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#### Abstract

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## How can arts-based methods support narrative inquiry into adult learning in the arts? A case study

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### Abstract

*This article considers an arts-based project, Learning Returns (2023), that seeks to capture the experiences of adults who have returned to arts study after some time away from formal education. The aims of the project are twofold: firstly, to evaluate the combination of narrative inquiry and digital film-making hosted on YouTube as a method of investigating adult learning and secondly, through an analysis of the Learning Returns content, to discover what themes the participants considered important to communicate to an imagined, virtual audience. The findings suggested that the aesthetics of the videos/films interconnect with the lived experiences of the participants. The participants were able to give an account of their experiences spontaneously, and at the same time communicate messages of hope to prospective adult returners. It was also discovered that the editing process offers a means of analysing the content of the films that is analogous to the approaches associated with qualitative research.*

**Keywords:** arts education, adult learners, arts-based research, narrative, experience

### Introduction

Researchers have employed qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of adult students (Reay et al., 2002; Crozier et al., 2008; Fowle, 2018; Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Approaches include autoethnography, life-writing, biographical and narrative inquiry (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; West et al., 2007; Nelson, 2008). At the same time there is an emerging trend where researchers draw upon arts-based methods to capture

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narratives of experiences in formal and informal educational contexts (Larsen, 2010; Farenga, 2018; Dickson, 2020; Dickson, 2021; Broadhead, 2021). Qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry could be understood as being part of a continuum that includes arts-based methods, but the relationship between qualitative and arts-based research is not straightforward (Butler-Kisber, 2010) nor is there a consensus that they should or should not be positioned as separate epistemological paradigms. Originally Leavy (1975) in *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* conceived arts-based research as a subsection of qualitative research. However, by the second edition Leavy's thinking had developed to a point where arts-based research was understood to be a distinct and alternative paradigm from qualitative and quantitative research, '...I am going to write about ABR as its own paradigm (while acknowledging it is understood by some as a set of methodological tools used in qualitative research)' (Leavy, 2015, p. 6). Qualitative research is associated with the use of words; arts-based methods can also utilise words to construct stories and poetry. However, along with verbal and written scripts, arts-based methods can employ still and moving images and/or processes of making and performing. Butterwick and Roy (2018) commented that the forms of creative expression associated with arts-based research continue to expand. Leavy (2015) recognised a potential 'synergy' between arts-based and qualitative research, where the two approaches complement one another. Janesick (2001) conceptualised both approaches as 'crafts' or techniques which researchers could draw upon 'to ultimately tell a story' (p. 7). The position taken in this article is that arts-based research is distinct from qualitative methods. However, there are some commonalities; for example, qualitative research can also involve story-telling. This article explores how narrative inquiry and digital film-making can work together when researching the experiences of adult or mature students.

In order to explore these questions, an arts-based project, *Learning Returns* (2023), is presented as a case study. The project was created to address the invisibility of adult learners studying the arts and the devaluing of arts education in UK educational policies by showing how much the learners themselves valued arts education. *Learning Returns* aimed to capture the experiences of mature students who had returned to education to study the arts after a period of time away from formal education. Their initial re-entry into learning was through informal arts study in galleries or museums, short community courses, Access to HE (in the UK this provision prepares adults without formal qualifications for higher level or undergraduate study) or occasionally direct entry onto arts degree courses. The arts subjects they studied were varied (textiles, printmaking, sculpture, creative writing, calligraphy, participatory and fine art). Initially the project was devised during 2020 as a response to the dramatic changes that occurred in people's working, leisure and learning lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Butcher & Clarke, 2022). *Learning Returns* explored the possibility that a video-sharing website could be a fruitful space for developing narrative inquiry and arts-based research. Broadhead's (2021) interrogation of film-making as a method for researching mature graduates before the pandemic was a precursor to this work.

The aims of this article are twofold: firstly, to reflect on the combination of narrative inquiry and digital film-making hosted on YouTube as a method for researching the experiences of adults and secondly, through an analysis of *Learning Returns*, to discover what themes the participants would consider important to communicate to a virtual audience.

