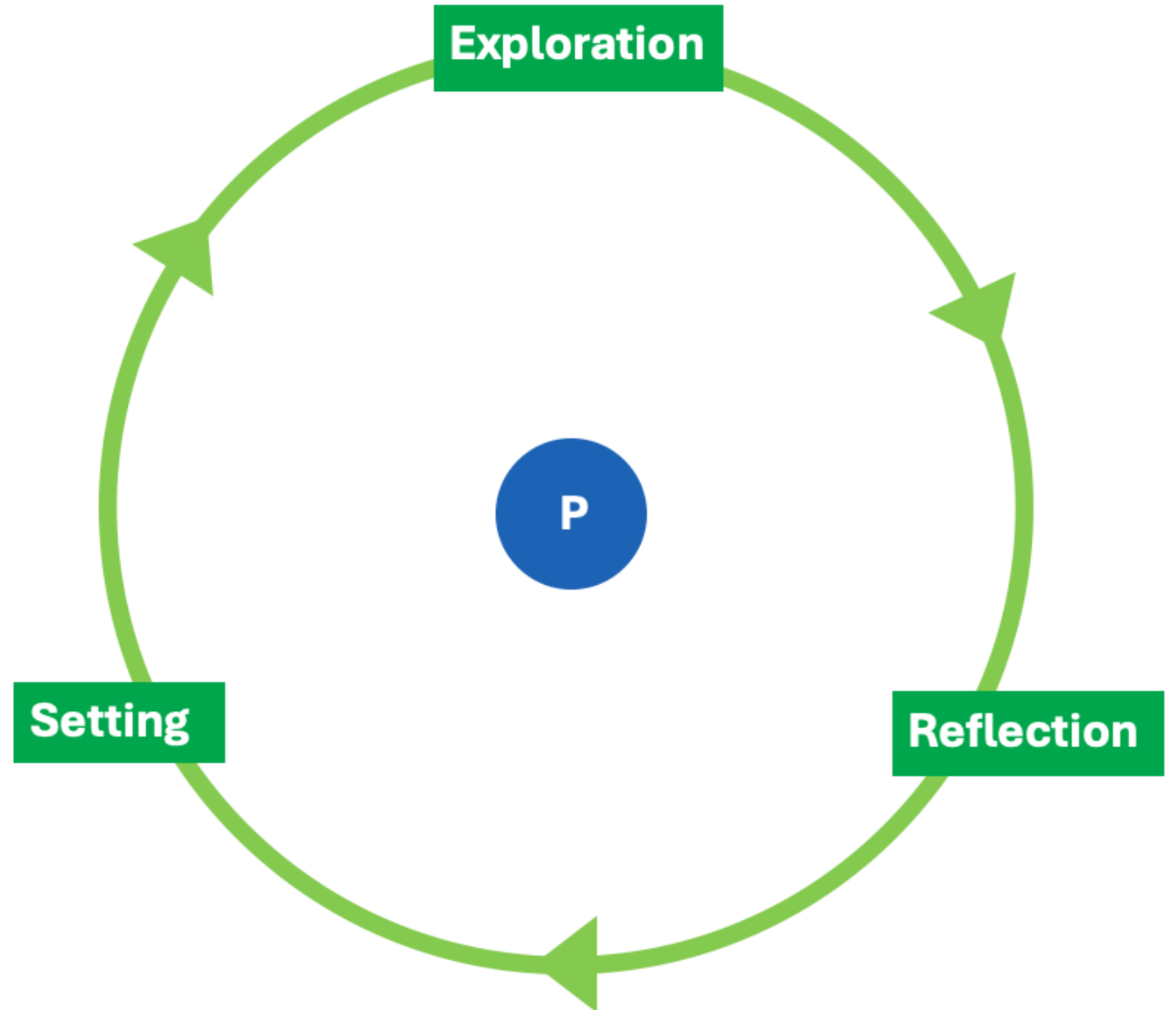


Learning through exploration

P = players /
participants

with their resources of
existing (!) knowledge,
abilities and
experience

as source of creative
thought and action



