

Beyond squares and flakes: Practising collective creative metacognition to engage tensions with arts-based teaching in adult education

Amy Zidulka

Royal Roads University, Canada (amy.zidulka@royalroads.ca)

Marnie Jull

Royal Roads University, Canada (marnie.jull@royalroads.ca)

Catherine Etmanski

Royal Roads University, Canada (catherine.etmanski@royalroads.ca)

Abstract

Many adult educators support arts-based methods to spark discovery and influence change. Concurrently, other scholars express caution about such creative approaches because they may lead to unintended consequences like resistance or alienation. As three adult educators from separate departments brought together by a university reorganisation, we reflect on our differing experiences with arts-based teaching. Informed by critical friendship, narrative inquiry, and critical incident analysis, we explore the concept of creative metacognition as situated self-awareness of one's (a) creative strengths and (b) contextual conditions. Using the humorous terms squares and flakes to caricature pedagogical norms with arts-based approaches, we examine our motivations and rationales. In doing so, we practise collective creative metacognition to uncover themes and tensions about applying arts-based methods with mid-career adult learners. Our inquiry encourages dialogue and respect for divergent approaches to arts-based methods in adult education and also promotes collective creative metacognition as a helpful practice.

Keywords: creative metacognition, collective creative metacognition, arts-based research, arts-based adult education, arts-based pedagogy



Introduction

Adult education literature positions creative processes, in particular arts-based methods, as means to advance individual discoveries and influence social change (Clover et al., 2022; Wildemeersch, 2019; Yang & Lipson Lawrence, 2017). Adult educators have long drawn upon arts-based methods such as theatre, song, and poetry to support various goals including learning, connection, telling local stories, and collective action (Kidd & Byram, 1979; Prentki & Selman, 2000). Clover et al. (2022) and Wildemeersch (2019) suggested that integrating the arts into adult education has become increasingly prevalent over the past decade, marking what they call an *aesthetic turn*. Arts-based methods can lead to new ways to inspire and impact others and facilitate new pathways for personal and professional transformation (Matarasso, 1997). At the same time, there are reasons to question whether and when overtly creative approaches best serve the achievement of individual and collective learning.

In addition to celebrating the aesthetic turn, adult educators have also noted instances when arts-based approaches, even when facilitated skilfully, can lead to unintended consequences for participants, such as feelings of alienation or marginalisation from their classmates or the subject matter, scepticism about the instructor's credibility, and resistance to learning – all of which we have experienced in our classrooms (Arya-Manesh & Adams, 2021). However well-intentioned an arts-based educator may be, such responses highlight the importance of an educator's capacity to decide whether and when a creative approach is appropriate. As such, the purpose of this paper is to activate greater reflection among arts-based adult educators about whether and when to use arts-based pedagogy in specific contexts.

With this context in mind, the remainder of this paper is organised as follows: We begin by introducing creative metacognition as a useful concept for educators deciding whether and when to use creative approaches. We then provide details about each author's positioning and describe how our methodological approach emerges from this positioning. From there, we narrate critical incidents as stories highlighting each of our relationship to arts-based pedagogy. Following this, we reflect on three themes drawn from these stories using a two-fold framework of creative metacognition: self-knowledge and contextual knowledge. We enhance this analysis with concepts from the field of conflict transformation as well as transformative learning. Finally, we explore three tensions we have encountered that help us navigate our specific contexts as adult educators in post-graduate learning contexts. We conclude by calling for increased attention to creative metacognition, including collective metacognition, among arts-based adult educators and our students.

Theoretical grounding: Creative metacognition

Creative metacognition is theorised in the creativity literature as both a concept and a process involving the ability to identify, monitor and regulate creative ideas and tasks in response to our environments (Lebuda & Benedek, 2023). It enables us to evaluate and adapt our cognitive process in response to contextual cues, integrating introspective reflection as well as an ongoing assessment of how our creative aspirations and actions relate to those of students and the cultures of our institution. This framing helps us to understand how we recognise our own creative strengths, evaluate the effectiveness of our creativity, and adapt our thinking and action in our creative pursuits.

