European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2026, pp. 403-407

Editorial: Arts and adult education

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The radical shift in the structure of the world begs for creativity. (Adler, 2006)

This special edition focuses on arts-based adult education and learning and arts education, theories and practices grounded in aesthetics, cultural expression and visual, narrative, rhythmic, tactile, and performative processes. Arts and artistic and cultural expressions are understood as ways of knowing, conceptualising and making meaning, feeling, touching and perceiving, self-social representation and reflection and acting in and upon the world. Arts-based adult education has deep roots in community, cultural, Indigenous, workers', literacy, feminist and popular education traditions, what J. Roby Kidd (Kidd & Selman, 1978) once called 'old and familiar partners' which are integral to adult education's critical social purpose. Creative expression is present when people gather to sing, tell stories, make theatre, write poetry, design posters, weave tapestries, dance and share cultural practices. It was present when Freire used 'culture circles' with literacy learners to visualise inequities through images to deepen consciousness (i.e., Freire & Macedo, 1995). Through arts-based learning and engagement, people learn to (re)interpret their circumstances, silence the noise of patriarchal capitalist rhetoric, see beyond what they are being taught to see, develop individual and collective voice, and learn to listen to each other as a practice of solidarity (Butterwick & Selman, 2003): 'With the aid of culture, we learn how to create ourselves' (Eisner, 2002, p. 2).

Creativity, artistic expression, and the imagination

Central to arts-based adult education and learning is the human aesthetic dimension. This includes perception, creation, experiencing, seeing, feeling and relating to the world through the senses, 'our first avenues to consciousness' (Eisner, 2002, p. 2). Fundamental too are artistic expression, creativity and the imagination, capacities inherent in all adults, but which have been ignored, underutilised or deadened through social conditioning.

ISSN 2000-7426
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http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.6904
www.rela.ep.liu.se

Feminist Olufemi (2020) reminds us that creativity matters because it 'is at the heart of any new world we seek to build' (p. 84). Every time we engage our creative faculties the interests of a better world, we render visible and challenge the logic of systems and practices of oppression and marginalisation. Creativity is what enables adults to make connections between things that previously seemed unrelated by rearranging them into, surprising juxtapositions, creating emotional openings, and startling new presences (Adler, 2006).

Artistic expression is the ability to communicate ideas, understandings, feelings, perspectives in engaging formats, to mobilise ideas, thoughts and feelings into and through creative mediums. In so doing, the arts uncover the light behind the shadows and the shadows that obscure the light. In ways that rational discursive modes may not, a photograph can capture a sense of resilience, a quilt can softly visualise domestic violence, a theatre piece can perform power relations, a song can resonate with the painful or shameful, an inert object can become dialogic, a dance can offer hope and possibility, a tapestry can awake the world to political violence, storytelling can take people into the unfamiliar, and an exhibition can vividly curate a history of colonialism (Barndt, 2011; Bedford, 2001; Butterwick & Roy, 2016; Clover & Sanford, in press; Clover et al., 2022; Clover & Stalker, 2007; Yang & Lawrence, 2017).

For Riceour (1979) the imagination is a critical 'cognitive force', a recollective (memory) and generative (making) power that can be mobilised to envision new worlds that do not yet exist. The power of the imagination is its 'capacity to defy the constraints of expectation and the everyday' and engender images of the possible (Wyman, 2004, p. 1). Imagination enables people to try things out in the mind's eye without the consequences of acting upon them empirically, thereby offering a safety net for experiment (Eisner, 2002). Exercising the imagination, Whitton (2018) argues, enables inquisitiveness – curiosity, wondering, questioning – and a strengthened ability to tolerate uncertainty and unknowability. It is the imagination, once liberated by engagement with cultural expression, that is 'necessary to the achievement of all we hope for as a society' (Wyman, 2004, p. 1).

Despite all of this, arts-based and creative practices are still frequently positioned at the margins of adult education, disparaged as 'non-scientific' or something to do after the important conversations and work are finished. The relationship between the arts and the university remain uneasy, with artistic pursuits harmless enough in and of them themselves, but incomparable to serious study and experimentation (Clover & Sanford, 2013). Yet we do a disservice to human creativity and artistic expression when we see it as a mere add on; we do a disservice to the imagination when we fail to realise that control over the imagination is control over the future. The powerful have unlimited opportunities to imagine the future into being in their own interests. While we must understand that arts-based and creative practices alone cannot liberate us or repair all the harm that has been and continues to be done, they can contribute greatly to our goals of social justice and change. Against the ignorance and stupefactions of patriarchal capitalism they can offer new insights into who we were, who we are and who we might become. Against despair, they can bring joy and hope. Against injustice, they stimulate resistance and action. Against fragmentation and hyper-individualism, they can build community and solidarity (Clover et al., 2022).

We invited adult education scholars to consider the use of arts-based and creative approaches in relation to creativity, artistic expression and imagination and modes of teaching, learning and researching, past and present. We invited them to explore tensions and challenges alongside the potentials and possibilities of making spaces for community, social and political engagement, and critical reflection.

