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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.

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

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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

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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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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

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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.

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Musicing, cultural diversity, and intercultural humility in Finnish liberal adult education

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the interplay between music and cultural diversity in an ensemble course involving learners from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds at a Finnish liberal adult education institute in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The study draws on a teacher-researcher reflective field journal and two semi-structured focus-group interviews with ten participants from weekly 90-minute ensemble sessions across two semesters in 2023-2024. Musicing with culturally diverse musical materials combined teacher-guided reflection. Through thematic analysis, three interrelated processes were identified: challenging assumptions, building inclusive micro-spaces, and developing transculturally oriented outcomes. Across these processes, intercultural humility emerged as an ongoing disposition of self-reflection, dialogic listening, and ethical co-creation. Findings indicate that multicultural learning environments, when supported by teacher-guided intercultural engagement, may not immediately produce transcultural artistic results but can create conditions for transculturally oriented outcomes over time. This approach appears promising for rethinking the public role of music pedagogy in increasingly pluralistic societies.

Keywords: intercultural humility, cultural diversity, musicing, artistic citizenship, Finnish liberal adult education

Introduction

Public adult education in the Nordic countries has long been grounded in welfare state commitments to equality, inclusion, and lifelong learning (Hebert & Hauge, 2019; Heimonen & Westvall, 2015; Kuusipalo et al., 2021). In Finland, liberal adult education (*vapaa sivistystyö*) aims to guarantee access to education and culture for all through publicly oriented, non-formal provision that promotes 'social cohesion, equality, active

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citizenship, and the well-being and versatile development of citizens' (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017, pp. 8-9). These goals explicitly include democracy, pluralism, sustainable development, and multiculturalism (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017). As Finland's population grows more culturally and linguistically diverse, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Väisänen et al., 2024), the adult education sector faces the task of aligning its foundational aims with the realities of a plural society. In response, this article approaches music ensembles as democratic spaces for inclusive learning through ethically informed public pedagogies that engage cultural diversity in Finnish liberal adult education institutes.

Nordic intercultural music education research cautions against treating cultural diversity as a fixed list of styles or genres. Rinde and Christophersen (2021), for instance, argue for dynamic, relational understandings of cultural difference that embrace collaboration, reflexivity, and shifting boundaries in everyday practice. Building on this relational framing, the study centres the teacher's role in guiding ethical and creative processes of intercultural engagement in ensemble teaching (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Kallio and Westerlund (2020) clarify the conditions such an approach requires, highlighting that stepping beyond personal comfort zones is not an obstacle to avoid but an ethical precondition for intercultural teaching and learning. Decolonial analyses likewise foreground stepping outside epistemic comfort zones and treating responsibility as relational ethics-in-practice (Kallio, 2020). This orientation shaped the course design: culturally diverse repertoire was not approached through superficial genre labels, such as 'World', 'Global', 'Ethno', or 'Fusion', but through ethical engagement with difference and the pedagogical use of discomfort.

In Finnish liberal adult education, music is widely offered through ensemble-based tuition, including bands, choirs, and orchestras. Musicing offers a useful way of understanding learning in such settings because it shifts attention from music as object to music as situated practice (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Artistic citizenship extends this praxial understanding by bringing its social, ethical, and civic dimensions into view (Elliott et al., 2016). From this perspective, music ensembles can be understood not only as spaces for individual skill development but also as practices in which participants learn to act with and for others through working with sonic materials. In the Finnish music education context, these ideas resonate with Väkevä and Westerlund's (2007) account of classroom music as a 'method of democracy' (p. 103), where value is ideally generated through shared activity and context-sensitive ethical deliberation rather than fixed hierarchies.

Adult education scholarship on the arts further reinforces this democratic component by treating art as public pedagogy. Wildemeersch (2019) argues that aesthetic experience in adult learning is not merely decorative; it expands what communities can perceive, imagine, and debate in public life. Similarly, community-based adult education in the arts emphasises that transformation requires more than participation alone. Butterwick and Roy (2016) argue that transformation in adult education requires more than enabling students to express their perspectives; voices, especially at the margins, must also be received in ways that change how we live together. These concerns resonate with decolonial and ethical debates in Nordic music education. Kallio (2020) shifts the emphasis from 'speaking' to 'establishing conditions for listening' (p. 184), while Väkevä (2025) develops 'voicing' as a pedagogical lens for questioning whose voices are amplified in society and on what terms. Connecting these ideas to Finnish liberal adult music education, ensembles can be seen as more than leisure activities; they can offer democratic, public, and educational spaces in which plural voices are negotiated through attentiveness, recognition, and response.

For the analytical framing of cultural diversity, the article draws on Huib Schippers' cultural diversity continuum from monocultural through multicultural and intercultural to transcultural approaches (Schippers, 2010). Within Nordic studies on intercultural music education, this continuum supports pedagogies that move beyond superficial exposure to unfamiliar musical content toward dialogic co-creation, where participants negotiate and re-articulate materials and practices through translation, adaptation, and reflexive attention to power dynamics and ethics-in-practice (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017; Westerlund et al., 2022). One longer-horizon possibility for observing transformation along this continuum is a transcultural orientation, understood as a continual negotiation and ethical reimagination of musical difference through dialogic collaboration (Thomson, 2024). Within this orientation, intercultural humility offers a way to examine how such negotiation may develop through listening, dialogue, and ongoing reflection.

While these bodies of literature offer important resources for rethinking the role of music, cultural diversity, and democratic adult learning, less is known about how intercultural humility emerges in ensemble learning within Finnish liberal adult education. Guided by this gap, I ask: *How does intercultural humility emerge among adult learners from culturally diverse backgrounds when teacher-guided musicing is intentionally oriented toward intercultural engagement in ensemble classes at a Finnish liberal adult education institute?* To answer this question, I first situate my teacher-researcher positionality, then present the theoretical framework, the study context and pedagogical setting, the methodological and ethical approach, the findings, and the conclusion.

Teacher-researcher positionality

My position was not that of an external observer but of a teacher-researcher embedded in the ensemble practice from which the research material was generated. I am a musician, pedagogue, and doctoral researcher whose work focuses on intercultural music-making. This background shaped the pedagogical design examined in this study, including the selection of culturally diverse musical materials, the facilitation of group discussions, and the creation of classroom conditions in which moments of discomfort could lead to shared reflection and, potentially, individual transformation.

At the same time, my role required reflexive caution. I was responsible for teaching and leading the ensemble, while also documenting classroom dynamics, participants' reflections, and my own pedagogical interventions in a field journal. My interpretations are therefore grounded not only in participant focus-group interviews but also in field-journal notes, through which I re-examined my pedagogical decisions and assumptions. In practice, I moved between ensemble leader, facilitator, coach, and experienced participant: offering musical guidance, suggesting alternatives for interpreting the musical material, supporting intercultural negotiation, and responding when stereotypes or cultural biases arose in discussion.

Theoretical framework

Musicing

In this study, musicing functions as an analytical concept for examining what adult learners do together in and around sound in the ensemble: playing, listening in action, arranging, improvising, cueing, evaluating, and responding to others as part of situated

musical practice (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). In this praxial frame, musical understanding develops through the interplay of performance, improvisation, arranging, listening, and situated judgment. Musicianship can therefore be understood as context-sensitive judgment developed through musical praxis, including decisions about music-making, listening, and interpersonal relationships before, during, and after musical involvement (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). As a teacher-researcher, this perspective allows me to approach the ensemble not only as a site of musical skill development but also as a civic space where participants negotiate roles, responsibilities, and relationships in sound, cultivating judgment about when to lead, when to support, how to shape musical content, and why to adjust to others' musical interpretations.

Artistic citizenship

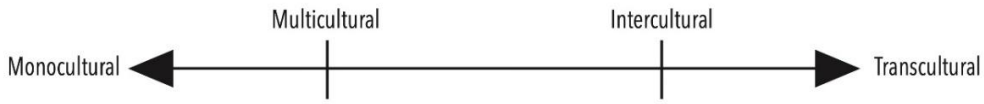
As a theoretical extension of musicing, artistic citizenship provides a bridge between praxial music education and adult education because it frames art-making as a form of ethical and civic action. Elliott et al. (2016) argue that artistic practices can be understood as ways of acting with and for others rather than merely as aesthetic or individual achievements. In this study, artistic citizenship helps conceptualise ensemble learning as a civic micro-practice: participants listen, take turns, negotiate responsibility, support vulnerability, and make musical decisions whose value is both relational and technical.

This framing is particularly relevant to Finnish liberal adult education, where learning is connected to social cohesion, active citizenship, cultural participation, and democratic life. Artistic citizenship therefore supports my central claim in this article: ensemble musicing can cultivate dispositions such as attentiveness, reciprocity, humility, and responsibility. Operationally, this lens directs the analysis toward situated moments in which assumptions are unsettled, risk-taking is enabled, learners move beyond comfort zones, and listening, identity, and belonging are reshaped.

Cultural diversity

To conceptualise cultural diversity and intercultural engagement without treating musical cultures as fixed categories, I draw on Huib Schippers' cultural diversity continuum. This framework is useful because it attends to movement and exchange across tradition, institution, teacher, and learner, rather than treating musical cultures as stable or self-contained units (Schippers, 2010). Schippers describes a continuum ranging from monocultural to transcultural approaches in music transmission, showing how musical traditions can move beyond coexistence or exchange toward new hybrid forms of musical expression. Schippers suggests that transculturalism emerges when musical traditions cross their original cultural boundaries and generate new musical forms that embody characteristics of more than one cultural context. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum.

Figure 1. Cultural diversity continuum. Source: Schippers (2010, p. 31; reprinted with permission)



In this model, monocultural transmission focuses on a single dominant music culture or practice, while multicultural transmission acknowledges the coexistence of multiple musical practices without necessarily requiring explicit interaction among them. Intercultural transmission involves comparison and interaction between musical cultures, potentially leading to musical fusions. Transculturalism refers to a more intensive form of synthesis, where new musical forms may develop beyond the sum of their influences, establishing distinctive artistic approaches and identities. Table 1 illustrates the defining characteristics of music transmission for each approach.

Table 1. Music transmission in culturally diverse environments. Source: Schippers (2010, p. 31; reprinted with permission)

Monocultural	Multicultural	Intercultural	Transcultural
• Music is transmitted in the context of a single, dominant music culture • Often a sense of superiority or belief in evolutional model • Single cultural reference for quality	• Music is transmitted without explicit reference to other musics but within an awareness of several other music cultures existing in a single cultural space • Multiple cultural references for quality	• Music is seen in relation to other musics, compared cross-culturally • May lead to mixing or fusion • Quality is addressed from multiple cultural perspectives	• Music has taken on in-depth characteristics of more than one culture • Likely to have become a genre of its own right • New, fused quality criteria are developed and applied

Within Nordic studies on intercultural music education, this continuum sustains a pedagogical stance toward dialogic co-creation: the negotiated re-articulation of materials and practices through translation, adaptation, reflexive attention to power dynamics, and ethics-in-practice (Kallio, 2020; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017; Westerlund et al., 2022). European intercultural music education similarly stresses evolving relations and synthesis across groups rather than simple coexistence (Rinde & Christophersen, 2021). When analysing the ensemble processes examined in this study, I use the term transculturally oriented outcomes to describe shifts toward a transcultural orientation.

Intercultural humility

I use intercultural humility to understand the processual stance through which dialogic and co-creative intercultural musical collaboration can make such transculturally oriented outcomes pedagogically possible (Thomson, 2024). Intercultural humility originates from the concept of cultural humility, which has been developed in medicine and social work as a lifelong, power-aware practice oriented to self-critique and partnership rather than as a claim to competence. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) characterise this as 'a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong process' (p. 118) involving self-evaluation and self-critique, re-addressing power imbalances, and developing mutually beneficial, non-paternalistic partnerships with communities. Understood this way, cultural humility resists endpoint thinking and can emerge in a collaborative musical setting where knowledge and authority are negotiated through shared experience and dialogue. Intercultural humility is not treated here as a measurable competence or final

learning outcome, but as an emergent, practice-based disposition of listening, self-reflection, and ethical responsiveness. Extending cultural humility into intercultural collaboration and community engagement, Thomson (2024) conceptualises intercultural humility as a valuable lens for music education:

> Although this discussion emerges from within medicine and social work, intercultural humility is a very relevant and important concept within the context of intercultural musical dialogue and collaboration. It becomes particularly salient in terms of approaching intercultural musical collaborations from the perspective of life-long learning processes that are in constant need of self-reflection, breaking down preconceived assumptions, and shifting perspectives. In this way, intercultural musical collaboration can be seen as a dynamic, fluid act of listening and dialogue that requires ongoing reflection and development, rather than a narrowly defined skill with an end point. (p. 137)

This perspective emphasises how intercultural dialogue and collaborative projects can enhance students' learning experiences while supporting the embedding of interculturalism and community engagement. Thomson (2024) also highlights the formation of intercultural humility in students' minds when engaging in musical dialogue and collaboration:

> The qualities of intercultural humility can be seen to emerge in the findings as a byproduct of studying in an intercultural environment, which gives rise to an understanding that we are all in a constant state of coming to know ourselves, others, and our ever-changing intercultural communities. (p. 153)

Such a reflective posture entails discomfort as an ethical condition for learning with difference (Kallio & Westerlund, 2020) and requires leaving epistemic comfort zones and treating responsibility as relational ethics-in-practice (Kallio, 2020). In relation to public pedagogy, music ensembles in Finnish liberal adult education can provide civic spaces where intercultural humility is practised in and through shared meaning-making. In such contexts, aesthetic experience can broaden 'what we are able to see and hear' (Kompridis, 2014, as cited in Wildemeersch, 2019, p. 117), enabling reciprocal listening and debate in shared public life. This requires not only opportunities for voicing identities but also the establishment of conditions for listening, so that voices, especially at the margins, can be heard in ways that matter for how we live together (Butterwick & Roy, 2016; Väkevä, 2025).

Context of the study

I conducted this qualitative case study at a Finnish liberal adult education institute in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The research was situated in a music ensemble class within the institute's arts programme, organised as weekly 90-minute sessions across two semesters (autumn 2023 and spring 2024).

The institutional setting is significant because Finnish liberal adult education includes folk institutes (*kansalaisopistot*) and workers' institutes (*työväenopistot*), which are historically rooted in broadening access to education and culture, supporting social cohesion and equality, and fostering active citizenship through non-formal provision (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017). In the Helsinki metropolitan area, these aims intersect with increasingly multilingual and culturally diverse everyday realities (Väisänen et al., 2024). In relation to these developments, and as part of expanding

learning opportunities for adults with transnational backgrounds, the institute had recently begun offering English-language provision, including the ensemble class examined here. Within the class, most participants, including myself, came from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with roots outside Finland, and for many of us, English was not our first language. Cross-cultural communication therefore became a central part of the ensemble dynamics, and the class functioned not only as a music-learning setting but also as a small adult-education space in which questions of participation, listening, and cultural negotiation became pedagogically relevant.

Given the focus on ensemble playing, there were fewer singers than in other music classes taught at the same institute, such as choirs or vocal groups. Most students played Western ensemble instruments, including piano, guitar, drums, bass, saxophone, trombone, violin, and trumpet. Their musical backgrounds ranged from hobbyists to semi-professional musicians. New students joined each semester, although some continued from previous semesters.

Pedagogical and methodological design

The lessons included instrumental and vocal improvisation, call-and-response exercises, group listening, and short reflective discussions. I taught the musical content through a combination of learning by ear, imitation, short model demonstrations, and simple one-page scores outlining structure, chords, lyrics, and basic rhythmic ideas. I presented short musical excerpts and song-based materials connected to diverse oral music traditions. Examples included Afro-Caribbean and call-and-response rhythmic phrases that students transferred to their own instruments; melodic motifs and performative elements explored through interaction with flamenco dance; and improvisational tasks inspired by Arabic maqam-related melodic practices, introduced through imitation. I emphasised the social context of the music: who uses it, where and when it is performed, and for what purpose.

When the musical materials were adapted to the instruments and skills available in the group, students negotiated tempo, form, instrumentation, improvisation, endings, repetitions, and interpretive emphasis. In practical terms, this meant that guitarists, pianists, and other instrumentalists often had to invent their own parts for materials not originally arranged for the Western ensemble instruments available in the class. These adaptations became part of the intercultural learning process because they required students to consider what could change, what needed to remain recognisable, and how the ensemble could work with unfamiliar material respectfully in relation to its origins.

Data collection and analysis

The data consisted of two semi-structured focus-group interviews and a reflective field journal kept throughout the weekly ensemble process. I used the focus-group format to examine collective reflection and interaction among participants, a key feature of focus-group methodology (Morgan, 2019). Each interview lasted 60-75 minutes and was conducted in English in a private room at the end of each semester. The interviews involved two different groups, comprising ten adult learners aged 25-66 who volunteered and gave informed consent. The analytic dataset included five participants in autumn 2023 and five in spring 2024. I also used a separate preparatory group interview with seven different participants from a prior semester to evaluate the clarity of the interview questions and to estimate the length of the interviews.

During the interviews, participants responded to open-ended questions about their ensemble experiences, musical decision-making, moments of discomfort, and perceptions of cultural diversity. Alongside the interviews, I kept a reflective field journal after each ensemble lesson. In the analysis, the journal helped me compare participant reflections with my own observations of classroom interactions, pedagogical decisions, and ensemble dynamics. I analysed the interview transcripts and field notes through thematic coding, iterative theme development, and theoretical interpretation (Burnard et al., 2016). I used the field journal to examine both alignment and dissonance between participant perspectives and my own teacher-researcher observations.

Ethical considerations

I followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2023). Before the study began, I provided participants with written and verbal information about the research purpose, methods, voluntary participation, and confidentiality procedures. I obtained informed consent from each participant. Because I was also the teacher, I repeatedly emphasised that participation in the research was voluntary and separate from participation in the ensemble class. This was important for mitigating teacher-researcher power dynamics and for maintaining procedural fairness. A peer researcher not involved in teaching also observed the interview process and provided feedback after each interview. This supported reflexivity, helped me evaluate the clarity and fairness of the interview situation, and offered an additional perspective on my dual role as teacher and researcher. The research activity was integrated into ongoing teaching without altering the pedagogical intent of the class (Burnard et al., 2016).

I ensured anonymity through pseudonyms in transcripts and quotations, minimised potentially identifying details, and retained no identifying demographic data beyond age range and general musical or cultural background. Because the class was not designed as a public recording or concert project, the empirical material consists of focus-group interviews and teacher-researcher field notes rather than a publicly accessible performance archive. Audio files and transcripts were stored in encrypted, access-restricted drives and will be deleted after five years.

Results

Drawing on focus-group interviews and my reflective field journal, the results are organised in relation to the research question: how intercultural humility emerged among adult learners when teacher-guided musicing was intentionally oriented toward intercultural engagement. I present the findings through three interrelated themes: challenging assumptions, building inclusive micro-spaces, and developing transculturally oriented outcomes. These themes are interpreted in dialogue with the theoretical framework developed above.

Challenging assumptions

In relation to a praxial view of musicing as knowing-in-action (Elliott & Silverman, 2015), I analysed participants' reflections as moments in which musical learning involved the re-evaluation of assumptions, including cultural biases (Thomson, 2024). This process was not only individual but also collective: assumptions became visible through ensemble interaction, group discussion, and the practical negotiation of unfamiliar musical

materials (Kallio & Westerlund, 2020; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). To examine how intercultural humility emerged through these processes, I asked questions such as:

- Before the course, what were your expectations about music and cultural diversity?
- During the lessons, when did you reconsider earlier ideas? What triggered that?
- Did the ensemble experience change how you think about music? If so, how?

When reflecting on students' motivation to participate in the ensemble, I noticed that several participants initially expected an enjoyable and somewhat exotic encounter with unfamiliar music. In the first lessons, they were curious to try something different from other ensembles offered in adult education settings. While such curiosity supported engagement, it also created moments in which culturally diverse materials risked being approached through simplified or stereotypical associations.

A concrete moment emerged in the second lesson of the spring semester. When I presented musical material rooted in Afro-Caribbean traditions, some students laughed and described the sound as too happy, or naive, framing the music as entertainment. I then opened a group discussion about the implications of slavery, colonialism, and postcolonialism in shaping Afro-Caribbean cultural expression. As the conversation unfolded, students engaged in self-reflection and began to re-evaluate cultural biases. One student also reflected on their own cultural origins and explained how their own community had experienced comparable forms of oppression in the past. From this experience, I observed what appeared to be a shift toward a more ethically informed stance, accompanied by increased motivation for music learning. When we played the song again, the energy in the room changed; students seemed to feel a responsibility to respect the cultural tradition and contribute to the music as well as they could. In interviews, students reflected on similar moments in which musical context shaped their perceptions:

> At first, it felt kind of funny to play these 'Latin' songs cause it's January and it's Helsinki and is cold and dark outside, and the music sounded so colourful and happy that I just laughed. It just brought me joy. (FG2 P2)

> It makes the songs more alive when you know some background about it, the image in your head like, okay, it should be like fun, so you don't need to worry too much. (FG1 P4)

> I love the music history and the context, that brings creativity because I get this image that I can relate to. I'm sure it adds something to my playing too. (FG1 P5)

As the course continued, students began to reconsider their preconceived ideas and ask more questions about the background and stories of the musical material. As captured in the interviews, this reorientation also involved feelings of discomfort, insecurity about one's own ideas, and a tendency to return to familiar stylistic or cultural categories:

> The other jazz songs were totally unfamiliar for me but then the bossa novas were a little bit more familiar. I noticed one lesson when someone said to me, 'I'm completely lost.' I should have said 'so am I,' but I didn't. (FG2 P3)

This insight suggests that students sometimes attempted to categorise the music by style or subgenre to stay within a comfort zone, while gradually accepting vulnerability and learning through discomfort. In the interviews, students also expressed frustration about

learning the musical content by ear in situ during the lessons, rather than using more traditional approaches, such as learning through written scores. They felt more confident practising beforehand and arriving ready to play what they knew and staying in their comfort zone:

> I tried to find a bass line for the song you suggested, and I found a different version. I practiced with that one at home and in the lesson was different. But it was kind of a great way to learn a new way to play the bass, I knew something about the structure, but it was a bit of a tricky situation because I practiced it wrongly. (FG1 P2)

However, as the discussion in the interview progressed, several students noted that practising alone at home can improve execution of a musical excerpt, but it does not necessarily foster innovation or learning new approaches. The discussion developed around the idea that remaining in one's comfort zone and learning only through familiar routines can lead students back toward familiar musical styles, making it harder to engage with unfamiliar forms of musical expression. Some students described this discomfort as a crucial element in learning new musical ideas:

> We realised that what we practiced at home didn't quite fit because there were many guitars and I could not play my part. So, we had to kind of relearn the song and piece it all together, you're learning not that 80% of the riff; you're learning that 20% to make it sound better. (FG1 P3)

> I didn't even know any of these songs beforehand. I thought we could not play them, but I was so surprised that in the end we can play each of the songs as a band, even if we don't understand the song beforehand. (FG2 P4)

These insights highlight that meaningful learning did not happen in isolation; the ensemble made it possible to learn through discomfort. As one student put it, 'I thought we could not play the songs, but I was so surprised that in the end we could play each of the songs as a band' (FG2 P4). That surprise was less about individual technique and more about what the group made possible. This collective dimension leads to the second theme: the building of inclusive micro-spaces in which risk-taking, support, and responsibility could be shared.

Building inclusive micro-spaces

Framed by artistic citizenship's emphasis on acting with and for others, I treated the band as a civic micro-public where roles, norms, and opportunities are made explicit and shared (Elliott et al., 2016). This approach aligns with Finnish music education debates on classrooms as democratic spaces where value emerges through doing together (Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007) and with teacher-guided co-creation in intercultural settings (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Discomfort was treated as a pedagogical resource when working across difference (Kallio & Westerlund, 2020). Given the focus on intercultural humility, I invited learners to discuss how these inclusive micro-practices were experienced in the ensemble:

- Can you recall a moment you stepped outside your comfort zone?
- What made it possible to try something uncertain (e.g., a new role or a way of improvising)?
- How did you contribute to ensemble dynamics and discussions?

