# Adult education in times of crisis and change: perspectives on access, learning careers and identities

Emerging from a conference by the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) in Portugal, this book offers an insightful reflection of adult education's evolution in response to the COVID–19 pandemic, exploring themes of access, learning approaches, identity, and digital pedagogy. It critically addresses the shift towards digital learning and its implications on social interaction, pedagogical practices, and the educator–learner dynamic. The narrative spans across diverse contexts, including higher education, community education, vocational learning, and informal learning environments, highlighting the pandemic's exacerbation of social inequalities and the nuanced effects on gender, ethnicity, and age. Through empirical research and reflective analysis, the book interrogates the potential of digital technologies in fostering inclusive and accessible learning experiences, while also considering the challenges of maintaining a sense of community and identity in virtual spaces. It not only assesses the immediate responses to the pandemic but also projects future implications and possibilities for adult education, aiming to inform practice, policy, and research. The book stands as a testament to the enduring significance of adult education in navigating times of crisis and change, advocating for a more equitable and responsive educational landscape.

**Editors**

Liliana Paulos
Barbara Merrill
Sandra T. Valadas
Andrea Galimberti
António Fragoso

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This book is dedicated *in memoriam*
of our colleagues and friends
Henrique M.A.C. Fonseca and Joaquim Luís Coimbra

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# Chapter 6

**Samantha Broadhead & Sharon Hooper**

## Learning Returns: Experiences of mature students in art and design captured through YouTube

### Introduction

*Learning Returns* is a project that seeks to document and celebrate the benefits adult learning in the arts have for individuals, communities, and civic societies. The project is based in a small specialist institution. There is a large body of research that has employed qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of mature students (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018; Crozier et al., 2008; Fowle, 2018; Reay et al., 2002). However, some researchers have begun to draw upon arts–based methods to capture narratives about widening participation issues (Broadhead, 2021; Dickson, 2020; Farenga, 2018). This project is informed by Duckworth and Smith's (2018) *UK Further Education Transforming Lives* where people were filmed telling their stories about the impact education has on their quality of life. Other sources include Mumtaz (2015) and Walsh et al. (2013) where multimedia art forms combine storytelling with digital media revealing personal stories that enhance our

understanding of human experiences. *Learning Returns* is developed by a team comprising an educational researcher and a documentary filmmaker. Other practitioners, such as a technical editor and a graphic designer have made valuable contributions to the project.

The research was devised during the COVID-19 pandemic when national lockdowns led to fundamental shifts in people's working and leisure lives as well as how they engaged with formal and informal learning. Many had to quickly learn new skills and new pursuits that complied with the constraints that were being placed on their activity. This can be seen in the increase, in the six weeks after lockdown was introduced in March 2020, of online learning, fitness classes, and crafting sessions broadcast through free-to-access videos such as YouTube (Bakhshi, 2020).

The potential for YouTube to be an informal learning tool has been widely explored, but the research team wondered whether it could also be an application that could be used in practice-based research and also as a means of showing research impact.

*Learning Returns'* overall, long-term aim was to demonstrate the benefits adult learning in the arts has for the individual, their community, and for civic societies. However, in the initial phase of the project there were two objectives, firstly, to investigate the ways in which four people who had previously been art and design students, spoke/connected with an audience of imaginary prospective students beyond institutions who were considering returning to education. The second was to evaluate YouTube as a means of conducting research with older people about their learning experiences.

*Learning Returns* is a work-in-progress. The initial findings revealed how previous students were able to talk confidently about their own experiences on camera, and that the topics they considered important to communicate could be broken down into a series of themes. The meanings of the stories were co-constructed between the participants and the researchers. The interpretation of the words was influenced by the aesthetics of YouTube and the aesthetics the participants themselves brought to the filming. Using the YouTube platform did raise some challenges. COVID-19 restrictions did

impact on the filming to a great extent. Thus, the progress was and is much slower than anticipated. Also, time was needed to build an audience for the films, and this could take months or years. As viewers experience the content of YouTube asynchronously the predictability and linearity of the research process can be disrupted. There is also the potential for YouTube to unsettle some of the pre-pandemic rhythms and episodes of adult learning (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016).

