European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2026, pp. 427-438

Building community among adult education tutors through an arts-based learning community of practice

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of arts-based learning within a community of practice (CoP) of adult educators from my perspective as an insider practitioner-researcher and a member of the CoP. Drawing on the concept of visual culture learning communities I explore how arts-based practices can be sustained within the constraints of increasingly standardised education systems. Using an interpretivist approach, I examine adult education tutors' experiences of participating in an Arts-Based Learning CoP. My findings show that engaging in a CoP enhances the well-being and professional growth of tutors, with transformative potential for both educators and their students. I acknowledge the limitations of the research, including insider-outsider dynamics within the CoP and I consider the possibility that visual arts may not resonate equally with all learners. Nonetheless, the findings highlight the potential of arts-based approaches to strengthen relational, reflective, and supportive professional communities in adult education.

Keywords: arts-based learning, creativity, communities of practice, affective learning, transformative learning

Introduction

Arts-based learning refers to the use of artistic methods to teach in non-artistic disciplines (Bamford, 2006). Engagement in the arts offers more than just aesthetic experience. It also fosters emotional engagement, critical reflection, and transformative learning opportunities (Dewey, 1934/2005; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995; Zander, 2004). Arts-based pedagogies create opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and shared understanding, allowing educators and learners to engage with diverse perspectives and develop deeper connections with others (Collins & Ogier, 2012). For adult learners, especially those with

ISSN 2000-7426
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http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.6305
www.rela.ep.liu.se

negative prior educational experiences, arts-based pedagogies can provide a supportive environment for learning by enhancing their self-esteem and confidence (Azevedo & Gonçalves, 2012).

Adult education in Ireland plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning, social inclusion, and community development (SOLAS, 2020). Many adult learners return to education after negative or interrupted schooling experiences, often carrying emotional barriers to learning. Adult educators do not just transmit knowledge; they also support the personal growth and wellbeing of their students. This makes the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching particularly important and highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are responsive, inclusive, and empowering.

While adult education often prioritises workforce-oriented skill development, it is just as important to support learning in the affective domain (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Arts-based learning allows adults to engage in learning emotionally as well as cognitively. Our classrooms should 'pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive' (Greene, 1995, p. 43). Greene's vision calls for learning spaces where both educators and learners are encouraged to bring their full selves into the classroom. An over-emphasis on standardised education ignores adult learners' diverse experiences. Adult educators increasingly work within education systems shaped by standardisation, performativity, and accountability measures, what Biesta (2010) refers to as the 'learnification' (p. 17) agenda. Biesta (2010, 2017) argues that such systems favour quantifiable outcomes, narrowing the purposes of education and constraining opportunities for creative engagement. For adult educators, these pressures can lead to a sense of professional narrowing and a loss of space for reflective, embodied, and collaborative forms of learning. Biesta (2013) regards teaching as a 'risky business' that requires flexibility on behalf of a teacher. Arts-based learning embraces this unpredictability, allowing educators to respond dynamically to students' needs.

Critical and transformative traditions in adult education frame education as a space for dialogue and social change. Clover and Williamson's (2019) concept of a pedagogy of possibility locates the arts as a tool for transformation while challenging dominant narratives. A pedagogy of possibility highlights how arts-based learning is a collaborative process that can lead to personal and social change. This aligns with Freire's (1970/2000) theory of education as a tool for transformation. An arts-based CoP can serve as a transformative space where tutors engage in dialogue, critically examining prevailing educational narratives.

Establishing an arts-based community of practice (CoP)

I established the Arts-Based Learning Community of Practice (CoP) as a space where adult education tutors share their experiences of using arts-based methods in their practice. Professional isolation is a challenge among adult education tutors in Ireland. Many tutors work part-time, or work across multiple sites of learning, often in the evening. An arts-based CoP offers a way to connect with other tutors in a way that is collaborative and grounded in shared experience.

Communities of practice offer educators valuable opportunities for professional growth by enabling collaboration and shared knowledge-building (Wenger, 1998). Freedman et al. (2013) highlight the distinctive learning that occurs within visual culture learning communities. These communities show how arts-based learning can flourish through immersion in the group rather than didactic instruction. While these communities are rule-based, the informal and non-hierarchical nature of these communities encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and creative exploration.