Participants consistently emphasised that a safe, supportive atmosphere and a manageable pace made risk-taking possible when learning together. In my field notes, I recorded moments of tense silence after unexpected situations and misunderstandings while playing, especially in the first lessons, when students met for the first time and brought different musical backgrounds into the room. In response, I slowed down the tempo of the class, provided clear instructions, avoided using complicated musical jargon, and offered short model examples of the musical excerpts before playing together. During the interviews, students described the atmosphere as supportive and safe, identifying it as an important condition for trial and error in ensemble practice. One participant explained, 'I really appreciate how the atmosphere is supportive and safe. Even though we have different skill levels, it's not about who plays best, everyone gets to try' (FG1 P4). Another participant emphasised the courage and patience involved: 'I'd say courage, being willing to jump in the deep end and patience. It takes lots of repetitions, lots of listening again, and trying a little differently' (FG1 P5).

These early tensions were connected to differences in language, musical background, and instrumental skill. At the beginning, students did not know each other, and the musical material placed different demands on different participants. For some, the repertoire was difficult, while others expected more challenge, as one student noted: 'I was personally hoping to jam more and learning to improvise with other people, and we didn't communicate so much while playing, that would have been interesting for me' (FG2 P5).

I observed that these moments required teacher guidance and group discussion to move the ensemble toward safer forms of risk-taking. Students took turns improvising, shared musical tasks, and gradually treated leadership as a role rather than a status. These practices helped distribute responsibility and lowered the threshold for others to step forward. Over time, such practices became micro-norms: small, repeated interactional routines that made risk-taking feel safe rather than punitive. Learners described how they began to co-create and rely on small interaction rules that helped them support one another. One participant summarised this as a practical rule: 'Never stop playing, if you keep the rhythm going, it still sounds okay' (FG2 P3). Another emphasised non-verbal communication: 'To let the others know you're finishing your solo, give a nod. That was the most important thing for me: communication' (FG2 P2).

I noted how these micro-norms emerged as simple, repeatable and structured micro-routines, such as rotating who counts in before the music starts; agreeing on one clear cue for endings; and a brief call-and-response warm-up exercise at the start of each lesson. I observed how these routines lowered the pressure in the group and created visible entry points for more active participation. Leadership was treated as a role rather than a status, distributed across the group by taking turns and reducing hesitation. Teacher guidance was also crucial for aligning individual learning needs with the group's progress. At times I intervened to help differentiate parts in the songs, rebalance the musical performance, or slow down the tempo so that everyone could hear how their lines fit into the music. Learners described how teacher guidance and individual feedback became crucial for building confidence in the group:

> When you suggested things like 'you take the higher notes,' I learned about the different layers, how the song is put together. The more you play, the more confident you get, and then you can concentrate on enjoying playing together. (FG1 P5)

The multicultural setting of the ensemble and the focus on intercultural engagement through culturally diverse repertoire made students' individual learning needs especially

varied. This made differentiated guidance important for supporting risk-taking and for working constructively with the diversity of the group. To support this, I used short group discussion moments to reflect on collective decision-making, such as deciding who leads, who supports, and when to start playing. As these routines settled, ensemble sound became more cohesive, and learners reported paying closer attention to one another rather than to notation alone. I guided this approach by emphasising listening to one another while playing. A recurring challenge was widening the attention from one's own line to the entire band. Several participants described this shift as demanding but necessary:

> Every time I came to the lesson, I had the target to really listen to what the rest are playing. And every time I was like, damn it, I still didn't hear properly because I was so focused on trying to keep my place in the score. (FG2 P2)

Overall, the observations and interview accounts show the ensemble functioning as a set of inclusive micro-spaces: small, repeatable practices that made risk-taking feel safe rather than punitive and spread responsibility across the group. These micro-spaces did not remove discomfort, but they made discomfort pedagogically workable. In the next section, I consider how such practices opened possibilities for re-articulating musical materials and imagining outcomes beyond superficial stylistic labelling.

Transculturally oriented outcomes

Framed by Schippers' (2010) cultural diversity continuum, I analysed participants' reflections and my field-journal notes as indicators of longer-horizon possibilities rather than immediate transcultural products. In this sense, transculturally oriented outcomes appeared first as curiosity, shifts in listening, and tentative changes in musical identity and belonging. To examine these longer-horizon changes, I asked questions such as:

- How did the ensemble experience affect the way you perceive music now?
- Did the focus on cultural diversity change the way you play? In what ways?
- How did dialogue and collaboration in the ensemble influence you outside the class?

Several learners described how unfamiliar grooves and musical expressions were incorporated into their musical interests. These experiences extended beyond the lessons into aspects of everyday life. For instance, students expressed incorporating the musical expressions acquired as embodied habits or routines. This cultural curiosity opened new ways to engage with music and transformed their listening habits. Some interview excerpts reflect on this experience:

> The cumbia basic beat, it's the offbeat. I find myself tapping it, it makes you even more interested in rhythm and exploring things, is a very simple thing, yet it can be complicated because it's not part of my rhythmic history. (FG1 P4)

> This song opened a new path for me, I found some playlists and collections of the same music, it was very interesting to investigate it and now I listen it all the time. (FG2 P1)

In the interviews, students discussed how the exposure to diverse musical traditions affected their perceptions of music, prompting creative ideas and expanding their musical language. They also discussed how they found themselves transferring those ideas to their own instrumental playing or creative processes, as one student said: 'I have some

inspiring thoughts about combining something traditional with Finnish lyrics and some psychedelic stuff. Could this happen here?' (FG1 P3). This insight indicates that the participants began to imagine cross-pollinations without pressure to produce an ultimate result framed into a specific musical category. Although such ideas may begin superficially and without deep intercultural understanding, they can provide directions for potential transculturally oriented outcomes in the future. Another field-journal moment concerned how a guitarist had little motivation to play a musical expression that did not traditionally include guitar. At first, the student appeared frustrated but tried to play the song. A few lessons later, the guitarist asked to play the song one more time, as they wanted to show their ideas about how the guitar could fit into the music. Students responded with supportive ideas on how to adapt the song based on the new guitar part, the group encouraged them to continue playing, and by the end, they appeared pleased with the outcome they produced. I read these not as a transcultural artistic result but as a negotiated re-articulation in progress.

When I asked learners to describe what had changed for them through the ensemble experience, they emphasised courage, mutual support, and permission to be vulnerable, which I interpreted as an indication that the ensemble functioned as a micro-public where risk is normalised and contributions matter. One participant explained, 'I gain a lot more confidence learning to play with other people. Previously I have been panicked fearful. I've lost a bit of the fear now' (FG1 P3). Another participant stated, 'What I got was communication and being allowed to be vulnerable sometimes' (FG2 P1).

During the interviews, students discussed how the ensemble experience influenced the way they communicated in musical contexts. They named confidence, patience, cooperation, and the ability to be vulnerable while playing together. Several linked these qualities to concrete ensemble norms, such as listening beyond one's own part, giving cues, and adjusting to others. As the discussion developed, participants connected these values to wider social relations, including respect for pluralism and communication across linguistic barriers. I interpret this as a modest democratic dimension of ensemble musicing: value shifted from individual display toward collective sound, and moments of disorientation became opportunities for learning together.

Taken together, these interviews and field notes suggest that transculturally oriented outcomes might begin in modest, embodied shifts, such as tapping unfamiliar offbeats on the bus, or in tentative cross-stylistic ideas tried out in a band rehearsal.

Conclusion

This case study examined how intercultural humility emerged in a Finnish liberal adult education ensemble when teacher-guided musicing with culturally diverse repertoire was deliberately oriented toward ethical intercultural engagement. In line with the sector's public mission of social cohesion, equality, and active citizenship (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017), the findings suggest a plausible pathway from initially superficial engagement with cultural diversity toward more reflective, ethically informed participation. Such movement was not linear, but it was observable in situated descriptions of classroom moments: students reconsidered assumptions after brief context-setting discussions; they accepted guided discomfort as part of learning; and they began to listen with and for others while sharing responsibility for the ensemble sound. Three pedagogical processes were especially consequential. First, introducing concise social and historical context reframed the musical content as community-situated practice, which prompted self-questioning and re-evaluation of cultural biases. Second, establishing inclusive micro-spaces made risk-taking more natural rather than

intimidating, distributed leadership, and lowered the threshold for participation. Third, attention shifted from individuality to the group, with learners naming confidence, patience, and willingness to be vulnerable as outcomes of playing together rather than of individual practice. Read from a praxial lens on musicing and artistic citizenship, these were not merely indirect outcomes; they were ethical and civic capacities cultivated in and through shared musical action (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Elliott et al., 2016; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007).

Considering Schippers' cultural diversity continuum, the course was not designed to produce a polished transcultural hybrid form of expression. Instead, the findings offered indicators of processes that may lead toward transculturally oriented outcomes: altered listening habits that travelled beyond class, exploratory cross-pollinating ideas, and shifts in identity and belonging (Schippers, 2010). These small, repeated practices are consistent with current Nordic debates that advocate for transformative processes beyond superficial exposure toward dialogic re-articulation in music pedagogy (Rinde & Christophersen, 2021; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). In this context, intercultural humility appeared less as a competence to be mastered than as an ongoing, power-aware stance of listening, dialogue, and reflexivity in action, coupled with responsibility as ethics-in-practice (Kallio, 2020; Thomson, 2024).

The findings also pointed to public-pedagogy implications for liberal adult education. When ensembles are treated as civic micro-publics, brief contextual prompts and negotiated routines can broaden what participants are able to perceive together (Wildemeersch, 2019), creating conditions in which plural voices are not only expressed but received in ways that influence living together (Butterwick & Roy, 2016). In that sense, the ensemble's democratic method, understood modestly as value generated through shared musicing, aligns with wider societal mandates of Finnish liberal adult education and its capacity to facilitate transformation at modest scales (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017; Kuusipalo et al., 2021; Väkevä & Westerlund, 2007).

Pedagogically, the study emphasised teacher guidance not as a means of prescribing artistic outcomes, but as a way of enabling ethical engagement, noticing emerging biases, and steering moments of disorientation toward collective learning rather than derailment. Institutionally, music programmes in adult education can integrate this approach by considering ensemble courses as civic spaces, supporting teacher autonomy for intercultural designs, and valuing process outcomes alongside technical performance (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017; Väkevä, 2025; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017).

This study offers a limited view because of its single-site design, small volunteer sample, short time frame, and the teacher-researcher's dual role. Focus-group interviews were conducted in English, which may have constrained some participants. Results should therefore be read as context-bound and illustrative rather than generalisable. Nonetheless, the convergences between interview data and field notes lend credibility to the patterns described, and the mechanisms identified, such as context-setting, micro-norms, and distributed roles, may be adaptable across adult education music ensembles with comparable aims.

Future work could follow groups of adult learners longitudinally to examine whether early attentional shifts and exploratory cross-pollinations consolidate into sustained transcultural collaboration; compare different ensemble designs, including repertoire selection, skill levels, and students' backgrounds; and investigate how language support and translation practices affect participation in multilingual adult education settings. Mixed-methods studies could also triangulate participant reports with audio analysis of interaction to link perceived learning with observable ensemble behaviour.

Within adult education ensemble practice, this study observed how intercultural humility can begin to take shape. While the study does not claim rapid transformation or polished transcultural artefacts as outcomes, the findings suggest that teacher-guided musicing, grounded in ethical context and micro-democratic routines, can cultivate dispositions such as curiosity, reciprocity, reflexivity, and shared responsibility. These dispositions may support adults in engaging pluralistic futures within culturally diverse societies through musicing (Butterwick & Roy, 2016; Kallio, 2020; Schippers, 2010; Thomson, 2024; Wildemeersch, 2019).

Declaration of conflicting interests

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

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Co-designing a jewellery curriculum: Conversations and remembrances about Ann O'Donnell and her work in adult education

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Abstract

Two researchers from the creative arts have come together in a conversational encounter to explore the educational legacy of Ann O'Donnell (1933-2019). O'Donnell was a jewellery designer, maker, entrepreneur and educator working in Leeds, UK during the late 1950s until 1993. During the time of O'Donnell's employment in an art college, its archivists and librarians did not collect many papers, curricula or resources made by women educators, who often had part-time roles. This resulted in their contributions to the education field remaining invisible. In order to preserve O'Donnell's legacy, conversations between the two researchers captured the pedagogic knowledge created by her experience and practice in creating a jewellery curriculum with her students. As O'Donnell was working at a significant time for the development of vocational qualifications in the UK (1970s-1990s) the conversation revealed O'Donnell's pragmatism in interweaving a liberal and vocational education for the benefit of her students.

Keywords: adult education, jewellery design, curriculum, vocational education, invisibilities

Introduction

This article considers the contribution of Ann O'Donnell (1933-2019) to adult vocational education, particularly in relation to training jewellery designers and craftspeople from

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local businesses. O'Donnell was an internationally recognised jewellery designer and maker, but also a notable educator in Leeds, UK, during the 1950s-1990s. O'Donnell was working during a time when vocational qualifications such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) were emerging in the United Kingdom (Fisher, 1999). O'Donnell played an important role in developing the BTEC curriculum for jewellery design and making. In many ways she was ideally placed to do this work with her personal jewellery-making expertise and innovation alongside her experience in managing with her business partner, Mae-Fun Chen the Leeds-based gallery-shop, *Anno Domini* (1972-1978). This gallery-shop provided exhibition and retail opportunities for other international jewellery designers. She had many capacities in design, crafting, retail, and business management.

In order to explore O'Donnell's contribution to jewellery education, it must be acknowledged that, like many other women designers and educators from that time, her work has not been sufficiently recognised or documented. This omission came to light when a mural was painted in Leeds College of Art based on a historical timeline of significant artists, designers and craftspeople from the 19th to the late 20th Century who had worked or studied there. In spite of O'Donnell's achievements in the fields of jewellery design and adult education, her name had been left off the mural. Connected to this was an absence of materials related to O'Donnell's contribution to jewellery-making curricula in the College archives. The ways in which women artist/designers-educators have been kept out of the historical record means that their knowledge and practices remain invisible and are in danger of being lost. The idea that women are silenced, made invisible and written out of history was explored by many feminist writers in the 1980s and 1990s when O'Donnell was drawing to the end of her career (Belenky et al., 1997; Merrill, 2005; Parker & Pollock, 1981; Spender, 1989). More recently, Perez (2019) has shown how women are still invisible through male bias in data collection, and this observation can also be applied to the gaps in the College archive.

Evidence for women design educators being omitted from histories about arts education can be seen in the particular context of Leeds. Leeds Arts University (previously known as Leeds College of Art, Leeds College of Art and Design, and Jacob Kramer College) is reputed to be a place where pioneering art, craft and design education was practised. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s people such as Harry Thubron (1915-1985) were instrumental in developing the Basic Design Course (inspired by Germany's Bauhaus). At the same time, visiting teaching fellows such as Alan Davie (1920-2014) wrote extensively about their mindful approaches to learning and Eric Taylor (1909-1999) developed his ideas about polytechnic education. *The Developing Process,* a document written in 1959 to support an exhibition of the same name, cites a male-dominated group of educators as the instigators of the Art Foundation movement derived from the Basic Design Course (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Department of Fine Art, Leeds College of Art, & Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1959). Exhibitions such as *Behind the Glass Mosaic* in 2013 and *The Process Continues* in 2015 have re-presented these accepted histories of art and design pedagogy (Sykes & Bainbridge, 2015). What is striking about these accounts is the apparent lack of women educators that were engaged in any form of practice or discourse around creative education in post-war Leeds. When looking in the archives, the papers from the post-war period are mostly those created by well-known male artists, designers and educators. The voices of women educators in the arts from that period are absent from the debate.

Complex questions need to be asked about whose writing is valued, whose papers are seen as worth keeping in archives and who writes our histories. How often do we reflect on the 'absences' in our histories? We cannot assume that because the evidence is

hard to find that women were not leading and inspiring others with their teaching practices. Maybe we need to draw upon different kinds of evidence such as personal testimony and memory?

This lack of documentation and representation poses a challenge when the researchers wanted to investigate the work of O'Donnell and at the time of writing O'Donnell's personal papers were lost or inaccessible. There is some limited scholarship that is beginning to emerge about O'Donnell (Broadhead, 2022a; Norton & Broadhead, 2017). This work drew upon first-hand accounts from O'Donnell herself and her sketch books, jewellery pieces and design visualisations. However, before the research into O'Donnell's contribution to pedagogy and curriculum design could continue, she had sadly passed away.

Why is it important to tell O'Donnell's story? Clover and Stanford (2022) argue there is a lack of historical memory and gender consciousness where women do not recognise the impact of patriarchy and perceive feminism as a relic of the past. At the same time, notions of masculinity and femininity are resilient. By making women's contributions to arts adult education visible it shows that the feminist project is ongoing and needs constant attention.

Spender (1989) referring to Reuben's (1978) comments on the paucity of evidence for feminist scholarship, wrote:

> … she will have to listen to a male record of male achievement in which implicitly and explicitly she is informed of the inferiority of women and if she refuses to accept this truth, then she engages in an act of faith, she defies the evidence. (Spender, 1989, p. 5)

In the spirit of Spender's and Reuben's words two researchers (one being O'Donnell's daughter) whose work is located in the creative arts have come together in a conversational encounter to explore the educational legacy of Ann O'Donnell. They wish to defy the evidence that only male innovation drove post-war art and design curricula and pedagogy, and also to establish an initial evidence base that captures O'Donnell's work as an educator in the adult and vocational sectors. The approach of a conversation was chosen for pragmatic reasons as O'Donnell's daughter, Frances Norton, could draw upon her knowledge about her mother's achievements. This knowledge was enhanced because, occasionally, O'Donnell used to take her daughter to work with her when she was teaching. Norton was an eyewitness to some of the practices that happened in the jewellery teaching workshops. Samantha Broadhead, O'Donnell's friend and biographer, was able to draw upon her own conversations with O'Donnell and also with a colleague who had worked with O'Donnell in the 1970s.

Context

Ann O'Donnell (1933-2019) was a jewellery designer-maker who first began teaching in the 1950s alongside conducting her modernist jewellery-making practice. She taught at Leeds College of Art with Harry Thubron when she was also studying at the Royal College of Art in London. Later O'Donnell started a family but continued her creative practice and her teaching. She had her own particular ideas about art and design education. She believed that her students should be expressive and experimental as well as learning the technical skills associated with jewellery-making. O'Donnell's accomplishments in her jewellery design have been noted elsewhere (Broadhead, 2022a). However, her teaching practice also had a profound impact on local people who still remember her fondly.

Like many women art educators O'Donnell's employment was in community courses, in outreach provision around the city and in part-time Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and City and Guilds vocational skills courses until she retired in 1993. During the 1970s and 1980s she focused on teaching BTEC qualifications and working with day-release students from local jewellery studios and shops. O'Donnell's expertise was widely recognised during her working life as she was a BTEC external moderator for Cass College. Cass College, now known as Bayes Business School, was established in 1966 and is the business school of City St George's, University of London.

By the late 1980s, part-time work for women was a prevalent feature of the UK labour market, with the 1989 Employment Act further lifting restrictions on women's working hours (Court, 1995; Meulders & Plasman, 1993). Teachers such as O'Donnell and Pam Rex (1929-2007) a potter and fine artist, spent their careers teaching part-time and in the evenings. Unfortunately, although valued by their students for their skill and knowledge, being in these teaching roles did not enable women art educators' access to the networks, status and recognition enjoyed by their male colleagues. As Clover and Sanford (2022) have said women 'participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated and the world is made' (p. 2). Furthermore, as marginalised members of staff their papers, plans, curricula and timetables were less likely to be kept in institutional archives. So, their contribution to the history of arts education was systemically made invisible. Perez (2019) argues that women are constructed to be forgettable, ignorable and superfluous from culture, from history, and from data.

It must be highlighted that O'Donnell also raised a family while running the jewellery design gallery-shop and being an adult educator. This intersection of roles gave her a unique insight into both the personal, educational and business/ entrepreneurial needs of her students.

O'Donnell was working at a time when vocational education was evolving. Fisher (1999) described the 1980s as a golden age for BTEC in terms of innovative curriculum design, 'BEC/BTEC has been a powerful agent for curriculum change and development and its direct influence on life within colleges was immense over two decades from the late 1970s' (Fisher, 2009, p. 16). O'Donnell had to grapple as an educator and an external examiner with the changing educational landscape that saw control of the curriculum slowly move from the educator to the Government and its agencies (Fisher, 2009). Pring (1995a) noted that the 1970s and 1980s were times of debate about what knowledge should be taught, and there was a tension between the need to widen access to a liberal education, founded in the humanities, and a need to provide relevant vocational training.

Fisher (2009) suggests that there were three phases of what he calls 'the new vocationalism'. The first phase in the 1970s was an entwining of liberal values and economic necessity in the curriculum which emphasised choice in how subjects were learned. At this point, 'the fundamental philosophy of a student-centred approach to learning, however, remained inviolate throughout the BEC/BTEC derived curricula' (Fisher, 2009, p. 195). The second phase in the mid-1980s saw courses being more closely positioned to meet the needs of the national economy. The third phase was when the curriculum was prescribed by the Government to meet its priorities.

When looking at the evolution of the BTEC specification it can be seen that the requirement for work experience became more prevalent, from a practice that could be simulated and was desirable to where simulations and/or real work placements were mandatory (Fisher, 1999, 2009).

In addition to evolving questions around who decided on what and how a subject was taught there were also structural changes in how a vocational curriculum was represented. Learning outcomes were being established to indicate what should be learned

as well as to provide some direction in how the BTEC programmes should be taught. The rise in modularisation led to vocational practices and the underpinning theories being treated separately rather than holistically. This was in part due to the Open College movement that devised a system of accreditation that led to the unitisation of qualifications and modularisation of curricula (Broadhead, 2022b). The Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) reiterated that modularisation enabled credit accumulation and transfer and this was an important means of recognising the learning of adults.

O'Donnell understood the requirements of an effective jewellery design curriculum, partly from her own art college training and partly through working with other educators. Rajili et al. (2015) outline that designing a jewellery curriculum should be based on an understanding of relevant tools and materials. Designing and making jewellery can be understood as an intuitive practice with an artistically driven standpoint and experimental-based approach, focusing on resolving design challenges related to the object itself. Abdel-Al et al. (2021) argue that the curriculum should include how to develop design thinking. This is how jewellery students solve complex problems by producing cyclical processes of making, testing and feedback for creative solutions that consider the user/ client as the centre of design.

As well as learning skills and design thinking, O'Donnell also introduced other topics such as the theory of jewellery design, working with clients, drawing metal and stones, and running a jewellery-making studio and business.

Conversation as method

The rationale for drawing upon conversation as a research method is that it is a pragmatic way of finding out and preserving O'Donnell's contribution to adult arts education. Bojesen (2019) has written about conversation as method. The researchers consider that this works in tandem with memory as method (Keightley, 2010; Radstone, 2000).

In this case, the conversation is a vehicle for narrative inquiry where stories are shared based on the cumulative memories of Broadhead and Norton (Barker, 2025). Through the conversation and the subsequent written account, a new story is created about the contribution of O'Donnell to adult arts education that defies the evidence that innovation in post-war arts education was created only by men (Reuben, 1978; Spender 1989). Butler-Kisber (2010) places narrative inquiry within the realm of qualitative and arts-informed perspectives.

Barker (2025) reflects on his use of conversation as method alongside the making of 'objective' drawings to reach a common understanding between himself and others. He also sees the fluid roles of 'memory narrator' and 'narrative responder' developing through the conversation. Memories are narrated and the listener responds to that version of the story that is being told. The participants in the conversation take up these roles as part of the ebb and flow of the discussion.

The approach is derived from a feminist critique of knowledge production where:

> Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource . . . accounts of the 'real' world do not depend on a logic of 'discovery', but on a power-charged social relation of conversation. (Attfield, 2003, p. 81)

The conversation as method has the potential to make O'Donnell's work visible and relies on the interplay of memory, narrative and imagination. As both Broadhead and Norton have themselves been art educators, they are able to imagine the practices of O'Donnell,

through some shared experiences. As Clover and Sanford (2022) argue, power relations are in play when considering visibility, invisibility, imagination and representation because these concepts address what we are able to know, imagine and narrate about the world, ourselves and others.

