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Editorial Comment

BERNIE GRUMMELL, EDITOR

In a time of accelerating social, economic, and environmental pressures, the theme of the 2026 edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* on "power and participation" draws on the Freirean tradition that recognises that education is always a political act, examining how various contexts, relationships and engagements of learning are immersed in and shaped by complex power dynamics. Articles explore the relationship between power and participation in terms of personal learning processes, but also how they act collectively to strengthen communities and address oppression, by creating spaces for critical engagement, solidarity and learning across a range of areas including global citizenship education, community education and spiritualism, as well as how they are enacted in contemporary practice areas.

As an Editorial Board we were interested in what meaningful participation in adult and community education looks like for both learners and providers, and how adult and community education is tackling some of the complex power dynamics and social injustices facing us today, challenging propaganda and disinformation, and creating spaces for collective action, social transformation and a more inclusive society.

Responding to this theme, the journal has three sections. Section One features three articles which offer varied theoretical focus from adult education. Section Two contains six case studies that provide valuable opportunities to learn from practice. Section Three contains two book reviews and a policy review.

Section One

The first article in the 2026 edition of *The Adult Learner* journal is a critical reflective piece about the *Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) Project Workbook* initiative addressing online disinformation and socio-political polarisation in Irish adult and community education in the face of "the pulling force of polarisation". Grounded in critical, transformative,

relational, and trauma-informed pedagogy, Meyler discusses key insights about developing politically sensitive education, highlighting the importance of adult education approaches for facilitating emotional reflexivity, safe and brave learning spaces, and values-based dialogue to foster critical engagement, cohesion, and collective agency in communities affected by disinformation.

The second article examines the impact of participation for a group of international postgraduate students in a Global Citizenship Education (GCE) programme in Ireland, the STAND Changemakers Academy, in the context of a global polycrisis. It documents how the experiences of participants during the Changemakers Academy shaped their understandings of GCE, their own sense of identity and potential agency for collective action. Oelschlegel and Jay offer valuable learning about the potential and the challenges of GCE pedagogy as brave spaces to build resilient learning communities who are capable of grappling with and growing through sensitive issues, tensions and conflicts.

The final article in this section, *Power, Participation and Spiritual Development* is an autoethnography using Freire's concepts of limit-situations, generative themes, praxis and conscientisation to explore one women's spiritual development in post-Catholic Ireland. Higgins thoughtfully reveals how questions of power and participation shape the author's journey from a deposited, male-dominated institution-centred faith towards more critically aware spiritual practice, offering key insights for critical consciousness-raising through spiritually-based dialogical approach to adult education that can nurture meaning and belonging and sustain personal and shared action for a more socially just world.

Section Two

The focus on power and participation is continued in six case studies in the Practice section, with the first paper, *Learning Across Borders: Power, Participation, and Lived Experience in Adult Education*, revealing the transformative potential of adult education for empowerment, identity reconstruction, and community participation. Oniah offers a powerful account of how lived experience functions as legitimate knowledge within adult and continuing education, narratively reflecting on the journey of a migrant woman navigating the asylum system, direct provision, and resettlement policies in Ireland.

I am still part of the world even though I am behind bars offers a review of Footbridge to the Pathway initiative, the first complete, in-person, higher

education degree programme directly for prisoners in Irish prisons. Sartori et al.'s paper reveals the importance of the adult education pedagogy of actively using group dynamics and multi-layered methodologies for recognition, democratic learning and transformative possibilities opened up by the initiative from the perspective of staff and participants on the programme.

The third paper emerges from a dialogue between two doctoral students about *Engaging Communities Through Creative-Based Practices* across a formal university context in Canada, and a non-formal community-based programme for migrants and refugees in Italy. Liberti and Gemma's findings reveal the potential of creative-based practices—art-based methods and podcasting, respectively—grounded in collaborative, participatory and relational approaches, to reconfigure educational spaces as vital sites of resistance, care, and transformation.