Setting

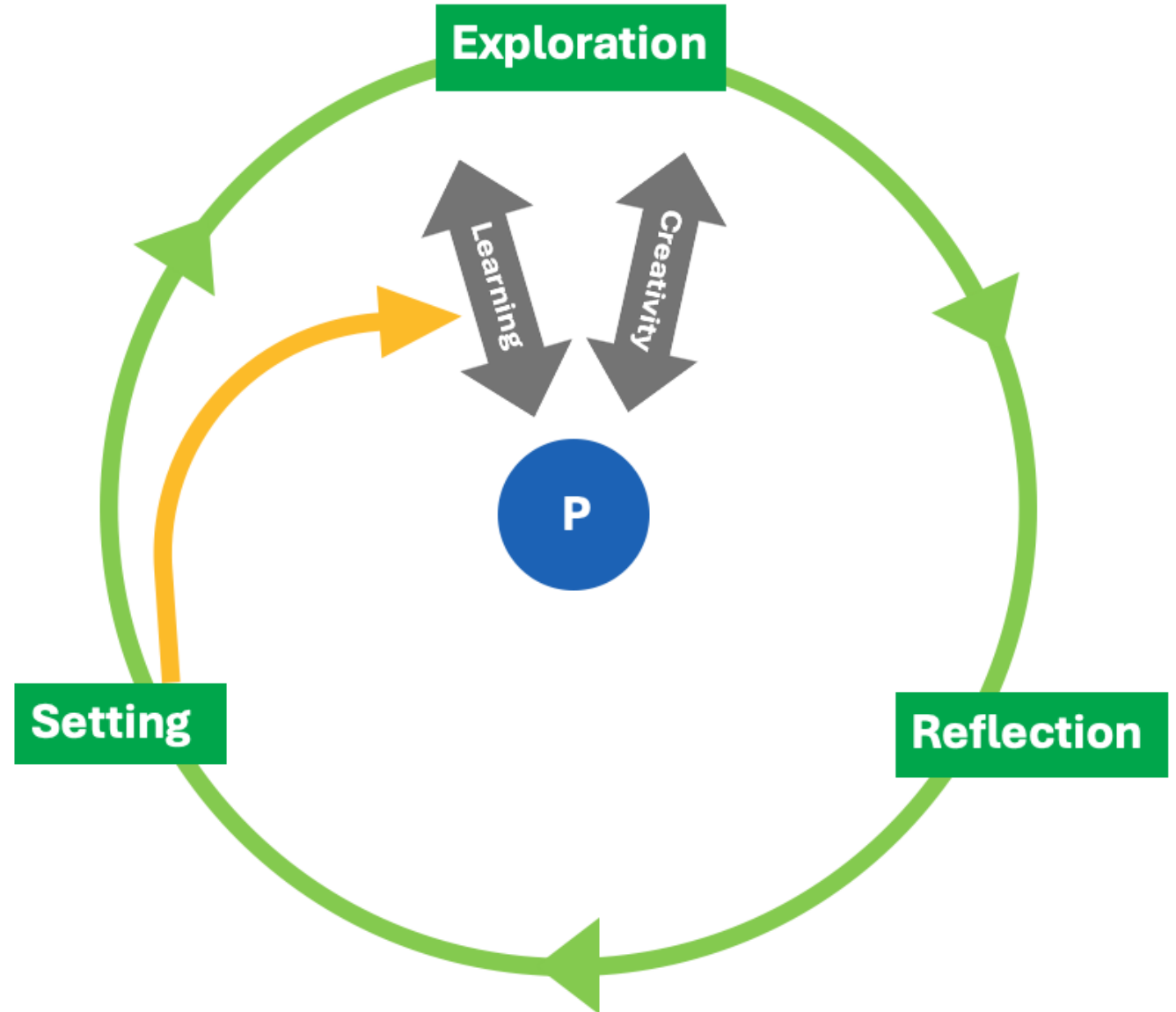
> Game, exercise, situation

Tasks:

- Initiating processes of learning (by experience)
=> Focus on important musical issues
- Generating creativity