The conversation is held between two researchers who have different life experiences and privileges, although they are both dyslexic and have worked many years in arts education. Their goal is that through their conversation they will reclaim O'Donnell's agency and her contribution to the field of jewellery curriculum design and pedagogy. The conversation is not an exercise in defending opposing positions or in establishing opposing knowledges. Conversation 'develops' in a 'non-linear' way accumulating layers of understanding; sometimes threads in the same conversation can be contradictory (Bojesen, 2019). The conversation is like a rich tapestry where shared understandings and points of misunderstanding can be explored.

Both researchers have memories of talking and working with O'Donnell, however Norton's were more in depth and richer due to being her daughter. Norton and Broadhead had both heard O'Donnell's stories many times over the years creating a longitudinal series of Morton and Broadhead have also shared many stories about O'Donnell's jewellery and teaching over the past twenty years. They have also spoken with colleagues throughout that time who worked with O'Donnell who also shared their memories about her. This history inevitably informs the content of the study.

The two researchers planned the project which was to have a conversation about the work of Ann O'Donnell. They agreed on the broad topics of teaching and curriculum design. They aimed to keep the process as flexible and free-flowing as possible. The conversation was recorded then transcribed using transcription software. The transcription was read and amended where there were repetitions and mis-transcribed words. The transcribed conversation was reviewed many times by Broadhead and Norton so that it communicated the conversation in an authentic way.

Ethical considerations

The researchers aimed to make the conversation an ethical encounter where the results would produce an authentic record of what transpired (Leavy, 2015). At the same time, they reflected on the transcripts to reduce the possibility of narrative polishing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Narrative polishing is where the desire to *tell a good story* overrides the need to tell an authentic one, which may not have a compelling narrative structure or have a satisfying ending.

Actions were guided with care and respect for the research record, Ann O'Donnell, her reputation and her family. When working with family members the researchers were open and transparent about the aims and objectives of the research.

In addition to the conversation there was also a supplementary semi-structured interview conducted by Broadhead with a colleague of O'Donnell after informed consent was given.

Limitations on the method

The relationship of daughter and mother may be seen as influencing how O'Donnell is represented; to a child the mother may be imagined having more agency than she had in actuality. Also, there would have been aspects of O'Donnell's teaching practice that Norton would not have seen. Events and facts can be mis-remembered; for example, the

dates for O'Donnell's shop are different in Norton's memory from published sources. Currently, there is a lack of archival material to back up remembrances. There is also a difference in speaking and the written representation of that speech, where tone and pace are missing, and this can influence how words are interpreted by the reader. In order to mitigate some of the limitations Broadhead conducted a semi-structured interview with a colleague who had worked with Ann in the 1970s. The interview was informed by the previous conversation between Broadhead and Norton.

Approach to analysis

Unlike other qualitative approaches such as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where data is broken into smaller coded pieces of text, narrative inquiry keeps stories intact and considers them holistically. The analysis then focuses on how and why the stories are told.

In this case the resulting narratives recounted through the conversation and its transcription were analysed by drawing upon Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. This comprises temporality, sociality and place. Firstly, the conversations were based on memories of past interactions with Ann O'Donnell recounted in the present with the future aim of raising her contribution to craft practice and pedagogy in a time of transition for vocational education. Secondly, sociality considers the personal and social conditions that shape the stories and in particular the power and social relations are explored. This is done by connecting local, petit, narratives to larger stories or meta-narratives (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Plummer, 1995). In other words, stories about O'Donnell's work were understood in relation to larger stories about vocational education, design practice, gender inequalities in the workplace and motherhood. Finally, the place indicates the situation in which the narrative was told. The conversation occurred and the story unfolds within the art college context and this is important because it situates the shared values and common experiences of both the researchers and O'Donnell herself.

Greenhalgh and Wengraf (2008) suggest that story telling is a means of communication rooted in intersubjectivity. This means two people have individual understandings of something that is held in common and this is part of story eliciting research. The intersubjective role of Broadhead and Norton is acknowledged and is considered through shared reflexivity.

Through reviewing the transcribed conversation Broadhead and Norton were able to identify the larger stories (and for them those of significance) of vocational education, design practice, gender inequalities in the workplace and motherhood. This is partly due to the positionality of the researchers themselves and their own experiences of working in an arts college as well as the findings of literature about gender, craft, vocationalism and pedagogy (Abdel-Al et al., 2021; Buckley, 1998; Męczyński, 2019; Rajili et al., 2015). Direct quotations from the interview with O'Donnell's colleague are included where they add increased insight into the story being told about O'Donnell's practice.

The transcribed conversation

> Norton: And I don't know where to start, really, but I'm just going to talk about the beginning of term, what she used to do with the students. Because Mum and Dad [Edward] ran the jewellery department between the two of them, they could decide who did what and how they did it.

So, my dad did a lot of the practical stuff and Mum did a lot of the design work and the theory – jewellery theory or design theory, some history, and the more technical part of painting jewellery. As part of her teaching of the BTEC, or whatever it was that they were doing, she would on the first day of term with the new students lay out on the board, 'We have to cover this, this and this. But I'm going to leave it up to you what order we do it in what you would like to do first.' So, she co-opted the students into the curriculum design.

Broadhead: What year would this have been, do you think?

Norton: So, I finished primary school aged nine, and it must have been 1979 or something like that.

Broadhead: Probably. And did she have her shop at that point?

Norton: Yes, I think that she had just opened the shop. It had been open for one year now. It opened in 1977.

Broadhead: So, doing the shop and teaching?

Norton: Yeah. Yeah.

Broadhead: That's a lot of work.

Norton: With the new business venture [the gallery-shop] she was trying to get the students involved. Giving them an experience of making [jewellery] for deadlines and shows. She'd invite them to the shop as part of the learning experience and sometimes it would be for like a specific show and they would make work for that show.
And so, they would get an experience that way, you know, working with the gallery. And then sometimes she'd invite them into the workshop to see how it ran and how to work with customers and that kind of thing. Because quite a lot of her students already worked in jewellery shops in town or in the Asian jewellery district in Leeds. So, they had some knowledge of working in retail but maybe not knowledge of how to run the studio or business themselves.

Broadhead: Yes. So that she would try to give them knowledge to empower them?

Norton: Yes quite a few of those students did go on to have their own jewellery studios.

Broadhead: So, they weren't working for somebody else. They got the confidence to run their own businesses.
Do you know any of them?

Norton: There was one guy called John but I cannot remember what his full name was. He was one of Mum and Dad's students. He has got his own business now, but I don't know if he's actually even retired now.

Broadhead: What courses did she work on?

Norton: So, she worked on quite a few different courses over her time at Leeds College of Art; she was a student there in the 1950s and she went to the Royal College. But she came back in the holidays and she worked with Harry Thubron, in the colour school and they were teaching the Bauhaus Basic Program and Josef Albers Colour theory.
After she'd finished at the Royal College, [late 1950s] she started working at Leeds Arts part-time maybe doing the night class. At first. And so sometimes she worked on the foundation – what is now the Foundation course – but her main focus was working in the jewellery rooms – even when she was learning, that was a very small course. At that time there was only three of them on the jewellery course with their teacher and so jewellery has

always been a minority subject area. And now some universities think that three people is not enough to run a course.

Broadhead: So, you think she taught on BTEC as well.

Norton: They had like different classes in the daytime. Sometimes the degree courses came in to the workshop and they would teach a jewellery elective. Yes. An elective. And then they had like the trade guys, the guys that worked in the jewellery shops that came in for a day release training.

Broadhead: She called it DAYTEC or something?

Norton: That's right. That was a forerunner of BTEC. It didn't last very long. It was a fad in the seventies or early eighties. So, she had to learn this whole new teaching programme DAYTEC and then they got rid of it and turned it into a BTEC.

Broadhead: That's how things happen. They evolve, don't they? Was the curriculum not as pinned down?

Norton: They had much more autonomy on how to teach learning outcomes and how to get the students through that. Mum was also an external examiner for Cass College in London so she knew how to put together that... In fact, they used to write the programmes for BTEC and they would set the learning outcomes and the modules. But when Mum went down to examine Cass, they weren't doing their own programme. She had to talk to them about how they could change that programme because they weren't teaching to the learning outcomes. They were teaching to their own programme. I think there was some arrogance at that time, thinking they were above the laws that they'd set themselves – do you know what I mean?

Broadhead: It's like a fight for autonomy to resist rules and regulations.

Norton: I would say so, yes.

Broadhead: So, let's talk more about the actual pedagogy that she and her husband used.

Norton: So, as I was saying, on the first day she would lay out to the students what they needed to learn, and then they would have an input on what order they did that work in. So, she gave them that much autonomy when she was trying to use real life experiences as a way of helping them understand theory.
And so, this is from the experience of a child who's basically gone to work with their mum. The students were really, really engaged and she allowed the lessons to be quite freeform as long as they covered what she needed to cover and touched on those learning outcomes. She allowed the students to bring questions that they had about their own jewellery experience. So, she fleshed out the theoretical side of making or thinking about design by allowing the students to talk about their own experiences or what they'd seen in galleries. They still had to produce portfolios, it was pre-computer time so everybody had folders and handwriting and cutting out pictures and sticking them in their notebooks.

Broadhead: What about drawing. Did they need to do drawing?

Norton: Yes, they did a lot of drawing.

Broadhead: Um was that a barrier, do you know?

Norton: No. she'd quite often set up still lives using metal so that they could understand how metal looked or how you might draw metal. She trained them in how to use watercolours to replicate how metal looks, how gemstones look, and, using light and

shadow or using lighting or spotlights so that the students could build the drama in their images.
Mum had her theory classroom in the rooms above the old pottery. It was not in the main building of Vernon Street it was across the road. And in that building they used to have photography in the basement, ceramics on the first floor. And then above that were classrooms that lots of different people would use. Floristry and window dressing classes and all those different subjects that the College used to offer.

Broadhead: And it's a nightclub now or something that's built in that space.

Norton: Yes. It was at the top of the road. So, I think they pulled half of it down to make into student accommodation. I think it was called Walk-a-Bout (a café/bar) for a bit.
But yes, that building was like a key part of Vernon street in the sixties, seventies, eighties. It was very established as a ceramics centre. So, when I said to her that I wanted to go to art college, she said, 'what kind of art do you want to do?' And I said that I didn't know because I'm just at school.
And she said, 'well, do some night classes.' I think I was 16 or something like that. I was probably too young to do it actually.

Broadhead: Did your mum talk about assessment at all?

Norton: Yes, so they used to swap marking with other courses so they would swap with furniture. I think that's what happened. And I know that Mum, because she had a masters [postgraduate qualification], then she would quite often be called on to do extra assessments.

Broadhead: She'd get paid for that?

Norton: Yes. I think she was paid as over time. So, she quite often would have furniture restoration essays to look at or other things that were going on at the College, I guess that's how she got into the external examining.

Broadhead: So, your father, how did he teach? Do you know?

Norton: So, he started the College as a life model and then he kind of moved from life modelling into odd jobs. But he was always doing stuff like building dark rooms or working with the building staff. Anyway, after he met my Mum, he decided he was going to do his teaching qualification. So, he did that and then he specialized in jewellery. He went through the training process himself and then did the teaching qualification.

Broadhead: So, did he do a degree?

Norton: He did one, but a bit later. He decided he would do Open University and a fine art degree. I guess within fine art he did jewellery.

The text above documents the transcribed and reviewed conversation held between the Norton and Broadhead. The next section discusses the narrative strands within the transcription linking them to wider stories deemed to be significant by the researchers. In particular the discussion explores the gendered division of labour in jewellery-making education; the BTEC curriculum; the shared circumstances of O'Donnell with her students and finally O'Donnell's legacy as a jewellery-maker and educator.

Discussion

Miller (2003) wrote a 100-year history of the Vernon Street building of Leeds College of Art and Design (its then name) and noted a great change in the 1970s-80s in terms of

introducing national qualifications within the art college, as well as some courses being migrated to the new Polytechnic (now known as Leeds Beckett) in 1970. Miller's history tends to focus on full-time courses and there is not much attention given to part-time or day-release modes of study. However, changes in forms of accreditation would influence how all courses and their curricula were designed and taught. O'Donnell and her husband, as has been argued, were working during a time when vocational qualifications were being structured in a different way. The suggestion of transition is evoked in the conversation about the changing curricula between DAYTEC and BTEC. In particular, BTECs were introducing the notion of delivering a curriculum that responded to learning outcomes. Norton refers to learning outcomes when describing O'Donnell's teaching practice and external examining work. From the conversation, it is interesting how O'Donnell created a jewellery curriculum that responded to the 'new vocationalism' and the needs of her students and the local jewellery-making businesses.

Gendered division of labour

The ways in which the curriculum was structured replicated the divisions of labour that happened in the jewellery-making industry. Duberley et al.'s (2017) research discovered gendered and stratified employment patterns in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter. For example, they found that the division of labour in the jewellery industry segregated those who were considered artists, and those considered skilled craftspeople (Banks, 2010; Hughes, 2012).

The O'Donnells' distribution of teaching was organised in such a way that Edward trained the students in the technical, traditional skills curriculum areas, often perceived as 'male work' (Simpson et al., 2014). Ann taught the students the underpinning theory and the design work that encouraged creativity and imagination. This was assumed to be primarily the domain of women (Henry, 2009). That is not to say that O'Donnell could not teach the technical aspects of jewellery-making; she was deemed to be very skilful when she worked for the Jewellery firm *Charles Horner* before graduating from the Royal College (Broadhead, 2022a). Previously, O'Donnell had shared with Broadhead that she found diamond setting boring because she would much rather 'break the rules' when making her jewellery pieces (Norton & Broadhead, 2017). O'Donnell encouraged her students to be experimental in the use of goldsmithing and the setting of stones (this was due in part to her education at the Royal College of Art).

The division of labour within the jewellery department would imply that the curriculum was also divided in this way, where design, experimentation, theory and technical skills were taught separately rather than integrated. This is further suggested when Norton explains that O'Donnell's theory classroom was housed outside the main college building. Sennett (2008) reflects on this separation: 'History has drawn fault lines dividing practice and theory; technique and expression; craftsman and artist; maker and user; modern society suffers from this historical inheritance' (p. 11). A colleague who worked with O'Donnell in the 1970s gave further insight into the practical need to separate theory and practice. They explained that the workshop areas where the practical skills were taught would have been very difficult to show slides in (this was how theory was taught in the pre-digital 1970s and 1980s). This was because they were set up as working spaces housing dangerous substances such as sulphuric and nitric acid that was used to etch or patinate metal. There was quite a lot of metal patination used at the time within jewellery-making along with other processes that used direct heat generating high temperatures.

BTEC curriculum

There was a growth in students studying the BTEC qualification during the 1980s. Initially, there were less than 20,000 registrations with the Business Education Council (SEC), BTEC's predecessor body, in 1978 but by 1982 this number had increased to 68,129 (Fisher, 1999). Miller (2003) described the transition to BTECs in the art school where:

> Four-year sub-degree vocational courses, established in 1970 and [were] mostly taken by 16-year-old school leavers. These courses were incorporated in the early 1980s into the new Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC).… For the first time, the structure and assessment practices of art college further education courses were determined not solely by art educators but by the imposition of a national framework, and its methodology was derived from industrial training models. (Miller, 2003, p. 83)

BTEC qualification prescribed the learning outcomes that needed to be achieved by students. But there appears to have been some flexibility, teacher-autonomy and the possibility of co-constructing the curriculum with learners. O'Donnell was able to ensure that her students had some input into how and when these outcomes were met. In order to make the programme as student-centred as possible students helped O'Donnell plan the scheme of work. She also encouraged her students to talk about their lived experiences of jewellery-making, so the course had meaning and relevance to them. O'Donnell was able to interweave the principles of a liberal education with the outcome focus of a vocational education. The debates surrounding the importance of not only focusing on job-based knowledge but also ensuring a wide humanities-informed and human-centred curriculum were prevalent during that time (Lewis, 1997; Pring, 1995b).

The links with industry were very important; O'Donnell and her husband taught people working in local small businesses as well as larger firms. In some ways O'Donnell was a bridge between educational and industrial contexts due to her knowledge and expertise. This was further confirmed by her colleague who said:

> but part-timers were brought in often because they had a very specific skill. And they were often seen as people that linked the outside world with the world of academia. They [the management] liked the fact that you'd done something in industry or had been a designer out there.

The importance of drawing to art college education has long been documented; it was the bed-rock of learning to be an artist or designer for many centuries (Cooksey, 2006; Jaffee, 2005; Miller, 2003). It is interesting that O'Donnell encouraged her students to draw so that they could gain extra insight into the qualities of the metals and gemstones they would be working with. Being able to represent one's designs through drawing and painting would have been useful when talking to clients who wished to commission bespoke pieces of jewellery.

O'Donnell's shop *Anno Domini* and later the studio in her kitchen played an important role in providing authentic learning environments for her students. They were able to experience, first hand, the business aspects of running a jewellery shop, studio and gallery. This insight would help those wanting to run their own enterprises. She also gave them opportunities to respond to 'live briefs' where they could make their own jewellery to be exhibited in the gallery-shop. The importance of giving learners work-based learning opportunities was central to all stages of the BTEC's development over the 1970s through to the 1990s and beyond (Fisher, 2009). The boundaries between O'Donnell's

teaching, creative practice and business were permeable in ways which would not be acceptable in today's vocational education context.

O'Donnell and her students have common circumstances

O'Donnell's life and work often mirrored that of her students; the courses she devised enabled people to develop their own design and creative lives if they wished. Part-time, adult education as well as day release work-based programmes meant her students could access jewellery-making materials, equipment and tuition. At the same time O'Donnell had a portfolio career (Cawsey et al., 1995) where she balanced her own practice with running a jewellery retail and exhibition space, *Anno Domini,* and her teaching practice. Męczyński (2019) found that this work pattern was also common in the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter and in the jewellery centres in Leipzig and Poznań.

Also, on a practical level O'Donnell needed to juggle many roles. Buckley (1998) noted that women needed to manage their small businesses such as dress-making within their homes in order to manage their creativity as well as their domestic responsibilities. O'Donnell when she closed her shop in the late 1970s moved her workshop next to her kitchen so she could continue her practice and teaching. This understanding that her students may have to manage complex work, creative practice and family commitments meant that creating student-centred, flexible and authentic learning opportunities was helpful to everyone concerned. Bringing her daughter to work with her was a strategy for O'Donnell to manage all the demands life threw at her. O'Donnell's colleague remembered that bringing children to work was a common practice in the 1970s:

> I remember what we used to do on the foundation course is they put 2 trestle tables at the back of the studio, and if it was holiday time, staff's kids would do stuff at the back, kids, they love doing art. All the rest of the students were getting on with stuff in the front.

This flexibility would not be acceptable in the 21st Century art college studio. But what it enabled was the eyewitness account from Norton about her mother's approach to teaching.

O'Donnell's educational legacy arising from the conversation

Fisher (1999) writes that the structure of the BTEC qualification aimed to develop specialist work-related skills and qualifications. He believes BTEC enacted a vocational progressivism, successfully transforming pedagogic practices during the 1980s.

O'Donnell made a contribution to art pedagogy through her innovative and pragmatic ways of creating and delivering curricula to her students. In a sense her teaching practice was informed by many influences such as an art school education, a new vocationalism, industrial experience, entrepreneurship, motherhood and her creative practice. This combination made her teaching responsive, based on wisdom rather than educational models that could become dogmatic and inflexible.

Conclusion

The research method as conversation did reveal the ways in which O'Donnell contributed to the field of vocational education that addressed jewellery-making. When reflecting on the conversation further it can be seen that Norton acted mostly as a 'memory narrator' and Broadhead spoke as a 'narrative responder'. This was not intended to be the case but

appeared to happen intuitively during the conversation. Broadhead carried out a supplementary interview with one of O'Donnell's colleagues from the 1970s. This provided additional clarity to some of the points that came out of the conversation. However, it was the conversation as a research method that is the focus of this article. This is because it is a pragmatic approach to capturing the stories about an educator's practice where other information has been lost or has not been preserved as part of the historical record. In some cases, there may not be any surviving colleagues that are accessible to researchers so this method could be the only option.

As with any research methods there are limitations when using this approach. It reveals how precise dates are very difficult to remember; to be accurate other forms of documented information are required. There were some fleeting glimpses into the ways in which students benefited from her teaching and curriculum design, but the perspective of students is not foregrounded in this account. Also, the tensions and difficulties that would have existed when O'Donnell was teaching are not explored in depth. A sense of frustration is captured in the conversation where O'Donnell had to quickly create new programmes when DAYTEC changed to BTEC after one year.

The student-centred approach was apparent in the conversation. O'Donnell appeared to see the students as partners in the education process. They helped organise the scheme of work the class would follow. There was a degree of freedom as long as the learning outcomes were achieved. It seems that she was interested in the stories her students told about their own jewellery making practices and used those to make the teaching of theory relevant.

The division of the curriculum into modules is not made explicit in the conversation. However, the spatial organisation within the jewellery department would imply that design, drawing, experimentation, theory and technical skills were taught separately rather than integrated. This is suggested when Norton explains that O'Donnell's theory classrooms were housed outside the main college building.

The boundaries between O'Donnell's domestic and professional life were permeable, she let students gain knowledge and experience by letting them into her shop and her workspace. This enabled her students to fulfil the work experience aspects of the BTEC qualification, if they were not directly employed in the industry. But she encouraged them to think beyond being an employee; inspiring them to consider being jewellers who could set up their own studios and businesses. She also brought her daughter into the workshop and the teaching space. Today such fluidity between the roles and responsibilities may not be tolerated in the current 'risk' averse educational context. However, for O'Donnell it was a pragmatic way of dealing with the complexity of being a jewellery designer-maker, entrepreneur, educator, and a mother. The conditions of O'Donnell's working life have allowed the researchers to draw upon Norton's memories, reclaiming her as an important arts educator who should have been acknowledged on the College's mural alongside her husband. O'Donnell's story is also Broadhead and Norton's story as they grapple with similar issues, such as having to deal with changing national vocational qualifications; managing different roles; and preserving one's own creative practices. O'Donnell's legacy provides a model based in pragmatism that others can draw upon to navigate contemporary adult arts education.

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Reclaiming indigenous learning in adult education: An ethno-andragogical perspective from the traditional art community

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Abstract

This study explores how cultural practices function as informal learning environments for adults, focusing on a kuda kepang community in Pal Tiga Puluh village, North Bengkulu, Indonesia. It examines how local knowledge, adult learning, and cultural continuity are connected through participation in traditional performance. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with community members. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated learning domains: embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience. These domains were associated with the development of technical skills, cultural identity, social cohesion, and perceived emotional empowerment. The findings suggest that the sanggar functions as a community-based learning environment in which knowledge is acquired through observation, repetition, dialogue, ritual participation, and intergenerational relationships. The study contributes to adult education by showing how culturally situated learning can broaden predominantly individual and cognitive understandings of adult learning.

Keywords: ethno-andragogy, adult learning, cultural learning, experiential learning, kuda kepang

Background

In many indigenous and rural communities, adult learning is deeply embedded in cultural practices and local knowledge systems. However, dominant adult learning models tend

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to be rooted in assumptions of individualism and cognitive rationality, thereby marginalising the spiritual, communal, and embodied learning processes that are central to indigenous ways of life (Aikman & Robinson-Pant, 2019; Rhodes, 2021). Among Ethiopian pastoralists, for instance, adult learning occurs through oral traditions and spiritual practices that resist formal schooling norms (Seyoum & Basha, 2017). When programmes ignore such culturally situated knowledge, they result in disengagement and reproduce educational inequities (Regmi, 2019). Similar dynamics appear in remote Australia, where literacy programmes designed as neutral technical skills overlook literacy as a cultural process, causing Indigenous youth to reject irrelevant learning (Kral & Schwab, 2017). Thus, the dominance of instruction-focused adult education models continues to marginalise learning practices rooted in culture, spirituality, and community, which are fundamental characteristics of indigenous communities around the world.

