

Beyond Measure: Mastery, Identity, and Creativity in Adult Arts Education

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Abstract

This article explores the role of adult creative arts education in shaping mastery, identity, and creativity. Drawing from the work of the Pitmen Painters and educational theorists such as Elliot Eisner, Jal Mehta, and John Dewey, the small-scale study investigates the practices of seven tutors working in adult community learning in Northeast England. Findings reveal that mastery involves continuous refinement through creative exploration, identity formation is deeply connected to personal and cultural narratives, and creativity thrives when learners are empowered to take risks and innovate. The article counters the dominance of standardization in education by instead exploring the immeasurable aspects of creative arts learning that are critical to fostering agency and self-expression.

Introduction

For many, the paintings of The Ashington Group, more commonly known as the Pitmen Painters, are tinged with nostalgia, reflecting both the socio-historical context of their creation and the lives of the working-class miners they depict. Active from 1930 to 1981, the group's work offers a fascinating document of life in a mining community and the artistic development of its members. While the paintings themselves are of considerable interest, this article draws inspiration from the accompanying quotations displayed above the gallery rails at the Woodhorn Museum in Ashington, Northeast England, where the works are exhibited. One such quote, attributed to Harry Wilson, a long-standing member of the group, exemplifies the sense of freedom and self-discovery that painting provided:

I have found new pleasure in using my hands and in making things... there is a feeling of being my own boss for a change, and with it comes a sense of freedom. When I have done a piece of painting, I feel that something has happened not only to the panel or canvas but to myself. (Feaver, 2009, p.28)

This expression of creative agency and identity resonates with the broader discussion of educational outcomes today (Brooke, 2023; Jarvis, 2009; Mehta & Fine, 2019; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Oliver Kilbourn, another member of The Ashington Group, captures this well when simply stating that "A funny thing, once you've painted a picture, you feel it's part of your life, you know" (Feaver, 2009, p.157). Despite its apparent simplicity, the quote reflects the broader impact of learning, where personal growth, identity, and meaning making are intertwined with the creative process. A further quote by Kilbourn beautifully conveys the transformative power of art as a form of expression when he explains that "I couldn't express myself so well in words and I found that I could express my feelings and what I wanted to get over in drawing and painting" (Feaver, 2009, p.23).



Figure 1. Oliver Kilbourn (1938). *Propping the Mat*. [oil on canvas]. Woodhorn Museum, Ashington, United Kingdom.

Elliot Eisner (1922-2014), the Stanford scholar of arts education, famously noted, “not everything is measurable, and not everything measurable is important” (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p.171). Yet education systems increasingly prioritize what can be measured, such as grades, test scores, and other outcomes, often at the expense of what truly enriches the learning process: the immeasurable, such as the sense of freedom or mastery that Harry Wilson describes. This sentiment is expressed well by the German geographer and naturalist Alexander Humboldt (2014) when writing that “what speaks to the soul, escapes our measurement” (p.134). As this study demonstrates, perceived errors and moments of creative exploration are central to developing individual creativity and identity, qualities that rarely make it into standardized assessment rubrics.



Figure 2. Harry Wilson. (1936). Ashington Colliery. [Oil on paper]. Woodhorn Museum, Ashington, United Kingdom.

This qualitative study explores how seven adult learning art tutors perceive and foster mastery, identity, and creativity within their teaching practices. Although all three terms may appear to be integral to creating art, it may come as some surprise that a scan of the qualification specifications written by one of the largest awarding bodies in the United Kingdom makes no exact reference to any of them.

In the United Kingdom, adult learning refers to education for individuals aged nineteen and over, primarily funded through local authorities and devolved combined authorities (MCAs), which now manage around 60% of the £1.34 billion Adult Skills Fund (ASF) following regional devolution agreements (Department for Education, 2025). Arts education, a key component of adult learning, includes both accredited and non-accredited courses in creative disciplines and is often justified through instrumental outcomes such as employability and skills development, despite its broader contributions to well-being and community engagement (Pember, 2025). Recent government investments, including the £450 million Crown Works Studios in Sunderland and a £380 million creative industries package, aim to stimulate regional growth through cultural infrastructure (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport [DCMS], 2025; Sunderland City Council, 2024). However, critics argue that such top-down initiatives risk overlooking the intrinsic value of the arts and fail to address structural issues like underfunding and limited community impact (The Guardian, 2025). This creates tensions for arts educators, who must balance policy-driven outcomes with advocacy

for inclusive and meaningful creative engagement.

