

# 'Who looks inside awakens'

working creatively with  
coaching clients



## Founders of Awakening Creativity, coach **Lindsey Wheeler** and humanistic counsellor **Christina Bachini**, demonstrate a simple and powerful new approach to incorporating creativity in coaching practice

**U**nless it forms part of their wider experience, training or background, the use of creativity in practice can feel daunting to some coaches. This is likely because many only encounter it as part of their elected continuing professional development (CPD), or on an art therapy course, or one of the more progressive humanistic courses. To our mind, this is a great shame and deprives coaches of a beneficial tool that can make an enormous difference to our clients' journeys.

Creativity as a therapeutic approach has a long history, particularly the work of Adrian Hill<sup>1</sup>, (often considered the founder of art therapy in the UK), and the work of Margaret Naumburg<sup>2</sup> and Edith Kramer<sup>2,3</sup> in the USA in the 1940s. Even earlier, Freud had made connections between imagery and the unconscious mind,<sup>2</sup> and Carl Jung's views on the importance and value of understanding one's 'inner city'<sup>4</sup> is still foundational to understanding the human condition. More recently, the benefits and outcomes of creativity as a therapeutic approach have been researched and documented in the US and UK by the American Art Therapy Association (<https://arttherapy.org>), and British Association of Art Therapists (<https://baat.org>) respectively.

'But your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart...

Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes.<sup>5</sup>

*Carl Jung*

### How does creativity help?

Helping clients explore their stories is what we all hope to do as professionals. We aim to support our clients as they journey to the heart of what is troubling them and uncover more helpful ways of 'being' today, in the present. It is here that working creatively really comes into its own. It assists the client to bypass the conscious mind, where all the current thinking and belief are enacted, and allows them to look at the *underlying* beliefs and values that are really driving their behaviour.

However, when clients enter the room, they, and we as coaches, are often most concerned with what their conscious mind is telling them. Much of our work is connected to helping clients gain clarity and some relief from the relentless churn

of their thoughts. It is here, we believe, that working creatively with a client is particularly helpful because it provides a safe and fertile route to venture into their unconscious, to uncover their thinking patterns and the principles behind them.

Creativity provides a key that unlocks thinking and enables a new kind of conversation between coach and client to take place; a conversation that does not rely solely on the client's ability to 'find the right words' and articulate in a literal or logical way what's going on for them. When a client is invited to create a physical representation of their issue, they are able to detach from it, and leave behind their conscious knowledge of the situation that they already know so well. They are then able to process the image in a way that offers new perspectives, and with their coach as guide, move the ideas forward so that a change in the thinking system can occur.

For example, if a client says: 'I'm feeling completely blocked, I really don't know what to do', asking them to create the metaphor 'block' as an image results in the mental freedom for a shift to occur. By simply creating an image of the 'block', the block itself is already transformed. Further investigation through skilled questioning will lead to an even greater understanding that will help reshape or dispel the block.

*When we work creatively with people, movement takes place.*

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### Working with complexity and confusion

We have all adopted beliefs, values, moral parameters and rituals from our formative years and life experiences. We learnt to adapt so we can fit in, stay safe and be accepted and loved. These early mechanisms become automatic responses that we make without much conscious thought, which is where the problem may lie. What worked when we were young or in a particular situation may not be what a person would now choose if this unconscious baggage were not the backseat driver.

That's not to say the unconscious cannot be trusted. It does many valuable things for us and has a positive purpose. Often, at the root of it, it aims to keep us safe and protected and provide the best opportunity for us to achieve a sense of belonging and love. But how it goes about this may no longer work or be helpful.

When we meet clients, it's likely they will say they feel sad or anxious, think they are not performing well at work, have 'lost their mojo' or don't know where they are going in life. Most clients know something is not 'right' but may have no idea what is causing this lack of 'rightness'. Conversely, some may be wedded to their story and seem committed to a fixed reason for why they feel like they do but still struggle to make sense of it all and express it verbally. It's not surprising they struggle because they are often experiencing a mix of emotions and feelings generated by their current and past



life experiences, and fuelled by their own responses and behaviours concerning their situation. A lot is going on – at both the conscious and subconscious levels.