Studies show that ignoring culturally situated forms of knowledge results in disengagement, lack of sustainability, and the reproduction of educational inequities (Regmi, 2019; Seyoum & Basha, 2017). In Ethiopia, for instance, indigenous knowledge contributes to sustainable development through accessible traditional medicine, win-win conflict mediation systems, and cultural tourism that generates local income (Moges et al., 2024). Similarly, in remote Australia, community-led learning centers that integrate indigenous cultural practices have proven more effective than formal literacy programmes (Kral & Schwab, 2017). According to recent data from Statistik Indonesia 2023, over 36% of rural adults in Indonesia engage in cultural activities such as traditional dance, music, and ritual as a form of community participation, yet these practices remain largely excluded from formal and non-formal education frameworks (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023). This signals a critical disconnect between national educational strategies and the lived realities of adult learners. In response, there has been a growing call for ethno-andragogy, a culturally responsive adult learning paradigm that integrates indigenous values, collective learning, and embodied practices (Clancy et al., 2023). Ethno-andragogy acknowledges that learning in many indigenous and non-Western settings is not an individual pursuit but a relational, spiritual, and community-based process (Gainsford & Evans, 2021).

Kuda Kepang is a traditional Javanese dance involving trance states, ancestral rituals, and collective performance, where adults engage not only in artistic expression but also in intergenerational knowledge transfer. Sanggar Samudra Jaya, a locally initiated community group, serves as an informal learning hub where adult learners ranging from dancers and musicians to pawang (ritual facilitators) learn through participation, observation, spiritual discipline, and oral tradition. Although *Kuda Kepang* was originally identified with Javanese people, its development has made it accepted by all levels of society. It is no wonder that *Kuda Kepang* performance groups now include many members from the Rejang ethnic group in Bengkulu. It is not only popular among adult men but also among children, adolescents, and women.

Despite the pedagogical richness of traditional arts, the educational potential of *Kuda Kepang* communities remains under-researched. Existing studies identified in this manuscript have primarily examined *Kuda Kepang* and related Jaran Kepang practices as cultural, artistic, or community-transfer phenomena, while less attention has been given to their functioning as adult learning environments.

As non-Indigenous researchers, we acknowledge that conducting research within an Indigenous cultural community involves ethical and epistemological challenges. Neither of us belongs to the Javanese *Kuda Kepang* tradition, and we recognise the risk of reproducing extractive representations of Indigenous knowledge. Throughout this study, we sought to engage collaboratively with community members, maintain reflexive

awareness of our positionality, and ensure that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation of findings. A more detailed positionality statement is provided in the methodology section. To address this gap, the present study raises four research questions: (1) How do adult learners engage in learning within the cultural setting of the *Kuda Kepang* art community? (2) What are the motivations, lived experiences, and values that shape their learning processes? (3) In what ways do ritual, bodily practice, and social interaction facilitate knowledge transmission? and (4) How can these processes inform the development of a culturally grounded framework namely, ethno-andragogy for adult education?

Literature review

Repositioning adult learning: Toward an ethno-andragogical framework

For decades, the fields of edult education has prioritised learner autonomy, reflective reasoning, and a pragmatic orientation toward solving real-life problems, as reflected in major theoretical frameworks such as as Knowles' andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005), Mezirow's transformative learning (Mtika & Kistler, 2017), and Brookfield's critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009). These models have provided a strong foundation for adult education practice, particularly in formal or institutionalised settings. However, they tend to privilege cognitive over emotional, individual over collective, and secular over spiritual dimensions of learning.

While these paradigms offer valuable insights, their limitations become increasingly apparent when applied in indigenous contexts in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asian traditional societies, learning is deeply embedded in social relationships, cultural rituals, and shared communal responsibilities. The focus on individual progress and rationalist outcomes fails to capture the relational and symbolic dynamics that characterise learning in such settings (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). This disjuncture has prompted scholars to question the universal applicability of adult learning theories and to seek frameworks that are more contextually grounded. For instance, transformative learning theory emphasises critical reflection and perspective transformation as the pinnacle of adult learning (Mezirow, 1997). While valuable, this approach often neglects communal, embodied, and spiritual forms of transformation prevalent in indigenous settings. In contrast, Romm (2015) argues that indigenous learning is grounded in relationality, spirituality, and collective experience, elements that are absent from coventional adult education learning theories.

A growing body of literature now calls for the development of culturally responsive adult education models. These include the acknowledgment of indigenous knowledge systems, which value experiential, embodied, and intergenerational ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012; Guo, 2017). Learning, in these contexts, often takes place through oral traditions, sacred performances, communal labor, and participation in rituals that reinforce collective identity. The knowledge transmitted in such forms is not abstract or decontextualised, but deeply connected to lived experience, social function, and spiritual meaning. This tension reflects what Mignolo terms *epistemic disobedience*, a call to delink from dominant Eurocentric logics of knowing and to reclaim the validity of non-Western epistemologies (Mignolo, 2009). Within this framework, indigenous knowledge is not alternative but foundational, challenging the asymmetrical power structures embedded in global knowledge production. These critiques signal the need for a paradigm shift in how adult education is theorised and practised. Rather than attempting to adapt

Western models to local cultures, there is a movement toward centering indigenous epistemologies as the starting point for theory building. This repositioning reframes adult learning not as a neutral or universal process, but as one that is shaped by power, history, and context. It also challenges the colonial legacy of education systems that have long devalued traditional knowledge from academic discourse. In their landmark work, Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against metaphorising decolonisation, urging scholars and educators to resist the tendency to integrate indigenous practices superficially into existing frameworks. Instead, they advocate for a complete reorientation of educational logic one that honors sovereignty, self-determination, and epistemic integrity.

Furthermore, recognising the diversity of adult learning practices is essential for achieving epistemic justice in global education. Education systems that marginalise or ignore culturally situated ways of knowing perpetuate inequality and disempowerment. In contrast, embracing pluralism in adult education theory validates alternative epistemologies and supports more inclusive, relevant, and transformative learning experiences. This shift paves the way for frameworks like ethno-andragogy, which seek to restore the legitimacy of local culture and spirituality as central to the learning process. By rethinking adult learning through the lens of cultural epistemologies, educators and researchers can begin to dismantle the universalist assumptions that have long dominated the field. This opens the door to more nuanced, community-based models of education that reflect the real experiences of learners in the Global South. It also contributes to the broader decolonisation of knowledge, asserting that no single model of learning can adequately capture the full range of human educational experiences. Gouthro and Holloway (2023) argue that a critical social theory perspective in adult education must go beyond piecemeal equity concerns to interrogate the broader structural and epistemological frameworks within which learning takes place. Their call for a '*pedagogy of hope*' grounded in Freirean tradition resonates with the *ethno-andragogical* insistence that education must affirm, rather than override, learners' cultural and communal identities. Similarly, von Kotze (2024) demonstrates through a South African popular education programme that the body itself is a site of knowledge: the gut, as a mediating organ between inside and outside, between self and world, functions as a teacher. This embodied pedagogy parallels the role of trance and ritual movement in the *Kuda Kepang* community, where the body becomes the primary vehicle for transmitting ancestral knowledge. Notably, Maksimovic (2024) in her exploration of place-based art education and adult learning argues that spaces of cultural production including community arts studios and alternative learning environments carry epistemic value that formal education systems consistently overlook. The community of *Kuda Kepang* is precisely such a space: a site where place, art, memory, and community intersect to generate culturally meaningful adult learning. These contributions provide an international theoretical foundation for the ethno-andragogical argument advanced in the present study.

Ethno-andragogy: An alternative approach to adult learning

Ethno-andragogy offers a theoretical and practical framework that foregrounds local culture, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge in the learning process. It rejects the notion that adult learning must occur in structured, formalised settings and instead recognises informal, everyday contexts such as ritual spaces, communal gatherings, and cultural performances as legitimate and powerful sites of education. This perspective is rooted in the understanding that knowledge is not solely transmitted through cognitive instruction but is also embodied, lived, and experienced through cultural participation (Loeng, 2018; Zulkarnain et al., 2023).

In this framework, learning is inherently communal and spiritual. Rather than positioning the learner as an isolated actor, ethno-andragogy situates them within a web of relationships that include elders, ancestors, community members, and natural or spiritual forces. Learning becomes an act of engagement with these interconnected realms, often expressed through storytelling, ceremonial practices, and symbolic gestures. Unlike Western models that separate knowledge from belief, ethno-andragogy embraces a holistic view where learning and being are intertwined.

A compelling manifestation of ethno-andragogy can be found in traditional performance arts such as *Kuda Kepang*, *Wayang Kulit*, and *Gamelan*. In these traditions, adults acquire knowledge through participation in music, dance, and trance, guided by ritual specialists (*pawang*) and community elders. These acts are not merely performative they are pedagogical. The learner internalises cultural values, develops technical skills, and experiences emotional and spiritual transformation through embodied ritual. Knowledge is passed not through written texts but through observation, imitation, and communal practice over time (Geertz, 1999; Lansing, 2012).

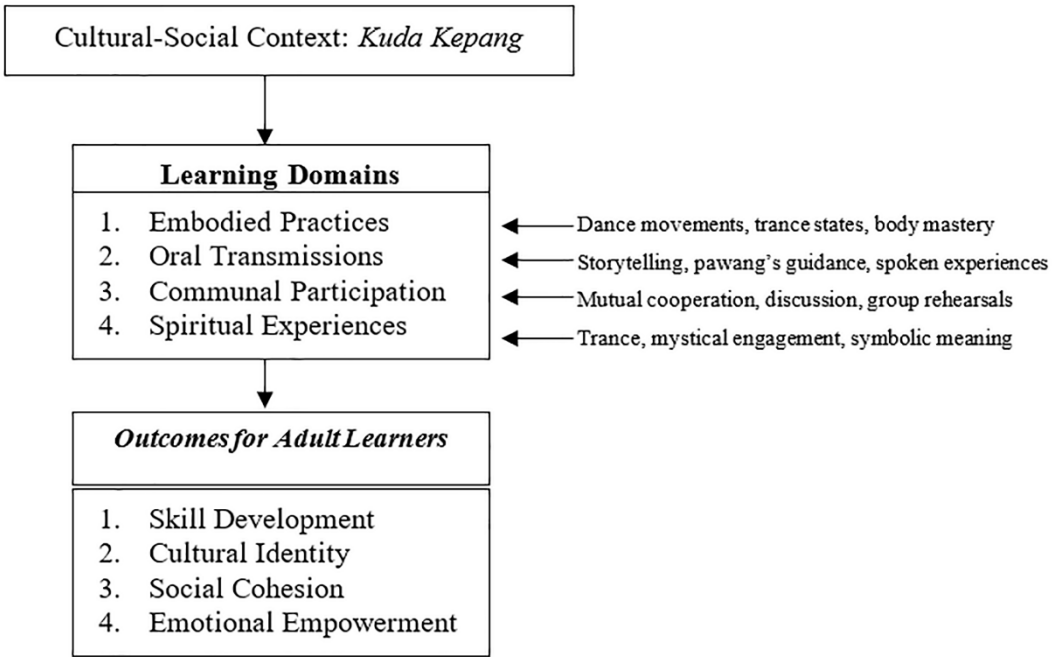
Another key aspect of ethno-andragogy is its recognition of the affective and symbolic dimensions of learning. As Hammond and Tisdell argue, adult learning is not just about thinking but also about feeling, moving, and relating (Hammond & Collins, 2013; Tisdell, 2003). In many indigenous contexts, learning is inseparable from song, rhythm, gesture, and physical space. These elements function as both content and method, carrying meanings that resonate at emotional, social, and spiritual levels. Ethno-andragogy thus reclaims the full range of human expression as central to education.

Importantly, this model also redefines the role of the educator. In contrast to the facilitator role popularised in Western adult education, ethno-andragogy emphasises the position of elders, spiritual leaders, and cultural practitioners as transmitters of wisdom. Their authority is derived not from formal qualifications but from lived experience and community recognition. The learning relationship is relational and often hierarchical, but grounded in trust, respect, and shared values. Ultimately, ethno-andragogy presents a powerful challenge to the homogenisation of adult learning theory. It affirms that culturally rooted practices are not peripheral but central to education, especially in indigenous and marginalised communities. By legitimising local knowledge systems and recognising embodied, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of learning, ethno-andragogy expands the boundaries of what counts as education. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive, just, and pluralistic future for adult learning globally.

Theoretical framework

This study proposes a conceptual model of ethno-andragogical learning grounded in the cultural and social practices of the *Kuda Kepang* art community. The model demonstrates how the unique cultural environment of *Kuda Kepang* functions as an informal yet highly structured educational setting for adult learners. Learning transpires organically through lived experience, communal participation, and culturally embedded rituals. This framework comprises three primary components: the cultural-social context, the learning domains, and the outcomes for adult learners. The development of this framework was rooted in grounded theory principles, where recurring themes, meanings, and learning processes emerged inductively from extensive field observation and interview data. Rather than being imposed deductively from pre-existing theories, the model reflects patterns of learning as they naturally occur within the cultural practices of the *Kuda Kepang* community (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Framework ethno-andragogical learning from *Kuda Kepang* activity



Cultural-social context: Kuda Kepang

Before elaborating on each component, it is important to situate this framework in relation to existing adult learning theories. Dominant Western paradigms principally Knowles' andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005), Mezirow's transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and Brookfield's critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009) have made foundational contributions to adult education theory by foregrounding learner autonomy, reflective reasoning, and self-directedness. However, these frameworks share a common limitation: they prioritise the cognitive, individualistic, and secular dimensions of learning while marginalising the communal, spiritual, and embodied aspects that characterise learning in indigenous communities (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). The ethno-andragogical framework proposed in this study extends rather than dismisses these paradigms. Specifically, it reinterprets Knowles' concept of self-direction not as individual autonomy but as collective agency where adults actively choose to learn in order to sustain and transmit cultural identity. It deepens Mezirow's notion of transformative learning by including spiritual and bodily transformation alongside cognitive perspective shifts: trance states in *Kuda Kepang*, for example, represent a mode of transformative experience that cannot be captured by rational discourse alone. And it radicalises Brookfield's critical reflection by extending it to include communal critical consciousness the collective recognition and resistance of cultural marginalisation. In doing so, the ethno-andragogical framework contributes a pluralistic, decolonial lens to adult education theory, one that is enriched by the Southern epistemologies embedded in the *Kuda Kepang* tradition (Gouthro & Holloway, 2023; von Kotze, 2024).

At the heart of this framework lies the *Kuda Kepang* performance tradition a Javanese folk art involving dance, music, trance states, and ritualistic practices. The sanggar (community arts studio) serves as a space where adults gather not only to perform but also to learn through active participation and mutual engagement. The *Kuda Kepang* community operates as a cultural microcosm wherein values, skills, and worldviews are

transmitted intergenerationally. This context situates learning within a dynamic ecosystem of local knowledge, collective memory, and spiritual involvement.

Learning domains

Within this cultural milieu, four interrelated learning domains are identified, reflecting the holistic ways in which adults acquire knowledge and develop:

a) *Embodied practices*: Learning is facilitated through bodily engagement. Participants partake in choreographed dance movements, navigate trance states, and cultivate control over their physical expressions. These embodied practices serve not only aesthetic and ritual functions but also pedagogical roles, enabling the internalisation of rhythm, discipline, and resilience. This aligns with Tisdell's assertion that knowledge in adult education is often embodied transmitted through lived, sensory, and symbolic experiences that carry cultural and spiritual significance (Tisdell, 2003).
b) *Oral transmission*: Knowledge is conveyed through storytelling, informal dialogue, and verbal instruction. Elders or ritual specialists, such as the *pawang*, provide mentorship, share historical narratives, and guide novice members. Oral transmission ensures the preservation of cultural wisdom and reinforces social norms.
c) *Communal participation*: Learning is inherently social. Activities such as rehearsals, group discussions, and collaborative performances foster reciprocal learning and cooperation. Through the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual aid), members cultivate social responsibility, empathy, and leadership. This domain underscores that learning is a shared, communal experience rather than an isolated act. This reflects the principles of 'situated learning' as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), in which learning occurs through participation in culturally meaningful social practices, and novices gradually move from peripheral to full participation within a community of practice.
d) *Spiritual experiences*: Ritual and symbolism play critical educational roles. Trance states, mystical interpretations, and symbolic gestures transcend mere performance, facilitating emotional transformation and deepening participants' sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to tradition (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ritual-based group learning in the *Kuda Kepang* community

Outcomes for adult learners

Engagement within these domains leads adult learners to develop not only technical and performative skills but also profound personal and communal capacities:

a) *Skill development*: Participants gain proficiency in dance, music, coordination, and ritual enactment. Additionally, leadership and organisational competencies emerge through active group involvement.
b) Cultural identity: Involvement in *Kuda Kepang* reaffirms cultural roots, fostering pride, belonging, and continuity with ancestral traditions. This engagement serves as a countermeasure against cultural erosion and social marginalisation.
c) *Social cohesion*: Collective learning participation strengthens communal bonds. Trust, collaboration, and solidarity are nurtured, contributing to the group's overall resilience.
d) *Emotional empowerment*: Through spiritual engagement and expressive practices, learners often experience personal growth, healing, and empowerment. This emotional dimension equips individuals with confidence and inner strength to navigate life's challenges.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to investigate the ethno-andragogical learning processes within the *Kuda Kepang* art community (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018). The case study approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex cultural phenomena in their natural contexts, allowing for an in-depth, holistic understanding of the social and educational dynamics that underpin adult learning in this traditional setting. We conducted this research at Sanggar Samudra Jaya, a community arts studio in Pal Tiga Puluh village, North Bengkulu, Indonesia. The sanggar consists of 49 members, including dancers, musicians, pawang (ritual facilitators), and elders. To obtain diverse perspectives on learning processes and cultural transmission, purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants. The distribution of participants based on their roles within the sanggar is presented in Table 1, while their demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 2. This purposive sampling ensured that diverse perspectives related to the learning processes and cultural transmission were captured.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Category	Number of participants
Elders	3
Pawang (ritual facilitators)	2
Active adult learners	10
Total participants	**15**

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants

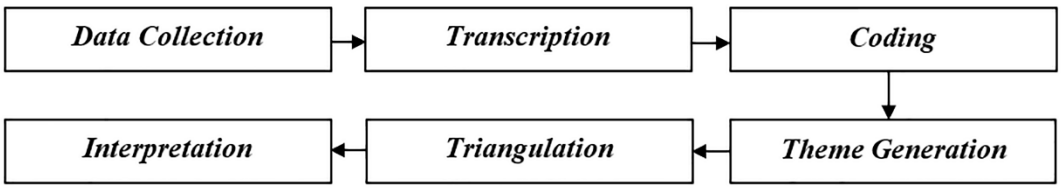
Characteristic	Description
Sampling technique	Purposive sampling
Population (sanggar members)	49 members
Sample size	15 participants

Age range	32-65 years
Male participants	9
Female participants	1
Participant groups	Elders, pawang (ritual facilitators), active adult learners

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of nine months, from August 2024 to April 2025, allowing for sustained engagement and immersion in the daily routines and ceremonial cycles of the sanggar. We collected data through two complementary qualitative methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Through participant observation, we observed rehearsals, ritual preparations, performances, and informal gatherings, taking detailed field notes and writing reflexive memos after each session. Special attention was given to embodied practices (dance movements, trance states), oral transmissions (storytelling, *pawang* instructions), communal interactions (rehearsals, discussions), and spiritual experiences (rituals, trance inductions). While semi-structured interviews, we conducted in-depth interviews with all 15 participants. Interview protocols explored the four learning domains (embodied practices, oral transmission, communal participation, spiritual experiences) and their perceived outcomes. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian or local dialects (Bengkulu Malay, Rejang), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Translations into English were checked by bilingual research assistant familiar with the cultural context.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving iterative coding and categorisation to identify patterns and themes relevant to the study's research questions and conceptual framework (Figure 3). The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Figure 3. The thematic analysis process applied in this study



Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided informed consent. The researcher remained sensitive to cultural protocols and the spiritual significance of the practices observed, ensuring respectful and ethical engagement throughout the research process.

Positionality statement

We are non-Indigenous researchers. Both authors are academic scholars in adult education and ethnography affiliated with Universitas Bengkulu and Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia. Neither author was born into the Javanese *Kuda Kepang* performance tradition. We acknowledge the risk of reproducing extractive or colonial representations when researchers interpret cultural knowledge from an outsider position.

Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, reflexive documentation, and an audit trail. Credibility was supported by nine months of field engagement, comparison of interview and observational data, and member checking. Transferability was supported through contextual and descriptive detail. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through reflexive memos and documentation of analytical decisions.

The findings indicate that adult learning within the *Kuda Kepang* community is situated, multisensory, and closely embedded in cultural practice. Participants' accounts and field observations point to the interaction of embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience.

Findings

Learning processes within the Kuda Kepang community

The learning processes observed within the *Kuda Kepang* community were predominantly informal and embedded in cultural practice. Rather than relying primarily on textbooks or formal curricula, participants described learning through rehearsal, performance preparation, ritual participation, observation, and interaction with more experienced members.

Embodied learning is central to this process. The transmission of skills occurs through the body's interaction with rhythm, movement, and sensory experiences. Participants internalise knowledge by repeatedly practicing dance sequences and mastering trance techniques, which facilitate the synchronisation of physical expression with symbolic meaning. This embodied knowledge is difficult to articulate verbally and is best understood through practice and repetition in social contexts. The sanggar, as the physical and social locus of learning, operates as both a studio and a community hub. Here, adult learners do not merely perform but engage in continuous social exchanges, including peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving. This environment fosters horizontal learning relationships where novices learn from elders and more experienced peers through observation, imitation, and constructive feedback. Such intergenerational interaction is essential for sustaining the continuity of the art form (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Spiritual preparation phase before performance

Further, learning in this community is non-linear and adaptive. It incorporates cycles of practice, reflection, and communal discussion that enable participants to refine their skills and deepen their understanding over time. This process is situated within the rhythms of daily life and community events, highlighting the embeddedness of learning within social and cultural rhythms rather than being confined to isolated sessions. The role of oral instruction remains significant, particularly in transmitting historical narratives, ritual protocols, and symbolic meanings associated with each movement and musical cue. However, oral teaching is often interwoven with practical demonstration, creating a multisensory learning environment that accommodates diverse learning styles and preferences among adult learners. Moreover, emotional and affective dimensions permeate the learning process. Participants often describe feelings of connection, belonging, and motivation as intrinsic parts of their educational journey. This affective engagement enhances retention and fosters a commitment to collective cultural preservation.

Participant narratives gathered during fieldwork offer direct evidence of these affective and educational dimensions. One senior dancer (male, 54 years) reflected on his involvement: 'Saya tidak pernah belajar dari buku semua yang saya tahu tentang Kuda Kepang, saya pelajari dari orang tua dan dari tubuh saya sendiri. Di sini, kita belajar dengan hati, bukan hanya dengan pikiran.' ['I never learned from a book everything I know about *Kuda Kepang*, I learned from my elders and from my own body. Here, we learn with the heart, not only with the mind.']. This account speaks directly to the embodied, relational, and non-cognitive dimensions of learning that characterise the ethno-andragogical model. Oral tradition is a cornerstone of ethno-andragogical learning. Instead of relying on written texts, knowledge is conveyed through storytelling, informal dialogue, and direct verbal instruction from elders and ritual specialists (Chilisa, 2012; Guo, 2017). The *pawang* (ritual facilitator) and senior members act as custodians of history, ritual protocols, and symbolic meanings. The community's *pawang* (male, 67 years) explained: 'Kalau saya tidak mengajarkan ini kepada generasi muda, pengetahuan ini akan hilang. Ini bukan hanya seni ini adalah cara kami menjaga leluhur tetap hidup.' ['If I do not teach this to the younger generation, this knowledge will disappear. This is not just art it is how we keep our ancestors alive.'] This oral transmission is not a one-way delivery of information. It is interwoven with demonstration and dialogue, allowing learners to ask questions and receive immediate corrective feedback within the context of rehearsals and rituals.