To assess whether and when to engage in creative expression, the creativity literature highlights the utility of practising creative metacognition. Amidst a significant body of research on the concept (e.g., Jia et al., 2019; Lebuda & Benedek, 2023; Urban & Urban, 2023; Urban & Urban, 2025), the conceptualisation of creative metacognition most relevant to our work is as ‘a combination of creative self-knowledge (knowing one’s own creative strengths and limitations, both within a domain and as a general trait) and contextual knowledge (knowing when, where, how, and why to be creative)’ (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013, p. 160). Expressed differently, there are times for creativity and other times ‘when it is better to follow a well-established precedent or to act out of habit – in other words, to conform’ (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013, p. 155). As will be exemplified through an analysis of our narratives below, this two-fold approach to creative metacognition can help adult educators to discern whether and when to use arts-based methods, and when other methods are more suitable.

To clarify what we mean by arts-based methods and creative approaches, we draw from Clover (2010), who, in her content analysis of selective adult education journals and conference proceedings, identified four key areas of women adult education scholars’ work with and in the arts. These included:

1. Community cultural development with a focus on justice for artisans, cultural agency, and the artist as educator;
2. Arts-based research ... along a personal/therapeutic and sociopolitical/educative continuum;
3. Civic engagement and knowledge mobilisation (KM), which emphasised collective arts projects and public engagement; and
4. Art education, which included learning to make artworks, learning about artworks, learning through art, and learning in situ. (Clover, 2010, p. 238)

When we refer to arts-based methods, we take all these ways of engaging through the arts into account, yet we focus on points two (arts-based research) and three (civic engagement and KM) in our own practice. As such, in this paper, arts-based methods refer both to pedagogies we might use in classroom teaching and to research, engagement, and KM methods we might introduce to graduate students under our supervision.

Author positioning

The three of us are university-based adult educators who work with professionals in a diversity of fields – from first responders to executives in large corporations to healthcare, government, or non-profit leaders. Catherine focuses on teaching leadership as engagement and engaged scholarship, with a special focus on arts-based research. Marnie teaches and researches conflict resolution at the personal, interpersonal, and systemic level, while Amy, from the School of Business, teaches and researches in the areas of creativity and innovation. We all, in our own ways, are connected to and passionate about the arts.

Lately, we have found ourselves grappling with tensions we have experienced in using arts-based methods within the context of a newly amalgamated school (i.e., department) within our university. Until recently, we were positioned in different schools within the same university, each with its own culture and thus its own implicit norms around the degree to which arts-based methods were viewed as legitimate in operating in service of student learning. Now, because of a university reorganisation, we are transitioning into being colleagues within a single, amalgamated school, where the

implicit norms of our previous schools are surfacing and sometimes colliding in ways that have prompted us to reflect on our personal and institutional approaches to arts-based methods. One of us comes from a unit that embraces arts-based, holistic, and transformative learning; another from a unit that seldom uses arts-based practices and favours pragmatic approaches with direct application to business; and the third from a unit that is open to individual instructors using arts-based methods but not as part of a shared, school-wide approach.

During this period of transition, we decided to engage in what we have come to call *collective creative metacognition*. We wanted to explore how each of us responded to the tensions and opportunities of arts-based methods within our separate schools in the hopes of discovering new possibilities as we moved to building a shared culture in our new school. To write this paper, we came together in regular dialogue over a three-month period to deepen our personal and contextual knowledge about creative practices in the courses we teach, reflecting on our individual creative strengths and limitations as well as the reactions of students and colleagues. Throughout this period, we engaged in collective creative metacognition through developing individual stories and collaborative sense-making to deepen our understanding of ourselves in relation to our past, present, and future contexts.

Collective creative metacognition as a methodological approach

With the above positioning in mind, this paper is not, nor was it intended to be result of an empirical study. Rather, this paper is best understood as a collaborative reflection on practice, which draws on the methodological traditions of critical friendship, narrative inquiry, and critical incident analysis to generate an approach we call *collective creative metacognition*.

Critical friendship

The relationship among the three of us extends beyond the professional. Over multiple years, we have shared meals, gone on walks, and built the kind of trust that allows for candid conversation. Professionally, as described above, we are commonly bound by a shared commitment to helping students develop the creative capacities they need to imagine and enact change in their professional worlds. Our decision to co-author this paper was motivated primarily by curiosity about how, given this shared commitment, we differ – sometimes in significant ways – in our approaches: How can it be that colleagues I so deeply respect and seem similar in so many important ways might hold different assumptions than me about what constitutes *good teaching*? The bonds of trust we had developed over time provided us with a rare opportunity to be vulnerable and respectfully question one another's assumptions. Thus, we were able to enact the values of trust and vulnerability identified as foundational to critical friendship (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2025).

