

Adult education, the arts and creativity

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Adult education, the arts and creativity

Welcome to this special edition of *Studies in the Education of Adults* on arts and creativity. This volume contributes to the now decades of innovative and imaginative work by arts-based adult educators and researchers from around the world. It emerges from the need for more critical and creative ways of thinking, being, doing, and knowing. The arts and creativity play such a key role in how people make sense of and explain their worlds, scholars in adult education have in force entered the realm of imagination, experimentation, and the human aesthetic dimension as the capacity for creativity (Bishop *et al.* 2019). The arts and expressive practices they wield come in many shapes, including performative/poetic, visual and narrative forms. The aim is to enhance the human condition and promote agendas of social, cultural, gender and ecological justice and change.

This special edition focuses on two major aspects of arts-based practice. The first is the pedagogical. The authors explore how the arts work to provoke deep, engaged, and reflective learning. For some, the power of arts-based and creative practice lies in their ability to inspire individual transformation, specifically for people who have experienced deep oppression and exclusion. This includes women who have experienced sexual violence, communities living in poverty and marginalised senior citizens. For other authors, social, ecological or gender justice and change are central goals of their aesthetic adult education work. While stated here as dichotomies, numerous papers show that in the context of arts-based practice, individual and social change agendas are seldom opposites. Rather, they are continuums that reactivate and strengthen self as they work in the interests of collectivity and respond to the needs of a deeply troubled world.

The second major aspect is the arts as a research methodology, which is also a continuum rather than a contrast. In 1995, Mary Poovey argued the limits of the rationalising knowledge created through objective research approaches. She stated that ‘no matter how precise, quantification [could] not inspire action’, particularly in a world where bonds are forged through sympathy and empathy rather than mere calculations or facts (Poovey 1995, p. 84). While the arts are highly cognitive, they equally stimulate feelings, emotions, and senses. Arts-based and arts-informed practices of research, as exemplified in this volume, are the ‘systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms ... as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies’ (McNiff 2008). This section is split into three, the first considers the value of utilising arts-based research approaches as an adult educator/practitioner, the second exploring the critically important role of arts-based research methods in community-based practice with marginalised groups, and the third represents an innovative application of a ‘maker-space’ arts-based research in an adult education context.

Arts as pedagogical force

A central question for McGregor (2012, p. 63) is ‘does art have the power to evoke change individually and collectively?’ If so, what does this look like? These questions are central to

the article by Kathy Bishop and Catherine Etmanski, who explore methods to open up spaces for individual transformation and collective creativity. Evoking Lewis Carroll's fantastical story of 'Alice in Wonderland', Bishop and Etmanski present 'Down the rabbit hole', a paper which uses the tale of Alice's adventures in Wonderland to explore the transformative learning potential of experiential, theatre-based workshops. The authors consider how theatrical conventions, including embodied methods, can be employed to create a learning environment conducive to transformative learning. Drawing on Yorks and Kasl's taxonomy of expressive ways of knowing, the authors advance the notion that transformative learning through theatre can enable participants to engage more fully with imagination, metaphor, and myth, as well as intuition and feelings.

In the next article, Darlene E. Clover takes up the complex challenge of gender injustice in the form of the exclusion of women, in all their diversity. Responding to the male-orientated and colonial narrative of nation making for Canada's Sesquicentenary, Clover explores the pedagogical impact on over 300 visitors to a feminist multi-media research exhibition she curated entitled 'Disobedient women: Defiance, resilience and creativity past and present'. Through the lenses of feminist adult education and exhibitionary praxis, she shares study findings from onsite comments cards and research forms to unearth the learning that was made possible through viewing the exhibition's images and narratives. The study showed that unmediated by an educator, the exhibition encouraged deep memories that fortified the spirit of the present, enabled new interpretations between the past and present and facilitated new cross-cultural connections, particularly between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

Clover's paper illustrates that although 'viewing' artworks have long been considered merely a passive practice, viewing can in fact be an active pedagogical process of new knowledge and meaning making when the viewer is exposed to alternative and absented tales and images for female resistance and resilience.

Arts-based research

Staying within a context of feminism and decolonising and their aim of gender justice and change, but moving us more towards combining adult education and arts-based research, is the article by Mary-Rose Puttick. She introduces a methodology which she calls 'pedago-Vis-ual assemblage' drawing together postcolonial feminist theory, arts-based methods, and Indigenous methodologies. The paper introduces Puttick's multifaceted roles as volunteer-teacher-student-researcher and describes her work with six Somali women who attended a family literacy class at a third sector organisation in Birmingham, UK. Puttick proposes that artefacts are affectual and sensory aspects, and creates a 'Pedago-Vis-ual assemblage' to ethically and dialogically foregrounding the voices of these marginalised adult learners. Puttick shows how by using artefacts, the methodological direction of the research evolved and was responsive to, and negotiated with, the participants. For Puttick, the practice of 'pedago-Vis-ual assemblage' as collaborative research challenges hierarchical research roles and deepens understandings of what meaningful co-created research can achieve.