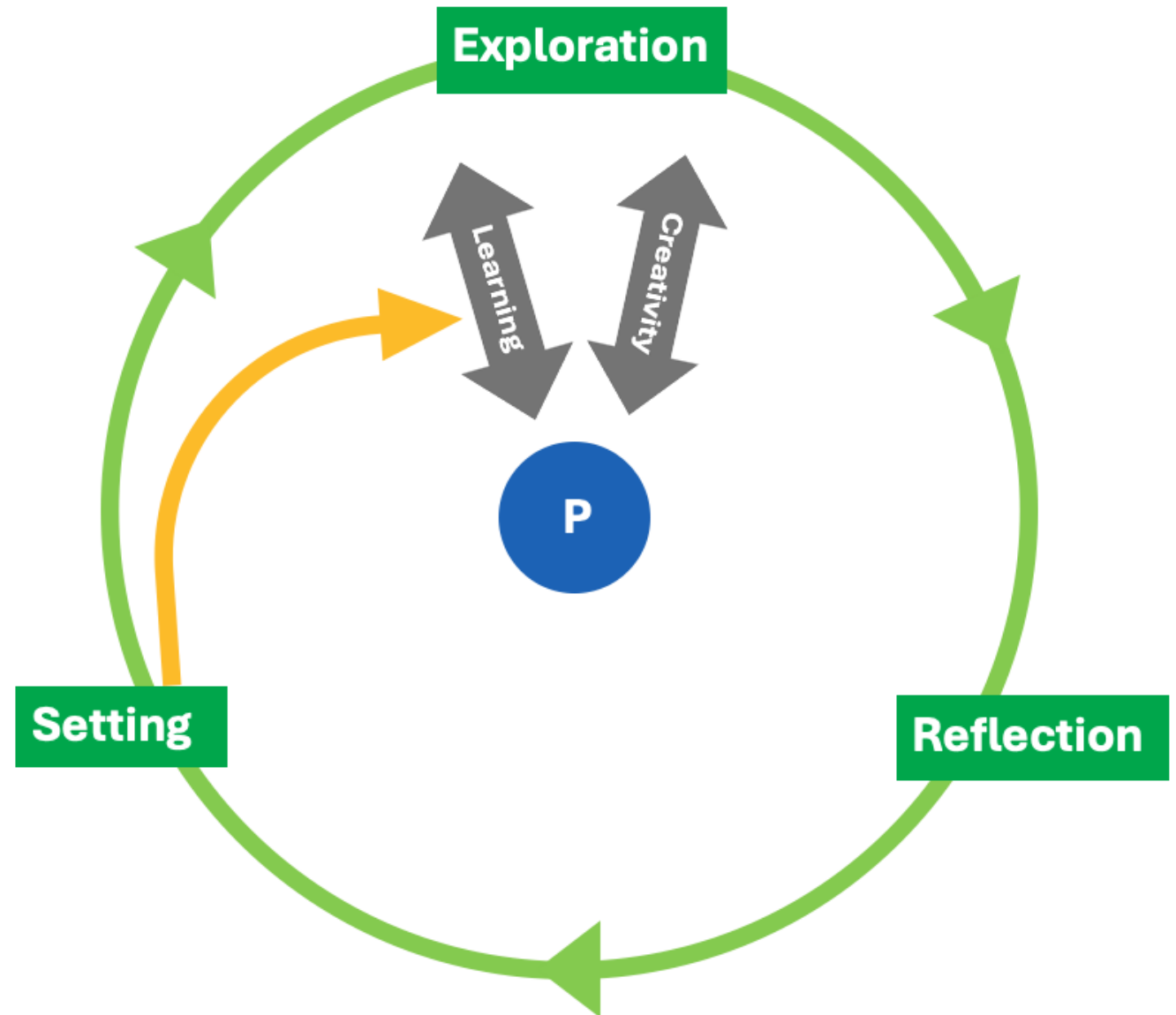
Features:

- Balancing between freedom and structure
- Providing high chance of „good music“
- Enabling focus on shaping by avoiding technical skills (scales, metre etc.)
- Inspiring imagination
- Images / associations are helpful