A primary goal was practical. We each sensed that there was something to be learned by expanding our field of vision and therefore our own practices as educators. Since critical friendship aims to nurture not only the growth of practice but that of the field (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2025), more broadly, we held hope that if we three, as critical friends, might arrive at a more expansive framing of what constitutes creative approaches – a framing expansive enough to hold both *squareness* and *flakiness* – we might be better positioned to nurture collegiality within our newly amalgamated school.

Critical friendship, which aims ‘to improve one’s educational and pedagogical practices in a specific context’ (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020, p. 7) appears well-suited to these practical goals. Moreover, critical friendship has become foundational to our practice of collective creative metacognition.

Narrating critical incidents

To engage in this exploration, we were also informed by the tradition of narrative inquiry (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) insofar as a narrative approach ‘privileges the teller’s experience and uplifts participants as the experts in their experiences’ (Bishop et al., 2019, p. 4). After verbally sharing our stories and experiences through dialogue, each author wrote a narrative representing critical incidents, moments that, through reflection, become turning points and create opportunities for deepening knowledge (Halquist & Musanti, 2010). According to Halquist and Musanti (2010), to be framed as a critical incident, a narrative should involve some degree of conflict or tension, contain some element of surprise to the one who experienced it, represent a broader and recurring pattern in the teller’s practice, and point to something of broader significance beyond itself, illuminating an underlying assumption, institutional norm, or pedagogical tension. We slightly adapted these criteria, including incidents and reflections that may not have felt tense or been surprising to the teller herself, but that revealed something surprising when viewed through the lens of a colleague’s different perspective or through the lens of creative metacognition. This is consistent with the goals of critical friendship, where highlighting differing perspectives fosters new insights (Stolle & Frambaugh-Kritzer, 2025).

Narrative analysis: Stories of arts-based pedagogy

Narrative scholars such as Anderson (2023), Bruner (1985), Page (2016), and Polkinghorne (1995) differentiate between the presentation of narratives as a form of analysis in and of itself (narrative analysis) versus analysing the themes and patterns that cut across various narratives (analysis of narratives). In the subsections below we each offer a narrative of the critical incidents and experiences that have shaped our approach to arts-based pedagogy. Subsequently, we offer an analysis of cross-cutting themes. Rather than exhaustive narratives of our work, we have limited our stories to focus only on the themes and tensions we pull forward in our analysis later in the paper.

Catherine’s narrative

In my work as a leadership educator, I often introduce a range of arts-based methods in the classroom, whether online or in-person. Somewhat differently than the other two authors, I find myself working in a context where these methods are accepted and even normalised. For example, as part of many of our leadership programs, there are segments called *Morning Practice* or *Dream Keepers*, which are opportunities for instructors and students to introduce a variety of practices that can support greater humanity within their roles as leaders and help deepen self-awareness and connections among members of the cohort.

When teaching in a leadership program specifically designed to support students from different parts of the world to lead in international and intercultural contexts, I often facilitated a morning practice that integrated embodied or arts-based activities. Examples

included theatre-based methods, meditation, writing, poetry, photography, and more. Activities were selected to offer exposure to a range of activities that could support students in grounding themselves as a leader and orienting to the day in a more present way, tuning into the wisdom of their bodies, expressing themselves through a range of creative methods, and building community in the cohort. After I facilitated a few examples, I also offered the opportunity for students to facilitate, thus providing the opening to share their own cultural wisdom. Many of these activities were innocuous, e.g., going for a walk in the forest, while others such as singing or dancing included more perception of risk, both for me and for some of my students.

In my own experience working or studying overseas, I have frequently been invited to *sing a song from my country* or join a group of dancers – and I was often ill-prepared to do so. My sense of alienation from the arts was palpable when I lived in Botswana and found myself in settings where people would break into song and everyone would know where they belonged in a three-part harmony. As such, I chose to integrate singing and dancing into these morning practice activities in an effort to prepare Canadian leaders for requests to dance or sing upon request, knowing that it may feel uncomfortable for some, including me.

I recall one instance of singing with a group of students in the garden one morning. Although most students expressed joy through having participated, one student expressed that it reminded her of a negative experience of being forced to sing in school. In another instance, I invited a community-based dance educator to facilitate a morning dance practice. What surprised me was that even the most restrained member of the class bounded with delight when the facilitator brought out ribbons. Moreover, spontaneous dance parties became a regular occurrence during coffee breaks.