Collaborative Pathways into Higher Education by Downes explores ways for integrating the learner voice within a collaborative partnership between SETU–An Cosán and the AONTAS Adult Education Summit. Its dialogic based workshop distils key guiding principles—of communication, trust, learner voice, flexible design, resource sharing, collective action, and reflective practice—as core to the development of a whole-systems model for sustainable and inclusive learner-driven pathways to higher education.

Ancient Practice and Modern Participation illustrates the value of participatory peer-led approaches that connect learning and lived experience through the case study of the Winterage Festival facilitated by the Burrenbeo Trust in Clare. Watson et al. demonstrate how place-based, culturally significant, informal learning activities can strengthen engagement, support collective action, and sustain learning over time as a model for adult and community learning.

Strengthening Workforce Capacity for Early Numeracy Through Communities of Practices and Reflective Continuous Professional Development by Liu et al. explores a partnership between Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, schools, and a third-level institution to support educators to embed numeracy more intentionally within everyday routines, providing valuable practice-based evidence for a call for sustained professional development for early numeracy in disadvantaged communities.

Section Three

Section Three comprises of two book reviews and a policy review. José Pedro Amorim reviews *Radical Educators in Grassroots Contexts*, a collection about radical educators edited by Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock. Chelsea Whittaker reviews *Understanding the Experiences of Adult Educators: Narrative Lessons for Professional Knowledge, Values and Practice*, a collection of narratives from adult education practitioners edited by Caitlin Fahy, Maria N. Gravani, Stephen O'Brien and George K. Zarifis. Nuala Glanton critically examines the third FET Strategy, *Creating Futures – Further Education and Training Strategy 2026-2030* through an Adult and Community Education lens.

I wish to thank all of our authors and reviewers for these important contributions to *The Adult Learner*.

My thanks also to members of our Editorial Board, for all their hard work and commitment throughout the year to bring this edition of the journal to life. I'd also like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Rosemary Moreland for her wonderful work and care-filled stewarding of the journal as editor for the last number of years.

The editorial staff and leadership of AONTAS have been a continuous guide for everyone involved in the journal, enacting a learning culture and adult education practice throughout all aspects of the production of the journal from which we thank them.

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Engaging Communities Through Creative-Based Practices: Case Studies from Formal and Non-Formal Education

FEDERICA LIBERTI AND SARA GEMMA

Abstract

This article presents two exploratory qualitative case studies conducted in distinct educational contexts. The first, based at the University of Victoria (Canada), involved two art-based workshops with undergraduate and master's students, and one session with doctoral students, to explore relational care practices within university settings. The second centred on several sessions of podcasting workshops developed in a social cooperative in Naples (Italy) as part of Italian as a second language (L2) course with Unaccompanied Foreign Minors and refugees. Drawing on participatory action research and autoethnography, both case studies share a commitment to researching with and for communities and employ creative practices as pedagogical tools for generating non-judgmental relational spaces in which unspoken dimensions may emerge. Taken together, these experiences highlight the potential of creative and care-based approaches to welcome vulnerability in both formal and non-formal settings, reconfiguring them as spaces oriented towards collective wellbeing.

Keywords: Transformative Education, Participatory Action Research, Art-based Practices, Care, Migration

Introduction

This article emerges from our encounters during doctoral journeys, our recognition of shared values, and from our desire to reflect together on the educational challenges within our respective life and research contexts. This shared reflection frames the introduction and conclusions, which were jointly authored and reflect the common theoretical, ethical, and methodological ground of the article; each case study section is written by the author who carried out the research. Our aim is to reimagine and

reconfigure educational and research spaces as sites of resistance, care, and transformation, highlighting the potential of creative-based practices.

Accordingly, this article presents two qualitative exploratory case studies across distinct educational contexts: one formal, carried out by Federica within the university, and one non-formal, carried out by Sara within a social cooperative working with young migrants and refugees.

Bringing these two studies together highlights a common relational approach to care in educational practice, one that extends beyond the specificities and constraints of different educational settings and the heterogeneity of participant groups, in order to cultivate meaningful participation.