## YouTube Context

YouTube is a video-sharing site where audio-visual material can be uploaded and viewed (Spyer, 2011). Audiences can watch content and/or create it themselves, so the division between producers and viewers can become blurred. YouTube practices lead to an obscuring of the distinction between amateur and professional 'YouTubers' who regularly post content to attract large audiences and subscribers which can lead to sustainable income. There is also a social network aspect to the platform (Lange, 2007; Spyer, 2011; Kousha et al., 2012). Boyd and Ellison (2007) comment that:

> We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 2)

YouTube allows users to create a 'channel page' so they can curate their content and enables viewers to like or dislike individual videos, give feedback, react to feedback, subscribe, and share videos in their network (Kousha et al., 2012). YouTubers seek to create an audience that will return again and again to view future videos, ideally by subscribing to their channels (Johnston, 2017; Medvedeva, 2019). Therefore, it is important for producers of content to be actively engaged with their audiences. Muller (2009) claims, 'YouTube is first

and foremost a cultural space of community building and shared experience' (p. 126).

Medvedeva (2019) considers YouTube as a space that facilitated the creation of aesthetic objects. However, Sweeny (2009) argues that producers, 'who are using social media as a medium challenge the authenticity of the art object, the authorship of the artist and the authority of the museum/gallery system' (p. 201). Dewey's important text, *Art as Experience* (1987) examines the aesthetics of pragmatism. He argues that art and life are intricately linked to each other. Medvedeva (2019) follows this line of reasoning when arguing that media aesthetics can and should be applied to art and everyday life. Art and life are not only interconnected, but also interdependent, '[m]edia has become a part of our daily lifelong 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). Therefore, any understanding of meaning created from YouTube videos needs to consider aesthetics. Even though aesthetics are integral to constructing the meanings of YouTube videos, they are not necessarily those forms associated with high art but those from popular and vernacular culture. The role of aesthetics in constructing meaning in YouTube videos can be applied to the content of videos, but also to the context in which the videos are curated, distributed, and viewed across social media platforms.

The researchers consider the aesthetics of YouTube to be a fusion of various visual, audio, graphic, and cinematic styles that move and oscillate together whilst vying for audience attention. Colour, text, design, sound, movement, and pace mimic or reproduce genres from popular culture. At the same time, content can have high production values or have 'home-made' qualities. YouTube aesthetics are mostly experienced as fleeting 'bite-sized' flashes of moving image, framed by the white background, and grid structure of the platform. They evoke emotion and construct meaning. 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.

Furthermore, Spyer (2011) understands internet platforms such as YouTube as decentralising group communication and subverting how reality is understood, leading to the creation of value through new kinds of aesthetic objects. Exchanges between producers and viewers are not synchronous; time and place are no longer constraining factors in group communication. Videos and channels may attract an unpredictable range of spectators who construct unpredictable readings of the materials on offer. Boellstorff (2008) suggests this mode of communication also changes the way people perceive the world.

## YouTube and Academia

There is a body of research that has investigated YouTube itself (Cheng et al., 2013; Snelson et al., 2012; Thelwall et al., 2012). For example, Kousha et al. (2012) identified six categories associated with academia in their analysis of YouTube videos. These were 'scientific demonstration, public dissemination, education, talks to academics, information about scientists, and comedy' (p. 1712).

Research studies have focused on how academic use YouTube videos as educational applications. Some studies have used YouTube videos as a dataset for research in specific areas such as medicine, public health, and marketing (Kousha et al., 2012). YouTube is used as a means of disseminating research to other academics and the general public, and potentially could be effective in demonstrating the impact of research findings beyond academia.

## YouTube as a Tool for Pedagogy

YouTube is not only linked to everyday life, but more particularly it is inextricably connected to education. It holds many types of educational videos for both formal and informal learning activities. These may be implicitly or explicitly intended to educate their audiences. At the same time, YouTube can be used strategically by university marketing

departments to publicise their institutions. The experience of viewing YouTube material as an educator or learner can be disorientating. There is a discordant and contradictory mix of content such as mainstream advertising, niche advertising, special interest content, celebrity culture, and experimental or transgressive material collaged together that rubs up against overtly educational or academic videos.