Adult community arts classes are delivered in a wide variety of settings, ranging from windowless basement rooms in health centers and repurposed school buildings to bespoke, well-lit studios and library spaces. Historical accounts, such as Edwards (1961) and Rees (1980), highlight the long-standing challenges of accommodation, with classes often held in outdated or shared premises under restrictive conditions. Despite these limitations, the diversity of learners is striking, ranging from young professionals seeking creative outlets in the evenings to older adults, including those in their 90s, returning to art after decades. Participants include individuals managing grief, those seeking social connection after relocation, and learners with disabilities such as visual impairment. Many are rediscovering a passion for art first sparked in school, while others are accomplished artists producing work for sale. The classes cater to a broad spectrum of experience, from complete beginners to those with advanced technical skills, reflecting the inclusive and transformative potential of adult arts education.

The aim of this article is to shift the professional discourse away from a focus on outcomes and products toward a deeper consideration of the processes involved in three key aspects of the creative arts learning journey. Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine's (2019) book *In Search of Deeper Learning: Mastery, Identity, Creativity, and the Future of Schooling* highlights how a focus on mastery, identity, and creativity can transform education into a more meaningful and engaging experience. Mehta and Fine argue that traditional schooling, which prioritizes surface-level knowledge and preparation for qualifications, fails to inspire deeper learning. Mastery develops through sustained practice, critical reflection, and real-world application, while identity is shaped by connecting to personal values and self-concept. Creativity flourishes when students are given the freedom to experiment, innovate, and explore their ideas in a supportive environment.

Mehta and Fine's arguments echo the work of educational theorists such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Malcolm Knowles, and Paulo Freire, who all emphasize the importance of active, student-centered learning and the empowerment that comes from education. By drawing on the insight offered by Harry Wilson, Oliver Kilbourn and these influential thinkers, this article aims to highlight the transformative potential of creative arts education. It advocates for a renewed focus on the immeasurable qualities of the creative process.

Literature Review

The volume of multi-disciplinary literature exploring the concepts of mastery, identity, and creativity is huge. The following paragraphs aspire to merely discuss some key ideas relevant to the understanding of this study rather than give any extensive exploration of each concept.

Mastery

From the Latin adverb *magis* meaning “a greater extent or more” (Oxford University Press, 2012), mastery in creative arts education is a continuous process shaped by deliberate practice, self-reflection, and sustained engagement with technique, rather than being a fixed state (Greene et al., 2023). Sennett (2008) considers craftsmanship an enduring pursuit of excellence, whereas mastery is seen as continually developing rather than having a defined endpoint. Similarly, Pye (1968) emphasizes that mastery is not merely the attainment of technical competence but instead gaining a deeper understanding of materials and processes. According to Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993), achieving mastery requires deliberate practice, defined as a purposeful effort to improve performance. Such thinking challenges the idea of innate talent or giftedness and suggests mastery is accessible to those willing to invest time and effort into their artistic practice (Ericsson et al., 2018).

In the creative arts, mastery is about acquiring technical skills while also a process of continually refining and reshaping one's craft in response to new challenges and creative instincts (UNESCO, 2023). Further to this, Jackson (2021) highlights that mastery is an evolving process in adult learning, during which learners experience a journey of transformation extending beyond technical expertise into personal development. Parallels can be drawn here with the Germanic philosophical concept of *Bildung* that advocates for a life of continual self-cultivation or self-formation in which the artist can see where the limits of their understanding and mastery are and “deliberately expands their understanding and mastery and make them grow” (UNESCO, 2023, p.42).

The role of self-efficacy is central to achieving mastery. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capacity to succeed. In the creative arts, learners with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through challenges and setbacks, while embracing the effort required to master new skills (Morrison, 2024). This belief in their ability to succeed becomes crucial in determining how much effort and perseverance learners put into their practice. In creative arts, they develop this self-efficacy by consistently stepping outside their comfort zones (Zimmerman, 2000). Moser (2018) suggests that mastery is not just about perfecting a craft, but about continuously striving for improvement, even in the face of setbacks.