The research is very close to and informed by digital story telling where students select images, clips of video, music and texts, and then collage them together to create their own story (Eisenhauer, 2012). However, there were some slight but important differences. Firstly, rather than the participants creating their own digital films, *Learning*

*Returns* was a collaboration between many contributors who all had an input into creating the outcomes. There were a professional graphic designer who had been an adult returner themselves, a research team (digital film-maker, and a researcher), a technician and the participants. Leavy (2015) and Foster (2015) have argued that collaboration between practitioners and participants can maximise the technical, aesthetic and authentic aspects of the work increasing the likelihood that the outcomes will reach their intended audiences.

Secondly, the aim was for the participants to tell their stories that were then represented within a consistent *Learning Return's* frame. All the films had a shared audio-visual identity that would be recognisable when it was broadcast on social media and video-sharing platforms. The imagery, music, typography and film-making were designed for *Learning Returns* in particular rather than the individual stories.

## Context – Adults returning to study the arts – double devaluation?

In the UK it could be argued that adults learning the arts are subject to two detrimental policy trends. Firstly, the government does not prioritise the arts in compulsory and post-compulsory education. Secondly, adult learning and the needs of adult students in particular are often invisible within policy at national and institutional levels.

Ashton and Ashton (2022) pointed out that in Europe education, arts and culture are central in policy and practice, citing Finland, France and Germany as examples where arts and culture are strategically developed. However, in the UK with the exception of Scotland, the value of arts and arts education has not been prioritised. Ashton and Ashton (2022) went on to show how arts state education has been systematically undermined during the last 20-30 years. The value of art education has been measured in terms of to what extent it can lead to employment in the creative industries. However, the role of education in developing a critical appreciation of the arts as part of living a good life (InSEA, 2021) has not been recognised as being important and nor do the benefits the arts have on health and wellbeing, social engagement and communities inform governmental agendas relating to arts education (Broadhead et al., 2022).

Policy directions rooted in neoliberal ideology have narrowed curricula so that they focus on sciences to the detriment of the arts (Broadhead, 2022). Accountability measures and funding cuts have contributed towards the erosion of the arts' teaching profession. This in turn has impacted on the numbers of students studying subjects like music and the visual arts (Bath et al., 2020; Clarke & McLellan, 2022). The introduction in 2011 of the English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) in schools has also had a negative effect on the arts (Johnes, 2017; Fautley, 2019; Neumann et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2020; Bath et al., 2020 ). This is because 'both students and schools are assessed by examination in given subjects, this standards-based model contributes to an imbalance in the status of different curricular subjects' (Lilliedahl, 2021, p. 2). It could be proposed that as young people are discouraged from studying the arts in school and later at university because they are perceived as being 'low value' and not leading to employment (Fazackerley, 2021), then more adults may consider returning to study them later in life. Broadhead and Gregson (2018) have noted that adult art students were often dissuaded from studying arts at school and wished to return to study them when they had more control over their lives. However, the opportunities for adults to study the arts later in life may be decreasing. Ashton and Ashton (2022) identified a loss of influence over education in local authorities resulting in increased centralisation that has led to detrimental inequalities in how people can access the arts.

Banks and Oakley (2016) argued that UK art schools (once an alternative educational route for working-class students of all ages when courses were funded by local authorities) have been assimilated into multi-faculty universities where, especially in the prestigious ones, the class profile has shifted toward the more privileged. They went on to point out that much of the post-compulsory education in the arts is linked to a public policy agenda of the ‘creative economy’ which not only marginalises working-class people, but also people of colour. Furthermore, some aspects of the cultural industries are highly gendered (Allen, 2013; Milestone, 2015; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Banks, 2017; Brook et al., 2020).

In the United Kingdom there have been declines in adult education generally (Fowle, 2018). When considering adults returning to study, it can also be seen that their needs have not been prioritised in UK educational policy. Butcher (2020) pointed out that there had been a 61% drop in the number of adults engaging with higher education over the previous ten years (Tazzyman et al., 2019). The near-disappearance of part-time mature learners, in particular, from conventional university study, is rarely addressed in institutional Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2019). Part-time adults remain almost invisible in national widening participation policies (OfS, 2020). There has been some recognition from the UK government that people need to learn throughout the life course, suggested by their announcement of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee in 2020. The Lifelong Learning Entitlement from 2025 aims to bring more flexibility and choice for adult students at level four through to six (UK undergraduate levels). Whether or not these interventions will diminish the barriers adult students face when studying the arts is open to question.