In ethno-andragogy, learning is inherently communal, situated within a web of relationships that include elders, peers, ancestors, and the wider community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). The *sanggar* (community arts studio) operates as a *community of practice* where novices learn by observing, imitating, and gradually taking on more complex roles. Activities such as group rehearsals, mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), and collective decision-making foster horizontal learning relationships. Such testimony underscores the urgency and cultural weight of transmission practices within the community, affirming that learning here is simultaneously an act of cultural preservation and intergenerational responsibility (von Kotze, 2024). A younger adult learner (female, 29 years) added: 'Waktu saya pertama kali ikut latihan, saya malu dan tidak tahu apa-apa. Tapi lama-lama saya merasa seperti bagian dari keluarga besar. Saya belajar bukan karena disuruh, tapi karena saya ingin menjaga budaya ini.' ['When I first joined rehearsals, I was shy and knew nothing. But gradually I felt like part of a large family. I learn not because I am told to, but because I want to preserve this culture.'] This statement reveals how social belonging and collective responsibility become powerful motivators for learning, contrasting with individualistic

notions of self-direction. Participation is not merely instrumental but identity-forming, as learners gradually move from peripheral to full membership in the community of practice. This voluntary, identity-driven motivation confirms that adult learning in this context is fundamentally self-directed, though its orientation is toward collective rather than individual goals a distinction that differentiates ethno-andragogy from Knowles' Western model of self-directed learning (Gainsford & Evans, 2021).

In summary, the learning process in the *Kuda Kepang* community exemplifies a dynamic interplay between embodied practice, oral transmission, social participation, and emotional engagement, creating a rich, culturally grounded model of adult education. The study also does not yet address how gender roles or intergenerational power dynamics influence access to learning roles, such as becoming a *pawang* or performance leader. These dimensions may affect how knowledge is transmitted, who controls ritual authority, and how status is negotiated within the sanggar.

Motivations, lived experiences, and cultural values in adult learning

Kuda Kepang learning within the community is not motivated by certificates, artistic employment opportunities, or income generation. Rather, it is driven by a commitment to preserving ancestral heritage and fulfilling intergenerational responsibilities. This orientation differs significantly from the practical needs and individual problem-solving focus emphasised in Knowles' theory of adult learning. Participants are motivated by a strong sense of belonging and collective identity, as many engage in learning *Kuda Kepang* to affirm their cultural identity and become part of a meaningful social group.

Many community members remain actively involved because the learning process provides them with a sense of peace, purpose, and spiritual connectedness. These experiences are cultivated through trance states, ritual practices, relationships with ancestors, and processes of emotional healing. Participants reported that during trance experiences, they often do not feel physical pain; instead, they experience profound emotional relief and spiritual fulfilment that they believe cannot be achieved through modern medical treatment alone. These findings suggest that adult learning within the *Kuda Kepang* community is motivated not only by cultural preservation but also by the pursuit of emotional wellbeing, spiritual transformation, and collective belonging.

Cultural significance and meaning

Kuda Kepang transcends its existence as a mere performing art, embodying a vital repository of Javanese cultural heritage and identity. It acts as a living archive of collective memory, where ancestral histories, moral values, and social norms are encoded within ritual performances and transmitted through generations. The cultural significance of *Kuda Kepang* is thus inseparable from its educational functions. Participants articulate a profound sense of cultural pride and belonging, recognising their role as custodians of a tradition that has withstood colonial disruption, modernisation pressures, and cultural homogenisation. This cultural engagement is experienced not only as preservation but as active reinvention and affirmation of identity within a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

The symbolic dimensions of *Kuda Kepang* performances serve as a medium through which the community negotiates meanings of power, spirituality, and social order. Each element the horse effigy, the trance state, the music functions as a semiotic signifier that conveys complex cultural narratives about human-nature relationships, ancestral

reverence, and cosmological beliefs. Through ritual enactment, community members reinforce social cohesion and articulate shared values such as mutual respect, harmony, and communal responsibility. These values are not merely abstract ideals but are concretely embodied in cooperative behaviors during rehearsals and performances, highlighting the inseparability of culture and social practice (Figure 5). Moreover, the cultural meanings embedded in *Kuda Kepang* act as a form of resistance and resilience. By engaging with these traditions, participants counteract cultural marginalisation and assert their right to cultural continuity and recognition. This resistance is particularly poignant in contexts where indigenous knowledge systems are undervalued or threatened by dominant national narratives.

Figure 5. *Pawang*-guided trance learning and emotional empowerment

The interplay between tradition and modernity is also negotiated within this cultural framework. While rooted in ancestral practices, *Kuda Kepang* performances have adapted to contemporary audiences and contexts, incorporating new musical instruments or performance venues, thus ensuring relevance and vitality. In conclusion, the cultural significance of *Kuda Kepang* extends beyond performance into realms of identity formation, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability, serving as a powerful site for the intergenerational transmission of values and knowledge.

Spiritual engagement in learning

Spirituality emerged as an important dimension of learning for participants who described ritual and symbolic practices as meaningful parts of their participation in *Kuda Kepang*. The data indicate that spiritual experience was intertwined with emotional, social, and cultural meanings rather than functioning as a separate learning activity.

Participants described ritual experiences as helping them connect symbolic meanings with bodily practice and collective memory. Elders and pawang were reported to guide participation in these practices within the community's established cultural protocols (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Communal practice and intergenerational collaboration

Spiritual engagement within *Kuda Kepang* transcends individual experience, fostering a collective sense of purpose and belonging. The shared ritual participation strengthens communal bonds and reinforces social cohesion, as individuals recognise their interconnectedness within a larger cosmological and social order. Furthermore, spiritual practices within the community provide mechanisms for coping with life's challenges. Participants report that engagement with *Kuda Kepang* rituals promotes emotional healing, offers solace, and nurtures psychological empowerment, enabling them to navigate adversity with renewed strength and confidence. The integration of spirituality into the learning process highlights the inseparability of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions in this ethno-andragogical model, challenging reductionist notions of education that prioritise only intellectual development. These dynamics are echoed in other cultural settings. For example, research article highlights how Balinese Gamelan communities integrate spiritual leadership and social organisation into musical learning, indicating that similar ethno-andragogical patterns may be observed across Southeast Asian traditional arts.

Learning outcomes

Participants described several outcomes of participation in *Kuda Kepang*, including technical learning, cultural identification, social connection, and perceived emotional empowerment. These outcomes were derived from participants' narratives and the researchers' observations rather than from standardised outcome measures.

Cultural identity outcomes are significant. Engagement in *Kuda Kepang* reinforces participants' connection to their Javanese heritage, fostering a sense of pride and continuity. This cultural affirmation acts as a counterbalance to the disorienting effects of modernisation and cultural assimilation, supporting the preservation of indigenous worldviews and practices. Social cohesion is another salient outcome. Learning within the community promotes mutual trust, cooperation, and solidarity. Through the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual aid), members experience enhanced social responsibility and collective efficacy, which extend beyond the sanggar into broader community life. Emotional empowerment is a profound and often understated outcome. The spiritual and

expressive dimensions of *Kuda Kepang* foster personal growth, healing, and confidence (Figure 7). Participants report increased resilience and an ability to confront life's adversities with greater emotional strength, indicating that the learning process has significant psychosocial benefits.

Figure 7. Public performance as cultural resistance and identity assertion

Moreover, the learning outcomes reflect a synthesis of individual and collective gains. While technical skills and personal empowerment benefit the individual, cultural identity and social cohesion serve the community's collective wellbeing, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between personal development and social integration. In sum, the learning outcomes observed affirm the efficacy of ethno-andragogical models rooted in indigenous cultural practices. They underscore the potential of traditional arts not only to transmit knowledge but also to nurture holistic adult development that integrates cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Discussion

Drawing on the voices of community members themselves, based on our interpretation of participants' experiences and narratives, we argue that the *Kuda Kepang* community exemplifies a distinct ethno-andragogical model of adult learning, one that integrates cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions in ways that diverge from dominant Western educational paradigms. This model situates learning within the lived experience of communal participation and ritual engagement, emphasising the embodied, oral, social, and spiritual transmission of knowledge. However, the study has not provided a comparative discussion with similar traditional art-based learning communities in Indonesia or Southeast Asia such as Wayang Kulit in Central Java, Reog in Ponorogo, or Balinese Gamelan ensembles. Such a comparison could highlight both the unique and shared features of ethno-andragogical learning across regional contexts.

To address this gap, the following comparative analysis is offered. In the *Wayang Kulit* tradition of Central Java, adult learners (dalang apprentices) acquire intricate knowledge of Javanese cosmology, philosophy, and narrative through decades of immersion under master practitioners (Geertz, 1999). The learning is non-linear, relational, and deeply spiritual patterns that mirror the *Kuda Kepang* model. Similarly, in

Reog Ponorogo a trance-based performance tradition from East Java the transmission of skills, spiritual discipline, and cultural values occurs through communal ritual and intergenerational mentorship, with no formal curriculum or examination. Research on Balinese *Gamelan* communities further corroborates these parallels: learning within *Gamelan* groups integrates spiritual leadership, collective rehearsal, and social organisation into a cohesive educational ecosystem, indicating that ethno-andragogical patterns are not unique to *Kuda Kepang* but represent a broader Indigenous Southeast Asian pedagogy (Lansing, 2012). What distinguishes *Kuda Kepang* is its particularly intense integration of trance as a pedagogical mechanism a feature less prominent in Wayang or Gamelan and its location in a diaspora Javanese community in Bengkulu, where cultural identity maintenance takes on additional urgency in the face of regional assimilation pressures. These comparisons enrich the ethno-andragogical framework by demonstrating its applicability across diverse indigenous performing art communities while also highlighting context-specific variations that future research should address. The convergent findings across traditions reinforce the argument that place-based, community-led arts environments constitute a distinct and powerful modality of adult learning in the Global South.

This approach challenges reductionist views of education that privilege formal, cognitive, and individualistic learning, highlighting instead the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy that honors the diversity of learning modes and contexts. The *Kuda Kepang* model affirms the value of informal learning spaces as critical sites for cultural preservation, identity formation, and community resilience.

Furthermore, We contribute to broader academic discussions by showing how by illustrating how indigenous cultural practices can serve as vehicles for adult education that foster both individual growth and collective wellbeing. It offers practical implications for educational practitioners, policymakers, and cultural preservationists seeking to support culturally grounded learning initiatives. Ultimately, the integration of spirituality, communal solidarity, and embodied knowledge within the *Kuda Kepang* learning environment offers a compelling example of how education can be reimagined to be more inclusive, holistic, and culturally attuned, thereby enriching the global discourse on adult learning and development.

These findings not only demonstrate the richness of culturally situated learning in indigenous communities but also provide empirical grounding for ethno-andragogy as a transformative pedagogical paradigm. The model evidenced here transcends reductionist understandings of adult education and challenges scholars and practitioners to expand their frameworks to include the deeply spiritual, affective, and symbolic dimensions of learning. This calls for the reconfiguration of adult learning theories to embrace pluralistic, culturally embedded, and socially responsive approaches.

Conclusion and implications

Drawing on participants' lived experiences, embodied practices, and accounts of ritual participation, this study argues that traditional cultural communities can function as meaningful sites of adult learning. In the *Kuda Kepang* case, learning was organised through embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience.

This study demonstrates, within the limits of a single qualitative case, that *Kuda Kepang* functions as a rich community-based environment for adult learning embedded in cultural, social, and spiritual practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to decolonise adult education by integrating non-Western epistemologies into mainstream discourse. It challenges the dominance of cognitive, individualistic, and secular paradigms by foregrounding the centrality of culture, spirituality, and social connectedness in adult learning. The ethno-andragogical model developed through this study offers an alternative framework that is more attuned to the realities of learners in indigenous and rural communities. Our position as non-Indigenous researchers also enabled us to make a specific contribution that may not have emerged from within the community itself. While community members naturally understood *Kuda Kepang* primarily as a cultural, spiritual, and artistic practice, we were able to interpret these practices through the lens of international adult education scholarship. This outsider perspective allowed us to identify and articulate *Kuda Kepang* as a coherent ethno-andragogical learning system composed of embodied learning, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual transformation. We do not claim that this interpretation is superior to community understandings; rather, it complements insider knowledge by translating local educational practices into concepts that can participate in global scholarly conversations about adult learning and decolonial education. Practically, the study has implications for educators, policymakers, and community organisers. It suggests that adult learning programmes should be designed to support, not replace, local cultural practices. Institutions must recognise and actively collaborate with community leaders, cultural bearers, and ritual specialists to co-create learning environments that honour local identity, language, and spiritual practice. Based on the findings of this study, three concrete and actionable policy recommendations are proposed. First, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of Indonesia (Kemendikbudristek) should formally recognise sanggar budaya (community arts studios) as legitimate Community Learning Centers, making them eligible for public funding, facilitator training programmes, and inclusion in non-formal education frameworks. This formalisation should be designed carefully to avoid imposing bureaucratic constraints that may undermine cultural authenticity recognition should enhance, not regulate, indigenous learning processes. Second, facilitator training programmes under the Directorate of Community Education should integrate modules on ethno-andragogy, sensitising adult educators to the epistemic value of indigenous cultural practices and preparing them to work collaboratively with community knowledge holders rather than supplanting them. Third, a national registry or database of indigenous learning ecosystems should be established, documenting the pedagogical practices, knowledge systems, and community facilitators of traditional performing arts communities across Indonesia's diverse regions. Such a registry would serve as both a policy tool and a cultural heritage resource, enabling evidence-based integration of indigenous knowledge into broader adult education curriculum development and research (Gouthro & Holloway, 2023). This study also acknowledges its contextual limitations. As the research is deeply rooted in one cultural setting the *Kuda Kepang* community in Bengkulu the findings may not be easily generalisable across Indonesia or Southeast Asia. Cultural specificity, while a strength, also constrains broader applicability without further comparative research. This is especially critical in contexts where formal education has historically marginalised indigenous voices.

For future research, this study opens pathways for further exploration of other indigenous learning ecosystems in Indonesia and beyond. Comparative studies across regions or performance traditions could deepen understanding of how ethno-andragogical principles manifest in different cultural contexts. Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine how participation in cultural learning spaces impacts adult learners' personal

development and community leadership over time. For instance, the Ministry of Education and Culture should recognise sanggar budaya (community arts studios) as legitimate Community Learning Centers (CLC), eligible for public support, training programmes, and curriculum inclusion. This would formalise their role in adult learning ecosystems without undermining cultural authenticity. In sum, we call for a reimagining of adult education not as a universal toolkit to be applied indiscriminately, but as a pluralistic field that must be grounded in the diverse ways humans create, transmit, and live knowledge. These directions are essential in constructing a robust, pluralistic adult education discourse that is rooted not in the universal application of Western paradigms, but in the contextual authenticity of indigenous learning systems. In this way, adult education becomes a vehicle for epistemic justice, cultural resilience, and social transformation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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

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Motivation and creativity art practices for adults through museum and photography

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Abstract

This article investigates the promotion of creativity, studying the process and results of a course given to students of the Nau Gran, an educational program that is offered to a public over 55 years old. It is a workshop designed to activate creativity through the practice of photography and visits to museums. Learning processes are approached from a multidisciplinary perspective, integrating aspects ranging from Visual Culture and Art History to digital technologies and Art Education. The research methodology is based on the Case Study, combining Arts-Based Research, so that the images acquire an important value as a result. Assuming the problem of learning for senior students, due to the gerontophobia, and valuing the benefits of lifelong learning, we use motivation as an argument, while reinforcing participatory practices evaluating the students' experience. The positive results of the project are reinforced with the opinions of the people involved in the research.

Keywords: heritage education, lifelong learning, photography, museums, creativity

Introduction

Some universities, mostly public institutions, have implemented programs designed for adults in their academic offerings. This is due to several interconnected factors, of which we will highlight three: 1) It is considered necessary to meet the demand of a type of student who is no longer studying for employment or initial training, since they are retired, having worked for decades; 2) With this type of offering, public universities amortise their potential faculty and facilities, while also meeting a social need; 3) A segment of the population has pursued tasks and obligations throughout their lives out of necessity, having always postponed their desire to study humanities subjects, such as art, history, or philosophy, something they always wanted to learn.

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University programs for adult education are designed to connect with existing subjects and courses, allowing this senior audience to share learning experiences with much younger students. In addition to the required courses for their chosen specialization, complementary pathways are also offered, typically consisting of workshops or more practical subjects. Within this complementary offering, the University of Valencia launched the course 'Photographing the City's Museums'. This innovative educational experience is the basis for the present article, which observes and analyses each step of the process, examining key moments and the creative potential that emerged during the sessions.

While seemingly simple, the framework of this activity explores the creative potential of senior students, employing innovative pedagogical approaches with a critical social dimension (Sofaer & Vicze, 2020). It involves learning photography while simultaneously visiting and exploring various museums in the city (Maksimovic, 2024), thus transforming the practice into a genuine performance and an artistic urban exploration (Lee, 2024). The real challenge lies in leveraging this academic environment to create a space for generating creativity (Meléndez et al., 2018). This is made possible by the attitude of everyone involved, as the accumulated experience of these senior students is highly valued. It is from this experience, combined with a relaxed academic atmosphere, that a high degree of creative maturity can be achieved. This is a highly engaging photography workshop that enhances creative and visual skills and abilities, emphasising visual culture, as advocated by Duncum (2015). Furthermore, the project offers the opportunity to explore the city, enjoying museums and other urban heritage sites. Huerta (2021) also emphasises this when he assures that 'economic barriers cannot become cultural barriers; therefore, we have an obligation to maximize the attractions of museums and heritage, such as attractive and identity environments', insisting that 'cultural heritage is for all citizens' (p. 3). To achieve this, we start with a structured approach centred around urban wanderings (*dérive*), organising activities that involve walking and strolling through the city, emulating the figure of the *flâneur*. This concept of *flâneur* connects with the art tradition and leads us to revisit the literature of Baudelaire (2006).

This research highlights the value of museums as spaces of intense cultural and educational activity (González-García, 2019), which is linked to the importance of heritage education. According to the latest definition approved by International Council of Museums in 2022, a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution serving society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity, sustainability, and creativity (Huerta & Alfonso-Benlliure, 2025). With community participation, museums operate and communicate ethically and professionally, offering diverse experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge exchange (Panciroli et al., 2020). It is clear, therefore, that museums must promote civic education, and it is from this intention that we foster creative thinking and creativity, with a healthy critical perspective (Hamlin & Fusaro, 2018). Students need more information about the cultural and educational possibilities of the museum. In a group of people over 55, what we especially value is their maturity and acquired knowledge, encouraging their concerns and desires. We encourage them to experiment, while strengthening their skills and expertise with the camera, encouraging them to create images to reflect on the power of photography (Sontag, 2001) and post-photography. This empirical part of the project will be fundamental, since from a certain point onward, the theoretical classes will take their own photographs as their starting point, which will be analysed in the classroom and discussed by all participating students.

The senior student group consists of 17 people, 6 men and 11 women, some with diverse professions (dentist, administrative assistant, salesperson, designer, chemist), most of whom are teachers, although some participants have opted for early retirement or have already retired. We are grateful for the commitment and great interest shown by all the participants. Their photographs demonstrate a strong sense of composition, showcasing their skill, aptitude, and ability to create images, sometimes with virtuosity and mastery. The aim is to leverage their knowledge and experience to foster creativity (Foley, 2014), boosting their self-esteem and abilities, and thus promoting healthy habits through innovative pedagogical practices (Dewey, 2005).

The *dérive* [drift]

The approach we propose to students for their various museum visits is that of the dérive, as conceived by Guy Debord, as a technique linked to the act of walking through diverse environments with a playful-constructive approach, something emphasised by Careri (2017) in his theory of walkscapes or aesthetic strolls. This type of *dérive* is undertaken with an awareness of the psycho-geographical effects it generates – effects experienced by the person undertaking the activity – and therefore with notions different from those of a simple trip or walk. Numerous artistic collectives have practiced the *dérive* since the beginning of the 20th century, such as the Dadaists, later in the wanderings of the Surrealists, as well as in the urban explorations of Walter Benjamin, or in the psycho-geographies of Lettrist and Situationist artists, as well as in the Land Art, or the experimental practices of groups like the Italian Stalkers in the 1990s.

The city as a public space is the ideal place for the practice of *dérive*. Urban environments are full of spaces that stimulate the development of learning experiences, thus becoming places where each artist acts as an archaeologist of the city itself, investigating through artistic practices with elements extracted from urban life (Figueras Ferrer, 2022). In this way, we break down certain prejudices we have regarding places where we can express ourselves without coercion (Foucault, 1995). Museums are urban spaces suitable for generating *dérive*, especially when the group of students leaves the classroom and walks to the designated location, although each participant can establish their own particular itinerary with complete freedom and autonomy (Freire, 2015). Using artistic experiences as a foundation is essential in defining new methods that can serve to develop innovative research approaches, from broad and diverse conceptual frameworks.

Methodology

The methodology we applied in this research is mixed, combining the Case Study (Stake, 1995) with Arts-Based Research (Navarro Espinach, 2022). Our aim throughout the process is to work from a critical and creative thinking perspective, assuming the role of participant observer. When exploring teaching with senior students (individuals over 55 years of age), we chose to create spaces for participation, both through reflection (dialogue, debate) and artistic creation, taking photographs that are used in the classroom as elements of analysis, thus fostering learning through their own creations. The creation and analysis of images is one of the defining characteristics of Arts-Based Research methodology (Barone & Eisner, 2011). The methodology of Arts-Based Research extends far beyond the method itself and is primarily grounded in epistemology – in how we come to know and represent the world. Photography, as a means of capturing the world through images, fosters an artistic intention in the recording of planned activities. We thus

promote a space for the co-construction of knowledge, prioritising issues through the study of factors offered by the images themselves. The methodological approach of the research is, therefore, qualitative, applying participatory action to the research design, so that the entire participating group becomes both researcher and researched, using techniques such as brainstorming, museum visits, urban drifting, image creation, or shared critical reflection (Starrett, 2020).

The course we are analysing, which was conducted for senior students, combines a theoretical component with a series of practical sessions, including museum visits and a photography workshop. This combination effectively trains students in image creation and art education, as well as in understanding museum spaces and art galleries. We explore contemporary art and other artistic expressions, including museums of various types. This combination of theoretical and practical elements, incorporating the *dérive*, a technique used to enhance creativity (Huerta, 2022), prepares participants to create photos with communicative intention, establishing and legitimising spaces that combine debate and training. We offer the opportunity to learn about museum processes from a broad cultural perspective, aiming to foster flexible participation and thus familiarise them with the mechanics of art and images from a contemporary viewpoint. We also promote a workshop model among adult audiences to empower them creating photos and face the challenges of the future of museums as cultural promotion entities and spaces for dialogue (Corbisiero-Drakos et al., 2021).

The context of the research

Given our interest in fostering creativity, a schedule of sessions was established with an original and provocative title for each one: session 1: *Identity* (presentation of participants and explanation of the course, dynamics and intentions of each planned activity); session 2: *Territories* (visit the websites of the city's museums); session 3: *Voluptuousness* (first visits with a practical photography workshop); session 4: *Intimacy* (visits with a photography workshop); session 5: *Memory* (theoretical class on the creative possibilities of photography, based on the work the students are doing); session 6: *Collecting* (visits and discussions through focus groups); session 7: *Dérive* (drifts, students are organised into teams and assigned museums to visit); session 8: *Practice* (new *dérive* and preparation of the final project, a group video); session 9: *Vanity* (theoretical class with issues related to the current state of digital museums); session 10: *Memories* (final session to review and discuss the students' work).

The main objective of the educational activity is to foster an understanding of art and images through the enjoyment of exhibition spaces in museums and other heritage sites. Among the secondary objectives, we highlight the following: (a) Introduction to the main concepts of photography, applying this theoretical foundation to the possibilities of image creation in exhibition spaces; (b) Understanding the importance of museums in the idea of cultural transmission and heritage education; (c) Designing and creating images coherently through lived experience; (d) Encouraging personal artistic practice in the workshops offered during classes and visits; (e) Approaching the city's museums as a key element of visual culture; (f) Walking through the city as an aesthetic practice; (g) Creating images by photographing details, elements, objects, interiors, landscapes, and exteriors; (h) Revisiting the city as a typographic museum, identifying the aesthetics of urban lettering. (i) To examine the lights and shadows of the city, also appreciating the magic of the liminal areas.