Both studies involved the design and facilitation of workshops grounded in participatory action research (PAR) frameworks reflecting a shared commitment to research with and for communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). In both contexts, collaboration is central, and learning unfolds as a relational, situated, and transformative process, emerging through care, embodiment, creativity, and collective meaning-making.

Building on these considerations, we both positioned ourselves as participant-researchers within the process, drawing on autoethnography (Belbase et al., 2008) to sustain an ongoing reflective cycle through the use of field diaries. Across both studies, characterised by linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, we integrated creative practices as pedagogical tools in the design of the workshops to overcome language barriers and to enable more inclusive and attentive modes of expression. As Martikainen and Hakokõngäs (2022) suggest, artistic practices function as inclusive and participatory tools. Indeed, they foster the involvement of diverse social groups, make abstract social representations tangible, support the exploration of how individuals make sense of social reality, provide access to embodied and affective experience, and illuminate differences in values and norms that may otherwise hinder community-building.

Finally, we reflect on the ways in which contexts are never neutral, and on how creative educational practices rooted in care can contribute to the development of new visions for personal and collective futures.

Come and Be Grounded: An Art Workshop for Collective Care

Come and Be Grounded is a series of workshops facilitated within the educational context of the University of Victoria (Canada), where I had the

great pleasure to spend five months as part of my doctoral programme. The workshops were developed within a broader research study that explores care as a relational, political, and embodied practice. The study is grounded in a shift from cure—understood as the repair of what is damaged—to care, conceived as a practice of attention, presence, and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008; Thomas, 2018) capable of reshaping how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world.

Care has long been confined to the private sphere, feminised, and removed from political imagination (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Clover et al., 2022). What might it mean, instead, to understand care as a relational infrastructure, one that actively shapes how we live, learn, and attend to one another?

Building on this conceptual core, the study was guided by the following research questions: "What does it mean to care, and to be cared for, today? How can relational care practices be explored and co-created in university settings? What transformative potentials might they hold?"

Autoethnography was employed as a reflexive device within the PAR process, enabling a critical interrogation of my dual role as researcher and participant. Within this framework, I integrated art-based practices into the design of the workshops. As noted in the literature (McNiff, 2008; Rolling Jr., 2016), art-based methodologies offer alternative languages through which to express what words alone may fail to capture, transforming emotions, intuitions, and perceptions into shared forms of knowledge, and rendering visible dimensions that might otherwise remain obscured.

It is within these perspectives that the workshops were conceived: as spaces inviting participants to explore mental health and relational care as shared, embodied, and collective processes. The aim is to reimagine educational environments—both formal, as in this case study, and non-formal, as in the one that follows—as sites more attentive to relationships, embodiment, and psycho-physical wellbeing.

The workshops, of approximately two hours' duration, were conducted with different groups within the Faculty of Education, Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, specifically:

- 16 master's students in Leadership Studies: two sessions followed by a final walkthrough
- 27 undergraduate students in Social Justice: two sessions followed by a final walkthrough

- 10 doctoral students, researchers, and lecturers: one session conducted during the Association of Graduate Education Students' (AGES) Weaving Connections conference

During sessions with students, course lecturers participated not only as facilitators but also as co-participants, contributing to a shared process of exploration.

Guided by the question "What does it mean to be present?", the workshops were co-designed to cultivate conditions for attentive listening, vulnerability, and shared meaning within a non-judgmental space. A wide range of materials, including collage, drawing, painting, and textiles, was made available. The spatial arrangement, organised in a circle with the option of floor seating, supported a co-inhabited space-time oriented towards relational presence. Such attention to care is significant given that university students face elevated risks of mental health difficulties (Merryman et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018).

The first phase, "How are you feeling?", began with a grounding and breathing practice aimed at fostering connection with self and space. Participants were invited to represent their experience through a chosen medium (e.g. writing, collage, painting), either by creating a symbolic creature—imbued with a name, shape, colour, texture, taste, and associated emotions—or by selecting an evocative image as a starting point for self-narration. Moments of sharing and reciprocal listening gently wove these individual narratives into a broader tapestry of collective understanding.