Many researchers and practitioners conceptualise social media platforms including YouTube as being for the young learner (Martínez & Alonso, 2015). Wilson (2003) suggests that a third educational space would be appealing to young people, in much the same way Freedman et al. (2013) conceive virtual, Visual Culture Learning Communities (VCLCs) attracting young learners. This would be distinctive from the first space of formal schooling and the second space of open, self-directed learning. Staikidis (2006) describes examples of educational third spaces as after-school programs, community programs, or lunchtime informal activities. However, these forms of learning play out in linear time whereas YouTube offers an asynchronous third space for learning. Duncum (2011) sees platforms such as YouTube facilitating the teaching of relevant skills, and at the same time bridging the transgressive space between youth culture and the institutional requirements of formal knowledge production. Sweeny (2009) noted that there were pedagogical implications in the visualities such virtual technologies construct. Learning identities can be formed in virtual environments related to the particular epistemologies that develop from social media.

Toffler (1980) coined the term prosumer as someone who creates goods and services for their own consumption. This extends to social media as Jenkins (2006a) argues that everyone potentially can create their own content for their own use that can be shared with thousands of others via platforms like YouTube and MySpace. Martínez & Alonso (2015) have investigated social media behaviour in young students, identifying six types of prosumers with varying propensities to co-create and innovate. Since the pandemic there have been studies that show how teachers have become prosumers, creating, and sharing their own YouTube content, not just through

necessity, but because they identify with a new digital professionalism and its values (Triviño–Cabrera, 2021; Zavyalova & Galvin, 2022).

YouTube can be understood as a space where potential peer–to–peer and participatory informal learning can take place, Jenkins (2006b) notes that social media platforms can facilitate a 'peer–to–peer culture' (p. 38) and a 'participatory culture' (p. 1). Jenkins (2009) refers to 'distributed cognition', where users have the technological and social skills to access the knowledge of others (p. 70). Gee (2003) also talks about 'distributed knowledge' where knowledge resides not in any one individual, text, or technology, but is distributed across networks of people, texts, and technologies (p. 184). Levy (1997) similarly refers to 'collective intelligence', where knowledge is pooled and compared with other forms of knowledge in order to fulfil common goals. Virtual communities arise from interaction with YouTube, 'they operate as self–sustaining systems out of mutual interests and a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and acknowledgement' (Duncum, 2011, p. 27). Bernstein's model of learning can also be applied where individuals develop their own repertoire of strategies for successful learning by drawing up the reservoir of knowledge held by their learning group/cohort. Bernstein (1999, p. 60) made the point, 'Clearly the more members are isolated or excluded from each other, the weaker the social base for the development of either repertoire or reservoir'. For those who cannot relate to their physical learning group for social, political, or practical reasons, then virtual learning communities possibly could offer a learning network supplying a virtual reservoir of strategies, skills, and knowledge.

## Methodological Approach

The approach is aligned to practice–based research because the resulting insights come from the creative practice of making the YouTube videos. New knowledge is gleaned from the means of practice (reflection on the process) and the outcomes of the practice (the content of the YouTube channel) (Candy, 2006; Candy et al., 2021). At the same time the videos also tell

the participants' stories who also contribute to the making of the content. The research was practice-focussed and fluid whilst being driven by the video-making process (Candy et al., 2021; Rolling, 2014). Insights are gained from a reflection on the creative process which included the participants' contributions through their verbal and visual participation (Akella et al., 2021; Schon, 1984). The *Learning Returns* project was developed through considered introspection that was shared between the researchers (Brown & Patterson, 2021; Dallow, 2003; Xue & Desmet, 2019).

Frayling et al. (1997) argued that as part of the dissemination of the work, practice-based researchers are, 'obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at their product/s' (p. 13). The design process of *Learning Returns* is therefore explained as part of the method. The practice-based approach was applied to this project because as Dallow (2003) has noted, 'It allows the research work of the creative practitioner to ask questions not only...about work...but through work' (p. 59). An example that is similar to this approach can be seen in the work of Duckworth and Smith (2018), *UK Further Education Transforming Lives,* people were filmed telling stories about the impact Further Education had on their lives. The films were shared through various social media platforms such as Twitter.

## Methods

The research explores the experiences of those who had previously studied the arts as mature learners and how they could communicate that to a virtual audience. It also evaluated the possibility that a video-sharing website could be a fruitful space for developing *Learning Returns* as an arts-based research project. Broadhead's (2021) interrogation of filmmaking as a method for researching mature graduates before the pandemic was a precursor to this work.