In a domestic leadership classroom contexts where being prepared to sing or dance on the spot is a less likely occurrence, I select arts-based methods that are more adaptable to students' organisational contexts. Now that mobile phone cameras are ubiquitous among Canadian students, I have found that photovoice is a reasonably accessible activity to conduct (Etmanski, 2023). Photovoice is *just different enough* from what the majority of students are used to so that it prompts an expansion of what is possible as teaching and research, yet *not so different* that it scares them. Having learned from my own experience of training in Theatre for Living (Diamond, 2007), I know that people hold many conscious and unconscious wounds around the arts, and shame or humiliation can rise to the surface rather quickly. For some, photovoice and its focus on symbolic imagery is the seed of transformative growth while for others it is just one step on their already in-progress process of transformation. Readers interested in learning more about how I facilitate these specific methods could refer to Antoine et al. (2024), Bishop and Etmanski (2021), Etmanski (2007, 2014), Etmanski et al. (2022), and Hill et al. (2025).

Marnie's narrative

In conflict resolution education, dealing with the suffering that conflict can inflict requires students to use cognitive and emotional strategies that can be nonlinear and messy as well as reasonable and structured (Coleman, 2024). Through the inquiry over the past three months with my critical friends, I came to the surprising realisation that there are significant arts-based components in two common pedagogical activities in my conflict resolution courses: role plays and systems mapping. Although the aesthetic components of the methods can help students develop both cognitive and emotional skills, they can also present challenges that have required me to sensitively apply or adapt these methods over the last two decades.

Scenario-based learning or role plays are one of the most widely used methods to teach conflict resolution skills (McAdoo & Manwaring, 2009; Nayar & Koul, 2020). Role plays require students to imaginatively place themselves in dramatic scenarios in the roles of aggrieved parties or the mediator, so that student mediators can practise listening and asking questions to guide parties toward resolution. Prior to our collective metacognitive process, I had not previously appreciated role plays as a form of theatrical improvisation, although I was aware of students' mixed feelings about expressing characteristics and behaviours that might not be their own. As a result of student feedback, my own reflection, and my research into the strengths and limits of role plays as a pedagogical method, I have adapted my role plays assignments so that students write their own role plays of a conflict with which they have personal familiarity. Narrating the perspective of various parties requires students to represent the interior drama of parties in conflict, which is a creative and challenging form of expression for many students, but does not require a more public-facing performance of those roles. Students then have the choice to practice their conflict resolution skills using a role play they developed or work with their student colleagues to explore an actual conflict that has immediate relevance to their context. In this way, I have a *challenge by choice* approach to the arts-based component of role plays, with the goal of supporting students to develop the emotional and cognitive flexibility required to engage with context-relevant conflicts.

Systems-mapping is another common method of teaching conflict resolution skills (Coleman, 2024) that I have discovered can be enhanced by highlighting its arts-based component. Systems mapping is the process of identifying various elements and their interdependencies within a particular context of conflict. Although there is a variety of digital tools for mapping the interdependencies in a system, I also emphasise a more arts-based or symbolic approach that is called *relational mapping*. In this method, students use everyday objects – such as household items or Lego blocks – to represent symbolic and material elements of a conflict system. This arts-inspired approach encourages students to think beyond conventional analytical tools, engaging with the conflict symbolically and spatially to better understand how different elements interact within a larger system.

One of the strengths of this method as a thinking tool is its tactile and interactive nature: elements can be moved easily, making the process especially valuable in group settings. Despite my rationale for using this method, there are often students in my courses who find the process cumbersome or awkward, preferring digital tools to help them think individually on screen rather than in a collective process using concrete objects. This leads me to wonder about how much to insist that students practise an unfamiliar method, challenging themselves to explore its potential before rejecting it as unconventional.

I find myself bumping into my own dilemmas about institutional power as I assign and assess projects that draw on students' creatively analytical skills when students express scepticism or resistance to those projects. I do my best to practise accountability in my teaching, so that I can explain how the assignments are aligned to learning outcomes directly related to the competencies needed for conflict transformation.

Amy's narrative

As someone who teaches design thinking, I often question whether it counts as an arts-based method. If creativity can be understood to encompass that which is wild, soulful, selfish, romantic, rebellious, cathartic, impulsive, useless, bizarre, or even destructive (Zidulka & Kajzer Mitchell, 2018), design thinking could be understood as its co-optation – a way to harness creativity for instrumentalist ends. However, the fact that design

thinking asks people to use visual methods, such as prototyping ideas using pipe cleaners, and dramatic methods such as role play leads me to classify it as an arts-based method, albeit a safe one, which has become commonplace and thus credible within business contexts. In a business-school context, design thinking provides a cover of instrumentalism, enabling receptivity in the mid-career MBA classroom.