However, when clients are invited to work creatively, they are able to represent complex emotions and confused thinking outside of themselves. The very act of creating an image – whether that be a drawing, a clay model, or a formation of buttons – they become an observer of their emotions. Their creation provides a window into their unconscious beliefs and values that are driving their current thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This window helps them uncover where their beliefs and values have come from and, by virtue of this, start to really understand why they do what they do. With this new understanding of themselves, they can see, sometimes for the first time, options and choices open up before them and figure out how to move forward more positively.

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## **Creativity requires no artistic ability or any particular creative skill by the coach or the client. It only requires an acceptance to go with the flow and a willingness to listen to the inner self**

The unconscious mind also affects how we physically feel. It is easy to see the relationship between our mind and our body when we think of situations when we just ‘know’ something’s not right, or if a situation is not safe, or we get a sense that someone is lying. We notice that bodily feeling, but it’s hard to define and often lurks on the edge of our conscious minds and we often try to ignore it. Nonetheless, we know there is hidden knowledge there that is as yet untapped.

Working creatively raises this kind of unconscious hidden knowledge to the conscious mind, helping clients notice it, understand it and feel it. In doing so, clients realise they have the opportunity to evaluate how the unconscious drivers influence their life and how helpful, or otherwise, they are. From this perspective, they can see they have choices to develop a more helpful approach that will serve them better.

### **Do I have to be artistic?**

Creativity requires no artistic ability or any particular creative skill by the coach or the client. It only requires an acceptance to go with the flow and a willingness to listen to the inner self. Our book *The ChrisLin Method, 5 Steps for Working Creatively with Imagery and Metaphor*<sup>6</sup> was written specifically to share our research and practice with fellow practitioners and explain how to help clients let go of their logical thoughts and listen to their intuition as a door to the unconscious. The method we developed is itself founded on empirical evidence from our years of research, experimentation and practice, from our own experiences and the results reported by other practitioners, but it is also highly influenced by our own personal approach to our work, founded in the humanistic, pluralistic and person-centred schools of thought.

Our experience with creativity spans many decades, and we have engaged with a broad spectrum of corporate and private clients over the years, including CEOs, leaders and teams in organisations, and young people. Our collective professional knowledge comes, in part, from our own diverse backgrounds: Lindsey’s experience in the technology sector in sales and human resources before qualifying as a coach complements Christina’s profound understanding and application of humanistic psychology as a counsellor. We work together because of our common belief in the value of creativity as an intervention and a desire to spread the word to fellow coaches. We enjoy the fact that we are so different, as we bring very different perspectives and test ideas through very different lenses, which we feel brings a valuable robustness to our work.

Through our own use of creativity, we realised how much we could all benefit from some deeper study on the actual process that takes place and identify a structure that can be shared with others.

Most practitioners we come across believe that creativity is a ‘messy’ intervention. But it doesn’t have to be. Yes, it can involve felt tip pens, pencils, paints and glue. But it can also involve whatever materials are to hand – white boards, flip charts, desk paraphernalia, household objects or items selected during a nature walk. One client we worked with was having a problem with his team and he used items from the canteen table to represent each person. Using sachets of salt, pepper, sauce and sugar, he laid these out as a visual representation of the relationships between them. In doing so, he was able to recognise there was a distance between him and certain members of the team, and explore the reasons why he experienced difficulty in his interactions with these people. This key insight enabled him to look at his part in the issue and develop some new strategies for how to work more effectively to bring his team together.