As well as considering work that has explored film-making and digital storytelling as a means of capturing educational life experiences (Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Walsh, Rutherford & Crough, 2013; Mumtaz, 2015) the

researchers identified a successful YouTube channel that had an educational focus. *Bob & Brad* was identified as successful because it had a large number of subscribers and had been active for over 10 years. The interaction with the audience was very apparent through its publicly visible feedback comments, where viewers asked questions and commented on what they had learned from the channel.

### *Bob & Brad — A Short Case Study*

An analysis of a successful YouTube channel was undertaken. Bob Schrupp and Brad Heineck created the educational YouTube channel *Bob & Brad* in 2011. Their tagline is 'the two most famous Physical Therapists on the internet (in their opinion)'. *Bob & Brad's* mission is to 'get fit, stay healthy, and pain-free' and is designed to reach people from 0 to 101 years old. Together they have over 60 years of combined experience in the physical therapy field and their YouTube channel alone has over 2 million subscribers. They utilise many forms of social media to reach a wide audience, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (*Bob & Brad,* 2022). On viewing their output from different years, it could be seen that their approach to YouTube had been finely crafted over time through a reflective process directed towards improvement.

When analysing their videos, it can be seen that they clearly have extensive expertise in physiotherapy based on research and practice which they communicate through demonstration, storytelling, and humour. *Bob & Brad* frame their content in a particular way that enables them to connect with their audience in a non-threatening, inclusive, and engaging manner.

1) The videos are not overly long being between 5–10 minutes at the most.
2) The videos are structured with a clear introduction, middle and end.
3) During the start and finish of the videos *Bob & Brad* are a double act repeating familiar humorous phrases that enhance a connection to an expectant audience (who is in on the joke).

4) There is a sophisticated sense of 'knowingness' as *Bob & Brad* play with the expected conventions of the medium that is directed to and includes the viewer. At the same time, they share personal stories of experience that feel authentic.

5) Genuine, useful information based on medical research is openly shared with a sense of care and attention to the audience's health and wellbeing.

6) The visual identity of the channel and videos are consistent, coherent and reflect their mission to get fit, stay healthy, and pain-free (as does the intro and background music).

7) The video is filmed with a single point of view from a static camera that captures *Bob & Brad* against a simple background and their logo.

8) They aim to post every day and encourage their audience to take part in competitions on their website as well as using the resources that are available there.

9) They refer to and use other forms of social media and podcasts.

10) Viewer comments are consistently liked by the *Bob & Brad* team and where appropriate viewers get one-to-one advice through the feedback/comments section.

11) There is *Bob & Brad* merchandising, but this is linked to physiotherapy and solutions that do not need specialist equipment are always the focus of the demonstrations.

What is significant about the *Bob & Brad* example is that they attract a diverse audience. Some of the viewers share their ages in the comments section and many are in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Bob often reflects that he is in his 60s and Brad is in his late 50s. This suggests that older people do engage with YouTube cultures that drive informal adult learning every day and on a global scale. *Bob & Brad* provide a service about maintaining health and well-being that is of interest to older viewers, much like the function of programming from public television. For example, Hopman-Rock et al. (2005) discovered that age was a factor in the participation in a health education

and exercise program on public television that appealed to over viewers over 55. The engagement of mature people could be to do with particular subject matter, formats, and aesthetics that attract certain audiences. A large part of the *Bob & Brad* output is educational in focus. Physiological issues are explained using anatomical models and 'Sam the Skeleton'. Then exercises designed to correct any physical problems that cause pain or immobility are demonstrated. The structure is based on a simple theory/practice dichotomy which is communicated efficiently and effectively within a few minutes. The response from viewers in the comments section is overwhelmingly positive.

The analysis of the *Bob & Brad* case study informed the design and format of the *Learning Returns* project. Attention and care were given to key elements such as the opening and closing titles that would be repeated in the films. A *Learning Returns'* visual identity could be built so that audiences become familiar with it. This was conceived as a practice-based project and in response to research that indicates that the aesthetics of YouTube videos and the project's channel were important in constructing meaning. A substantial amount of time was taken in designing the visual identity of the *Learning Returns'* social media presence. A graphic designer was employed to design a series of coherent 'assets' that could be used on the project's YouTube channel and Twitter page. Assets are visual designs that could be used as banners, titles, and idents. Typography and labels were also designed that could be used in the individual videos. The project team felt it was important to design an appropriate visual and audio identity for *Learning Returns* based on its mission to be informative, inclusive, and fun. Royalty-free music was then sourced that could be used sparingly at the beginning and end of each video. The contributions of adult students could then be framed within a format which was non-threatening, familiar, 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 style of mid-century animation such as Top Cat (1961), The Pink Panther Show (1963) and Scooby Doo, Where Are You! (1969–70). Characters were designed that were based on different animals to