Wenger (1998) argues that engaging in learning communities is also a social and identity-forming process. In these communities, tutors are not only developing new pedagogical approaches; they are negotiating who they are becoming as educators. Such informal spaces foster identity development and a sense of belonging (Freedman et al., 2013). This reinforces the value of arts-based learning CoPs as a means of professional development for adult educators.

When tutors engage in CoPs, they are more likely to implement new teaching strategies in their classrooms which can enhance student engagement (Vescio et al., 2008). Therefore, CoPs offer tutors opportunities to adapt strategies that meet the diverse needs of adult learners, while also while also functioning as environments where challenges can be discussed openly and without judgement (Brennan & Gorman, 2023). It is important to distinguish between communities of practice as safe spaces and brave spaces. While safe spaces are traditionally imagined as environments free from judgement, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that safe spaces can hinder dialogue by prioritising comfort over critical engagement. They argue that meaningful learning, particularly when it involves identity, emotion, or relational dynamics, necessarily entails a degree of discomfort and risk. Arao and Clemens (2013) instead advocate for the notion of 'brave spaces', which encourage participants to engage with discomfort, grapple with challenging issues, and confront issues of power and privilege, rather than avoiding conflict. While it is important to foster trusting environments where participants can practise without judgement, it is equally vital to recognise an arts-based learning CoP as a brave space that invites critique, experimentation, and exploration.

While CoPs create valuable opportunities for collective learning, they can also reproduce boundaries around who feels included. Wenger (1998) emphasises that participation and belonging are shaped by individuals' prior identities, histories, and levels of confidence, which means that not all members experience the community in the same way. As a result, some educators may develop a strong sense of inclusion within the CoP, whereas others may find themselves on the margins. Awareness of these dynamics is vital in creative CoPs, which depend on inclusive participation to sustain the collaborative, exploratory nature of arts-based learning.

Freedman et al. (2013) suggest that online spaces can widen access, connecting learners across distances and creating new forms of collaboration. I established the Arts-based Learning CoP to create a collaborative space where tutors can explore arts-based pedagogies, share ideas, and support one another in developing creative teaching practices. This also aligns with Ellsworth's (2005) concept of pedagogy in the making, which describes pedagogy that is shaped by experience. This supports the flexible and emotional nature of arts-based learning and highlights the value of spaces where creativity, reflection, and professional learning can grow.

The establishment of the arts-based learning CoP initially involved informal conversations among tutors who were studying on education programmes within the South East Technological University (SETU) in Ireland. These tutors previously attended arts-based learning workshops or expressed an interest in using creative methodologies in their classrooms. From these initial meetings, I invited tutors to join via email, monthly newsletters, and word-of-mouth. Over time, the CoP grew into a network of approximately fifty members. Online meetings are held monthly, to accommodate members across different locations, while I also organise in-person workshops once or twice a year in SETU. Each monthly session focuses on a specific theme, or artistic medium and I encourage group members to lead workshops, sharing their ideas with one another. My ongoing involvement in organising and participating in sessions has given me an embedded understanding of how the community functions in practice.

A key goal of the CoP is the creation of a non-judgmental space. I encourage members to participate according to their own ability, with no pressure to produce or present finished work. This ethos helps foster trust, allowing their creativity to flourish.

The literature highlights the transformative potential of arts-based learning; the role of CoPs in fostering collaboration and professional growth; and the positive impact of arts-based pedagogies on adult learners' engagement. This offers a strong theoretical foundation for exploring how participation in an Arts-based Learning CoP can support both tutors and their students.

Methodology

My research focuses on adult education tutors' experiences of engaging in an Arts-Based Learning CoP. This study is grounded in my position as a researcher and an active participant within the Arts-Based Learning CoP. Adopting an interpretivist stance allows me to explore how meaning is constructed within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as well as a greater understanding of the emotional, relational, and transformative dimensions of arts-based learning. Rather than seeking distance, I recognise that my relationships within the CoP shape both access to and interpretation of the data. This approach offers me rich, deeper insights into the personal and professional aspects of arts-based learning.