The aim is to emphasise the use of Arts-Based Research through image creation. This artistic methodology can empower adult learners. As Saam and Egetenmeyer (2026)

state: 'In the discourse of adult education empowerment can be seen as a process promoting equitable opportunities' (p. 65). A paradigm shift is proposed, moving the focus from image interpretation to a transformation of reality that promotes the use of images through a performative approach, exploring their heritage potential (Gutiérrez González, 2022). Issues of gender and diversity are incorporated into classroom explanations and discussions, utilising a virtual museum that students can access on their mobile devices or through projections. The goal is to emancipate adult learners so they feel capable of generating artistic processes (Hachem et al., 2025).

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a descriptive-exploratory qualitative methodology with an artistic methodology, using a socio-educational approach that considers factors such as student age and teacher involvement. An ethnographic perspective is adopted, oriented towards educational innovation and fostering educational change. Because the research takes place within the teaching activity itself, it raises awareness of the interactions occurring within the entire group involved in the educational process. Data collection occurs during the teaching exercise, and participant observation is inductively developed, focusing on the unfolding educational activity, tutoring the students, and identifying critical learning moments, including both the difficulties and the benefits they bring. The responses, expressions, and narratives of the participants, based on their actions in the teaching and learning processes, are also collected.

Analysis of data and findings

A key data collection tool is the analysis of images created by students, critically reviewing them during various teaching sessions. This observation is then incorporated into the research findings (Healey et al., 2016). The information is categorised by focusing on two main aspects: the artistic outcomes of what has been learned and the didactic activities as an observed environment. The study sample draws on the teacher's own experience and the historical collection of materials produced by the students. Acquiring resources to promote lifelong learning and participation in artistic activities fosters interaction with participating senior students.

Results obtained from artistic approaches

Participants/place/activities

Drifting and photography are the two artistic discourses that methodologically frame the educational experience we are investigating, thus proposing a teaching approach that aims to foster creativity (Suh, 2019). The results include both written documents and records of student opinions, as well as their image creations. During the course, the group visited various museums in the city of Valencia (Museum of Fine Arts, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern [IVAM], Museu Valencià de la Il·lustració i de la Modernitat, Benlliure House Museum, Ceramics Museum, Fallas Museum, Silk Museum, Museum of Prehistory, L'Etno, Rice Museum, Science Museum, L'Íber, and Museu d'Història de València [MHV]), as well as some heritage sites (l'Almoina, City of Arts and Sciences, la Nau, San Nicolás, El Patriarca, Centre del Carme, las Naves, Centre d'Artesania, Palau de les Arts, and Grau Cemetery). The participants took thousands of photographs, which favours the use of mobile phones as portable devices (Mascarell Palau, 2020), although some

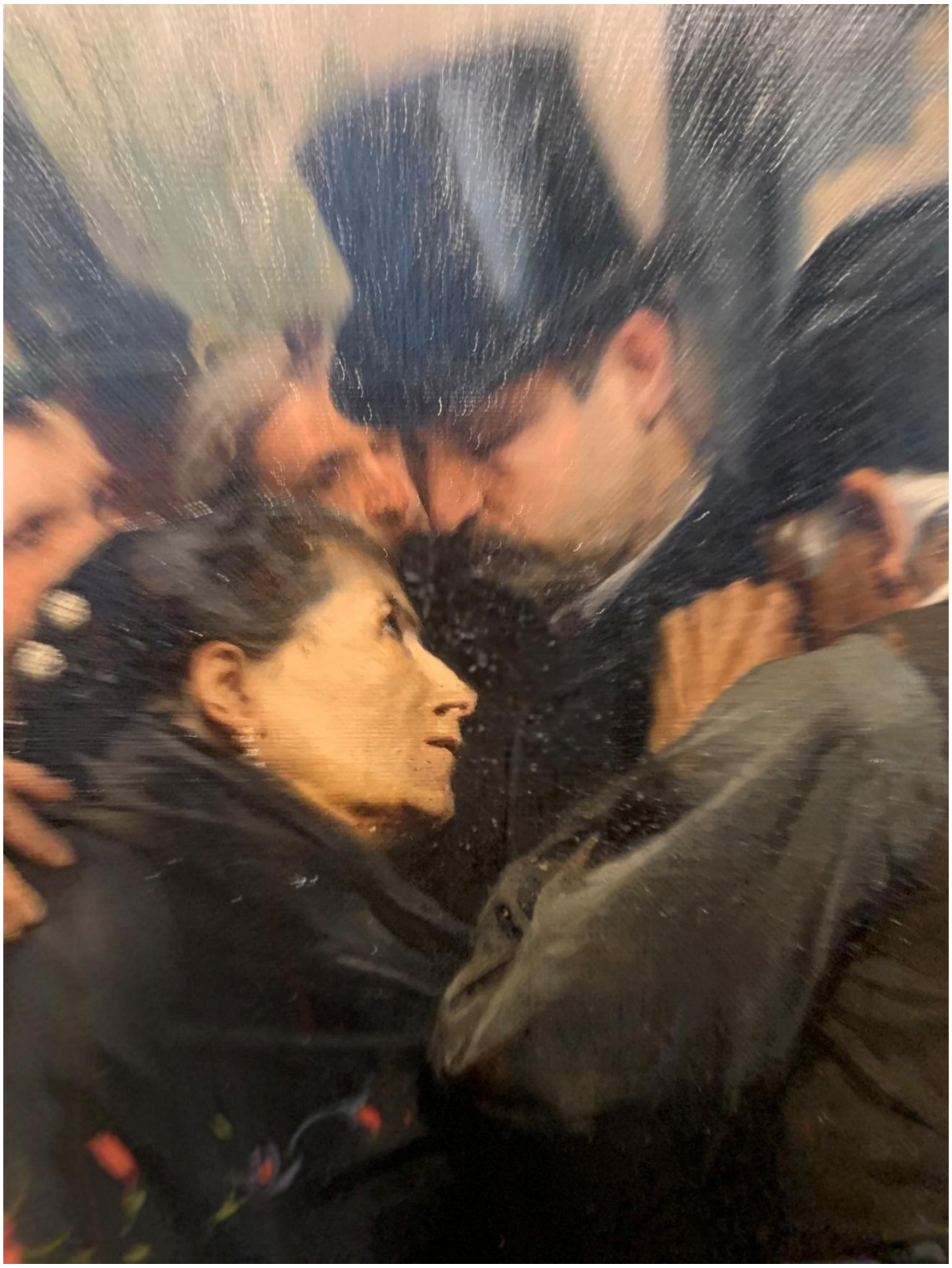
students used their digital SLR cameras. The instruction was as follows: each student had to choose and submit a single image from each museum.

Figure 1. Photo of the Zanele Muholi exhibition at the IVAM. Source: Photograph by Arcadi Cotolí Melià, used with permission

The effort of having to choose a single photograph from all those taken is the most intense and rewarding part of the process, as it forces students to question many aspects of their own creations (Barthes, 2025). The number of photographs uploaded (17 per museum) also allows for the development of an explanation in the classroom, with enough time to analyse each image, encouraging the teacher to generate discussion among the students (Souza et al., 2022). It is through these images that we address formal, content-related, semiotic, and symbolic issues. For example, in the case of Arcadi Cotolí's image (Figure 1), we discussed the importance of geometry in this mathematics teacher's creations. Furthermore, we used some element of each photograph to talk about artists who use photography as a means of expression.

Art teacher María José Tamarit uses an expressive technique in her photograph of a detail from the painting *The Glory of the People* (Figure 2), thus accentuating the intensity of the gazes of the figures involved (mother and son in the scene). This decision allows us to reflect in class on the use of filters and effects in photography. This analysis is based on demonstrating the pedagogical value that this type of research practice has for students in the construction of their personal identity (Huerta, 2024), as well as in the understanding of the identities within their cultural reality, thereby fostering a comprehensive understanding of the social environment through active and participatory methodologies (Bourriaud, 2009).

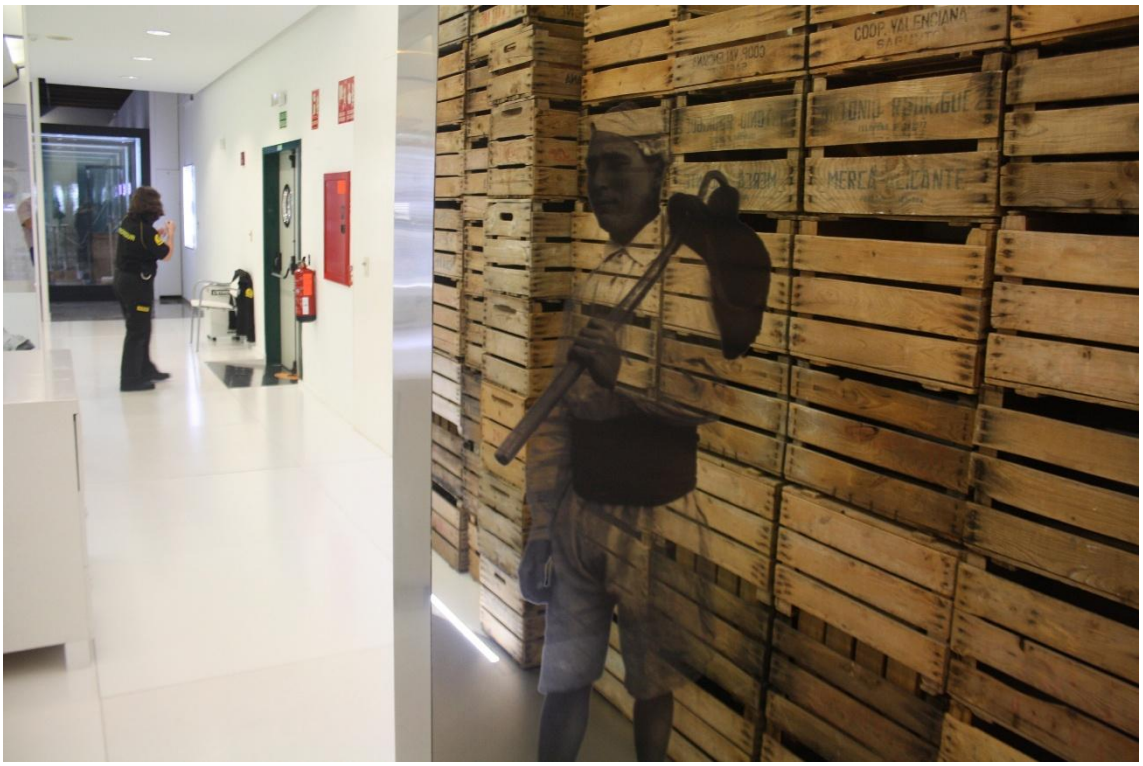
Figure 2. Detail of the painting *The Glory of the People* (1895) by Antonio Fillol Granell, in the Museum of Fine Arts of Valencia. Source: Photograph and digital modification by María José Tamarit Moradillo, used with permission



Research method using reflection based on images

The classroom work develops an analysis of the value of photographs taken during the *dérive*, as a means of investigating the social environment from lived experience (Sutton, 2020). The research is conducted from an auto-ethnographic, narrative, and artistic perspective, involving all participants in the active construction of a narrative that is complemented and built in different phases: searching, analysing, and selecting images; discussion; and joint analysis and reflection with the group. The analysis of the images is developed through a series of educational research activities with participating senior students, where the artistic perspective plays a key role in their practice (Macaya et al., 2025). The process consists of: searching for images through inquiry; selecting and compiling these images; developing a personal proposal based on the images; collectively exhibiting and commenting the results through discussion groups; and finally, systematising and jointly debating the results of the discussion groups on the images (Specker et al., 2017). Among the images collected, those offered by the installations created in museum exhibition halls stand out, as captured by Miguel Marín Jiménez in his image of the l'Etno art installation (Figure 3).

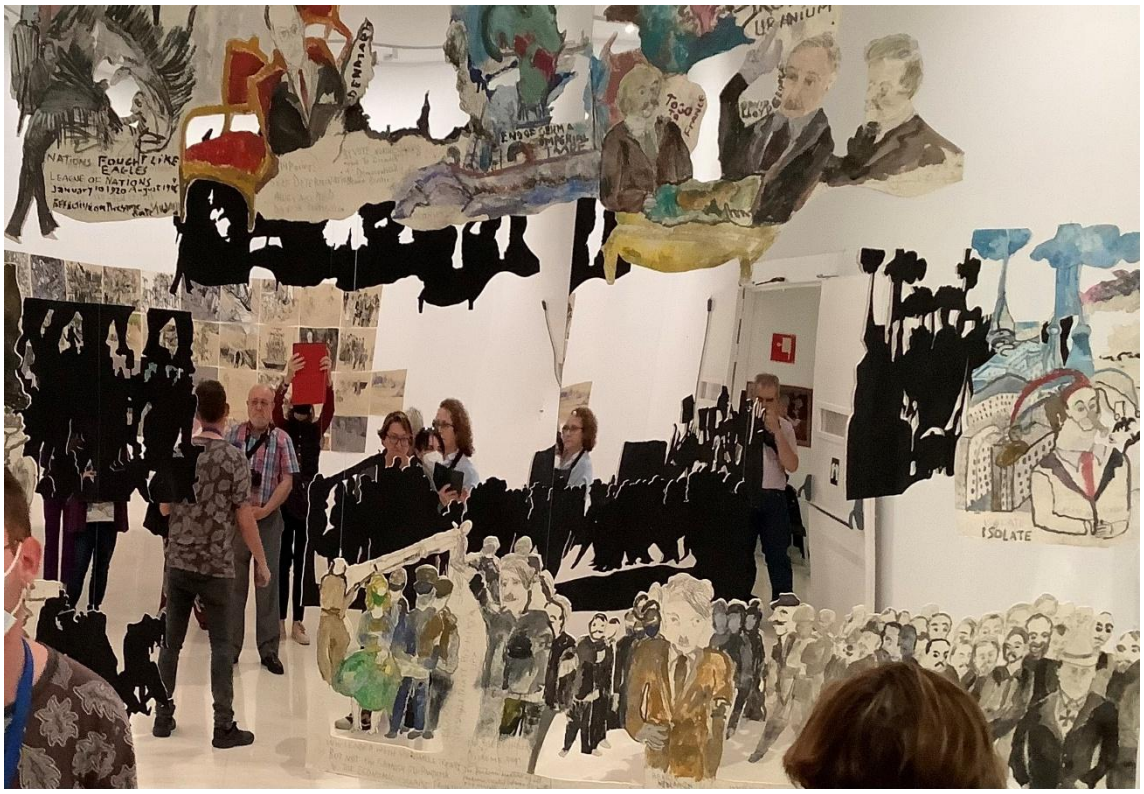
Figure 3. Room setup in the permanent exhibition at the Valencia Ethnology Museum 'l'Etno'. Source: Photograph by Miguel Marín Jiménez, used with permission



Collecting snapshots taken of museum exhibition installations allows us to develop detailed reports on the discussion processes, based on an analysis of the photographs submitted by the students. It is important to emphasise this process as a key aspect of the research, since it fosters a pedagogical practice that results in a conscious learning process based on an auto-ethnographic visual narrative. The use of digital technology to create the images and share them with the group promotes a mutual exchange of knowledge. To foster the development of critical and creative thinking, it is important to provide students

with spaces for debates that promote analysis, synthesis, interpretation, inference, and judgment. This encourages a bolder and more unconventional education, from which to formulate ethical and aesthetic questions (Atkinson, 2019). Creative skills are also required to help students see things from a fresh perspective, considering current challenges, especially when dealing with senior students who come to the classroom with a wealth of accumulated life experience. Critical and creative thinking should be present in the activities students undertake both inside and outside the classroom, empowering them to propose innovative solutions to specific problems.

Figure 4. An IVAM mediator explains the Anna Boghiguian exhibition. Source: Photograph by Dolors Enrique i Ferrada, who titled her photo *Don't think you're out*, used with permission



Critical thinking is the ability to analyse and reflect on facts objectively in order to form a judgment or opinion, solve problems systematically, and understand the logical connections between ideas, values, and beliefs that are rooted in society (Soto-González et al., 2025). It involves gathering the necessary data to analyse and understand situations, leading to logical conclusions. A person capable of critical thinking is not easily manipulated. Psychologist Joy Paul Guilford identifies the following aptitudes as essential for success in developing creative thinking: sensitivity to problems, fluency, flexibility, novelty and originality, elaboration, analytical and synthesis skills, reorganisation or redefinition, complexity, and evaluation (Guilford, 1950). Both in the classroom and during museum visits, students have been able to experience these aptitudes, incorporating this knowledge into their creations, developing an artistic discourse through images, and reflecting on these narratives. When discussing in class the photographs taken during the visit to the Anna Boghiguian exhibition at the IVAM, most students highlighted the motivation they felt at being able to 'enter' the works of

this octogenarian artist (Figure 4). The aspect of motivation is fundamental to adult education (Bílá & Kalenda, 2025).

Figure 5. Architectures by Santiago Calatrava at the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia. Source: Photograph by Manuel Zapata Rayo, used with permission

In addition to details of artworks, exhibition halls, exhibited pieces, and other elements typical of museums, another facet reflected in the students' photographs is the urban landscape as the environment in which the visited museums are located. The City of Arts and Sciences is the most striking example (Figure 5). In this way, we observe how the images that form part of this research connect us with humanity, which has implications for the conceptual and pedagogical approach to these images. They bring us closer to ways of life, behaviours, and roles, to people's relationships with others and with the world, allowing us to delve into the research process from a personal and lived perspective. The personal is part of the social; it places us before the symbolic visualisation of what we know, and from this emerge narratives and discoveries that tell us about social relationships, how we perceive the city, and how we live. In educational research, it is important to establish and connect with educational practices, since these same practices, based on ethnographic and artistic visual research, are in turn articulated along the dual axis of research, teaching, and the improvement of teaching practices within their context. Working with creativity through Arts-Based Research offers senior students the enormous potential of a research methodology as a pedagogical process of construction, allowing them to learn about themselves and the society they are part of. Furthermore, it enables them to explore the creativity generated by their own history and to reflect collectively on pressing issues that include the city, museums, collective

heritage, and the understanding of art through artistic practice. Using the *dérive* as a catalyst transforms them into *flâneurs* (the dérive involves critical observation and active intervention in space, whereas the *flâneur* is essentially a passive observer who records urban experience without intervening in it), observant strollers conscious of the aesthetic capacity generated by the urban environment (Careri, 2017). The results are ultimately aesthetic in nature, since reflection allows them to obtain surprising and captivating images, going beyond the document that certifies their museum visit, as seen in the photograph presented by Miquel Valls after his visit to the Museum of Fine Arts (Figure 6). It is not a work of art or an interior space of the museum, but rather the interplay between the architecture, the clouds, and the sky.

Figure 6. Ambassador Vich Courtyard in the Museum of Fine Arts of Valencia. Source: Photograph by Miquel Valls Marco, used with permission

By having to develop a visual narrative from their own images, participating students can offer us themes and questions that will be addressed later in the classroom, incorporating those issues that truly interest them or that emerge from the images themselves. This constitutes a participatory approach (Healey et al., 2020). In this way, knowledge arises directly from the photographs they have created images linked to the visited environment, which speak to us about the museum as an institution, and which respond to specific sociocultural and personal conditions. We detected an artistic intention in these images, an aesthetic element that, in this case, acts as an ally to the research process, as we have emphasised in the methodology description, facilitating and enabling a deeper exploration of some of the aspects that each participant wishes to highlight. Analysing the results of the focus group work allows us to identify several issues related to the comments from the viewing and analysis sessions of the photographs, which in turn allows us to

strengthen the wording of the research process's conclusions. The impact caused by the images themselves affects the analysis developed by the participants in the focus group, allowing them to delve deeper and learn about issues related to positions and the history of photography, the people who generated it, and their own involvement in the process.

Figure 7. Handloom in the Valencia Silk Museum. Source: Photograph by Maite Rabena Pérez, used with permission

The great diversity of the museums visited also allows us to understand the potential of these institutions, since beyond their collections, their architecture, or the distinction that may emanate from the image they project, what matters in this case is that the senior students enjoy themselves, learn, and above all, create, practising an exercise in artistic production that empowers them as inspired designers (Figure 7). Luigini (2020) states that the ability to use graphic skills, and in general the ability to integrate the use of the visual, the mind, and the hand (perception, thought, representation) to solve problems and create effective products, facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge. The Italian author also reminds us, referring to the advice of Morin (2016), of his definition of art as the human capacity to create works, forms, colours, and sounds that give, or should give, aesthetic emotions. The French sociologist compiles his notes on beauty, art, and aesthetic feeling in this essay. He is interested in aesthetics understood as emotion, as the feeling that arises in us when confronted with the spectacle of beauty, whether artistic (the beauty of a work of art) or natural (the beauty of a landscape). How can we define this feeling, this pleasure, that we experience in the presence of beauty? For Morin, aesthetic emotion is the mirror of creative emotion. To create, the artist appeals to unconscious forces (inspiration) and conscious ones (corrections). Similarly, the aesthetic emotion that seizes us when faced with a work is both rational and irrational, since it appeals to both feeling and intelligence. And is this aesthetic emotion useful? Echoing Aristotelian concept of catharsis, the author demonstrates how, in these times of crisis we are experiencing, beauty is a formidable antidote to fear, horror, anguish, and death.

Figure 8. Figures of 'ninots indultats' in the Museu Faller de Valencia. Source: Photograph by Vicente Zaragoza Dolz, used with permission

Visiting a museum unique in the world for its subject matter, such as the Fallas Museum of Valencia, highlights aspects of identity that lead us to reflect on the capacity of certain elements (the Fallas festival, popular culture, deeply rooted celebrations with a tourist appeal) to become symbols of what each territory, each culture, each particular way of living and representing experiences represents. This is reflected in the photo by Vicente Zaragoza, in which we see people dressed in traditional Valencian attire (Figure 8). The historical tone of the image is reinforced by the use of black and white when showing it to the rest of the class.

Based on classroom discussions and student responses to questionnaires, a synthesis of the results of the analysis of these work sessions was compiled, systematising the issues raised by theme. In this sense, certain themes prevailed in their observations, and therefore in their learning, which helps us understand how their interest in creating one type of image or another emerged. This highlighted several realities. First, how the images themselves constructed a series of meanings, with narratives implicitly present in the photographs in recurring ways. This noteworthy aspect allows us to make generalisations and reach consensus based on the experience dérived from the images themselves, and not solely through the institutional discourse we often fall prey to. This reinforced our perspective and our conviction regarding certain social, cultural, political, and economic situations in our environment, shaped by the very image of the museums we visited.

Figure 9. Photograph of the painter's studio in the Benlliure House Museum, an image that its author, María Alonso, offers us as a true still life with objects. Source: Photograph by María Alonso, used with permission

One case we consider particularly interesting is the visit to the Benlliure House Museum, the place where the brothers Mariano and José, a sculptor and a painter respectively, lived and worked. These artists are important figures in Valencian art, but the most appealing aspect of visiting this house-museum is that it preserves the studio where José Benlliure painted. Walking through the artist's studio allows one to see both the large north-facing window through which light entered the workshop, and numerous materials the artist used for painting, including clothing and props with which he dressed and adorned his models. Student María Alonso has created a still life (Figure 9) using some of these elements, taking advantage of the light entering through the window, which gives the image an interesting contrast of light, encouraging a more artistic interpretation of the composition.

The students expressed their preferences regarding photographic artists, resulting in the following names: Ramon Masats, Robert Capa, Dorothea Lange, Ron Galella, Cindy Sherman, Del LaGrace Volcano, Francesc Jarque, Sebastião Salgado, Chema Madoz, Spencer Tunick, David Hamilton, Brassaï, Man Ray, Ouka Lele, Sally Mann, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Luis Calvente. We therefore see a wide variety of styles and backgrounds, thus creating an eclectic value for the whole, which allows for greater freedom in the teaching experience, while also enriching the range of opinions during reflections and debates.