evoke a sense of diversity. They were drawn 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 Twitter and YouTube pages and in making videos for the *Learning Returns* channel. The aim was to upload learning stories from those who had returned to education later in life to YouTube then publicise them through social media. In the much longer term, it is hoped that *Learning Returns* will gain some momentum and the impact of the project can be measured through audience feedback in addition to viewing metrics. It is anticipated that this may take a few months and possibly years, and that the project needs to be open ended to some extent to deal with the asynchronicity and unpredictability of social media.

### *Recruitment of Participants*

Mature graduates from arts courses in the North of England during the previous seven years were asked if they would like to be part of a research project that would involve being filmed telling their stories that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* channel. Consenting participants (Gemma, Hafifa, Terence and Frances) were contacted through email so they could be informed about the aims and objectives of the research and told that it would contribute to a greater understanding of the motivations and achievements of mature students. Before the filming took place, 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 prospective adult arts students. There was no rehearsal time, the participants were able to talk straight to camera as they were told anything they were not happy with could be edited out.

It was very important for the wellbeing of contributors to be very open and transparent about the project because of the public nature of YouTube. The project information given to participants asked them to think carefully about whether or not they wanted their film to appear on a video-sharing site. The project team would monitor any feedback comments posted in response to the

films so that offensive or hurtful material could be deleted. Participants could pull out of the project and have their films withdrawn at any point.

Filming days were arranged with the participants and were carried out in an arts university. Care was given to the background and context of the shots, keeping in mind the visual identity of *Learning Returns*.

After filming, the subsequent footage was edited in the first instance to 10 minutes. This was perceived on first viewing as being far too long as there was a lot of repetition, and the pace did not work. So, the first film was cut to two minutes, and this was very effective.

### *Editing and Analysis*

The editing process was undertaken between the two researchers and a technician and was a means of identifying, developing, and consolidating the themes.

The analysis was undertaken in three main stages. The first, considered the raw footage (which was gained from 30 minutes of filming for each participant). The stories found in the footage were disentangled and represented in a series of 10-minute films; the importance of this was that participant contributions could be understood in context. On viewing the 10-minute films 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, conceptual and interpretive stage, was where the stories were broken down into two-minute films. 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 films.

The third stage of analysis and interpretation was to identify important 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* channel.

Butler–Kisber (2010) points out that there is a danger that research process appears to be linear and in clearly defined stages, for example, collecting data, carrying out the analysis and then writing up the findings. However, within practice–based research the process can be much more fluid and iterative or cyclic. It could be argued that the analysis goes on throughout all the stages depending on what the researchers bring to the process. In practice, the analysis of the themes was iterative, developed through a de–contextualising and re–contextualising cycle (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). The editing process proved to be very important because it enabled themes that could be revisited and reviewed.

## Results

The two–minute films construct meanings through the aesthetics inherent in the films constructed by the backgrounds, the lighting, the framing, the graphics, and the music. The participants also construct the aesthetics through their choice of clothing, at least two of the participants shared that they had been thoughtful about the colours of their outfits. The way that the participants spoke was also very influential, the rhythm of their speech, the emphasis on words, and the subtleties of body language all influenced the interpretive decisions made by the researchers when identifying the themes.

The participants were all seated and were represented as portraits or 'talking heads'. This placed a focus on what they were saying; future work could involve action and movement which would create new meanings and levels of interpretation.

Each participant's story was presented in a relatively coherent way during the films, and the points they were making were contextualised within their particular narrative. However, there were some themes that ran across the films.