Bulk and Collins (2024) argue that insider research involves far more than sharing characteristics with participants; it is a situated, dynamic, and deeply felt experience shaped by context, identity, and ongoing interactions. Within a Community of Practice, shared understandings, trust, and established social relationships can offer richer access to participants' perspectives and the contextual nuances of their meaning-making. At the same time, such proximity requires careful attention to potential bias, power dynamics, and the influence of organisational and personal contexts on data interpretation and researcher-participant relationships.

As an insider participant in the Art CoP, I was already embedded in the social dynamics and creative practices. Consequently, my dual role as both participant and researcher inevitably shaped the research process. This positioned me uniquely to understand participants' experiences, but it also required ongoing reflexivity to explore how my existing relationships and familiarity with participants influenced data interpretation. I maintained a reflective journal to document my personal biases and assumptions, during data collection and analysis. This helped to minimise the influence of researcher subjectivity on the interpretation of findings as I was better able to distinguish between participants' voices and my own perspectives.

I used a purposive sampling strategy to identify participants who were actively engaged in the CoP and were willing to explore their experiences of engaging in the community. At the time of the study, the CoP had 50 registered members (48 female and 2 male). Five female tutors volunteered to participate in the research. While the sample size is relatively small and gender-skewed, it allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. While specific data for the adult and further education sector is not available, this gender imbalance reflects broader trends in education in Ireland, where female educators (73.6%) are more prominently represented (Central Statistics Office, 2025). Nevertheless, the gender imbalance within the sample represents a notable limitation that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

I collected research data through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. This format suited participants, who were located across different geographical regions. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and used open-ended questions. These

questions explored participants' motivations for joining the CoP, their experiences within the group, and the impact of arts-based learning on their teaching practice. When conducting interviews, I was conscious that participants knew me as a fellow member and organiser of the CoP. I believe this familiarity supported openness and trust, but it also required careful attention to power dynamics and ethical practice.

Prior to the interviews, I provided participants with a consent form outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity is rarely achievable in naturalistic inquiry, particularly when the researcher holds an insider role within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, I maintained confidentiality by interviewing participants individually outside the shared community space, ensuring that their contributions could be protected and separated from their identities within the CoP. To ensure this protection, pseudonyms were used.

I obtained informed consent in accordance with SETU's ethical guidelines. I assured participants that all data would be anonymised and securely stored, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

I analysed the interview data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted manually to allow for careful engagement with the data and to ensure that emerging themes reflected participants' own words and experiences.

I used member checking to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. I returned interview transcripts and initial thematic summaries to participants for verification. This helped to ensure that my analysis accurately reflected participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The findings from my research show how tutors constructed meaning from their experiences in the Arts-Based Learning Community of Practice (CoP). From my analysis of the interview data, five themes emerged. First, tutors described strong personal connections to art, often grounded in childhood experiences or longstanding creative habits that shaped their identities and motivations for joining the CoP. Second, the CoP functioned as an important space for connection and dialogue, offering collegial support and enabling shared exploration of arts-based teaching. Third, tutors highlighted how the CoP provided inspiration and validation of their arts-based practice. Fourth, tutors highlighted the need for a nurturing environment characterised by trust, psychological safety, and freedom from judgement, which empowered tutors to take risks and extend their practice. Finally, arts-based learning transformed tutors' practice by boosting learners' confidence, creativity and well-being, while also generating positive ripple effects that extended into their families and wider lives. These themes illustrate how the Arts-Based Learning CoP supported personal, relational, and pedagogical growth among participants.

Personal connections to art

Tutors described deep personal connections to art, often rooted in childhood experiences. These early memories shaped their current identity as creative practitioners and

influenced their motivations for joining the CoP. For example, Eva described her experience of growing up with art:

> … I didn't study art, but art was everywhere with us, and we had such a freedom, and I grew up exposed to music and dancing and drama and arranging and colouring and painting and exploring different types of art without formal education.

This reflects the way informal creative experiences can provide a foundation for later engagement in arts-based professional learning.