The second phase, "How are we feeling?", invited participants to co-create a shared artwork, deepening engagement with care as a collective and communal practice.

A qualitative analysis, combining immersive content engagement with thematic synthesis, identified recurring patterns across participant groups. Participants engaged actively with the creative prompts, often describing the workshops as spaces that enabled forms of expression not always available within academic settings. The resulting collages constituted a key outcome of the process, functioning as a visual and symbolic map of a desired society, one that is attentive, empathetic, and just. Participants reflected on the interplay between social position, community care, awareness, action, and reflection as interconnected elements sustaining wellbeing across their academic journey (e.g. *Image 1*). Care emerged as a relational fabric, enacted through multisensory and intergenerational practices, frequently shaped by invisible and feminised labour, shared rituals, and ecological awareness (e.g. *Image 2*). It was consistently framed as a political, pedagogical, and affective practice, encompassing intersectionality, LGBTQIA+ rights, anti-racism, and economic

and ecological justice (e.g. *Image 3*). Participants highlighted mental health and emotional wellbeing, voicing fatigue alongside a need for rest, safety, and slower, more connected ways of being. A strong orientation towards imagination and possible futures emerged, with creative practices acting as generative spaces for envisioning alternative, care-centred worlds.

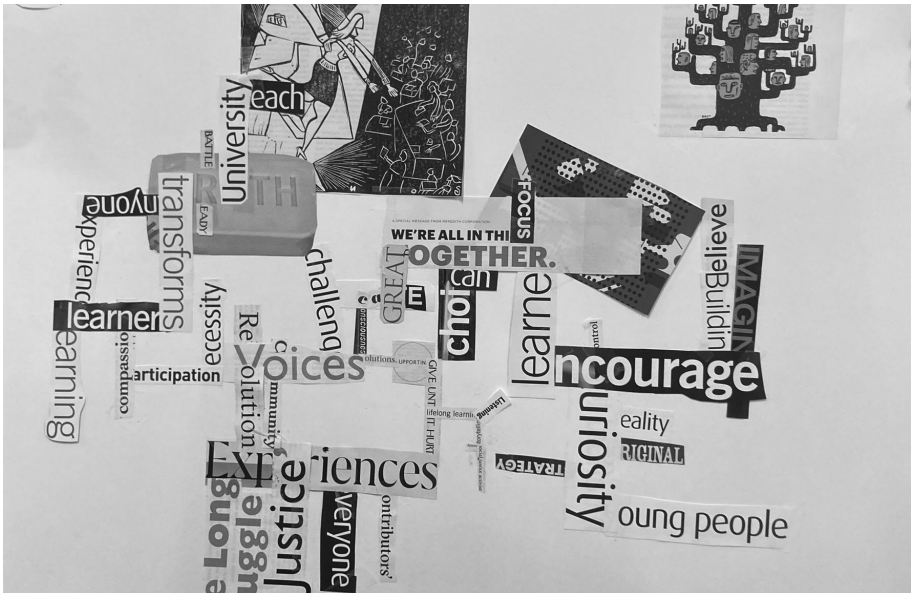


Image 1. Crossword



Image 2. Generational Leadership



Image 3. Connections

A significant outcome was the articulation of interconnections between care, social justice, and leadership, shaped by participants' disciplinary orientations. Social Justice students articulated care and wellbeing in relation to justice, asking, for instance: "How can we care for ourselves while engaging in social justice work?" Similarly, Leadership students understood leadership as distributed and relational rather than hierarchical, rooted in trust, intergenerational exchange, and commitments to social justice. This was exemplified in an artwork representing an intergenerational "leadership tree", where leadership was associated with the sharing of knowledge and care practices, particularly through the figure of the grandmother. A small, crocheted element along the trunk evoked the weaving of care, relationships, and teachings, while a "medicine" placed at the margins recalled, in the words of one participant, the ability to "always have care ready for every situation".