The interplay between deliberate practice and self-efficacy highlights the importance of providing learners with feedback and opportunities to develop their reflexivity. The idea that personal and technical development are co-dependent in acquiring mastery is alluded to by Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) in an allegory describing the ultimate reward gained from the patience needed to make fire from striking a stick on flint, when writing “This applies to those who are dismayed at the beginning of their studies and then set out to gain mastery over

themselves and to devote themselves in patience to those studies with marvelous results” (Richter, 1883, p.230). The term mastery is now widely used in educational contexts beyond the arts, particularly in Math teaching. It should be noted that its increased use has led to some criticism that historically it carries connotations of dominance and control, which can be alienating for some social groups, creating challenges for educators and learners alike (Feldman, 2023; Simpson & Wang, 2023).

Identity

For adult learners, engaging in artistic practice is knowingly, or unknowingly, a means of exploring and expressing their personal identity. Antony Gormley, the British sculptor, makes this point succinctly when stating that “the direct experience of art makes the individual” (Hickman, 2005, p.10). Sullivan (2021) argues that the act of creating art is inherently tied to identity, as it provides a space for learners to reflect on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Early pioneers of adult learning such as Eduard Lindeman (1889/1926) recognized its central role in self-development and individual flourishing. More recently, Cross (2019) discusses how creativity plays a crucial role in transforming learners' identities, especially in the context of older learners navigating life changes. Dewey (1934) emphasizes the role of experience in the formation of identity. For Dewey, learning is an active, reflective process where individuals engage with their environment and, through this interaction, shape their sense of self. Ontologically, Dewey believed that identity is formed in the practice of learning and the process of growth, rather than being fixed (Ralph, 2024).

Malcolm Knowles’s (1980) concept of andragogy suggests that adult learners, as willing participants, seek education as a means of self-directed growth, which inherently links learning to identity development. Knowles (1980) emphasizes that adult learning involves integrating life experiences and personal values into the educational process, fostering a strong connection between learning and self (1980). Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory further expands this notion, suggesting that critical reflection on prior assumptions leads to profound and often cathartic changes in how individuals view themselves and the world (Mezirow, 1997). The belief that participation in adult learning is driven by a desire for personal growth or transformation suggests that artistic practices serve as a vehicle for such reflective processes, enabling learners to explore and reshape their identities.

In addition to fostering personal growth, arts education can support the development of emerging professional identities. Many adult learners begin to see themselves not only as more confident individuals but as artists, printmakers, or photographers. For some, creative learning is part of a longer-term ambition to work in the arts or contribute to their communities. Gert Biesta (2017) offers a valuable perspective on this existential dimension of arts education, arguing that its purpose is not solely about skill acquisition but the learner’s

“coming into presence” (p.39).

Contemporary creative practitioners also highlight the deep connection between identity and artistic expression. British singer-songwriter Raye, reflecting on her journey, stated: “Artistry really stems from your identity. An artist is conviction and having a perspective that you identify with and you back and you love 100%” (Bell, 2023). Having navigated emotional intensity, musical innovation, and commercial risk, she described her creative process as liberating: “All of this music has been some form of medicine to me. I feel liberated now” (Wang, 2024). Raye’s reflections describe her own “coming into presence” (Biesta, 2017, p.39) and reinforce the idea that identity is not only shaped through introspection but also through the act of creating and sharing work that resonates with one’s personal truth.

The role of community in shaping identity is also crucial in arts education. Macmurray (1957) posits that identity is not formed in isolation but through relationships with others. In the context of community arts programs, learners come together to share their experiences and collaborate, which helps shape and reinforce their sense of belonging (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). As individuals interact with others, they are exposed to different perspectives and ideas, which can lead to a deeper understanding of their own identity (Henderson et al., 2023; Wenger, 1998).

Pessoa (2002/1982) explores the notion of personal disquiet and introspection, which aligns with how creativity, especially in the arts, allows individuals to engage with complex emotions and existential questions, offering a pathway for self-reflection in learning. His work on existential reflection emphasizes the internal journey artists undergo while navigating uncertainty and introspection. In this sense, art becomes a medium for confronting one’s innermost feelings and reflections.

Malchiodi (2012) suggests that creative expression can serve as a therapeutic tool, enabling learners to cope with emotional challenges and build resilience, further contributing to personal empowerment. The Ancient Greek word *poiesis* for “to make” or “bring forth” (Oxford University Press, 2012) has been described therapeutically as a form of “soul-making” (Levine, 2001) in which identity lives in the actuality of the creative process, with *poiesis* also being closely linked to the Greek word *aletheia*, meaning “truth or disclosure” (Whitehead, 2003). The notion that the creative arts provide an opportunity for artists and craftsmen to explore and disclose their hidden selves is summarized well by the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (2004/1931) when writing that “In Art, man reveals himself and not his objects” (p.184).