Leggo (2014) argues that poetry (from the Greek *poiein*, to make) creates, or makes, the world in words. The article by feminist Carol Rogers-Shaw illustrates this 'creating the world in words' through her work using 'research poetry' with people with disabilities. For Rogers-Shaw, poetry is both poignancy and creativity, it not only enhances comprehension of the world, but also, of research content. She introduces the role of research poetry in adult education to address issues of social injustice, recognise and value emotion and allow the voices of marginalised populations to be 'heard'. She explores the role of poetry in

research to creatively analyse and present data on identity, and learning to live with disability. Rogers-Shaw shows how research poetry can draw attention to the embodied experiences of disability and evoke strong responses of empathy and understanding in the audience. She describes poetry as a technique to advance social justice aims and decolonise research methodology. Weaving together academic writing with poetry throughout the article, Rogers-Shaw illustrates how poetry as research method help study participants not only move beyond the strictures of hegemonic academic writing and reveal the multi-layered perspectives of participants, whose complex and rich lives can and should never be reduced to mere stereotypes.

In this special issue of *Studies*, we invited authors to consider how the arts and creative practices could be used as tools of adult education and lifelong learning in communities. We sought to explore the links between learning, creativity and education and the role of arts in the social, gender and ecological change/justice context. In the following three papers, the role of arts-based practice to engage more marginalised groups is explored. Through sharing these stories, the authors advance our understanding of how artistic practices can be employed to affect social change and bring often unheard voices into the public sphere.

The first is a paper by J. Adam Perry and is entitled, ‘when my home is your business’: Transforming stories of housing in a post-industrial city’. Perry examines how performance-orientated arts practice was used to harness and engage marginalised communities living in the post-industrial city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Perry reflects on how a community-based theatre project enabled engagement in artistic practice, public pedagogy and urban rejuvenation. He describes how a small group of high-rise tenants who were at risk of homelessness were enabled to engage in critical public pedagogy. Perry’s paper enhances our understanding of how community-based initiatives can address social oppression and further the use of critical and public-facing community-based pedagogies.

Natalia Balyasnikova and Spring Gillard add to the discourse on the beneficial role of arts-based adult education in community settings. The authors focus on the experiences of older immigrants’ language learning through involvement in arts-based activities. They consider the role of creativity and learning in later life, and explore how purposeful language practice can be enhanced through different forms of creative expression, including drama, storytelling and collaborative artwork. They provide a compelling account through the case of Jacqui, an older immigrant attending an arts-based English learning programme. Balyasnikova and Gillard’s study considers how arts-based programmes can give voice to marginalised learners, bring social connections, and offer the opportunity for personal growth and autonomy. In order to be potentially transformative, the authors identify the need for arts-based programmes to be flexible and follow a community-driven design.

In the third paper, Nicola Dickson provides a personal and honest account of her experience as artist-facilitator employing the visual arts as an engagement and research tool. Building on the findings of Balyasnikova and Gillard’s research, Dickson’s paper explores the challenges and successes in engaging marginalised adult learners in community-based, arts-informed adult learning. Her research took place at a Scottish charity which supports female survivors of childhood sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Dickson reflects on the complex psychological, physical and emotional barriers to participation in adult learning and the research process. She identifies the importance of creating ‘safe spaces’ to ensure participation and reflects on the artist-facilitator role ‘crafting’ engagement. Mirroring the findings of Balyasnikova and Gillard paper, successful engagement was achieved through the adaption of flexible and responsive facilitation. Dickson concludes by identifying the benefits of utilising an innovative, non-traditional research approach to

explore the experiences of this ‘often silenced’ group of women as survivors, visual artists and adult learners.

In the final article of this volume, we move away from adult education and into the realm of teacher education in higher education with the article, ‘W(e)aving and flowing towards social change: Diffracting with data in maker literacies for adults’ by Amélie Lemieux and Virginie Thériault. These authors explore the relationality between arts-based education, environmental sustainability, and maker education. They utilise a post-humanistic methodology to describe ‘w(e)aving as a way of listening’ and reflect on ‘maker education’ activities, such as collages, digital compositions, painting and artwork. The authors introduce the concept of ‘makerspace’ research, and situate maker education within the broader field of adult education research. Findings from a research project conducted on twenty in-service teachers enrolled in a graduate course on Maker Education (Makerspace) using two vignettes are presented. The vignettes are based on artefact artwork, interviews, and other forms of communication with Annike, an in-service elementary teacher. To analyse the data, the authors use diffraction, agential cuts, and glow data to engage with Annike’s artefact, mappings, email communications, and interview data. From their analyses, Lemieux and Thériault argue that post-humanist arts-based methodologies shed new light on dynamic relationalities between humans the rest of nature and as such, poignantly illustrate human accountability in a more creative way.

The papers included in this special edition of *Studies* represent the diverse field in which the arts and creative practice can be used in adult education. This edition exemplifies the range of innovation and breadth of applications made possible through arts and creativity, from a pedagogical approach to a methodological toolkit. This provocative collection invites us to consider the multifaceted ways in which the arts can be used to advance engagement in adult education, and challenges us to reflect on how arts-based practice can enhance our developing understanding of adult learning in 2021 (and beyond).

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