Butcher and Clarke (2022) noted that barriers to studying the arts are compounded for adult learners, who often need flexible routes into higher education, such as through Access to HE courses. Adult returners (defined by HESA as aged over 21), often have limited time and financial support while managing their learning alongside work and caring commitments. Therefore, for those adults returning to study the arts it could be perceived as a risky endeavour as it requires much personal investment that may not lead to stable employment (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018).

On the other hand, many people do return to study the arts later in life because they believe that being creative is a significant part of their identity. Butcher and Clarke (2022) have argued that the voices of part-time mature students are rarely heard in research around the arts. The transformative aspects of lifelong learning in the arts need to be further elucidated to institutions and policy makers. *Learning Returns* sought to explore and make visible the attitudes and experiences of this group of ‘doubly devalued’ students.

## The arts-based approach to inquiry

This project drew upon the participants’ stories about their experience through a form of narrative inquiry that also had a visual element. Butler-Kisber (2010) placed narrative inquiry within a qualitative paradigm. The associated processes of reflection on past events, telling, listening and retelling are suitable for those inquiries that wish to capture experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Rolling, 2010; Farenga, 2018). These accounts constructed by researchers and participants are conventionally captured through the transcription of verbal story-telling and/or through writing.

However, this project also drew upon arts-based research where the narratives were filmed and broadcast on the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. Arts-based methods comprises a range of strategies or approaches that can draw upon one or more of the arts

in the inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In this instance the participants' stories were conveyed through film-making and broadcasting via YouTube. McKay and Sappa (2020) argued that the arts can enable individuals to adopt multiple languages other than verbal language or writing, communicating in a multi-sensorial fashion that is not limited to cognition but can evoke feeling.

Arts-based methods are centred in the belief that experience, understanding and meaning are multifaceted (Rolling, 2010). The arts offer ways of knowing derived from sensory perception leading to emotional, aesthetic and intellectual responses to the world. These different ways of knowing can potentially enhance a researcher's comprehension of complex human interactions. Arts-based research is relevant to adult learning because it is, 'research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience' (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 1). McNiff (2008) considered artistic expression as an important means for both researchers and participants to reflect on and examine their experiences.

When ascribing quality to arts-based research outcomes and processes, it is problematic to depend on those associated with science-based research. Sinner et al. (2019) asserted that criteria such as validity, significance, reproducibility, reliability and exportable generalisations can be seen as irrelevant when evaluating arts-based research projects. Piantanida et al. (2003, p. 187) suggested that as arts-based research is still an emerging field, the means of judging quality may not yet have been determined.

With a view to establishing quality indicators Leavy (2015) identified authenticity and truthfulness as important tenets of arts-based research that help distinguish it from quantitative and qualitative paradigms although it could be argued that qualitative methods can also be political, consciousness-raising and emancipatory (see Table 1).

*Table 1.* The main tenets of quantitative, and qualitative and arts-based research. (Leavy, 2015, p. 295).

<b>Quantitative</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Arts-Based</b>
Numbers	Words	Stories, images, sounds, scenes sensory
Data discovery	Data Collection	Data or content generation
Measurement	Meaning	Evocation
Tabulating	Writing	Re(presenting)
Value neutral	Value Laden	Political, consciousness-raising, emancipation
Reliability	Process	Authenticity
Validity	Interpretation	Truthfulness
Prove/convince	Persuade	Compel, move, aesthetic power
Generalizability	Transferability	Resonance
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary

‘Authenticity’ is increasingly being recognised as an indication of quality in arts-based research. Eaves (2014) discussed strategies for optimising the authenticity of representation and of interpretation within arts-based research. Eaves argued that the art forms or media used should be carefully considered in terms of the needs of the participants so that they are not restrictive but facilitate accessibility, polyphony and authenticity. Research projects should be designed so they are underpinned by transparency, discipline and reflection (Mitchell et al., 2005) as well as epistemological, theoretical and methodological coherency (Eaves, 2014).

The aesthetics of the outcome are connected to its authenticity so they have power and meaning for the audience (Hervey, 2004; Imus, 2001). Leavy (2015) wrote that the aesthetic aspect of arts-based research has a power to catalyse an emotional response in the audience and this indicates the usefulness of the approach. To do this, ‘an artistic rendering must get to the heart of the issue and present that essence in a coherent form in order to achieve aesthetic power. In order to achieve these ends, one must pay attention to the architecture of the form.’ (Leavy, 2015, p. 278). So, for example, the crafting of the *Learning Returns* films’ aesthetics was carefully constructed to provide a coherent frame for the stories the participants were telling so that the audience would respond at an emotional and cognitive level and believe the representation of experience was truthful and authentic (Chilton & Leavy, 2014).