Creativity

Creativity is often seen as the cornerstone of artistic practice (Levinson, 2024). In arts education, creativity is viewed as both a process and an outcome, one that promotes personal growth, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Weisburg, 2020). Kaufman and Gregoire (2019) build on this, viewing creativity as a holistic and multidimensional process that involves the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. They also highlight Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) use of the terms "complexity" and "multitudes" to describe the characteristics of creative people. Such language indicates the importance of adult learners developing the ability to form creative works through what Rubin (2023) calls "energetic ideas" (p.14), formed from an awareness of external worldly inspirations. As with mastery, rather than coming from any inner innate source, creative inspiration is everywhere around us (Glăveanu, 2020). Friedrich Schiller (1849/1795) makes this exact point when writing that "In a creative mind, on the contrary, reason withdraws its sentinels from the gates: the ideas rush pell-mell into the city" (p.315). This makes opening up and allowing external inspiration in, integral to the process of becoming or being creative. For Hans Georg Gadamer (1989/1960), the German philosopher, this appreciation of "otherness" and the importance of "openness" to it are central to understanding.

The standard definition of creativity in most dictionaries concludes that the creative act involves some kind of originality or novelty, along with some value or utility. For instance, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) defines creativity as the ability to produce something original and valuable, while requiring both technical skill and innovative thinking. Judgement of this is highly subjective and difficult to agree on. Take for example, *Septology*, a transcendent exploration of the human condition by Jon Fosse (2022/2019), which won the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature, and which belies punctuation conventions. Heralded by many critics as creative, imaginative, and hypnotic, I gave up after several pages, unmoved and irritated.

Within the context of adult creative arts classes, learners often consider their artistic endeavors to be creative if they like what they see and feel pleased with them (Lin et al., 2023). This partly grounds their view of creativity in the field of aesthetics, with numerous sources suggesting that aesthetic appeal does play a crucial role in creative work (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2022; Welke et al, 2023). Further to this, aesthetic appeal can be linked back to identity or feelings of connectedness to what we create, with a recent study showing that rating a painting as highly self-relevant was strongly linked to finding it more aesthetically appealing (Vessell et al., 2023).

As adult learners often have no intention of sharing their artistic creations beyond family and close friends, what is important to them is how creative they feel rather than the extent to which they are judged to be creative (Gauntlett, 2028). It is their own judgement that matters.

To avoid the inclusion of public judgement as a criterion, a more suitable definition for adult learning might be “the synergy of imagination, intention and action that produces a novel result” as suggested by Brandt (2020, p. 9). Once public judgement is taken out of the creativity equation then the key concern in being creative is closer to the Latin word *creatus* meaning “to bring into being” (Oxford University Press, 2012). This then becomes an achievable ambition to understand better how to form and bring ideas to fruition rather than more abstract claims of achieving creativity.

In summary, mastery, identity, and creativity are interconnected in arts education. Mastery is a continuous process shaped by deliberate practice and self-reflection, while identity evolves through creative expression. Creativity, whilst generally being defined through the lens of originality and novelty, is closely linked to aesthetics and personal significance within the realm of the adult creative arts classroom.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study explores the reflections of seven art tutors on how they foster mastery, identity, and creativity within their teaching practices. Professional discussions were chosen as the data collection method, which allowed for the flexibility to explore participants’ unique perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This format ensured consistent focus on the study’s core themes while enabling the emergence of topics of interest during conversations.

A professional discussion in this study refers to a structured conversation between the researcher and participants, designed to explore specific topics in-depth. Unlike traditional interviews, professional discussions are less formal and allow for a more collaborative exchange of ideas. The focus is on eliciting reflective responses from participants, drawing on their expertise and experiences. This method encourages dialogue rather than interrogation, enabling the researcher to gain deeper insights into the participants’ views and practices while fostering a more open and comfortable environment for sharing knowledge (Boudah, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

As educators so often feel the weight of professional judgement, it was stressed from the beginning that there were no correct answers, simply reflections on how and when the three themes might be apparent in lessons. The ambition was instead to create something akin to the description given by Robert Lyon, the group’s original tutor, when writing that “They did not want to be told what was the correct thing to look for in a work of art but to see for themselves why this should be correct; in other words, they wanted a way, if possible, of seeing for themselves” (Feaver, 2009, p.18).