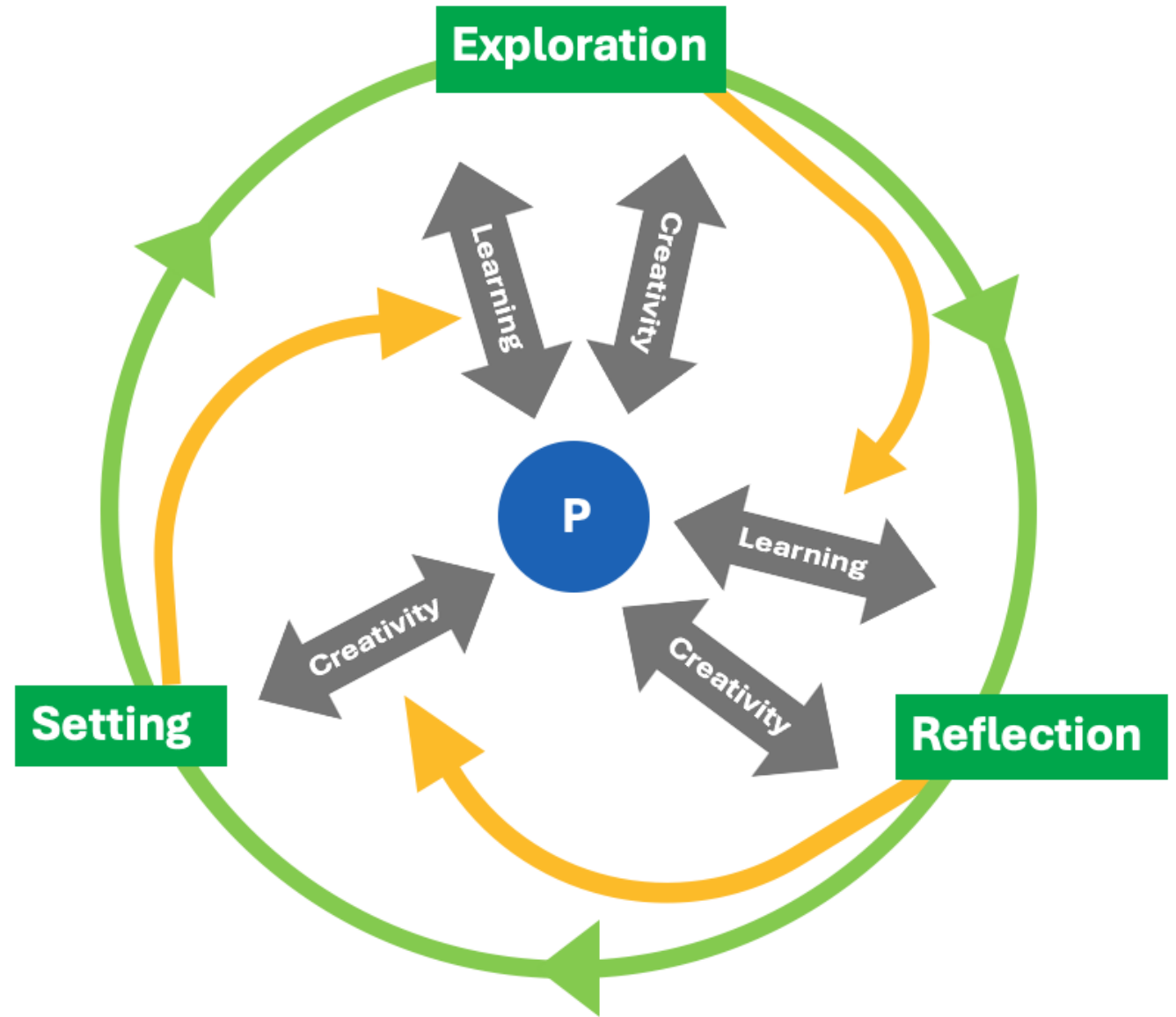
Exploration

- = Practical improvisation
- open-ended, without defined „solution“
- delivering relevant music experience
- learning through experience
- in a creative process
- building on the individual resources
- and enriching them