Even with that cover, I often eschew more symbolic approaches, such as representing ideas using the type of art supplies found in an elementary school classroom, in favour of storyboarding, where students draw or paste images to depict users' experiences. Outside of these design thinking exercises, I rarely use arts-based methods in my teaching – even though, at the personal level, I credit involvement with the arts for much of what I value in my life and professional journey. Rather, I tend to draw on what McFadzean (1998) has called paradigm-preserving or paradigm-stretching approaches, methods like brainstorming that are familiar, not arts-based, and that open the possibility of a creative leap without requiring students to leap if they do not feel called to.

I have been influenced by research suggesting that an unconscious bias against creativity exists even within organisations that claim to seek it (Mueller et al., 2012), and that being perceived as creative can lead to being seen as having 'lower leadership potential' (Mueller et al., 2011, p. 494). For many professionals, being seen as creative entails real professional risk, which may affect not only personal goals but the ability to exert positive influence in their organisations. Taking this risk may impact not only a student's personal goals, but their ability to influence, for example, when advocating for a more equitable work environment. Indeed, as Meyerson (2003) showed, positive, creative organisational change has often emerged not from those who seem creative, but by those she calls *tempered radicals* – people who successfully walk the tightrope between conformity and rebellion.

I perceive that many of my manager-students hold bias against overtly creative methods described by Mueller et al. (2011; 2012), while recognising that some of this perception may arise from insecurity in myself. In any case, it feels safer, in terms of maintaining my own credibility, to err on the side of paradigm-stretching or preserving approaches. Moreover, it can feel more respectful. Much of my formal education is in creative areas: I have early degrees in architecture and creative writing. I am thus aware that, as Business School faculty member, in some ways I am a guest in a different culture, who is called upon to adapt and translate to an academic culture that is different than the ones in which I came up. Moreover, in considering Meyerson's (2003) work, I question whether an effective way to achieve radically creative outcomes at times could be to embrace processes that do not draw attention to their creativity.

Analysis of narratives: Thematic reflections on creative metacognition

These reflections on the tensions we feel and the choices we make in our specific contexts have highlighted for us the importance of creative metacognition. As described earlier, creative metacognition is a situated self-awareness that leads to understanding (a) one's own creative strengths and (b) contextual conditions (Jia et al., 2019; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013; Lebuda & Benedek, 2023; Urban & Urban, 2023). Although the concept of creative metacognition highlights the importance of reflecting on our creative process and outputs in context, our stories revealed the need for additional metacognitive tools to understand some of the tensions that surfaced through the metaphors of *squares* and *flakes*.

All humans are complex and nuanced and, clearly, we are unfairly stereotyping when, as our paper's title suggests, we refer to *squares* and *flakes*. However, it is with a

playful and non-totalising spirit that we observed that our non-arts-based colleagues at times can typecast their arts-based counterparts as *flakes*, whereas those committed to the arts can sometimes dismiss adherents to conventional pedagogies (e.g., lectures and discussions) as *squares*. As we discussed our various perspectives and stories, we realised that we were seeking nuance beyond the mutual bias inherent to stereotypes of *squares* and *flakes*.

For this, we turned to the metacognitive concepts offered by the Insight approach, originally developed in the field of conflict resolution, which focuses on how threat and bias can constrict cognitive functioning, while curiosity can create space for shifts in understanding and interaction (Jull, 2022; Melchin & Picard, 2008; Picard, 2016; Price, 2013). As we discovered, a perceived threat to what matters to us or others (experienced as discomfort or alienation, for example) can lead to a narrowed perspective and trigger reactive behaviours of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn (Jull, 2022). In our educational settings, these reactions can show up as withdrawal, resistance, or caricaturing others through labels such as *squares* and *flakes*. In contrast, when we can help to foster curiosity in ourselves and others, it can expand cognitive functioning and make room for insight and transformative learning, regardless of whether conventional or arts-based pedagogical approaches are in play. This reinforces the importance of personal self-awareness and contextual knowledge that are skills emphasised in the creative metacognition literature and central to our roles as adult educators.