The study utilized a small, purposefully selected sample to prioritize depth over breadth, consistent with the objectives of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The tutors recruited are all members of the arts department of a local authority’s creative arts adult learning team, working in a large city in Northeast England. Their experience ranges from eight to over forty years. Collectively, the participants teach across diverse disciplines including collage, drawing, photography, and textiles. The sampling strategy was designed to capture a range of perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I am both the researcher and the arts program manager for the team and have a professional relationship with all the participants. This insider status helped build trust and rapport, encouraging openness during discussions. However, it also presents a potential limitation, as familiarity may have influenced responses or interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to mitigate this risk.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifiable details anonymized, particularly important given the small, close-knit nature of the team. All participants provided informed consent.

Each professional discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes and was guided by three open-ended questions:

- How do you support creativity in your teaching?
- How is mastery developed in your classes?
- How is learner identity apparent in the work they create?

The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their teaching practices, challenges, and personal interpretations of these themes. The concise format respected participants’ time while allowing sufficient depth of exploration.

Table 1

Research Participants’ Specialism and Experience

Tutors	Specialism	Experience
Participant 1	General Art	17 Years
Participant 2	General Art	8 Years
Participant 3	Mixed Media	12 Years
Participant 4	Needlecraft	45 Years
Participant 5	General Art	10 Years
Participant 6	Photography	20 Years

Participant 7	Textiles	15 Years
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Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through audio recordings, a method chosen for convenience and to foster conversational rapport (Gray et al., 2020). Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked for accuracy. Participants were invited to review discussion summaries to ensure their responses were represented accurately, enhancing the study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. A two-stage coding process was employed: deductive coding focused on the predetermined themes, while inductive coding identified emergent subthemes, such as "risk-taking" under creativity and "technical confidence" under mastery.

Codes were refined iteratively, ensuring alignment with participants' accounts while acknowledging personal interpretations informed by a background in art education (Patton, 2015). The thematic analysis highlighted commonalities across participants' experiences while preserving individual nuances. Regular cross-referencing of codes and themes with the transcripts ensured a robust and transparent process.

Limitations and Conceptual Considerations

While this study provides rich insights from tutors, its findings are limited by the small sample size and its focus on a single geographic location. As such, generalization to broader contexts is not possible. Additionally, the study did not begin with shared definitions of the key concepts—mastery, identity, and creativity—which may have led to varied interpretations. While this allowed for authentic, personal reflections, future research might benefit from an initial dialogue to establish common understandings of these terms. The researcher's dual role as programme manager may also have influenced the dynamics of the discussions, despite efforts to foster openness and neutrality.

Results

This section presents the analysis of qualitative data, identifying key themes of mastery, identity, and creativity that emerged from the participants' reflections. The themes are explored through verbatim quotations from the text, which offer insights into how the educators perceive and experience these elements in their artistic practice.

Mastery

The theme of mastery revolves around the development of technical skill and its relationship to confidence, practice, and the application of knowledge. A common thread across the data is the emphasis on the importance of practice and building confidence. For instance, Participant 1 highlighted the role of repeated practice in mastering techniques: "It's practice, practice, practice, practice, practice," illustrating the foundational role of repetition in acquiring skill. Similarly, Participant 5 noted the quick progress learners can make when they break down skills into manageable components: "I always remind learners that it's never too late to study art, and that they can really progress quickly when they break it down into simple techniques." This emphasis on practice and breaking down complex tasks into simpler steps is echoed by Participant 3, who asked her learners, "What do I find challenging about this technique?" to encourage self-reflection and mastery.

In addition to technical ability, mastery is connected to the development of precision and adaptability in artistic processes. Participant 2 described how precision cutting leads to a shift towards compositional skill: "Once you've got the precision... almost like the draftsman-like skills of precision cutting, it's then composition." This transition from technical competence to compositional freedom was echoed by other educators, such as Participant 4, who noted that once learners understood the process of reverse image making, their results improved dramatically: "Preparing the drawings so they would work well as lino prints took time, but once they understood the reverse image process, their results improved dramatically."

Identity

The theme of identity highlights how artistic practice is intertwined with personal expression, reflecting learners' understanding of themselves and the world they inhabit. Participant 2 described how personal meaning was woven into creative choices: "The colors they pick, the design, it's tied to who they are and what matters to them." Similarly, Participant 6 emphasized the importance of embedding personal meaning into creative work: "It was like a fantastic identity piece of work because, in a really, really simple way, their identity was the objects they chose."