**Table 1** – Cross–cutting themes

| Themes | Cross–cutting themes |
|---|---|
| • Ecology and used clothes.<br>• Learned that need to make things for a purpose.<br>• Connection to the groups sharing through group crits, very helpful.<br>• Learned skills.<br>• Find out about participatory arts.<br>• Education got ideas flowing. | Previous learning experiences |
| • Full–time work since 1979 apprenticeship technical.<br>• Engineering background making moulds for glass bottles.<br>• Did not have opportunities when younger.<br>• 18 years old interested but dissuaded from art into the sciences.<br>• My art practice is Arabic calligraphy.<br>• Wanted to be in the arts but degree too expensive and therefore decided to do an MA.<br>• As a mother of two education is not your place. | An understanding of own positionality |
| • Realised already had the skills to make and do something.<br>• You can do it.<br>• Encouragement to return to education.<br>• Others should 'jump in'.<br>• Experienced no difficulties or prejudice in education due to age.<br>• If unsure, just try it.<br>• It's empowered me. | Encouraging others |

| | |
|---|---|
| • Move away from technical digital project management to organising creative projects.<br>• 'Unbolt the door' to the art world.<br>• Working with a group of older South Asian women who are isolated, bringing them together through art.<br>• My main purpose is to make art that reflects life.<br>• I have been doing work at festivals and in exhibitions for some years now. | Future projects undertaken after formal education |
| • Need Evening Access and Education courses for developing confidence.<br>• Older people give it 100%.<br>• Passion and curiosity – education as affirming.<br>• Art keeps you mindful and giving joy.<br>• Through networking on my course, I am able to collaborate on commissions. | Valuing returning to education |

## Discussion

## Previous Learning Experiences

Without prompting from the researchers, the participants were keen to give clear accounts of what they had learned, whether this be skills, concepts, or new practices. They reflected on the benefits of their previous learning experiences. Certain moments or critical incidents had stuck in their memories that they felt were significant enough to share.

### *An Understanding of Own Positionality*

All the participants identified themselves as primarily creative practitioners, but also in terms of the reasons why they had returned to education later in life. They constructed a particular identity for themselves and for their imagined audience. Part of their identity was formed by their parental

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status or their previous careers. There was also a notion that their identities included whether or not they had been encouraged or enabled to go into higher education when they were younger. There was a knowingness about their representation as people who had returned after years out of formal education.

### *Encouraging Others*

The participants demonstrated an empathy for what older, prospective arts students watching their films might be worried about; prejudice, having the ability to succeed, fitting in. There were also lots of encouraging words shared to suggest that people could and should make the leap and return to education, that this would be a positive experience.

### *Future Projects Undertaken After Formal Education*

All 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. One of the participants was active as a sculptor and this was in sympathy with his previous work making moulds.

### *Valuing Arts Education*

There were many statements given about the value of an arts education. It had given practical benefits, such as developing networks and social capital as well as developing skills. There were also benefits for well–being and confidence. Mature learners themselves were also valued as being engaged and curious.

It was striking that 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 the plans each had for the

future. Their performances were enhanced by the editing process so it must not be forgotten that these stories were mediated 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 concerns and desires. It was this that led to the encouragement that was freely given by the speakers.

## Conclusion

The *Learning Returns* project has begun to show the benefits adult learning in the arts has for some individuals, their communities and for the wider social context. However, it is a work in progress, and it is hoped that additional data will be gleaned as the *Learning Returns* channel grows its audience and subscribers.

Currently, the four participants who had previously been art and design students spoke/connected with an audience of imaginary prospective students beyond institutions who were considering returning to education. It is hoped that this imaginary audience may become more concrete as the project progresses. The participants were confident 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.

Secondly, the *Bob & Brad* case study suggests that it is possible to reach mature audiences through YouTube. So far, on a very small scale, YouTube has been an effective means of conducting research with older people about their learning experiences. Progress has been slow, as time is needed to build up an audience for *Learning Returns*. In some ways the research process is unpredictable and non-linear due to the nature of social media.

The project highlights the importance of aesthetics, which is of particular concern to creative practitioners. However, YouTube functions as a melting pot of many aesthetic realms, that of popular culture, everyday life as well as personal visual and audio styles. The researchers, the graphic designer, the

participants, and the YouTube platform all influence the aesthetics of *Learning Returns,* and this influences the interpretive aspects of the research.

Finally, the boundaries between informal learning, research method, and research impact become blurred during the *Learning Returns* project as it appears to operate in all those arenas. Research data can be gleaned from both the content of the films and the metrics and feedback of the audience. Impact has yet to be established but is possible through the same platform's feedback mechanism.

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