Among the feedback we received from students through the surveys, we observed both their interests and their concerns when facing a creative and participatory activity. To the first question of the final questionnaire, 'Why did you choose this course?', the majority responded that it was because of the appealing proposal, which combined photography and museum visits. However, three students, the most experienced in photography, initially thought it would be more of a conventional photography course. To question 2, 'What did the course give you?', six responses highlighted the discovery of museums they were unfamiliar with, two considered it very interesting to have learned

how to take photographs, and the rest indicated that they had discovered their creative and artistic side. In response to question 3, 'What would you highlight positively about your experience during the course?', all answers agreed that the overall experience was worthwhile for both learning and enjoyment. To question 4, 'What aspects could be improved or changed?', six people indicated that the afternoon schedules don't allow for the desired depth of exploration during museum visits, as there isn't enough time; four indicated that the theoretical section on photography and the history of photography should be expanded, while the rest highlighted the need to increase the course hours. Question 5 refers to museums they were unfamiliar with and discovered thanks to the course. Most were unaware of the Benlliure House Museum, the Centre d'Artesania, the Grau Cemetery, and the Rice Museum, but all agreed that they rediscovered some they had already visited, such as the Fallas Museum, the Silk Museum, the Museum of Prehistory, L'Etno, and the MHV. In the case of the L'Íber Museum, a miniature museum (lead soldiers), they were surprised by the originality of its concept. When asked about the aspects of photography they found interesting (question 6), they particularly valued the aspects of composition and the technical possibilities offered by cameras, including their mobile phones. When asked to evaluate the group visits (question 7), they made it clear that sharing these experiences was one of the most positive elements of the experience. Since the group consisted of senior adults, it was very common for a pleasant chat to spontaneously arise after the visits on a terrace or in a café. The responses to question 8, 'What role have museums and photography played in your life?', being an open-ended question, provided a true life story for each participant, something I, as an educator, greatly value. Finally, regarding question 9, about whether there was any aspect they would like to highlight, they again agreed in positively valuing the experience as an example of participatory teaching that yields artistic results and enhances the creativity of those who participated.

Among the students' final comments, we have gathered some phrases that we consider particularly significant, given the high level of satisfaction and the fact that the experience allowed them to foster their creativity through motivation. Student RBE expressed her satisfaction: 'Este curso me ha permitido conocer mejor mis posibilidades haciendo fotos, algo que nunca había imaginado' [This course has allowed me to better understand my photographic potential, something I had never imagined]. For MJT, the most important aspect was being able to share the experience: 'Hacer las actividades en los museos en compañía del resto del alumnado me ha proporcionado una gran satisfacción, y los resultados han sido increíbles' [Doing the museum activities with the other students was incredibly satisfying, and the results were amazing]. In ACM's opinion, the combination of theory and practice yielded excellent results: 'Cada sesión de clase tenía un componente teórico poderoso, pero además teníamos la oportunidad de convertir en imágenes la información recibida gracias a las fotos que hicimos en los museos' [Each class session had a strong theoretical component, but we also had the opportunity to translate the information we received into images thanks to the photos we took in the museums]. In MCC's case, the motivation stemmed from the structured pace of instruction: 'Hemos tenido tiempo suficiente tanto para aprender de autores y obras, como para disfrutar haciendo fotos' [We had enough time both to learn about artists and their works and to enjoy taking photos]. A noteworthy aspect of the results obtained is that the participating senior students have developed their observational skills, something we consider especially important given the value we currently place on time and how we use (or fail to use) it, being so immersed in the presence of digital devices. For Byung-Chul Han, among the practices that require time is attentive and careful observation, since the perception associated with information excludes long and slow observation. The

philosopher argues that the careful contemplation of things, unintentional attention, which would be a formula for happiness, recedes in the face of the pursuit of information (Han, 2023). He is concerned about the lack of appreciation for knowledge, given that we communicate continuously without participating in a community. We store vast amounts of data without memories to preserve. Faced with these concerns, and revisiting the concepts of studium and punctum developed by Roland Barthes when reflecting on photography, Han insists that greater attention to things is paired with forgetfulness and the loss of self. When the ego weakens, it becomes receptive to the silent language of things. What worries Han, however, is that along with things, we lose our sense of belonging. Research like the kind we present here gains strength as a lived experience, both in the creative process and in the exploration and generation of artistic and aesthetic explorations among adult students.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis conducted, we highlight some key issues as a conclusion and final assessment of the research. We value the displays of artistic creativity in the images created by the study participants, which are exhibited in the results section, along with some examples of their photographic work. The senior students demonstrated their creative ability to generate narratives through images, creating photographs based on lived experiences. These photographs reflect their interests and their understanding of life, which aligns with their extensive life experience and their desire to materialise this acquired knowledge. They had no prior experience with photography (except for one student who is a graphic designer and has worked in that field for decades), but this did not prevent them from achieving excellent results. Furthermore, thanks to the experience, they were able to revisit their city through its museums, as the images were taken during a series of excursions to different urban spaces, especially museums.

The mix of male and female students also offers an interesting result that we can approach from a gender perspective, since we detect particular ways of deciphering social rituals, depending on the perspective taken. This is especially evident in aspects of identity, both personal and collective. It is also clear that this type of research, based on teaching experiences, allows for innovation in education, demonstrating its theoretical and practical foundation, and incorporating a certain degree of risk, always necessary given that it is an artistic subject. The emotional impact multiplies the educational effect of the activity, and this is made possible by the program of museum visits, some well-known, along with others with which the students were less familiar. The age of the participants fosters a type of intense and enriching reflection, taking into account their life experience and their desire to share ideas in the discussions. The images they have created and shared constitute a valuable element for better understanding the interests of these students. They demonstrate their creative ability, boosted by lived experience.

A research design was developed to foster critical and creative thinking among senior students, students who had no prior experience with or knowledge of creativity through arts practice. Artistic and creative skills were developed from a critical perspective, incorporating an educational model that promotes both teamwork and individual creativity. To achieve this, visits to various museums were organised, where students took photographs. It was recognised that there was a lack of prior knowledge about the meaning and characteristics of critical thinking and creativity, which served as a starting point for exploring different situations and themes. The participatory action research was based on a program of activities that considered time, participation, resources, dedication, and student responsibility, allowing them to make the most of each planned and lived

experience. The aim of the participatory action research was to become a valuable tool, with the potential to transform a specific reality, by engaging creative thinking through the active participation of the students in the research, and by fostering new perspectives on change in learning. The research has made it possible to solve the problem of the incipient knowledge about creativity as a perspective of the experience carried out, in this case with senior students.

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Choral singing in a social movement as a tool of adult education: 'Warszawianka 1905' as a teacher

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Abstract

This paper examines how choral singing functions as a site of adult education within social movements through a case study of 'Warszawianka 1905' as performed by the Prague Revolutionary Choir. Combining dialogical autoethnography, new-materialist diffractive analysis, and autophenomenography, we conceptualise the song as actant, historical witness, and teacher. We propose a 'pedagogy of redundancy', i.e., the use of purposeful cycles of listening, choral recitation, rhythmic chanting, humming, and iterative performance which lowers shame, builds affective and social reserves, while enabling translanguaging, improvisation, and rapid public uptake. Framed as 'strategic deep andragogy', we offer a 4R heuristic: Repeat, Relax, Reframe, Resound, showing how the collective voice binds bodies, memories, and political imagination across languages and generations. Productive tensions between nostalgia/critique and canonisation/improvisation animate identity work. In addition, we note the limits of a single-song regional focus and outline pathways for comparative research.

Keywords: adult education, choral singing, social movements, pedagogy of redundancy, strategic deep andragogy

Introduction

In contemporary education, literacy – both writing and reading – has long been considered a foundational skill (Freire, 1970; Jacobs, 2002). Recently there has been a shift in literacy research turning to multiliteracies and multimodalities with a view to recognising a

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plethora of ways in which people engage with the world around them and construe meanings (Brown & Zhang, 2025; Zapata et al., 2023). We note that this still does not seem to be a widely explored perspective. While oral traditions have received some attention from social movements (Augusto et al., 2024; Srigley et al., 2018), they are often associated with distant cultures or the fading memories of older generations (Bornat, 2002; Tańczuk, 2024). Yet the experiences of collective singing, discovering one's own voice, and harmonising with others are just as fundamental (cf. Hołubowicz, in press). These acts are about expressing oneself, selecting the right words, and creating a shared vocabulary. However, at the same time there are vibrant developments in indigenous studies retrieving oral traditions from obsolescence thus reestablishing their potential: this manifests itself, for instance, in the growing popularity of storytelling in pedagogy (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). A song too tells a story, as argued by Alberhasky and Durkee (2024) in their research examining lyrics and the way a narrative is created, in which the scholars use a large data set of pieces from various musical genres. The power of a song, however, exceeds the message that the actual words carry. Thanks to the music – the rhythm, the melody, the particular instrumental rendition – it is possible for a song that we hear with our inner ear to take control of us, thanks to the affect it generates. This usually occurs when we like the composition but also at times seemingly against our will. This is likely the reason why songs have been used amply in education; this approach is frequently advocated in language learning in particular. However, nowadays singing is often evaluated through a professional lens, linked to career-making, rather than being seen as a natural form of communication (Small, 1999; Turino, 2008).

Developing a liking for a song and a willingness to share it with others as well as hearing it reverberate with a multitude of voices has inscribed itself into recent educational theory in which teaching is increasingly understood as an act of generosity rather than merely one of transmission. For Vlieghe and Zamojski (2025), teaching involves placing before others something one cherishes in the world and inviting learners to contemplate it. This act of educational generosity goes beyond integration or hospitality: it is a formative gesture that exposes the next generation to the world as gift, while also shaping them in relation to it (cf. Kowzan, 2025). Within adult education, and especially in the arts, such generosity often takes the form of a shared presentation rather than a finished product to be contemplated or consumed: instead, it is an offering to be reenacted together.

Choral singing exemplifies this gesture with particular force. The choir does not merely display a song to an audience; it first has to 'tear the song from the self' (cf. pl. *trzeba się wydrzeć*) in a gesture that is both vocal and communal. Here the choir functions as a collective teacher – albeit one that emerges through the prior constitution of a community. As Esposito (2011, 2015) suggests, community is not a fusion without cost but a relation of mutual exposure and obligation: each member must contribute, even if only by opening their mouth and lending their breath. Participation demands a relinquishing, a giving-up of something of oneself and subjecting it to music so that something greater may resound. In this sense, the educational power of choral singing lies in the voices torn from ordinary speech, raised above mere noise and offered back to the world as a renewed presence of the cosmology embedded in a particular song (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998).

By combining dialogical autoethnography (Harada, 2013), new materialist diffractive analysis (Kotze et al., 2018) with its focus on affect rather than discourse as well as autophenomenography with its flows of experience-based meanings in time (Kowzan, 2022), our study promises to show how a single revolutionary song torn from committed individuals can become an assembled teacher in adult education. This teacher

is capable of leading learners into histories of struggle, mediating multilingual and plurilingual collaboration, as well as producing affective bonds across generations and borders. Dialogical autoethnography consists of both authors' conversations interpreting the reports and data brought by the participatory observer. Its strength lies in first-hand in-depth experience of the phenomenon under scrutiny by one of the authors of this paper Ola Hołubowicz, accompanied at the stage of interpretation and analysis by the other researcher, Piotr Kowzan, who was not directly involved in the observation. In this instance, dialogue has a potential for being more productive, as the person with an insider's perspective can discuss her reflections with an 'outsider' relying only on the empirical material able to preserve a critical distance from the issue. Here we use autophenomenography to trace variation in one person's experience of the same phenomenon across time (Kowzan, 2022; Shu, 2020). It is not a separate dataset but a temporal reading of Ola's first-person material, especially where present-day singing reactivates childhood memories and earlier affective attachments. Diffractive analysis was used as a reading strategy for tracing how voices, bodies, languages, tools, and historical associations intra-acted in particular episodes.

We also aim to incorporate a methodological innovation by writing part of the article from the song's perspective, echoing trends in post-qualitative research with its aversion to only discursive aspects of language (Le Grange, 2018). Finally, acknowledging the contradictory impulses around 'Warszawianka 1905' – nostalgia versus critique; canonisation versus improvisation – we hope to enable readers to see how adult learners negotiate their political and musical identities in practice. This gesture situates our approach within arts-based and creative nonfiction educational research traditions in which aesthetic form is treated not as ornament but as a mode of reporting and inquiry (Barone, 2008; Eisner, 2017; Greenwood, 2012).

We begin with the assumption that collective singing is processual and participatory. It is not confined to the final product: the act of learning and rehearsing the song is itself a site of adult education. Its participatory character resonates with the pre-twentieth century notions of music as music-making; in other words, each rendition is a unique temporally situated experience rather than a material artefact such as a vinyl record or music CD (Turino, 2008). In practical terms, our fieldwork involved participatory observation during the rehearsals and performances of the Prague Revolutionary Choir which is comprised of singers from many countries. It is a small non-professional collective with a varying number of members whose main objective is to engage in activism in a joyful way by singing songs associated with the broadly understood leftist heritage: in other words, songs celebrating transnational civil rights and revolutionary movements. The musical quality is not irrelevant but it plays a secondary role. The chorists strive to improve their technique, but the guiding principles rely on radical inclusion irrespective of vocal experience or skill, relying on the notion of participatory art that presumes active engagement (Turino, 2008).

Methodology

Data was collected through participatory observation during rehearsals and performances of the Prague Revolutionary Choir, supplemented by fieldnotes, selected audio/video recordings, and document analysis concerning the song's circulation and historical uses. The material discussed in this article was selected because it captured the full learning sequence through which a new song enters the choir's repertoire: collective listening, phonetic negotiation, rhythmic recitation, humming, harmonic distribution, and public performance. Our aim was not exhaustive documentation of the choir's activity but rather

to pay analytical attention to episodes that illuminated how learning, coordination, and affect were co-produced in practice.

Our objective is to trace the biography of one song rendered by the choir, 'Warszawianka 1905', personify it and treat 'her' as a teacher of the choir. We see a song as a cultural artifact which owing to its rhythm and melody can become embedded in people's minds. Music is a product of human activity which is capable of escaping conscious control and holding power over people at a physiological level. We aim to explore the ways in which one song can function as a teacher both in adult education and in a social movement. We also aim to demonstrate how this approach can be transplanted to other learning contexts.

As for our methodological approach we approach the role of the song from three different perspectives. First, we view it as an actant (à la Latour, 2017), i.e., a force capable of bringing people together. Second, we regard it as a witness carrying sedimented histories (leftist: social democratic, socialist, communist, anarchist and antifascist), along with worldview assumptions and organisational strategies that at the time were regarded as innovative (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Finally, we treat the song as a teacher, enveloping participants in a cosmos of collectivity. Its rhythm and melody instruct bodies, evoke tears, and demand participants be together in the moment until the last verse – the completion of the performance. This triadic lens allows us to see how 'Warszawianka 1905' (female, approximately 146 years old) operates simultaneously within rehearsals (as a welcoming learning space), performances (as a form of public pedagogy), and individual memories (as autophenomenographic testimony).

At the level of methodology, there are similarities between our core idea of giving voice to song and the practices of deep ecology (cf. McClaskie, 2023). The Council of All Beings ritual involves participants removing their human identity for a moment and 'speaking on behalf of other-than-human Beings' (Hindhede, 2023), cultivating an ecological self and encouraging the development of compassion across species and generations. This fundamental principle of treating all beings as having inherent value, however, derives not from modern ecology but from Indigenous worldviews. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes in *Theory of Water*, the world is composed not only of animals and plants but also of ancestors and stories; water and 'the other living beings in the network of Anishinaabeg life are teachers and co-creators' (Simpson, 2025, p. 161). The analytical point here is circulation. Water circulates like the blood of the planet, bearing information about past and present, carrying memory, and teaching resilience through its changing forms.

The bridge to song is therefore empirical as well as metaphorical. Both water and choral singing can be understood as media of memory and relation. The comparison may be made on three levels: by analogy, insofar as both water and song serve as carriers of history; by homology, insofar as both instantiate a deeper phenomenon of memory-bearing and communal binding; and by morphology, insofar as both share forms of flow, rhythm, and resonance that shape how communities perceive themselves. These three levels correspond to what we trace empirically below: historical transmission, collective binding, and embodied rhythm. In this sense, to sing together is to place oneself within the currents of history just as a river does. This makes the song an active teacher of collectivity.

To translate this orientation back into adult education, we use strategic deep andragogy to name a methodological-pedagogical orientation in which adult learners provisionally decentre themselves and allow a more-than-human cultural actant carrying sedimented histories to organise attention, memory, and collective response (Latour, 2017). *Deep* signals both an attentiveness to more-than-human voices associated with

deep ecological thinking and the reactivation of inherited cultural resources under changed conditions, extending Bendell's (2018) notion of deep adaptation beyond material and social resilience towards a cultural dimension of recovery and re-use. *Strategic* draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's sense of strategic essentialism: the deliberate and provisional treatment of a complex entity such as the song as if it could speak with sufficient coherence to become a teacher, while remaining aware that this coherence is analytically constructed rather than ontologically given (Spivak, 1990). Strategic deep andragogy therefore concerns who or what is provisionally allowed to take pedagogical initiative; the pedagogy of redundancy, developed below, describes how this learning proceeds in practice.

In practice, this methodological orientation takes the form of three interrelated gestures:

- Writing sections of the article in the first person of the song, allowing a polyphony of voices to emerge
- Using fragments of the lyrics as mottos introducing subsequent sections, granting the song space to 'speak for herself'
- Creating new verses in response to what we uncover about its history and context

These gestures are not acts of historical reconstruction; rather, they deliberately suspend fidelity to factual detail in order to reanimate the spirit of the song. At the same time, we remain attentive to the song's sociological force. Thus 'Warszawianka 1905' does not merely reflect political history but actively addresses and shapes a group. Even though we do not engage in textual analysis of the lyrics, the song's title, its collective address, and its cultural embedding matter profoundly. Our approach thus acknowledges this specific sociological agency while opening space for the song to act as a teacher in the present. Throughout the article, we distinguish three textual registers: empirical material (fieldnote-based description and autoethnographic testimony), interpretive commentary (our analytical claims), and experimental writing (passages voiced by the song and the newly written stanza). The experimental passages are not presented as historical evidence; rather, they function as arts-based analytical devices that condense relations, affects, and tensions disclosed through the empirical material.

As researchers of social movements, we are embedded in the present. However, despite this we sometimes overlook how not only the conventions of protest have changed but also their force. What was once experienced by thousands – from the ominous silence of slaves (Bijsterveld, 2008) to striking workers singing together (Lynch, 2009) – now often unfolds on a smaller scale (Eyerman, 2019). This paper focuses on the role of collective singing in such modest events in Central-Eastern Europe, examining how repetitive and participatory practices generate social integration and function as a form of adult education.

Analysis

With this methodological framework in place, we now turn to our analysis, examining how the song operates across rehearsals, performances, and personal memories.

Śmiało podnieśmy sztandar nasz w górę!
/ˈɕmja.wɔ pɔdˈɲɛɕ.mɨ ˈɕtan.dar naʂ v ˈgu.rɛ/
Choć burza wrogich żywiołów wyje,
/xɔt͡ɕ ˈbu.ʐa ˈvrɔ.gix ʐɨˈvjɔ.wuf ˈvɨ.jɛ/

Choć nas dziś gnębią siły ponure,
/xɔt͡ɕ nas d͡ʑiɕ ˈgɲɛm.bjɔ̃ ˈɕi.wɨ pɔˈnu.rɛ/
Chociaż niepewne jutro niczyje…
/ˈxɔ.t͡ɕaʂ ɲɛˈpɛv.nɛ ˈju.trɔ ɲiˈt͡ʂɨ.jɛ/
(‘Warszawianka 1905’, female, age 146)

Rather than provide a full translation at this point, we offer only a rough semantic orientation: the stanza calls on singers to raise their banner despite hostile forces, present oppression, and an uncertain future. In the choir, an unfamiliar song is initially approached through sound: participants listen, repeat, and negotiate pronunciation before receiving a provisional translation. We reproduce something of this sequence here, preserving linguistic unfamiliarity as a brief part of the reading experience.

Choir - led by the song

Every member of Prague Revolutionary Choir can suggest a song of their choosing, or to look at it inversely, suggest being led by a song that has chosen them. The person advocates for the song by presenting its history, extolling its merits, enumerating the reasons why it should be included in choir performances or sharing their enthusiasm. As soon as the group has agreed to work with a given piece, the choir initiates the process by listening to the song collectively. The lyrics are already there to be found on shared files that are accessible courtesy of the Krakow Revolutionary Choir; if it is not part of their repertoire, the Prague counterpart searches for lyrics on the phones. Alternatively, Marti Składanek (The Prague choir’s founder) or Janí Heinová (one of the conductresses) print out the lyrics before the rehearsal using the resources of the corporations that employ them.

The next step is to read the text out in unison. The person ‘chosen by the song’, or someone proficient in the language the song ‘speaks’, reads one verse and then the other members repeat it chorally; this process continues through the entire song. Special attention is paid to words which are difficult to pronounce. Any issues regarding atypical pronunciation found in the song are clarified; sometimes non-standard alterations are introduced to keep the desirable rhythm in the rendition. This approach is often applied when a song has non-English lyrics. A highly proficient or native speaker of the target language guides the process at the phonetic level as this procedure entails additional repetition at this initial stage. The person also spontaneously translates the song to English so that the choir members can become aware of the content and the message.

We, the authors of the paper, deliberately reject the word ‘master’ the language and choose ‘settling into’ instead, as we do not believe that ‘mastery’ is either possible, relevant or desirable. This position follows Freire’s conviction that learning begins in dialogue, not control (Freire, 1970; Stańczyk, 2021). To settle into a song is to inhabit its history and listen to what it teaches, rather than to dominate it. Becoming masters of some content contradicts the approach promoted here – it is the learners who let themselves be led by the song, listening avidly to the meaning it carries. Participants derive meaning not only from the actual lyrics but the song’s vibrant history and internationalism. Fidelity to past renditions would seek an alternative form of ‘perfection’ as a goal – one working with a multitude of voices possessing a varying degree of musicality, a plethora of dialects, languages and native languages; this embodies the inclusive ideology behind it.

The next step involves rhythmic reading line by line with participants repeating the lyrics after the song guide to familiarise themselves with the text. Finally, the whole song is read out rhythmically and chanted chorally, functioning as an intermediary phase

between recitation and singing. After a few repetitions, once the chorists feel that they have become sufficiently acquainted with the linguistic layer to try producing it musically, the collective moves on to learning the main melody line by line through humming or fully vocalising the text. At this stage practicing the song begins: singing the lyrics stanza by stanza without any differentiation into separate voice parts. Unless the song is particularly simple, the choir members may manage to sing only the first stanza by the end of the rehearsal: it usually requires further practice, but the end outcome is perceived as a reward which offers a motivation boost.

During the following rehearsal after the warm-up and vocal exercises work on the piece is resumed. At each meeting the singers might take all the steps described above; the process can be somewhat faster but this depends on the number of participants who were absent from the first practice of the new song. The choir tends to cover the whole song phonetically and vocally on multiple occasions. As soon as everyone feels comfortable with the main melody, the choir proceeds to learn to sing in harmony. A highly proficient or native speaker of the target language guides the process at the phonetic level since settling into it entails more repetition to become familiar with it. This stage is much shorter as the choir have already become acquainted with the song. Once they feel ready, each member volunteers to sing the voice of their choosing. If there is a substantial imbalance in numbers, more advanced and experienced singers – usually the conductresses Janí or Sofia, or Marti (the founding mother) – join the less numerous group. The collective also make sure that each group has at least one singer who is capable of holding the voice line to steer the others who may be more susceptible to drifting into another melodic line. As opposed to professional choirs, Prague choir members are not forced to remain in their voice categories (e.g., soprano, alto, tenor, etc.) but are free to choose the melody they feel most comfortable with producing, which might mean that a person with a deep voice opts to sing the soprano line as they find it more appealing or easier to internalise.