Furthermore, the inquiry and aesthetic encounters resulting from arts-based research are present as part of everyday life (Dewey, 1934). Dewey’s important text, *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1934) examined the aesthetics of pragmatism. He argued that art and life are intricately linked to each other. Medvedeva (2019) followed this line of reasoning when arguing that media aesthetics can and should be applied to art and everyday life. They are not only interconnected, but also interdependent,

Media has become a part of our daily life a long time ago, but this daily routine also has its own aesthetics, its own creative laws, according to which they influence and emotionally influence us. (Medvedeva, 2019, p. 969)

The viewing of the films on YouTube contextualised them within a space outside of academia that was closer to the viewer’s every day existence. Dickson (2021) argued that arts-based research was an effective way of capturing experiences, but also a means of disseminating the research to different, non-academic audiences. By creating a distinctive visual identity for *Learning Returns* the films could be more easily discovered, recognized and remembered within the context of YouTube where other content vies for audience attention. The aesthetics are mostly experienced as fleeting ‘bite-sized’ flashes of moving image, framed by the white background and grid structure of the platform. The architecture of the YouTube channel as well as the individual films help evoke emotion and construct meaning (Foster, 2015). Aesthetics evoke a response in the audience that could be emotional, spiritual, physical and cognitive. The audience could be awake to these aesthetic responses or they may not be conscious of them.

Closely aligned to the notions of authenticity and truthfulness is the value of trustworthiness. Butler-Kisber et al. (2003) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed a notion of trustworthiness as an alternative validation of the research, where processes were open and transparent. Rolling (2010) developed this notion further,

the indirect sources of arts-based outcomes may require a kind of interpretive validity. Interpretive validity in arts-based research might invoke each of the multiple readings within a research study to serve as a criterion for trustworthiness. (Rolling, 2010, p. 110).

Bassey (1999) contended that notions of trustworthiness were appropriate for research in educational settings due to the complex nature of the context and interactions of people within the educational process. The outcomes of research could be framed as what is possible, likely or unlikely rather than claiming one truth or a certainty. The constructing of a detailed and rich description and a coherent narrative account was, for Bassey, an important test of trustworthiness.

## Method

*Learning Returns* aimed to capture the experiences of adults who had returned to education to study the arts and to evaluate how the resulting stories could communicate meaning to a virtual audience. It also evaluated to what extent a video-sharing website (YouTube) could be an appropriate platform for developing an arts-based research project. Within this article ‘film’ and ‘video’ are both terms referring to digitally created moving images.

Outside the field of education Pink (2007) has been influential in embedding film within a research methodology. Pink (2007) created the ‘video tour’ where the researcher, with the participants, walked around their homes, filming the discussions that took place. There have been other similar examples of research that have employed digital-film to capture stories of educational experience (Walsh et al., 2013; Mumtaz, 2015; Duckworth & Smith, 2018). *Learning Returns* (2023) sought to portray experience through narrative and film-making but then to curate the films as part of a YouTube channel. The video-sharing site has been used as a means of promoting informal and formal learning (Wilson, 2003; Staikidis, 2006; Duncum, 2011). The analysis of YouTube videos has also been undertaken as a research method (Kousha et al., 2012).

### *Recruitment of participants*

The participants were drawn from those who had returned to study the arts as older learners. Many had come from the Access to HE routes. In order to initiate the project adult returners to education in the north of England were contacted. They were asked if they would consent to being filmed telling their stories that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. In the first instance four participants, Gemma, Hafifa, Terence and Frances volunteered to take part. Later when these four films were shown six more participants came forward after finding out about the project through the informal networks of adult learners. Participants also were asked to suggest others who could potentially be part of the project. It is anticipated that the number of participants will grow as *Learning Returns* becomes established.