Anna described art as part of her habitual way of thinking or processing information. She recalled that as a student she would listen to lecturers and 'be doodling…notebooks…full of notes, but…also full of doodles…' stating that she found it 'nice to listen and… draw at the same time'. This underscores for me how creativity functions as both an expressive outlet and a cognitive tool, supporting concentration and meaning-making.

I discovered that some tutors were drawn to the CoP for deeply personal reasons such as supporting their mental wellbeing and having a space to relax. Art was described as 'something that I do for my mental health and for my wellness' (Amy). Others emphasised the CoP as a relaxing environment where they could unwind, with Anna describing it as 'a nice way to spend time…in other people's company'. Sarah noted, 'There was no pressure… and that was… really good for me mentally… just to slow me down'. Overall, the CoP was experienced as a space that encouraged slowing down and being present, offering a low-pressure alternative to fast-paced teaching environments.

The structure of the CoP also enabled tutors to carve out dedicated creative time, amid competing demands, something they often struggled to prioritise. Kate noted that it helped her to be disciplined with her creative time. Scheduling the sessions meant 'I'd set myself free, put it in my diary' (Kate). Sarah explained that the experience encouraged her to integrate creativity more intentionally into her personal life:

> … I've actually had friends over a couple of times just to… paint… it brought us together… And it's made me really conscious of how I use my time in that I really want to make more time now just to sit down and try out something new and just to experiment.

This demonstrates to me that the CoP supported tutors in reclaiming their creative time and nurturing their personal well-being.

Finally, tutors emphasised that art allowed them to connect with something deeper and more reflective, a meaningful experience they hoped to share with learners. Kate commented, 'when you're drawing… your mind is free' while Eva described art as something that 'feeds our soul…our mind in a natural way'. These perspectives highlight to me a shared belief in the emotional and existential value of creativity.

Connection and dialogue with other tutors

In my analysis it emerged that a central motivation for joining the CoP was the opportunity to develop connections with colleagues who shared similar interests and challenges. Tutors valued being part of a group that shared 'the same thoughts… and love for what we're doing' (Amy). They described the CoP as a space for collective curiosity and mutual support, with Sarah noting the 'sharing of ideas' and 'sense of connectedness' that emerged through regular interaction with the group.

This sense of professional community appeared to reduce isolation, foster collegiality, and create a supportive network for developing arts-based teaching practices. The CoP functioned as a relational and dialogic environment where tutors could support one another in meaningful ways.

Art at the heart of practice: Ideas for arts-based learning

Another key theme that emerged from my analysis was the role of the CoP in generating new ideas for teaching. Participants saw the community as a valuable resource for practical activities and pedagogical inspiration. As Amy explained, the CoP helped her to 'start stockpiling…resources' to bring into her classroom. This is particularly helpful given the limited time tutors often have to design creative activities.

Tutors reported that the CoP increased their confidence to try new approaches. Sarah described it as giving her 'a little more confidence in trying out new things…to be more experimental in [the] classroom', while Amy reflected that the CoP validated practices she was already using:

> I think it gave me permission to bring art into my classroom… Because I've been doing it anyway, But I've been not naming it…So I felt like it was valid. And now I own it and I have it as a highlight of my course…

This suggests to me that the CoP not only provided new knowledge but also legitimised participants' existing creative competencies.

Creativity flourishes in a nurturing environment

Trust and psychological safety emerged as essential conditions underpinning creativity within the CoP. Several participants expressed initial concerns about sharing work but emphasised that the group environment quickly alleviated these anxieties. Kate reflected that while she was unsure at first, she 'didn't feel intimidated' and felt comfortable contributing.

The importance of a non-judgemental atmosphere was frequently highlighted. Anna described the CoP as offering 'safety, equality, and trust', emphasising that artistic ability did not determine a person's value within the group:

> … We're all at different stages and levels of our artistic ability, it doesn't matter. You always say, do you want to share? … and it's all appreciated… it's a skill in itself to be able to create that environment…

Participants also stressed to me the value of ensuring that everyone's contributions were genuinely acknowledged, with Eva noting that 'everybody feels valued… everybody's work feels valued'.