### **How to work creatively with clients**

The ChrisLin Method consists of five steps and nine core questions and is supplemented with numerous frameworks for working with specific emotions, behaviours and models, such as boundaries, anxiety and the Drama Triangle.<sup>7</sup> The five steps provide the coach with a simple structure that leads the client from first engagement through the exploration of their creation, to the embodiment of the change and finally, the decision of what to do with their creation when the work is finished. This structure is the backbone of the process and guides practitioners through the ebb and flow of the therapeutic journey. The nine core questions are specifically designed to guide the client through the exploration of their creation (Step 3) and reach some new level of understanding about themselves.

In developing the core questions, our assumption is that the image knows something that the client doesn’t – the image is the holder of the unconscious beliefs and values. So the questions are designed specifically to help the client, and coach, stay focused on the image and uncover what it knows. Once mastered, the coach is free to use these questions along with the framework-specific questions, and their own questions, for a rich and developmental experience.

### Examples of core questions

1. Tell me the story of your image
2. What does this colour represent to you?
3. What does this shape mean for you?
4. What is important about the size of this?

In our experience, the biggest challenge for coaches who are new to working in this way is staying focused on the client's image or creation. As coaches, we are used to asking questions about what our client thinks, feels and believes, so it can feel strange to be asking questions about their image, as if it were a living thing. But the assumption behind our method is that the client *already knows* what they are thinking, so we need a different approach. Working creatively in this way presupposes there is something helpful and, as yet, unheard or unnoticed by the client that the image of their inner world can offer.

### The five steps

Following the steps sequentially ensures a well-run session and will boost your confidence in working creatively as a regular part of your practice. The key elements for each step are:

#### Step 1. Introducing creativity to a client

Often it is about recognising when the client is stuck, unable to verbalise their emotions or their thinking, and would benefit from being taken away from their logical, rational brain. Sometimes the client's use of language, and regular use of metaphors, can give a clue that working creatively would be a good approach for them. Help clients understand that this is not about being an artist or having any artistic abilities.

#### Step 2. The process of creation

Remind the client that the work they will do is about slowing down, tuning into their intuition and being able to doodle or create an abstract, representation, symbol or metaphor. Encourage the use of any creative materials, colours or shapes that they feel drawn to. Set a time limit, such as 5 or 10 minutes, and stay silent while the client is creating.

#### Step 3. Exploring the client's creation

The coach listens to the client's story of their creation and also notices the image as a whole and its component parts. Use the nine core questions to encourage and guide the client to dig deeper into the image and uncover what it has to offer.

#### Step 4. Integrating the changes

Up to this point, all the work has happened outside of the client, and it is likely you will see physical as well as mental shifts in the person. Integration happens by supporting the client to embody the change. For example, suggesting they pick up their image, hold it to their heart and breathe it in.

#### Step 5. Closing the session

When the client is out of the creative process, check they have achieved what they set out to achieve. It may be a complete shift and therefore the process is complete, or a smaller shift that lets the client know there has been a change, but there may be more work to do. Find out what the client wants to do with their creative piece. Do they want to have it on view at home? Do they need to perform a ritual to let go of it?

Over the course of our careers, we have used, experimented and tested many theories, models, approaches and techniques. However, in our opinion, none have been as impactful or effective in facilitating lasting change for our clients as the power of creativity. The method is fully described in the book and on our training courses, and while it is primarily aimed at supporting counsellors, coaches and art therapists to work in this way, it can be applied by practitioners across many disciplines – psychologists, teachers and classroom assistants, HR managers and line managers, or, for personal development.

All you need is to:

- Know the method, but not be a slave to it
- Remain intensely curious about your client's creative work
- Trust your own intuition to ask the right question at the right time.

We believe that creativity has a significant role to play in helping clients look at their underlying, unconscious drivers. For this reason, we believe creativity deserves a prominent place in any coach's toolkit. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Christina Bachini** and **Lindsey Wheeler** are co-founders of Awakening Creativity and authors of *The ChrisLin Method: 5 Steps for Working Creatively with Imagery and Metaphor* (2023). Their more than 50 years of collective experience spans working with young people to corporate clients, with individuals, groups and teams and training in the ChrisLin method.

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