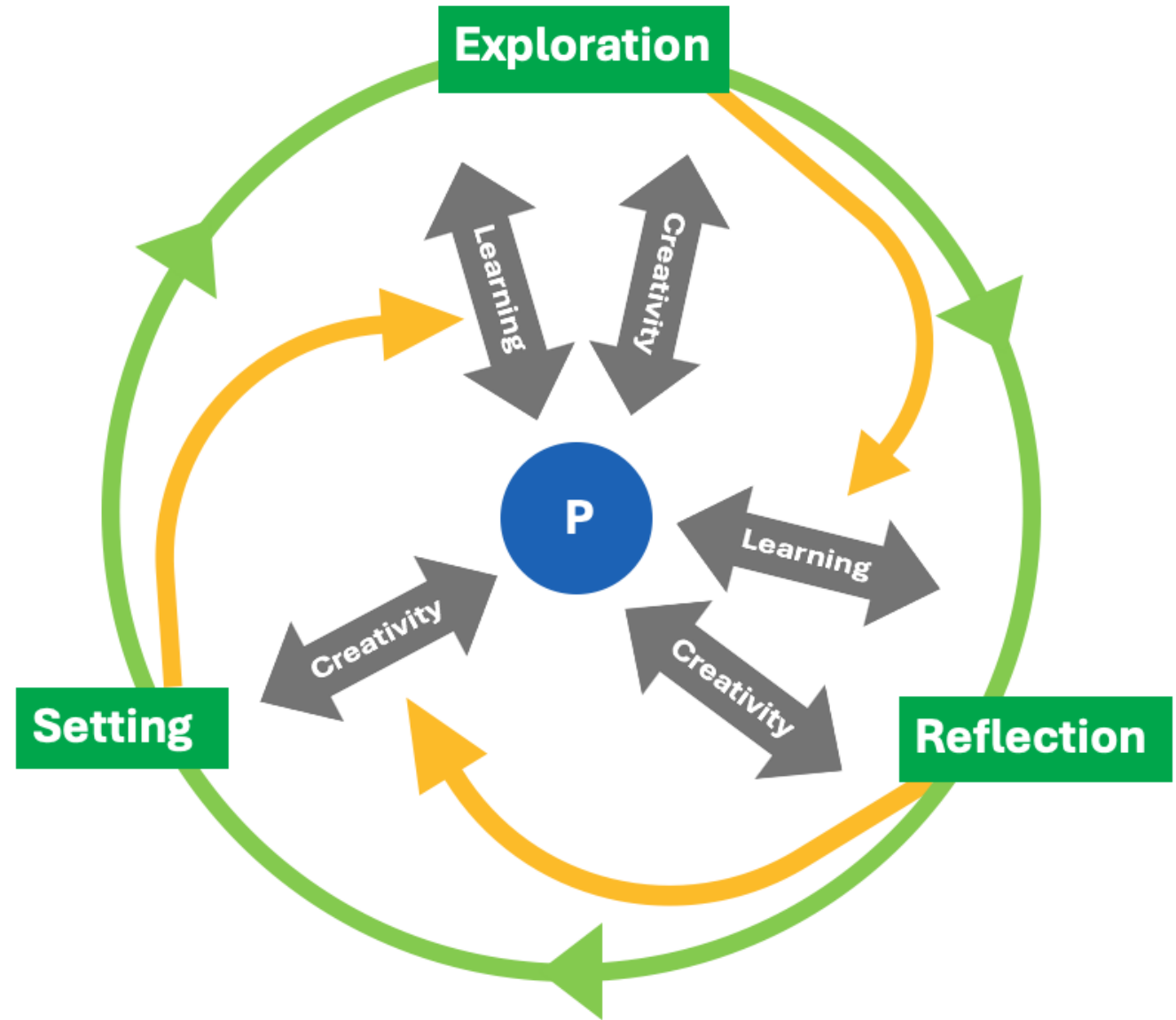
Reflection

- Resulting from exploration, aiming at (new) setting
- either as inner process of the facilitator
- and/or as open discussion
- or other ways of reflection within the group
 - => learning by understanding
 - => generating creative ideas
- Good questions are helpful!
- Even “failed” explorations might be fruitful



New setting

- Resulting from reflection,
- either set by the facilitator
- or by the group
- starting a new circle