While these patterns were shared across groups, differences emerged in how care was experienced and articulated across educational levels. Undergraduate students tended to feel care through relational and affective engagement; master's students more often conceptualised care as generative and pedagogical; while doctoral students and staff tended to problematise care, foregrounding emotional labour, burnout, and the need for safety and rest. These differences reflect situated forms of critical awareness and contribute to a plural understanding of care across educational trajectories.

The workshop was met with enthusiastic engagement, with teaching staff expressing interest in integrating these approaches into their own practice. At the same time, a recurring challenge concerned the limited time available for reflection and group dialogue, with participants suggesting longer sessions.

Findings are not generalisable, as they are grounded in a specific context, reflecting the ethical responsibility of caring for co-produced visual narratives. The prominence of care-related themes also reflects the lived experiences of a significant number of international and migrant students within the university context. These perspectives align with those emerging in the second case study on non-formal education with young migrants and refugees, despite contextual differences, and point towards a shared desire for renewed forms of collective care.

Podcasting as a Tool of Education-Mediation

Resilient Voice was a podcasting laboratory developed within a broader doctoral research project in experimental pedagogy in a non-formal educational context. The thesis work, grounded in qualitative and autoethnographic methodologies, involved two years of PAR carried out within a reception and integration cooperative for refugees in Naples, Italy. As a researcher and an educator engaged in migration reception and care, I was continually required to define and negotiate the boundaries of my positionality (Holmes, 2020) within the field during the initial phase of the research. In addition to observing the different dynamics of reception and case management concerning asylum seekers within the multidisciplinary team, I spent several months working in close contact with Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, particularly during activities related to the teaching of Italian as a second language, acting as a classroom tutor and support to the teacher.

The Italian as a second language (L2) support course was designed to address a set of interconnected educational challenges emerging in the reception context, particularly related to low engagement in learning activities, weak motivation in second language acquisition, and tensions affecting group cohesion and individual wellbeing among young refugees approaching adulthood. Specifically, during the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1/A2-level Italian course held from May to August 2024, a moment of team reflection brought to light the difficulties in engaging the young participants, also due to a series of tensions related to their cohabitation and the uncertainty surrounding their future. As often occurs among those approaching the age of majority, anxiety about the future and the possibility of having to leave the reception project, can generate a sense of distance from community dynamics and from the perceived necessity to attend the courses.

For this reason, the specific research questions that guided my observational pathway were: "What role can education-mediation play in promoting

wellbeing and preventing inter-group marginalization in vulnerable contexts?" and "How can creative tools promote agency and support the learning of Italian as a second language in a non-formal education setting?"

So, during the Italian course, according to the teacher, an educator-mediator, and a team of radio professionals who brought their recording and editing equipment to the Cooperative, participants were invited to co-design and co-produce a podcast at every stage of the process.

Erta-Maj and Vaquero (2023) classify podcasts among transmedia tools that facilitate education in non-formal educational contexts, while Smith (2019) highlights their potential as instruments of horizontality, fostering cooperation and critical reflection on practices. Particularly in highly complex and vulnerable learning environments, the process of producing a podcast (Menéndez et al., 2025) requires participants to negotiate among themselves the most appropriate modes of implementation, to assess the technical competencies available to them, and to decide how to construct an effective project both in technical and content-related terms. These are processes of collaborative multimodal composition that offer participants the opportunity to build partnerships among themselves (Sottocorno, 2025).

The workshop involved 15 participants aged between 16 and 18, from various countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Mali, Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire, with French and Arabic serving as working languages. The activity spanned four months, with two sessions per week on average, each lasting two hours, amounting to a total of 60 hours of activities. The learning environment consisted of a multimedia laboratory and included the collaboration of two media education practitioners and a linguistic-cultural mediator.

The podcasting laboratory was integrated into the Italian L2 programme as a ludic-pedagogical device aimed at fostering engagement among learners with low levels of language proficiency and recent entry into reception pathways. Initial resistance, often linked to frustration with language learning—particularly among participants with limited or no prior schooling—was addressed through a game-based and participatory pedagogical approach. Linguistic barriers were further mitigated through an embodied approach to learning and the use of digital media tools, as participants progressively familiarised themselves with audio recording and video production equipment.