Interestingly, I found that the online setting did not diminish this sense of safety. Participants generally felt comfortable creating at home, with some reporting that the virtual format reduced feelings of vulnerability. As Kate noted, being in her own environment meant she did not feel 'people were looking at you straight away', and she appreciated having the choice to show or withhold her work. In this way, the CoP offered a space to support creative risk-taking.

Transforming practice through art

All participants reported using techniques and ideas from the CoP in their teaching. Many described to me how arts-based learning had a profound impact on their students' confidence and self-esteem. For example, Kate recounted a moment when a learner became emotional after creating something they had not believed possible and was 'so proud' of their achievement.

Similarly, Sarah explained that students who initially thought they weren't creative were able to produce 'really lovely work', which 'opened them up to the possibilities' of further creative engagement. These outcomes were linked to increased self-esteem, with Eva noting that arts-based learning fosters 'pride and joy', which are 'important for well-being'.

Participants also observed that students' engagement with art extended beyond the classroom, influencing family relationships and daily life. For example, Anna explained that incorporating art into family literacy sessions helped people 'connect with each other' and supported children's learning at home. Sarah noted that learners made more time for creative activities with their children as a result of their classroom experiences. This suggests to me that arts-based learning may have ripple effects that reach beyond individual learners into their family and community lives.

These findings show me that engagement in an arts-based CoP provided collegial dialogue and validation of teaching practices. It also provided tutors with practical ideas as well as giving them safe structures that enabled risk-taking and growth. Tutors translated these experiences into practice, reporting enhanced learner confidence, wellbeing, and family engagement. This illustrates to me that arts-based CoPs operate as both an affective resource, promoting wellbeing, belonging and confidence, and a pedagogical resource, where they can share their ideas.

Discussion

In this study, I argue that arts-based learning CoPs provide educators with opportunities for dialogue, connection, and belonging, enabling them to develop artistic skills in a supportive network (Brennan & Gorman, 2023; Freedman et al., 2013; Wenger, 1998). Learning through visual art communities is a collaborative process that shapes both professional identity and social connection (Freedman et al., 2013). Participants reported joining the Arts-based Learning CoP for both professional and personal reasons. Their motivations include a passion for making art, the desire to be more creative in their own classrooms, and the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers. The CoP also offers a space for relaxation, illustrating how arts-based communities of practice can nurture participants. This encourages tutors to extend beyond the cognitive domain to also include affective aspects of learning (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Within highly standardised education systems that prioritise performance and accountability (Biesta, 2010, 2017), educators may lack opportunities for creative autonomy, reflection, and relational learning, making their engagement in arts-based learning communities even more important.

Research participants describe the CoP as a safe and inclusive environment where their creativity could flourish. Trust and mutual respect were central to this experience, enabling tutors to take risks, share their work, and feel validated. Such environments are essential not only for educators but also for learners, as they promote emotional safety and openness to experimentation. This echoes what Arao and Clemens (2013) call 'brave

spaces' which encourage challenge and risk taking. While tutors noted the importance of safety in the group, this security was the necessary foundation for the 'bravery' required to push their creative boundaries.

The transformative potential of arts-based learning is also evident to me in the study. Tutors report increased confidence in using creative methods as a result of engaging with the peers while also observing growth in their students' self-esteem. All the research participants applied techniques learned in the CoP in their classrooms. Their stories highlight how arts-based activities engage students in ways that supported both their academic and personal growth. When tutors have confidence to engage in creative pedagogies, they are better able to empathise with students, model creative practices and encourage experimentation, thus creating supportive learning environments (Greene, 1995).

My research demonstrates that arts-based pedagogy can also be a powerful tool for social transformation (Freire, 1970/2000). Tutors shared stories of students bringing creative practices into their homes, engaging with their children, and fostering intergenerational learning. This ripple effect underscores the broader social impact of arts-based education. This also reflects Clover and Williamson's (2019) concept of a pedagogy of possibility, where arts-based learning becomes a space for critical reflection and social transformation. The Arts-Based Learning CoP is a meaningful example of pedagogy of possibility in action. It provides a collaborative, non-judgmental space where tutors can explore creative practices, reflect on their identities, and develop new approaches to teaching. By engaging in shared artistic experiences, tutors are not only furthering their own wellbeing and professional growth but are also reimagining their roles as educators. They are moving beyond the limitations of standardised education to embrace a more imaginative, and transformative model of adult learning.