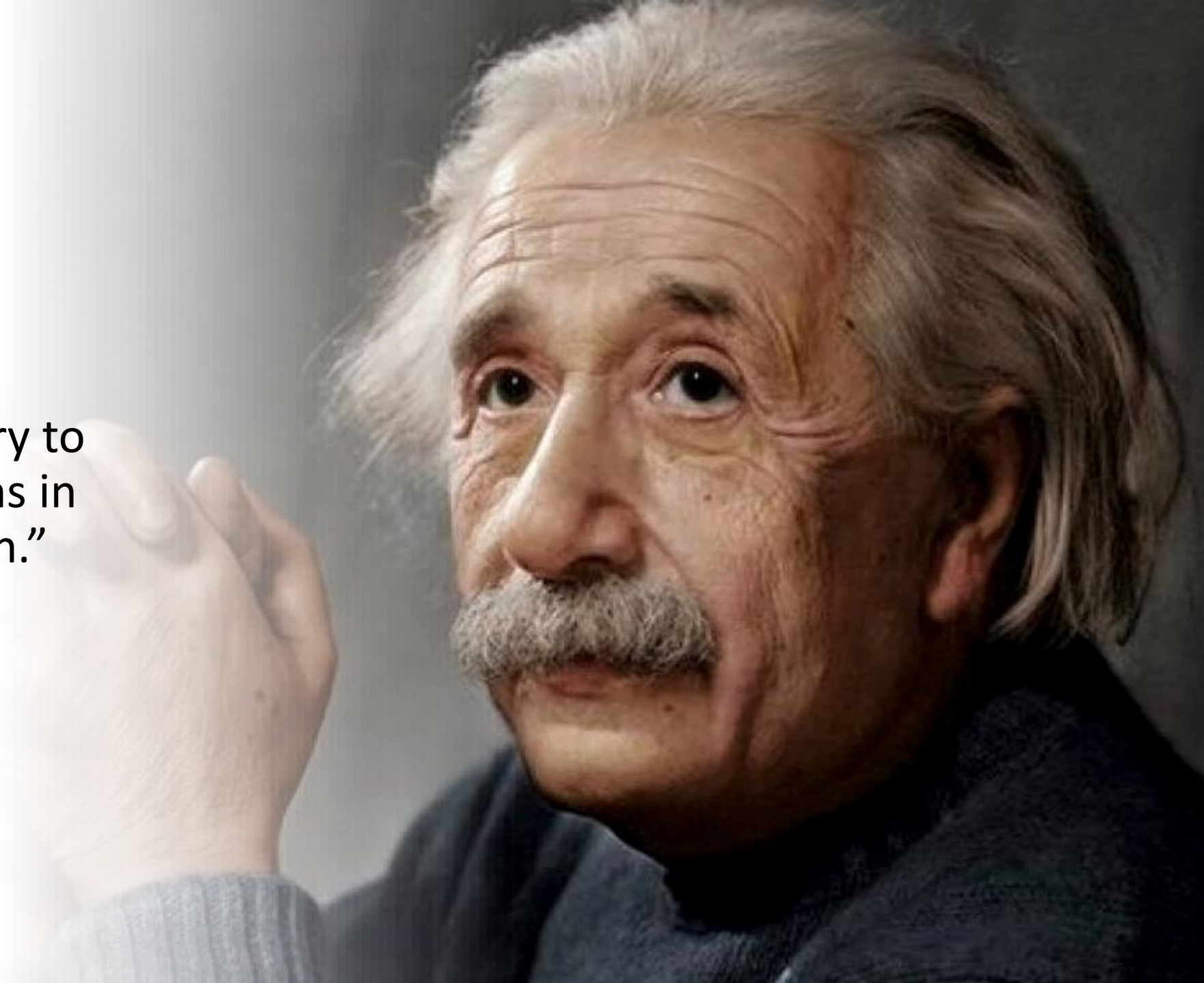
Learning through exploration

characteristics

- Participants are not being taught,
- but learn on their own
- building on their existing resources
- through experience (during the exploration)
- through understanding (during the reflection)
- => Learning on equal terms
- suiting the non-hierarchical character of improvised music

“I never teach my students; I merely try to create the conditions in which they can learn.”

(Albert Einstein)



Books with games for the setting



1973



1983



1992



Lilli Friedemann (1906–91)

- Violinist, specialized in Early and Contemporary Music
- Started improvising in the 1950s
- Pioneer in enabling improvisation
- Developed exercises and later games for introducing improvisation in folk-style (metric rhythm & melody) as well as in contemporary music
- Target groups: pre-school children, adult amateurs, professional musicians, people in educational and therapeutical professions



exploratorium
berlin raum für
improvisation

- **STAGE:** concerts & performances
- **LEARN:** weekend-Workshops, continuous courses, continuous ensembles, further training
- **PLAY:** open stages and other improvisational encounters
- **THINK:** talks, conferences & a special library
- **YOUNG EXPLO** for children, young people and families

Two games:

Landscapes & Journey

Landscapes

- Not meant as programme music
- but as images which combine individual ideas with a shared theme
- and enable structures which are heterogeneous, but still consistent
- Images help creativity!

Journey

- Landscapes in motion, without predetermined themes
- Setting for long improvised processes
- even with large groups

Two games: landscapes & journey

Excerpt from a documentation of a course with teenagers



Link to video file: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/17ljhuwkmqxsiealynyqo/workshop-with-teenagers_excerpt-of-documentation.mp4?rlkey=vccojc03u12ar3pzm5xgnovv&st=muf5o193&dl=0