From an ethical point of view the wellbeing of contributors was the priority. The researchers were very open and transparent about the public nature of YouTube so that participants understood that they would be visible to a world-wide audience. They were given an information sheet and consent form that explained the aims of the project, the reasons why the research was being undertaken, what participation entailed and the right to withdraw at any time. A participant could request that their film be removed from the YouTube *Learning Returns* (2023) channel and the research team would comply with their wishes. It was stressed that the participant should think carefully about the public nature of YouTube before consenting.

The project gained ethical clearance from the University’s Ethics Sub-Committee and at this point there were no issues identified. Nevertheless, the ethical aspects of the



project were reflected upon by the research team, throughout the process, as unanticipated ethical dilemmas could arise at any point. The ‘journey’ that the participant would take as they contributed to the project was imagined by the researchers with the aim of anticipating issues that might arise. Trustworthiness and authenticity were aims that the project worked towards. The participants’ stories and the meanings they conveyed were captured and the processes by which this was done were also reflected upon throughout the project. At this point it must be clarified that the stories were inevitably co-constructed with the researchers as meaning was mediated by how stories were told and researchers could not promise a disinterested objectivity.

The reflection took place in practice as an iterative act at key points, during the filming, reviewing the uncut footage and viewing the final films before and after they were posted to the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. Through the reflection the team needed to be assured that the participants were represented in a respectful way and that the content would not cause harm to themselves or other people.

In order to limit the intrusion into the lives of participants their geographical location or the places where they studied or worked were omitted as were their full names. Many of the participants were practising artists and designers who wanted to talk about their creative practice; this was allowed as long as sensitive information was not revealed. As a compromise the participants’ social media, linked to their artistic work, were shared if they requested it.

The participants who agreed to undertake the project showed no signs that they were uncomfortable with the filming but to alleviate any concerns they may have had the research team carefully explained the technical aspects when the microphone, camera and lighting were set up.

All the participants were shown their films so they could ask for changes or decide whether or not to withdraw at that point. After the films were posted they were monitored by the research team on a regular basis or when alerted by the YouTube notifications system. Any comments posted in relation to the films would be considered by the research team and if perceived as offensive or hurtful, they would be deleted. Participants could also ask for inappropriate comments to be removed. The *Learning Returns* project is intended to run for three years during which the content will be added to as other adult returners consent to participate; currently there are 10 participants. After that time the project will be reviewed and if it is deemed not to be sustainable, the *Learning Returns* content would be stored on an institutional repository and the channel deleted.

### ***The process***

Participants were asked to prepare themselves for talking about their educational and life experiences. They had control over the kinds of topics they felt it was important to share with a virtual audience.

Filming days were planned to fit in with the schedules of the participants. Backgrounds and lighting were designed to frame the contributors as they were speaking and to give a visual continuity to the films.

There was no rehearsal time – the participants were able to talk straight to camera. They could do this with confidence because they were told that anything they were not happy with could be edited out.

## *Curation of the Learning Returns Channel on YouTube*

A *Learning Returns* visual identity suitable for YouTube was created so that audiences would become familiar with it and recognise that the films were part of one project. This was an aspect of the project that differentiated it from digital storytelling methods (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Eisenhauer, 2012). The aesthetics of YouTube and the *Learning Returns* channel were important in constructing meaning. A graphic designer was employed to design a series of coherent ‘assets’ that could be used on the project’s YouTube channel. Assets are visual designs that can be used as banners, titles, and idents. Typography and labels were also designed that could be used in the individual videos. The visual style was designed to be non-threatening and engaging.

The designer’s response to the brief was negotiated with the research team. It culminated in a style of type and colour palette chosen because it would signify a slightly nostalgic mid-century animation. Characters were designed based on different animals to evoke a sense of diversity. They were depicted engaging in a series of activities such as reading, examining and measuring to suggest that learning is not a passive activity. These assets were then used for constructing the YouTube pages and in making videos for the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel.

## *Editing and analysis*

The editing process was undertaken between the researchers and a technician and was a means of identifying, developing and consolidating the themes. The research team was struck by how intertwined the acts of editing and analysis are. Butler-Kisber (2010) cautioned that the arts-based research process can appear to be linear and in clearly defined stages, for example, collecting data, carrying out the analysis and then writing up the findings. In practice, processes were fluid and iterative or cyclic and entailed a de-contextualising and re-contextualising cycle (Duckworth & Smith, 2018).