While my research offers valuable insights into the experiences of tutors engaged in an arts-based Community of Practice, I need to acknowledge several limitations. The small sample size of five participants, all female, limits the generalisability of the findings. Research on gender and arts participation suggests that women may be more likely to engage in arts-based communities due to documented gender differences in how art is received, experienced, and valued (Szostak, 2023). These findings may contribute to women's participation in arts-based learning environments, potentially shaping the gender composition of the CoP. This gender imbalance may also reflect broader trends in the adult education sector but also suggests the need for more diverse perspectives in future research that capture male perspectives and compare gender-differentiated patterns of engagement in arts-based learning.

Because I am a member of the CoP, there is a potential for bias in data interpretation, despite my efforts to maintain reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process. While Bulk and Collins (2024) warn that navigating the dual identities of insider and outsider can challenge objectivity, this unique position also facilitates a more nuanced, understanding of the research participants. Although I sought to remain reflexive throughout the research process, I recognise that complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable within this approach. Instead, I present this study as a situated interpretation, shaped by my ongoing participation in the community.

While CoPs can foster belonging, they can also exclude those who lack the shared history or specialised knowledge required to participate fully (Wenger, 1998). Participation in arts-based learning communities is influenced by confidence, identity, and norms around cultural knowledge (Freedman et al., 2013). Exclusion from arts-based practices can also point to broader social inequalities. Clover and Williamson (2019) highlight how arts spaces can marginalise participants along social lines such as class,

race or gender. It is possible in this research, that male educators and educators unsure of their artistic ability self-excluded from the CoP and the research. I recommend that future research explores the experiences of those on the periphery to find better ways of bridging the gap between perceived insiders and outsiders.

Whether these processes translate to other art forms, such as music, drama, or movement, remains an important question. While there may be shared learning processes across different art forms, some features of visual arts may be unique to this medium. Future research could investigate these differences by comparing how arts-based learning communities engage across multiple art forms.

Despite the limitations, the findings of my study suggest that arts-based communities of practice (CoPs) can play a role in enhancing adult educators' professional development, wellbeing, and creativity. Policymakers and educational institutions can support such initiatives through funding, as well as integrating creative pedagogies into the professional development of adult education tutors. Embedding creative pedagogy within adult education policy could help shift the focus from standardised outcomes to more holistic, learner-centred approaches.

Conclusion

My research examines an unconventional approach to engaging adult educators through arts-based practices. What emerged in my study was how an arts-based learning CoP shaped tutors' ways of thinking, relating, and teaching. These experiences influenced not only their pedagogical choices but also their wellbeing, confidence, and professional identity. These findings suggest that arts-based professional learning is not simply an enhancement to existing practice but a catalyst for deeper reflection on practice. This shows that Arts based learning communities can offer alternatives to the constraints of standardised education highlighted by Biesta (2010, 2017).

My research also highlights the importance of intentional spaces where educators can engage creatively without judgement. While the value of professional communities of practice is well documented, my research shows that creative communities can promote trust and vulnerability in ways that are qualitatively different from traditional professional development.

Although my research was limited by the small, all-female sample, the findings point to several areas for further exploration. Future studies could investigate how arts-based CoPs function across diverse settings, and among different art forms. Future research should also explore the experiences of educators who do not engage in arts-based learning communities.

Overall, my exploration suggests that creativity is a vital dimension of professional practice. When educators are offered the opportunity to create, reflect, and collaborate in meaningful ways, they develop capacities that extend far beyond the CoP itself. Investing in such spaces supports not only tutors' growth and wellbeing but also cultivates learning environments where imagination and empathy can flourish. The research shows that when educators are supported to explore and create, both they and their students can thrive.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the Literacy Development Centre (LDC) in SETU who supported me in setting up the Arts-based Learning Community of Practice.

I am deeply grateful to the tutors in the Art Community of Practice, especially those who participated in this research. Being part of this community has been the most rewarding aspect of my work, and their ongoing support have made this journey both meaningful and inspiring.

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