Through reflecting on the stories narrated above, we identified three interrelated themes: (1) contextual knowledge (2) personal self-awareness and (3) key principles of adult education. In relation to creative metacognition, we recognised three temporal dimensions of theme 1, contextual knowledge rooted in the past, present, and future. We also discovered aspects of personal knowledge (Theme 2), including perceptions of threat and bias, that we consistently navigate within the contexts we inhabit. Our third theme identifies some andragogical insights revealed through our stories, as is fitting for a journal on the arts and adult education.

Theme 1: Contextual awareness of past, present, and future

In considering the influence of the past, we each recognised in our stories the various ways that learners might relate to arts-based methods based on their past experiences and default expectations. Catherine demonstrates awareness of her students' default practices in her adoption of photovoice, which is '*just different enough* from what the majority of students are used to so that it prompts an expansion... yet *not so different* that it scares them.' In innovating role play pedagogy so that students claim greater creative license, Marnie adapts 'one of the most widely used activities in teaching conflict resolution skills', and thus, like Catherine, straddles the divide between what is potentially threatening for students toward what might be illuminating. Similarly, in adopting design thinking, Amy expands on what students might typically experience in a business school classroom, while rooting her pedagogy in approaches that are credible within their context.

In considering the present, the storytellers identify how different ways of knowing are advanced through using arts-based methods, which we discuss in greater theoretical depth below. In Marnie's story, she notes how role play allows 'students to represent the interior drama of parties in conflict' and how using Lego blocks to engage in system mapping enables students 'to experiment with spatial configurations and test out their interpretations and various perspectives of potential stakeholders'. Catherine speaks to embodied ways of knowing and relating that can be expressed through singing and

sharing symbolic images. Amy helps students animate their curiosity to generate innovative solutions to design challenges by using storyboards (rather than improvised sculptures) as tools for thinking and communicating.

In considering the future, the storytellers make choices based on the learning outcomes of their courses and how students may apply class practices in their future professional contexts. Catherine's choice of introducing song and dance aligns with the cultural fluencies required of students in international and intercultural contexts. Marnie recognises that students in her courses on conflict transformation need preparation to deal with the discomfort of intense emotion and complex layers of meaning that can be offered through authentic role play and symbolic representations. Amy's decisions to adopt and adapt design thinking are taken in the context of the credibility that design thinking already holds, with a view to equipping students with skills in a process that is currently popular in many organisations in which they might work.

Theme 2: Personal knowledge of tension and bias

In addition to highlighting contextual knowledge, the stories reveal rich layers of personal knowledge. The stories illuminate how we each navigate the inner and relational tensions that can be provoked by introducing arts-based methods into learning spaces that are conventionally guided by linear, discursive thinking. Through reflection on our own vulnerabilities and uncertainties, we grappled with the threats and possibilities of inviting students into creative forms of engagement. Catherine reflects on her early sense of alienation from singing within the cultural norms of three-part harmony in Botswana. Later, her training in community theatre made her acutely aware of the threat of emotional risks of creative expression, 'where shame and humiliation can emerge rather quickly'. These insights now shape her pedagogy as she works to balance experimentation with emotional safety. Though she may feel nervous to introduce singing, she has developed courage and confidence to do so, based on students' positive responses that affirm the appropriateness of her risk. Marnie draws on her experience with the threat, messiness, and suffering of conflict to support students to engage cognitively and emotionally in a way that can help them stay present and open despite the discomfort that conflict incurs. Amy's narrative spotlights the tension between her deep grounding in the arts and the pragmatic ethos of business education, navigating how to maintain credibility while introducing creative approaches in a context that values clarity and utility. She chooses to use methods that 'open the possibility of a creative leap without requiring students to leap if they do not feel called to' by introducing methods that 'do not draw attention to their creativity', which can be threatening. Across these stories, we noticed how our personal experience and institutional context converge in the ongoing negotiation of what it means to teach responsibly and creatively.

The notion of bias as 'the absence of further relevant questions' (Jull, 2020, p. 225; see also, Lonergan, 2001) provides a powerful lens to understand the challenges inherent in both our learners and ourselves. Bias, in this sense, is not necessarily prejudice or conscious rejection, but a limitation in inquiry, an unnoticed exclusion that can occur within individuals and among groups. Bias is revealed when curiosity is dulled or when preferred approaches are unquestioned despite their constraints or impacts. Students may dismiss creative tasks from their instructor as irrelevant or *flaky*, or instructors may champion creativity by dismissing students' valid resistance as *square*. Recognising how bias functions – as the constraining of questions – can enable us to activate curiosity and wonder what might lie beyond our certainties and hesitations, not necessarily to champion

arts-based methods but to apply contextual discernment with clarity and accountability about what we do and why we do it.