This sense of identity is also linked to personal growth and transformation over the course of artistic practice. Participant 5 observed how learners change throughout a course, from doubt to a stronger sense of self: "It's interesting to see how learners change during the course. They begin by doubting themselves but, by the end, they've found a voice in their work, and that's when I know they've connected with their artistic identity." For some participants, the materials and methods used became a vehicle for reflection, with Participant 4 explaining: "I encouraged them to bring their own imagery to make it a personal response."

The process of artmaking, as evidenced by these examples, is not just about creating objects but about discovery and self-expression, allowing learners to connect their work with their identity, while forging a deeper relationship between personal meaning and artistic output.

Creativity

Creativity, as presented in the data, is viewed not just as the ability to generate novel ideas but as a dynamic process of exploration and risk-taking. Participant 1 emphasized the fluidity of creative decision-making, suggesting that creativity is a process of ongoing adjustments: "This isn't about how well you can draw a face... this is about composition in a very movable, adjustable kind of way." Similarly, Participant 4 discussed how learners pushed their creative boundaries, particularly through the use of new materials and techniques: "The use of blending colors and experimenting with multi-color prints showed how willing they were to push their creative boundaries."

Creativity is also framed as a process of learning through mistakes and challenges. Participant 2 highlighted how mistakes can become a source of creative solutions: "Every mistake is a new creation. You can always salvage something, even if it's not what you originally planned." Participant 6 also reflected on how breaking out of rigid ideas fosters creativity: "I have pushed them towards a willingness to take risks as part of developing their creativity."

Moreover, creativity was viewed as a personal journey of discovery, where learners push beyond predefined boundaries. Participant 6 further emphasized this point with her comment on the importance of creating an environment that encourages freedom and risk-taking: "Creating a sort of environment for them where they want to do things and be creative and take risks." This notion of creativity as both a personal and exploratory process aligns with Participant 3's statement: "Creativity isn't about getting it perfect; it's about exploring the possibilities."

The themes of mastery, identity, and creativity are deeply interconnected in the participants' artistic practices. Mastery is not just about the technical acquisition of skills but about how learners develop the confidence to apply these skills in increasingly complex and personalized ways. Identity is forged through the act of creation, with learners using their work as a means of self-expression and transformation. Creativity, in this context, is a dynamic, exploratory process, one that embraces mistakes, encourages risk-taking, and allows for personal and artistic growth.

Discussion

This research explores mastery, identity, and creativity in arts education, expanding upon the

literature on these themes within adult learning contexts. The findings support Jan Mehta and Sarah Fine's (2019) view that they are not isolated themes but deeply intertwined and central to the educational process.

The findings align with Ericsson *et al's* (1993) concept of deliberate practice, drawing attention to the importance of repetition in skill development. Participant 5's emphasis on breaking down complex tasks highlights this. Similarly, Participant 2's reflection on transitioning from technical competence to creative decision-making reflects Sennett's (2008) view of craftsmanship as an evolving journey. This reinforces Jackson's (2021) assertion that mastery in adult learning is an ongoing process of refinement and self-improvement.

Identity formation emerged as a deep personal process of self-expression, consistent with Lindeman's (1989/1926) perspective on adult education as self-development. Participants noted how learners embedded personal stories and transformations into their artistic practices, resonating with Dewey's (1934) notion of experiential learning. For example, Participant 5 observed learners transitioning from self-doubt to confidence, and in doing so finding their artistic voices. This also aligns with Sullivan's (2005) argument that artmaking reflects one's inner world and values. Another of The Ashington Group members, Leslie Brownrigg, shared his thoughts on the importance of identity to the artwork we create when commenting that "It seems to me that to look at a painting by Jimmy Floyd, without watching Jimmy at work on it, or knowing something about Jimmy himself, as we all do in class, does mean that the painting loses a lot of its point" (Feaver, 2009, p.107).

Creativity was shown to be a dynamic, transformative process involving experimentation and risk-taking. Participants emphasized how mistakes and challenges became opportunities for growth, aligning with Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) and Kaufman's (2019) views of creativity as being iterative and holistic. Participant 6's focus on fostering a safe space for risk-taking reflects Moser's (2018) argument that creativity in adult learning enhances resilience. This is a sentiment put well by Fred Laidler, who joined The Ashington Group in 1948, when describing the supportive culture of critical feedback present within the group, "We've learnt from each other. Ones helped another, one's criticized another without anybody being offended, which is a great thing, I think. Here it's opinion without penalty" (Feaver, 2009, p.135).