The analysis and editing were undertaken almost simultaneously in three main stages. The first stage examined the raw footage (which was gained from 30 minutes of filming for each participant). Repetitions, false starts and technical issues were edited out so that the key stories about the participants’ experiences could be determined. This led to films of initially 10 minutes’ length. On viewing it was noted that ideas were often repeated and significant points were lost in some of the descriptive explanation. It was also suspected that the attention span of a YouTube audience may be shorter than 10 minutes.

The second stage was where the films were broken down even further to two/three minutes, a conventional length of time for video stories (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). It may seem drastic to make this cut; however, it actually made the stories clearer and the key points could be covered in that amount of time. The two/three-minute films were sent to the participants for their approval. This was considered by the researchers as the conceptual and interpretive stage. At this point the researchers drew upon reflective practice and experience to interpret the stories that were being told whilst identifying important themes that needed to be represented in the shorter versions.

The third stage of analysis and interpretation was to identify themes that ran across the stories. The results were then written up where the researchers aimed to provide an account that comprised, ‘transparency, inclusion of participant voice, aesthetic qualities, verisimilitude and utility’ (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 31). Through the process of editing the

themes became distilled and were used to structure the final versions that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel.

It could be argued that the analysis went on throughout all the stages depending on what the researchers brought to the process from their reflections and discussions. The editing process proved to be very important because it identified themes that could be revisited and reviewed.

## Findings

There are two aspects to the findings of the project, firstly there is an analysis of the content of the films to discover what themes were important for the participants to communicate to a virtual audience about their learning experiences. The second reflects on the arts-based method.

Table 2 collects the narrative elements discussed by seven of the participants which have then been arranged by themes. These were discovered through the editing processes mentioned above.

The elements identified in the stories show that the participants recounted memorable past learning experiences that had stayed with them. They also recognised that they were older learners and identified as being creative. They strongly advocated studying in the arts and proudly talked about the creative work they had undertaken outside of formal education. It has been argued that UK policy makers do not value arts education, yet from their comments this group of people clearly do. The findings indicate the importance arts education has on the lives of the older learners and that they wish others to have similar experiences.

*Table 2.* Cross-cutting themes from the content of the films

Narrative elements from the participants' stories	Cross-cutting themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecology and used clothes</li> <li>• Learned that need to make things for a purpose</li> <li>• Connection to the groups sharing through group crits, very helpful.</li> <li>• Learned skills</li> <li>• Find out about participatory arts</li> <li>• Education got ideas flowing</li> <li>• I thought I would be a fiction writer, but I have written poetry and a script. I have covered a lot more than I expected to.</li> <li>• Skills to make prints, but also realising how narrow my world view had been.</li> <li>• Scared and excited to begin the course.</li> </ul>	<p>Significant/memorable learning experiences</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full time work since 1979 apprenticeship technical</li> <li>• Engineering background making moulds for glass bottles</li> <li>• Did not have opportunities when younger.</li> <li>• 18 years old interested but dissuaded from art into the sciences.</li> <li>• My art practice is Arabic calligraphy</li> <li>• Wanted to be in the arts but degree too expensive and therefore decided to do an MA</li> <li>• As a mother of two - education is not your place</li> <li>• Had a family, tried to get back into work but found it hard</li> <li>• With age it's sometimes hard to call yourself a writer.</li> <li>• Unfinished business with art and design</li> <li>• I was a careers advisor but always had an interest in fashion.</li> <li>• I was a manager so I know how to deal with people</li> </ul>	<p>An understanding of own positionality</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realised already had the skills to make and do something.</li> <li>• You can do it</li> <li>• Encouragement to return to education</li> <li>• Others should 'jump in'.</li> <li>• Experienced no difficulties or prejudice in education due to age.</li> <li>• If unsure, just try it.</li> <li>• It's empowered me.</li> <li>• Just do it, if you have got that itch, just scratch it. Life is too short.</li> <li>• Just do it, more you put into it more you get out of it, need to be sure you can devote time to art education.</li> <li>• People do have transferable skills</li> <li>• Just do it - just knock the barriers out of the way.</li> <li>• Artist is not a proper job – that's rubbish I have met people who make their living in the arts.</li> </ul>	<p>Encouraging others</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move away from technical digital project management to organising creative projects</li> <li>• 'Unbolt the door' to the art world</li> <li>• Working with a group of older South Asian women who are isolated, bringing them together through art.</li> <li>• My main purpose is to make art that reflects life.</li> <li>• I have been doing work at festivals and in exhibitions for some years now.</li> <li>• I am a textile artist telling people's stories</li> </ul>	<p>Future projects undertaken after formal education</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need Evening Access and Education courses for developing confidence</li> <li>• Older people give it 100%</li> <li>• Passion and curiosity - education as affirming</li> <li>• Art keeps you mindful and giving joy.</li> <li>• Through networking on my course, I am able to collaborate on commissions.</li> <li>• The course has given me the confidence to say 'I am a writer'.</li> <li>• Bringing your life skills to education takes you to a totally different level.</li> </ul>	<p>Valuing returning to education</p>