In the following exchange, the song is personified and given a voice:

‘Warszawianka 1905’ (female, age 146):

> When I was requested by the choir to share my knowledge, I advised the group to begin by listening to an existing recording performed by the Krakow Revolutionary Choir. Then they read out my lyrics in unison, discussed difficult phonetic passages and translations, chanted the text rhythmically, hummed the melody, and only then did I encourage them to sing – first in unison and later harmonising with or without voice categories.

This process, summarised by Piotr and Ola in their notes as ‘la la la → singing in another language’, takes place at a decreasing distance from the content and is essentially a pedagogy of redundancy: repetition, mutual facilitation and rhythmical reading (often aided by metronome or piano apps on phones) thus allowing adults to learn by doing, listening and repetition. Within this ecology, the song is treated as a living companion: she ‘guides’ novices, demands attention to her story, and gradually reveals her affective power. The song is a hub in a network of people, their specific skills or lack thereof, and their social roles or needs or the tools employed (Latour, 2017). Even an undefined social context must be taken into account when assessing the potential of the particular song to be performed in future (cf. Hołubowicz & Kowzan, in press).

> El bien más preciado es la libertad
> hay que defenderla con fe y valor.
> Alza la bandera revolucionaria

Que lleva el pueblo a la emancipación.
Alza la bandera revolucionaria
que lleva el pueblo a la emancipación.
('Warszawianka 1905', carried on a Spanish current: 'A las barricadas' (1936))

Comrade 'Warszawianka 1905'/'A las barricadas':

> I chose Ola to become my disciple. I met her when she was an elementary school student and I was still invited to schools as part of curricular music classes. It seemed that Ola and her classmates used to enjoy accompanying me in singing.

Ola:

> I was carried away by the song and I observed that my classmates were also, thanks to her marching pace and the rising melody, creating a sense of explosion, but I was not able to put my finger on this as a child.

Comrade 'Warszawianka 1905'*:*

> I became *persona non grata* later. They banned me from schoolbooks a few years after the systemic transformations in 1989, when decommunisation and desovietisation ideologues directed their focus onto the school curriculum. This occurred even though I was born long before Poland adopted socialism as its official regime. Over a century earlier my father, Wacław Święcicki conceived me while imprisoned, which is perhaps why my birthday is unclear. It was either in 1879, (Stojek-Sawicka, 2022), or in 1880, when my second father, Józef Pławiński, composed music (Alonso, 2021) or in 1884 (Ossa Martínez, 2009). Yet I must have been considered a relic of communism, the eradication of which was deemed 'a return to normality' (Janowski, 2007, p. 83). The fact that I was rejected as a schoolteacher felt incomprehensible. Why?

Ola:

> The sudden marginalisation of an eagerly performed composition was not explained to us: the teacher in our final year just dismissed our request to sing it with the remark, 'You can sing this one at home'. It occurs to me now that we probably did not give too much thought to the issue since we were used to being given no explanations as to why some course of action took place at school, and in the world around us. Nonetheless, Comrade 'Warszawianka 1905' somehow did not disappear from my life. She was there, hummed every now and then in my childhood, lyrics internalised, accompanying me in my pompous desire for something intangible and revolutionary through my adolescence, but then she slowly started growing silent, ousted by contemporary punk rock and indie music.

After approximately two decades of so-called decommunisation and desovietisation, a process which in practice involved attempts to erase all symbols, histories, intellectual traditions, political ideas, and key figures associated with the broadly defined left – the campaign gradually lost momentum in the public sphere, despite the endeavours of the Institute of National Remembrance (Polish acronym: IPN) to promote such policies (Kałużna, 2018). The aesthetics of martyrology under the oppressive regime of the past seemed to lose its grip as the new generations without any first-hand experience of the former system came of age. Thanks to this shift, leftist activists increasingly began reclaiming their heritage. Krakow Revolutionary Choir is a collective that epitomises this trend: they have resumed public renditions of the songs that fell out of favour post 1989 including 'Warszawianka 1905'.

One such performance of 'Warszawianka 1905' was held on June 24, 2023. The piece, which was considered the anthem of the 1905-1907 Revolution, was sung by the Krakow Revolutionary Choir and the Warsaw Revolutionary Choir in Łódź, Poland, as part of the celebrations marking the 112th anniversary of the Łódź Uprising (irk, 2023). The workers, who demanded an eight-hour working day and the right to receive an education in their own national languages, were brutally suppressed by the Tsarist authorities. To commemorate the event the leftist circles of Łódź, Warsaw and their allies organised a march with many participants wearing outfits that were typical of the working class in the early twentieth century.

After joining the Prague Choir, I became familiar with more leftist anthems recognisable and sung all over the world. It was then I realised that the Spanish 'A las barricadas!' was a close relative of 'Warszawianka'. I deduced that the song must have reached Spain thanks to the Polish division of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, carried by the *Dąbrowszczacy*, alternatively known as the Jarosław Dąbrowski units. The two songs share strikingly similar lyrics and an almost identical melody. It would make sense that a substantial group – Polish soldiers constituted approximately 4000 to 5000 out of a total of 35 000 international volunteers fighting with the Republican Army (Pietrzak, 2021) – might well have brought the robust and seductive comrade 'Warszawianka 1905', whose appeal would generate her Spanish variant.

In fact, however, the melody reached Spain before the Polish International Brigades did. It was introduced by Otto Mayer (now known as Otto Mayer-Serra), a Berlin Jewish communist who moved to Catalonia after the fire of the *Reichstag* in 1933. Mayer-Serra was a Marxist musicologist and a conductor of the workers' choir in Berlin. He saw the need to establish a similar group in Barcelona in order to activate workers through music; in this way he hoped to prevail over the passivity-inducing bourgeois culture by raising awareness among his project's participants. Comrade 'Warszawianka 1905' – of course a Polish proletarian anthem – under her German alias ('Auf die Barrikaden') migrated to Barcelona together with other revolutionary songs by German and Soviet composers, sent to Mayer-Serra by his friend and comrade from Berlin, where 'Warszawianka 1905' yet again shifted her identity to work in the Spanish context. Owing to her appeal and power, she was acclaimed the 'hymn of the Spanish confederation of anarcho-syndicalist labour unions Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) […][and] the anarchist hymn' (Alonso, 2021, p. 464); she was also sung with Catalan lyrics.

This testimony illustrates how 'Warszawianka 1905' operates as what Deleuze and Guattari (2005) call a rhizome. Its radicalism recalls the Latin *radix* (*root*), although its historical circulation resists precisely such a rooted genealogy: rather than following a single line of descent, it proliferates backward, sideways, and across struggles that local 'farmers of history' have been unable to eradicate. In the classroom, as Niesz (2022) reminds us, schooling often reflects the victories of one movement at the expense of another; the result is that when regimes change, the curricular decoration changes with them. Songs once endorsed as part of collective memory are suddenly dismissed as inappropriate and relegated to the private sphere with the suggestion that they may be sung 'at home'. What is lost in such a move is not only a political symbol but a formative sociological experience.

The song's removal from collective practice functioned less as an erasure of text than as an act of silencing. What had once been encouraged in unison became marked as improper, almost recalcitrant, if sung aloud. For children, the constellation of connotations behind the collective singing was rarely conscious; it was simply the pleasure of voices rising together. For teachers and curricular 'farmers', however, the very timbre of 'Warszawianka 1905' carried unwanted resonances, aesthetic and political

alike. Yet the song did not vanish. Through humming, memory, and later its migration into new contexts, 'Warszawianka 1905' continued to move – between solitude and collectivity, between Poland and Spain – resisting efforts to silence it.

Chorus:

> Ha!... zemsta straszna dzisiejszym katom,
> Co wysysają życie z milionów!...
> Ha!... zemsta carom i plutokratom!
> A przyjdzie żniwo przyszłości plonów!
> ('Warszawianka 1905', female, age 146)

Given the international nature of the choir, 'Warszawianka 1905' was a perfect candidate to become their new teacher. There were some initial doubts about singing in Polish as it is quite challenging even for Czech-speakers, even though Czech is closely related to Polish. Nonetheless, Polish diacritics, phonetics and a lack of familiarity with the language rendered it difficult to articulate for some. Collectively the chorists decided to simplify the process by combining one stanza in Polish with one in Spanish and keeping the Polish chorus '*Naprzód Warszawo...*'. The merging of those two linguistic versions also underscores the choir's heterogeneous membership and its allegiance to internationalism. Additionally, it allows the Polish original to re-enter the leftist activist scene, where its Spanish counterpart has long dominated owing primarily to the far wider use of Spanish over Polish.

Once 'Warszawianka 1905' was elected the new guide, the group listened to existing recordings in Polish and in Spanish, read the lyrics aloud in unison, discussed difficult phonetic passages and translations, chanted the text rhythmically, hummed the melody, and only then began to sing synchronously. Singing in another language, which causes the gap in understanding to close, is essentially a pedagogy of redundancy: repetition, mutual facilitation and rhythmical reading (often aided by metronome or piano apps on smartphones) allow adults to learn by doing and listening, adding another dimension to learning through repetition. Thus, bad habits formed by many choir members as a result of immersion in the prevalent mode of education can be overcome. By education-induced 'bad habits' we mean those that demonise mistakes and convince students to strive towards perfection alone, erroneously seeing the learning process in binary terms: either one 'has learned' the skill/material or not, without any nuanced distinction between different levels of ability. One way to overcome this binarity might be inspired by indigenous pedagogies, more specifically by Māori practices of collective oral and aural learning through repetition described by Paringatai and Wharerau (2021). This would involve approaching the song as if it were a living companion: it 'guides' novices, does not pass judgments, allows for 'mispronunciation' or replacing parts of lyrics with 'lalala' as the multitude of voices do not expose the imperfect rendition of individuals. Through the embodied experience of producing sound collectively which vibrates through the chorists, the song reveals its affective power, enhanced by the attention to its history.

The stanza below is not presented as empirical material or as a historical continuation of 'Warszawianka 1905'. It is an explicitly marked experimental writing device, developed to reframe and test how the song's pedagogical logic might be carried forward into the present.

Chorus:

> Forward we march, through silence and scorn,

la-la-la, new generations are born.
Songs once discarded return with more might,
voices together rekindle the fight.

Raise up the banner of learning once more,
The chorus of many will open the door.
Each repetition, a weapon, a shield,
waste turned to power, the future revealed.
('Warszawianka 1905', anew[1])

Performance as educational generosity

We read the following account autophenomenographically because it juxtaposes Ola's childhood experience of the song with its present reactivation in the choir:

> I do not remember the circumstances in which 'Warszawianka 1905' was performed for the first time or how often the choir has rendered it since. What I do recall is the emotion: I felt moved and I verbalised this while announcing the piece. Despite my allegiance to internationalism over nationalism I experienced a sense of being moved at an affective and bodily level that I could accompany the song in public. Retrospectively, I see it as a coming-out of sorts, which occurred in a public yet semi-intimate space; generally the choir is invited to sing at small-scale events with a maximum turnout of a few hundred participants. This publicly visible relationship with Comrade 'Warszawianka 1905' was manifested in a welcoming space permeating with acceptance. I felt somehow solemn and grateful that chorists were willing to struggle with fricatives and other intricacies of Polish phonetics to synchronically vibrate and sway under the guidance of the song. Shifting between Polish and Spanish – a real challenge given that the latter is not spoken by all the members – offered everyone an opportunity to relax the speech apparatus and functioned as an important link to the song's international legacy. This enabled me to recontextualise my private 'Warszawianka 1905' as relevant to a much wider audience, many of whom probably believed the song to be of Spanish origin, ignorant of the complex history behind this cultural artifact.
>
> It is likely that my reaction was not unique, but that many of those present of Czech, Slovak, Polish or other Slavic descent also shared my sentiment, locating in the song a text of Slavic Central-Eastern European ancestry that connoted a peripheral perspective in the tradition of international movement and marked a significant contribution.

This episode supports our argument in three ways. First, it shows how multilingual performance can produce affiliation without requiring full linguistic equivalence. Second, it demonstrates that the song's public force depends on the rehearsal-based accumulation of confidence and bodily familiarity. Third, it illustrates how personal memory becomes politically recontextualised through collective enactment.

What is the result of this para-artistic analysis?

The fact that Ola does not have an accurate memory of the Prague Revolutionary Choir's public premiere of 'Warszawianka 1905' is pregnant with meaning. It leads to our conclusion that the forgetting itself can be described as a specific pedagogical practice. The value of this educational process lies not in a final outcome but in participation itself: the choir keeps learning to sing with emphasis placed on the activity and the social gathering rather than the musical piece itself. The boundaries between rehearsals and performances are blurred and porous with each public rendition lending an opportunity to become an open practice. This strategy begins with simply learning a song but its reach

exceeds its musical aspect. Repetitive vocal production does not only allow for work on singing technique but induces a bodily-synchronisation of the members of the choir – through simultaneous breathing, nodding, swaying or stamping. At public events, the vibrant assemblage grows larger transiently, dispersing right after the end of the performance to reassemble at the following event.

Every shared song carries the latent potential to become a protest song (cf. Kowzan, 2023). By altering a word, repeating a line, or inserting a verse, communities can reframe familiar melodies into immediate commentaries on unfolding events. Redundancy is thus not mere practice: it is the reservoir that allows collective voices to intervene when history calls.

The individual words of the lyrics, which are at the same time comprehensible and foreign linguistically, historically or politically to all concerned, are not as relevant as the whole, which is more than just a sum of particular elements. What matters is less the semantic content of the individual words than the act of collective singing the lyrics. What bears significance is the encounter, the affect, and the repetitive character, where the main goal is the continual recreation not only of the specific cultural artefact, but invoking its spirit as a way to pay respect to the past and embed it in the present with the future in view. From a higher vantage point, the cyclical nature of the practice helps to sustain the activist community around the choir, which resembles a ritual pledge of allegiance to certain values realised in a more playful manner given the form of art in question.

To describe the practice, we propose a term *pedagogy of redundancy* – it involves rote-learning, recitation of words where not all individual ones are understood and where their approximation suffices with possible and frequent modifications or omissions. It entails a deliberate resignation of one's own individual agency and a willing subordination to the collective. In a way it reaffirms many educational approaches that are now considered obsolete and dubious both by the modernist project and by neoliberal technocratic tendencies.

Discussion

By pedagogy of redundancy (pol. *pedagogika nadmiaru* or *pedagogika powtórzeń*) we mean a learning arrangement in which purposeful repetition, overlap, approximation, and surplus participation create the conditions for collective uptake. Its unit is not the individual act of correct reproduction but the accumulation of shared reserves: phonetic familiarity, rhythmic confidence, affective safety, and readiness for public enactment. The pedagogy of redundancy we propose is about the conscious cultivation of abundance and repetition in the learning process. It is not a new direction, though we firmly believe it is worth retrieving from neglect and recognising anew. In educational literature, the concept of *redundancy* most often appears as a principle of avoiding unnecessary information, for example, in cognitive load theory (Sweller et al., 2019). However, in arts education, there is a tradition emphasising that repetition is a condition for coherence and the foundation of musical beauty. Redundancy pedagogy is the deliberate building of a richness of experience: we repeatedly listen, read, recite rhythmically, translate, hum, sing, divide into parts, and return to the song in subsequent rehearsals. Each iteration adds a new layer of understanding and embodiment.

Redundancy here grapples with the concept of waste: on the one hand it is in opposition to waste, but rather suggests the creation of an interaction-rich safe learning environment in which adults can experiment, make mistakes, laugh, and experience the power of the choir/the voices synchronised in unison and/or harmony. At the same time,

it recycles a type of waste: a song that was 'dumped'. Drawing on Greg Kennedy's *Ontology of Trash,* we view waste as uniquely ambiguous:

> no object in itself is immune to becoming waste, while, on the other hand, no object is in essence waste […] waste is, most simply put, our failure to preserve our values. […] Waste, then, is not just matter out of place; it is matter without place. (Kennedy, 2007, p. 7)

Redundancy is thus the opposite of waste; it is stored social energy.

In information theory, redundancy stabilises signals under noise (Shannon, 1948), and in resilience thinking it creates slack that enables systems to improvise under stress (Taleb, 2012). In singing practice, the repeated cycles of reading, humming, and chanting create precisely such reserves of familiarity: they are not 'wasteful' but generative. Adult learners, often navigating utilitarian pressures and time scarcity (Illeris, 2018), here discover that redundancy produces capacities beyond the moment – to improvise, to insert new verses, or to reclaim discarded songs when a crisis or opportunity arises. Under conditions often described as polycrisis, overlapping disruptions and information saturation, such redundancy provides low-latency readiness to speak publicly and collectively when circumstances demand it.

'Warszawianka 1905', irrespective of its significance preceding the so-called communist regime, was discarded in an ostentatious gesture of ritual purging from all spheres of life because of its former ideological allegiance. Envisaged as pregnant with meanings inimical to the ensuing 'apolitical' neoliberal system, she was gradually pushed from public circulation by another 'Warszawianka (1831)' which no longer had a competitor. Supposedly, one of the reasons for eliminating the 1905 version from the school curriculum was that students were confused by having two songs with the same title in the repertoire. Now 'Warszawianka 1905' is both out of place – incompatible with the commonsensical and naturalised conceptualizations of capitalism and liberal democracy – and without a place – anachronistic, propagating a militancy that today's activists (at least in Europe) would prefer to pursue through peaceful struggle. She is reborn through reemployment and reembodied by the collective via this pedagogy of redundancy.

It is important to emphasise that this concept has no established literary origin; rather, it is our working term, derived from observations of choral practice. This 'mnemonic recitation of information' (Paringatai & Wharerau, 2021, p. 49) emerges in some indigenous traditions. This phrase is used with caution: 'indigenous traditions' encompasses a wide range of practices found in very different societies and is often employed in an attempt to avoid describing them through negation as non-Western. For instance, Karyn Paringatai describes a pedagogy she uses while teaching her students ''*waiata* (songs) and *haka* (chants) and the subsequent performance of these items [which] all are in the Maori' (Paringatai & Wharerau, 2021, p. 49), the majority of whom are from abroad and thus have no prior familiarity with the language. Paringatai relies on the Maori traditional pedagogy which relies heavily on repetition and memorisation along with learning in the dark without the aid or distraction of notes. This darkness recreates conditions associated with pre-colonial forms of learning in which long hours without visual aids made oral and aural transmission central. Long winters with many hours of darkness were used to acquire esoteric knowledge by aural exposure, and as the authors of the chapter claim, the indigenous could not rely on writing and thus excelled at memorising the songs/chants after hearing them only once. The students of today do not usually rely on this type of memory given their immersion in a multimedia culture that

provides numerous external aids to remembering, making such a practice even more challenging.

Repetition also resonates with Heidegger's notion of dwelling (Creely & Waterhouse, 2024). Settling into a song is not about 'mastery' but about inhabiting it long enough for thoughts to gather within its form, enabling singers to move beyond faithful reproduction towards an attuned transformation of the song. The improvised verse we include earlier in this article would not emerge if the song were treated as a relic to be faithfully reproduced. It arises only when redundancy has made the form liveable, flexible, and open to transformation.

In the Prague Revolutionary Choir, members do rely on written sources. They must, given that they are often reading languages they speak only partially or not at all. Yet this dependence on the written word is only part of the story. The choir's familiarisation with songs in an unfamiliar language still significantly resembles the process of memorisation found in the Maori example. Singers may not understand every word they utter, but the song's broader political and emotional address remains legible through context, melody, and collective delivery. Occasional failures of pronunciation, memory, or comprehension are absorbed into the choral texture: reciting the lyrics or replacing them with 'lalala' to sustain the volume if one cannot pronounce, read or remember them, does not detract from the song's power. 'Warszawianka 1905' – already translated into many languages – can be performed in any language, including those into which it is yet to be translated; its emotional force would remain for those who sing it. In this way it plays a function similar to that of prayer, creating a sense of ritual incantation invoking past gatherings of workers, activists or combatants as well as people who struggle for the betterment of working or living conditions around the world today.

Strategic deep andragogy names an orientation in adult learning in which participants temporarily redistribute pedagogical initiative towards a cultural form, allowing its accumulated histories, material affordances, and demands to reorganise collective attention and action. In this case, our orientation extends rather than rejects thing-centred pedagogy (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019): the song is not only attended to and studied but collectively voiced, and participants provisionally allow it to organise what is attended to, repeated, remembered, and publicly professed. The collectively sung song is therefore not merely a 'thing' held in shared attention and study; it becomes a professing presence, a medium through which claims on the world and on the group can be voiced. Strategic deep andragogy thus concerns how pedagogical initiative can be provisionally redistributed towards such cultural forms; the pedagogy of redundancy describes the learning mechanism through which this becomes possible, while the 4R heuristic introduced below renders that mechanism portable beyond this particular case.

'Warszawianka 1905' is a demanding teacher. By letting the more-than-a-thing resonate and guide the learning process, it is possible to hear echoed the struggles of past generations and their histories. This approach resembles some indigenous pedagogies in which a bricolage of stories plays an educational role, with no one unique narrative establishing hegemony. In the bricolage model, different stories do not clash or conquer one another; they add more detail or vantage points, thus enriching the collective tale. There are various stories about 'Warszawianka 1905', including unreliable accounts of the date of its creation, as the different sources contain discrepancies. This approach is reminiscent of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's acount of Nishnaabeg cosmological narratives. Simpson describes a plurality of origin stories rather than a single explanation of the world's creation. Their diversity reflects the capacity of each individual storyteller to shape and reinterpret the tradition using their own voice. What is important is not a single origin story but the way the stories can teach how to live with each other (Simpson,

2025). This redistribution of agency also resonates with Rancière's (1991) egalitarian hypothesis that intelligence appears in shared forms rather than credentialed transmission. The resulting 4R heuristic can be expressed as Repeat–Relax–Reframe–Resound. We repeat to relax our self-protective shame reflex; we relax to reframe our understanding (for example, by inventing a stanza); we reframe so the song can resound outside the rehearsal as a public voice.

Drawing on indigenous pedagogies does not mean the mindless recitation of particular stories and 'playing Indians' as is common at children's camps in the Czech Republic. On the contrary, it encourages attention to local circumstances and thus offers insights into how stories can be reaffirmed and how personified cultural artefacts can be employed for educational purposes (Lawrence & Paige, 2016; Simpson, 2025).

Conclusions

Our study shows that choral singing within a social movement constitutes a distinctive milieu of adult education in which 'Warszawianka 1905' functions simultaneously as actant, witness of history, and teacher. We propose a pedagogy of redundancy, purposeful cycles of listening, choral recitation, rhythmic chanting, humming, and repeated performance that build affective and social reserves, lower the shame of error, and enable rapid, situated uptake, including translanguaging and verse-making. Framed as strategic deep andragogy, this practice provisionally redistributes pedagogical initiative towards the song as a cultural form, using its coherence strategically rather than treating it as ontologically given. The 4R heuristic: Repeat, Relax, Reframe, Resound – captures a pathway from rehearsal to public voice. Crucially, the song does not merely invite; it demands breath, attention, and synchrony from performers. It calls potential participants to step from listening into joining, answering a collective address that binds bodies and memories across languages and generations. Productive tensions (between nostalgia and critique, canonisation and improvisation) do not weaken but rather animate this pedagogy, thus allowing adult learners to negotiate political and musical identities in the present.

The limitations of this study stem from its focus on a single song, a particular choir ecology, and an Eastern European context. Our approach privileges affective and relational dynamics over textual analysis and therefore cannot account for all dimensions of learning within other musical or social settings. Future inquiries might compare multiple songs, languages, and activist formations, trace how redundancy scales in larger publics, or examine how the song's call can sometimes be resisted, silenced, or appropriated. These limits also open a path forward: by foregrounding the song's agency and its demands on both singers and listeners, the study suggests that education through art depends not on mastery, but on sustained, collective responsiveness.

Notes

[1] This stanza is an author-generated experimental addition, developed with the assistance of ChatGPT in a structured multi-perspective prompting process. It is not treated as empirical material, historical evidence, or part of the original song; its function is heuristic and illustrative. The final wording was selected and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for its interpretation and inclusion.

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Aims & Scope

The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

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