Such observations highlight the role of social learning and collective engagement. The concept of belonging to a community of practice, such as that created by The Ashington Group, offers a valuable lens through which to understand the broader impact of arts education on adult learners. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is not merely an individual pursuit but a socially situated process, where identity is shaped through participation in shared

practices, dialogue, and mutual engagement. Within such communities, learners co-construct knowledge and meaning, fostering deeper understanding and cultivating a sense of collective identity and purpose.

It is worth noting that while The Pitman Painters exemplify how working-class men in early 20th-century Britain engaged in adult education and self-expression through art, their group was not readily accessible to women in the same community, besides some early unnamed attendees. While these men found empowerment and visibility through their artistic endeavors, local women often faced limited or different educational opportunities, shaped by domestic expectations and gender norms. Valerie Hall highlights this disparity in *Contrasting Female Identities*, noting that working-class women were frequently excluded from cultural and artistic learning spaces that men could more freely access (Hall, 2000). Mrs. Ann Errington, a local political leader in the interwar period, reflecting on gender roles in mining communities, reinforces this divide, explaining that while men's identities were rooted in collective labor and public life, women's roles were closely tied to the home and community care, leaving little space for their participation in cultural or artistic pursuits (Tomaney, 2023). This suggests that women's roles and opportunities in the arts were shaped more by exclusion than by equal access.

To those unfamiliar with teaching creative arts, the assumption might well be that conversations about mastery, identity, and creativity are the norm among practitioners. If anything, these conversations felt new and different. The tutors who participated had an awareness that these concepts are integral to what they do yet all commented on the infrequency of such conversations, as so often the key imperatives are completing lesson rubrics with measurable outcomes or the replenishment of materials. Some even expressed discomfort with the notion that their lessons encouraged any form of identity formation, primarily because personal issues might come to the surface for learners and be difficult to manage.

The findings of this study are significant because they illuminate the often-overlooked dimensions of adult arts education, those that go beyond technical skill acquisition to encompass personal transformation, identity formation, and creative agency. In a policy landscape increasingly dominated by measurable outcomes, this research highlights the value of arts education in fostering deeper learning and emotional resilience. By articulating how mastery, identity, and creativity manifest in adult learning contexts, the study provides educators and policymakers with a richer understanding of what meaningful arts education looks like and why it matters.

The challenge will come in maintaining the conversation and creating a culture in which

deeper discussions are a norm rather than an interesting extra, particularly in an increasingly demanding educational sector where the time to reflect can often seem limited. Future research should explore the implementation of lesson sequences which integrate mastery, identity, and creativity, based on the reflections shared in this study.

Conclusion

Despite this study's small sample size, the results highlight the critical relationship between mastery, identity, and creativity in creative arts education, illustrating how these concepts are interwoven in adult learning creative arts classes. The findings suggest that mastery in the arts is not merely about the acquisition of technical skills but is an ongoing process that involves personal transformation and creative exploration. Similarly, identity formation in artistic practice is one of continual evolution, shaped by self-reflection and the integration of personal meaning.

As creative arts educators, it is essential to foster environments that support not only the development of technical skills but also the personal and creative growth that the members of The Ashington Group so eloquently allude to.

In many ways, the purpose of this research project was not to prove that mastery, identity, and creativity are integral to creative arts learning, though the findings suggest that they may well be. Instead, it aimed to shift the dialogue from *measuring* the outcomes in creative arts education to engaging in a deeper conversation about what gives it *soul*.

Recommendations

Integrate self-reflection into arts practice: Educators should encourage learners to engage in self-reflection throughout their artistic journey. By repeatedly asking reflective questions, learners can develop a deeper understanding of their personal artistic identities and foster their creativity.

Create risk-taking and experimentation opportunities: It is important to create an environment where learners feel safe to experiment and take risks. Educators should promote creative freedom and provide opportunities for learners to engage with materials and techniques in such a way as to encourage creative exploration and personal discovery.

Emphasize the evolutionary nature of mastery: Mastery is a long-term, evolving process rather than a destination. Highlighting the importance of practice, reflection, and perseverance can help learners develop the mindset required for artistic and personal growth.

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