Contributors

In the first article, Canadian adult educators Amy Zidulka, Marnie Jull, and Catherine Etmanski (2026) share reflections and experiences of integrating arts-based approaches into normatively structured university classes for mid-career professionals. Taking back the terms ‘squares’ and ‘flakes’ used to derogatorily caricature arts-based approaches and educators, they employ them playfully to challenge the oversimplifications and dichotomies of normative practices. Using three thematic areas, the theory and practice of collective creative metacognition and a conversational approach, the three authors reflect on their own motivations, assumptions, rationales and the tensions and offer an invitation to adult educators and their students to reflect on their own individual and shared experiences as means to foster increased individual and collective capacity, stimulate the curiosity and imagination and learn to sit more comfortably with the unknowns of their lives and work.

Karen Bunyan (2026) from Ireland shares findings from a study of the role of arts-based education and learning within a community of practice (CoP) of adult educators. Recognising her positionality as an insider-founder practitioner-researcher of the CoP, she discusses how she used different approaches such as purposeful sampling to attend to bias and semi-structured interviews and journaling allow participants to share their motivations for joining the CoP, their experiences within the group, and the impact of arts-based learning on their teaching practice. Her findings highlight the importance of intentional spaces such as CoP to enable educators to engage creatively, without judgement. Creativity offered the opportunity to reflect, to collaborate in meaningful ways, to develop their own professional capacities and to cultivate learning environments for themselves and their learners where imagination and empathy were able to flourish.

As Finland’s population grows more culturally and linguistically diverse, adult educators face the challenge of aligning foundational aims of adult education with the realities of a pluralised society. In this article, Javier Sánchez-Pérez (2026)share a case study that examined the interplay between music and cultural diversity in an ensemble music course in a liberal adult education institute in Helsinki for learners from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Positioning music ensembles as democratic spaces for inclusive learning and using teacher-researcher reflections and semi-structured focus-group interviews the study found that multicultural learning environments, when supported by teacher-guided engagement, create important conditions for critical transcultural learning. By making music together learners were able to reconsider assumptions, question biases, sit with discomfort and vulnerability, and listen with and for others as a shared responsibility for the ensemble sound.

The exclusion of women from adult art education history and the subsequent invisibility of their contributions in the United Kingdom is central to this article by British feminist adult educators Samantha J. Broadhead and Frances Norton (2026). Using a ‘conversational encounter’ they tell the story of Ann O’Donnell (1933-2019), a recognised jewellery designer and maker, and notable educator in Leeds who is however, absent from the College’s mural of acknowledgement. The authors explore how the curriculum was divided along gender lines – technical skills (male) versus creativity, design and imagination (female), and O’Donnell blurred the boundaries between liberal and vocational education and her domestic and professional life in order to maintain her artistry and allow her students to gain not only knowledge and experience but to think beyond being simply an employee to consider being jewellers who could set up their own studios and businesses. As they outline the significance of O’Donnell’s work, they share how they too grapple with similar issues and question whose histories are seen as worth

keeping in archives, who writes our histories and how ‘absences’ in art education histories can become seen and memorable.

Ari Putra and Retno Dwi Lestari (2026) share findings from their study of how indigenous cultural practices serve as non-formal adult learning environments. Focusing on a traditional *Kuda Kepang* art community in rural Indonesia and using a case study approach, they examine the interaction between local knowledge, adult learning, and cultural sustainability, arguing that *Kuda Kepang* is not simply folklore or ritual but rather a holistic learning ecosystem encompassing technical, social, spiritual, and cultural elements. Their thematic analysis uncovers a practice of creative, experiential and communal education driven by cultural identity. Practices include embodied performances and trance states to transmit knowledge and values and the *sanggar*, a community arts studio, serves as a key site for intergenerational learning and emotional bonding. While acknowledging that as outsiders their interpretations may be not be wholly correct they argue that what they found is an important culturally grounded, spiritual, community-based and decolonial model of Indigenous knowledge and learning that needs to be integrated into broader education discourse and policy and offers a new paradigm for adult education

Moving to Spain, the study by Ricard Huerta (2026) turns to the Nau Gran program at the University of Valencia, where a photography and museum-based workshop invites students over 55 to reclaim creativity often assumed to belong to the young. Drawing on case study methodology and arts-based research, the author treats participants' photographs not merely as course output but as evidence of how lived experience translates into image-making and narrative. The findings push back against gerontophobia in education, arguing that age brings not a diminished capacity for creativity but a distinct one, shaped by memory, reflection, and a desire to share accumulated knowledge. Notably, the students’ visits to museums across the city became acts of rediscovery as much as instruction, with participants, most picking up a camera seriously for the first time.

A study of the Prague Revolutionary Choir finds that ‘Warszawianka 1905’ does more than accompany a social movement. The song actively demands breath, attention, and synchrony from those who sing it, and it calls participants to move from listening into joining. It is treated not as a historical artifact but as an active witness and teacher in its own right. The authors, Aleksandra Hołubowicz and Piotr Kowzan (2026), describe this as a collective address that binds bodies and memories across languages and generations. It is achieved through a ‘pedagogy of redundancy’: repeated listening, chanting, and performance. The researchers do not smooth over the song's contradictions. Instead, they argue that its tensions actively animate the learning it produces. These tensions give adult participants room to work out their political and musical identities. The researchers are candid about the limits of their study. They ground their argument in a single song, within one choir, in an Eastern European context, and their focus on affect and relation leaves textual and cross-cultural dimensions unexamined. Still, they point to a broader claim: education carried through art depends less on technical mastery than on sustained, collective responsiveness.

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