### *Significant/memorable learning experiences*

The participants were able to share memorable or significant moments from their learning experiences with confidence. These learning experiences were often linked to their identities as creative people. There was a combination of acquiring skills alongside learning to think differently about their practices. There was also a sense that they enjoyed

discovering practices and topics which were new to them. There were signs in the tone of voice and facial expression of the enjoyment they had in sharing their memories and stories in the films which would not have been gained in the same manner from a textual account. It was interesting that the participants chose not to share negative experiences about learning, which they were free to do if they wished.

### ***An understanding of own positionality***

The participants chose to describe themselves in various ways, but often their identities were linked to their creative practice or their previous careers. Parental status was also an important element of the identity some wanted to promote. The accounts they gave of themselves were linked to lack of opportunities to study the arts when younger and in some cases being dissuaded from doing so. They constructed a particular identity for themselves and for their imagined audience, which was why they focused on those associated with being adult learners in the arts.

### ***Encouraging others***

One of the striking findings of the research was how many of the participants chose to encourage people in their imagined audience who may be considering going back to learning. 'Jump in', 'Just do it', 'Try it' and 'Life is too short' were phrases used by the participants. Encouraging people to take the first steps, to take a risk, seemed to be a common thread in the films. The participants had some empathy and understanding with their audience, perhaps pre-empting some of the fears and concerns they may have about returning to education. So, they spoke about how people had skills already that they could apply to their education, that they had not experienced any prejudice due to their age in their learning context and that people had careers in the arts after study.

### ***Future projects undertaken after formal education***

Some of the participants had either a plan for future work in the arts using their creative skills or were actually already engaged in projects. Most of their creative practices had a socially-engaged perspective to them, using their skills to work with others. One of the participants was active as a sculptor and this was in sympathy with his previous work making industrial moulds. Another was a textile artist using their skills to initiate story telling.

### ***Valuing returning to arts education***

The participants reflected on the value of returning to an arts education. It had given practical benefits, such as developing networks and social capital as well as acquiring skills. They recognised the benefits for cultivating well-being, curiosity, engagement and confidence.

The contributors to the YouTube films could construct coherent stories about their own past experiences and weave in their thoughts about the value of arts education and, in some cases, their plans for the future. It was notable that they could do this with no rehearsal time and these were stories that seemed to 'come from the heart' (Meadows, 2003).

The participants' performances were framed by the editing process so it must not be forgotten that these stories were also constructed by the interpretations and values of the researchers. However, there was an awareness tacitly held by the participants that can be 'read' in the films about the audience, about their imagined concerns and desires. It was this that led to the encouragement that was freely given by the speakers.

## Reflection on the method

The reception and interpretation of the *Learning Returns*' outcomes were subject to a tangle of aesthetic influences that all contributed towards constructing meaning. The YouTube platform itself has its own visual style and brand. The viewing of the *Learning Returns* films was inevitably part of a complex bricolage (creation from diverse things/ideas/artefacts/images/styles/genres) of adverts, notifications and other YouTube content. This can be received as a discordant and clashing realm of competing messages, ideologies, values and voices. However, this, it could be argued, is the pragmatic aesthetics of social media, a very particular landscape of audio and visual material that is part of many people's daily lives (Medvedeva, 2019).

The aesthetics of the project created through the banners, typography, colour palette and music associated with the *Learning Returns* project was also an important lens through which to view the films and interpret their meanings. The designed visual identity ensured that *Learning Returns* was recognisable within the ocean of material found on YouTube. One critical reflection was that it would have been beneficial to have had input from the participants when creating the visual brand with the designer. This would have made it a much more participatory arts project.