The first episodes of the podcast focused on the writing, recording, and editing of participants' personal stories and migration trajectories, which were then connected to a broader discussion on hate speech and perceived stigma upon arrival in the

new cultural context, as well as on whether certain experiences of discrimination may have led to the internalisation of similar attitudes or prejudices.

As in the first case study, the embodied experience and the meaning of multicultural coexistence proved to be valuable tools for exploring identities in transition. Through thematic focus groups involving educators and mediators, adolescents from different cultural and religious backgrounds reflected on the communicative value of various expressions related to the sacred, music, and dance as manifested in their respective traditions. The reflections that emerged were collectively translated into a performative script, adapted to the learners' linguistic level, which served as the basis for the design and production of additional podcast episodes that have not yet been published. The methodological framework underlying this proposal draws on PAR, conceived as a form of knowledge that emerges through collaborative processes with the community. By producing podcasts, it becomes possible to gather narratives rooted in the lived experiences of key community figures, while simultaneously involving learners in the collective construction of their own stories. In this way, the approach fosters multimodal literacy practices that affirm oral tradition as a valid epistemological foundation and as a means to influence both formal and non-formal educational processes.

For this reason, adult education—rooted most of the time in complex and layered situations (Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021)—should implement education-mediation techniques that involve continuous reflection on their own practices, in order to be able to foster, even in conditions of marginality, communities of practice and forms of resistance (hooks, 1990) through participation as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

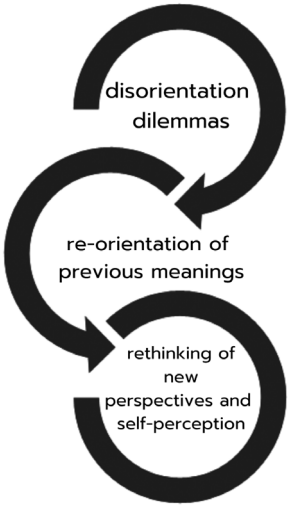


Figure 1. Adapted from Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021

The podcast was shown to be a democratic and participatory educational tool: those who, during the first weeks, were unable to write or narrate their own stories, and even less to perform them, were involved in the technical aspects of editing and sound systematisation. Through this strategy, participants were able to overcome the difficulties that had distanced them from language learning and instead immerse themselves in the script of their biographies, which were now transformed into stories to be told, e.g. as can be heard in the pilot episode of the podcast, J. states:

> We faced a dangerous journey at sea; I feared for my life […] now I am in Italy, learning the language and able to express my opinion through this microphone. This podcast is our way of giving a voice to those who are often not heard.

Conclusions

The reflections developed through the sharing of our respective workshop experiences have raised interrelated questions: "How might the academy be nourished by the knowledge already present within communities?" and "How might knowledge generated within academic spaces be meaningfully returned to those communities?"

While these questions remain open and require further exploration, our case studies highlight the pedagogical potential of creative practices as generative tools for collective questioning, shared aspirations, and the cultivation of a sense of community. In heterogeneous and often vulnerable contexts, care-rooted creative practices appeared to suspend judgement and enable broader participation through multiple forms of expression. As also noted in the introductory literature, creative mediation allowed for the elicitation of themes and needs that might otherwise have remained unspoken or unseen.

In relation to migrant inclusion and learner wellbeing, non-verbal and creative approaches opened up relational and playful dimensions, offering ways to hold tensions without necessarily resolving them while creating space for complexity to coexist. At the same time, our dialogue and exchange of practices brought to light several important differences. A first concerns temporality: workshops in the formal context were subject to more restrictive time constraints, limiting opportunities for sustained dialogue. A second relates to participation: although both studies were met with enthusiasm, engagement did not occur on equal terms. In the non-formal context, the reception community, the workshop formed part of a mandatory Italian as a second language course.

Nonetheless, beyond these differences, limitations, and structural constraints, the effort remains that of committing to relational care as a pathway for transformative learning, capable of nurturing and sustaining the capacity to imagine possible futures in an ecological, reflective, and caring way.

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