Theme 3: Our roles and goals as adult educators

Taken together, the above two themes provide a glimpse into our own creative metacognition in terms of revealing our contextual awareness and personal knowledge. In addition to offering metacognitive themes, the stories also highlight familiar adult education principles, stretching back to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which points to the importance of educators meeting learners where they are and offering the appropriate scaffolding to enable growth (Merriam, 2001). The stories also reveal tensions and connections between transactional and transformative educational goals (Mintz, 2022). Whereas transactional learning emphasises knowledge acquisition and skill development, transformative learning involves a more fundamental shift in our meaning-making structures or identity (Boyd, 1989; Cranton, 2011; Mezirow, 1991; Scott, 1997). Our stories show that our respect for both kinds of learning can sometimes show up as tension, while other times they are in service to one another.

Although Mezirow (1991) famously asserted that transformative learning begins with a *disorienting dilemma*, our stories raise questions about the degree of disorientation that will best serve learners. Lipson Lawrence and Cranton (2015) offered a more nuanced model of transformative learning by advancing the notion of *catalyst* instead of dilemma and suggest that 'a catalyst can be traumatic, a turning point in a process, epochal (dramatic) or incremental (gradual)' (p. 63). They described different kinds of catalysts, including everyday *or* dramatic external events, as well as internal processes within an individual's consciousness. Their model positions transformation as a longer-term process rather than an endpoint, involving a catalyst that is followed by encouraging or delaying influences. They use the analogy of gardening to suggest that a skilful gardener (i.e., an educator, mentor, or empathetic friend) can create helpful growing conditions but cannot force expanded consciousness or transformative growth. Similarly, when such catalytic seeds are planted, encouraging influences can support this seed in taking root more quickly. Conversely, they suggest that transformation remains possible, albeit more difficult, in the face of delaying influences. This theory of transformation demonstrates awareness of contextual conditions and the role of educators therein.

In a similar vein, Schnepfleitner and Ferreira (2021) suggested that transformative learning theory should be adapted to more explicitly address contextual analysis. In their words, 'by developing awareness and appreciation of personal and sociocultural context, educators can better facilitate transformative learning situations within existing contextual constraints' (Schnepfleitner & Ferreira 2021, p. 41). This reinforces our sense of the alignment between transformative learning and creative metacognition insofar as we are inviting educators to become aware of their/our creative strengths and the contextual conditions.

In line with scholars such as these, the concept of creative metacognition places emphasis on the process of knowing, not only the knowledge itself. As such, it serves as a bridge between our understanding of transformative learning and arts-based methods by helping us recognise different forms of knowing so that we can move between them with awareness. Moreover, we have found it useful to consider Heron and Reason's (1997) typology of four forms of knowing (in the Western tradition): experiential, propositional, presentational, and practical. Experiential knowing comes from direct experience, propositional knowing involves understanding as concepts or abstractions.

Presentational knowing is symbolic, oriented to meaning and represented through art, literature, and music. Practical knowing relates to acting in the world, making decisions and completing tasks that meet needs and advance goals. Although our institutional norms often privilege propositional knowing as the standard of academic rigour or credible pedagogy, arts-based methods allow us to develop presentational knowing, where meaning is generated through image, symbol, the body, and story (see, e.g., Dirkx, 1998; Lipson Lawrence, 2012; Lipson Lawrence & Cranton, 2015; Yorks & Kasl, 2006). For adult learners who come to our courses having acquired rich life experiences (experiential knowing), both propositional and presentational knowledge are valuable in enhancing their capacity to advance concrete goals (practical knowing). In this paper, we invite educators to consider whether and when to advance which ways of knowing.

Discussion beyond squares and flakes: Engaging the tensions as sites of learning

Reflecting on the stories and concepts above helped us to identify some of the tensions we navigate as well as relevant questions that might help other adult educators navigate their own versions of the square/flake tension in themselves or their contexts. These tensions are not meant to be resolved; rather, they are productive insofar as they help to expand our thinking and practice. The three significant tensions we identified are outlined below.