There is also the aesthetics of film making, the choice of lighting, contrast, background colour, pacing and sequencing, point of view, framing – many decisions that influence the style of a film.

Another important layer of aesthetics came from the choices made by the participants themselves. Their choice of dress, tone and expression of voice, the emphasis given to certain words and phrases, the manner in which they made gestures - all contributed to the aesthetics of their films. Choices in colour and style of type, titles and labels were driven by what the participants brought to the filming sessions.

The processes of editing as part of a film-making practice seemed to be in synergy with the 'analytic process'. Narrative elements that were communicated through audio visual elements were considered through a cycle of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, that is sequences were split apart and re-joined again to make a coherent but trustworthy narrative. Decisions on which element were important were made based on the cues given in the film footage. How the participants spoke and acted suggested which aspects of what they were saying were important.

Unlike participants in methods that involve recording and transcription, these contributors seemed to have a tacit understanding of an audience beyond the group of researchers or a wider academia (Dickson, 2021). They were addressing the research team in the first instance, but also an imagined audience of people who might be considering returning to education. This potentially could be anyone with access to YouTube. It was the generosity and positivity with which they shared their stories and their encouragement that was captured by the arts-based approach. One of the strengths of this method is that it humanises the participants. The meanings that were constructed were in part understood from seeing and hearing them reflect, speak, remember, argue and propose ideas that sprung from their learning experiences.

These experiences were also contextualised within their life stories and their identities as creative practitioners.

Unlike the linear nature of some research projects, there is an element to *Learning Returns* that is open ended and asynchronous. The researchers are quickly able to revisit the films and to view new interactions and feedback. The audience, also, can view or come across the films at any time in any place. It is anticipated that a deeper interaction with the audience may take many months and possibly many years to develop due to the unpredictability of social media.

It must be noted that there are limitations when employing a public interview that will be broadcast as a research method. The positive and encouraging nature of the comments aimed at potential students might be a function of what the participants believed a YouTube video was supposed to do; namely to advocate for arts education to prospective adult students and present only its positive aspects. They are less likely to reveal any experiences of struggle during their learning experiences if they know it will be seen by a public audience.

## Conclusion

The project highlighted the importance of aesthetics, a particular concern of creative practitioners. YouTube functions as a melting pot of many aesthetic realms, that of popular culture, everyday life as well as personal style and modes of communicating. The researchers, the graphic designer, the technical support, the participants and the YouTube platform all influenced the aesthetics of *Learning Returns* and this in turn effected the interpretive aspects of the research.

The participants were confident and generous in sharing their stories that linked their past learning experiences with future aspirations related to their creative practices. They also sent out positive messages about the value of adult learning in the arts. They made passionate entreaties to prospective adults returning to arts education to ‘just do it’, ‘make the leap’ and ‘have a go’. The initial findings are that aesthetics intersect with the lived experiences of the participants in the videos to communicate messages of hope for aspiring older artists.

The participants were very positive about the project and wished to encourage and motivate other prospective learners. The participants were able to give an account of their experiences spontaneously, without any practice or previous planning. The ability to communicate through the camera could be partly due to the personalities of those who volunteered to take part in the project. But it could also suggest that learning in the arts can lead to confidence, active participation and being socially engaged (Thomson & Maloy, 2021).

Sequences of moving image were deconstructed and reassembled to construct coherent narratives that have visual, audio and emotive aspects that create a particular set of meanings. The relationship of editing and analysis needs further exploration. The editing process offered a means of analysing the content of the films that is not the same as but akin to the analysis in traditional qualitative research.

The *Learning Returns* project was designed to address the lack of visibility of mature students studying the arts and to challenge the ways they seemed to be devalued by institutions and policy makers and to show how the students themselves valued their own learning experiences. It did meet some of its aims in that it does capture the learning experiences of adult students and it does address an imagined audience of prospective adult learners with an air of encouragement.

As to whether it actually reaches that audience directly is open to question. As the films have high production values they are not made quickly and the research team does not have the time to create content on a regular basis. To grow a loyal and interested audience, new films should be uploaded every week but in actuality this happens once a month.

Adult and open learning departments and widening participation teams from other universities have declared an interest in using the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel with their students. Perhaps this is the best route by which the intended audience could engage with the films.

Even though there are challenges in sustaining the project, the participants generously gave their time to it and this indicates that they think their role in advocating for an arts education is important.

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