Tension 1: Building on the familiar vs opening to the unfamiliar

All pedagogies are characterised by affordances and limitations, just as all pedagogies can privilege certain learners and potentially marginalise others. Our familiar institutional structure of lectures and discussions provides students with a set of norms and expectations that they have learned to navigate by developing a certain set of skills for argument, analysis, and application. Conventional, discursive approaches have the advantage of allowing those who, in their journey as students, have become familiar with these approaches to delve deeply into creative exploration without allocating attention to the pedagogical methods themselves. Here, an analogy to musicianship is apt, in which a musician can be creative with a familiar musical instrument, to which they have dedicated years of practice, in ways that may not be achievable with a new instrument. Moreover, students who are not academically confident and have mastered conventional academic skills through time and discipline may more easily access content learning if they are able to rely on their existing academic skills.

That said, conventional approaches can both constrain learning possibilities and marginalise students who do not learn best in academically normative ways. Arts-based methods can lead to new, unexpected pathways of transformation through opening possibilities for foundationally different ways of knowing and being. They can abet in developing skills such as emotional attunement, comfort with ambiguity, and symbolic thinking as well as responsiveness to emergent meaning. Such methods may feel particularly appealing to students who are exploratory or adventurous and crave emergent and creative learning. They also may make learning more accessible to students who express themselves in ways that are more experiential, visual, emotional, or intuitive – as well as those with prior exposure to the arts. For the educator hoping to foster transformative learning, engaging in creative metacognition assists in assessing when

building on familiar approaches versus opening to new, arts-based ways might better serve student learning.

Tension 2: Education as exploration vs preparation

Another tension lies in the potentially competing purposes of higher education as a space for exploration or transformation and a site for preparation for professional practice. This dual role can generate tension, particularly in programs designed for mid-career professionals. Some learners may seek refuge from rigid workplace norms and long for a space to reimagine their roles and abilities; others arrive with focused goals and expect skill development they can apply immediately. As we discussed in our stories, arts-based methods may feel liberating to the former and frivolous to the latter. In both cases, pedagogical choices are not just about creativity but about contextual fit.

Tension 3: Flakiness vs squareness

Our third tension points to consideration of our own positioning as educators and leaders of learning experiences, and asks, ‘what is lost and gained, when we make ourselves vulnerable – and perhaps risk being perceived as flakes?’ Through adopting arts-based methods, which may appear strange to students, we risk being perceived as flaky in some contexts. However, if, as educators, we aspire to contribute towards individual, organisational, and societal transformation so that the world of tomorrow might be more equitable and joyful than the world of today, do not we have an obligation to model different ways of being? How can we expect our students to act courageously in transforming the status quo if we do not demonstrate that we possess the courage to do so? Yet, here too, there is a tension to be navigated. Without denying the possible impact of courageous modelling of different ways of being, there are contexts in which students perceiving an educator as flaky and thus not as credible could limit willingness to be led by that educator into risky or vulnerable learning terrain. There are contexts in which an educator’s normativity – their squareness – might contribute to students’ ability to focus on exploratory learning.

Conclusion

Although we teach in the same university, our personal backgrounds and training, as well as our organisational positions and cultures are different enough to generate productive dialogue through this practice of collective creative metacognition. In this shared exploration, we compared our personal experiences with bodies of literature on creative metacognition, conflict transformation, and transformative learning. In so doing, we identified three themes related to contextual awareness, personal knowledge, and our specific roles and goals as adult educators. From here we explored three tensions, which may be equally useful for adult educators who, like us, wish to make wise decisions in support of the learners with whom we work.

Returning to the playful language in our paper’s title, we used the terms *squares* and *flakes* to represent the caricatures that can result from oversimplifying the preferences and norms of other individuals and contexts, where the *square* reflects the transactional, propositional approach and *flake* involves the more presentational and transformational approach. In co-writing this paper, we adopted these terms as shorthand to describe the tensions we wanted to unpack as we explored our own experiences of teaching mid-career

professionals through the arts. As we enhanced our individual and collective metacognition, our conversations expanded our scope of understanding, possibility, and respect.

In applying collective creative metacognition to our own teaching and documenting it in this paper, we offer an implicit invitation to arts-based adult educators and, by extension, their students to undertake this kind of exploration of their individual and shared experiences and the wider context of their lives and workplaces when deciding whether and when to engage through the arts. Not only could this foster increased individual and collective capacity for generative change, both with and without arts-based methods, but it may also help to generate the kind of curiosity that enables imagination and engagement with the unknown. In this historical moment marked by increasing polarisation and multiple, intersecting, global crises, individual and collective creative metacognition grounded in critical friendship offers a way to move forward with enhanced intentionality, reflexivity, and dialogue across difference.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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