

Article

Reflective Practice in Arts-Based Learning: Teaching Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in Inclusive Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the development and delivery of an inclusive higher education programme for adults with intellectual disabilities within an Irish university. The programme was developed between two academic departments within an Irish University, to provide this student cohort with access to university life, enabling them to study and graduate alongside their peers. Central to the study is a module in arts-based communication, which aims to support students' expressive, emotional, and social engagement in learning. Adopting a reflective, practice-based approach, the paper draws on the experiences of an educator involved in teaching on the programme. Through critical reflection on teaching practice, the study examines how arts-based pedagogies can enhance communication, participation, and inclusive learning environments for students with intellectual disabilities. The findings highlight the transformative potential of arts-based learning in supporting not only skill development but also confidence, self-expression, and relational engagement. The research also illustrates how reflective practice can inform the ongoing development of inclusive pedagogies in higher education. This study contributes to the field of inclusive education by offering practitioner-based insights into the role of the arts in fostering meaningful participation and engagement for diverse learners.

Keywords: arts-based learning; reflective practice; intellectual disability; inclusive higher education; practitioner research

1. Introduction

Tertiary education in Ireland comprises further education and higher education (Iannelli et al., 2016), and spans the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2025). Within further education, programmes start at Level 1, which is at foundation level focusing on basic literacy, to Level 6 at NFQ, while in higher education programme offerings start Level 6 up to Level 10.

In addition, the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy 2021–2031 introduced a ten-year plan to improve literacy, numeracy, and digital skills for adults in Ireland, emphasising accessible learning and coordinated support (SOLAS, 2021). Included within this strategy is the promotion of inclusive and equitable education which is a key theme across the entire education sector, with particular focus on educating the 'furthest behind first' (SOLAS, 2021, p. 58).

For adults with intellectual disability, who are representative of one of the 'furthest behind' groups, SOLAS (2021, p. 58), access to education commences typically at NFQ



Academic Editor: Luca Tateo

Received: 25 June 2026

Revised: 10 September 2026

Accepted: 23 September 2026

Published: 27 September 2026

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Level 1 within further education with limited opportunities for such individuals to have access to higher education.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) is a dedicated fund by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as a commitment to support the equity of access to higher education (HEA, 2022). The South East Technological University of Ireland (SETU) was awarded such funding from the HEA for the programme developed at NFQ Level 6, 20 ETCS which stands for European Credit Transfer System as the common credit system in place in Ireland and in Europe to assign credits of learning to a programme or module. This programme, entitled Certificate in Personal Development was developed between the Department of Nursing and the Literacy Development Centre (LDC) in SETU which is a national higher education centre, offering focused programmes for educators and managers in adult literacy and the broader further education sector. (Power et al., 2025).

In developing this programme, apart from meaningful participation and inclusion in higher education, it also aligns to the ALL Strategy 2021–2031 which informs the funding for the educational activities of the LDC (SOLAS, 2021).

The Certificate in Personal Development programme places the student at the centre where students with mild to moderate intellectual disability have a meaningful experience of university life and build a skillset that will equip them to live an enhanced life through experiencing learning to reflect life skills needed by the individual and delivered in a way each student can relate to.

The subject areas for the programme are as follows:

Year 1—10 ECTS (2×5 ECTS) modules entitled 'Skills for Life 1' and 'Skills for Life 2' which will include education in for the following areas, with 'Skills for life 2' scaffolding on the learning introduces in 'Skills for Life 1', within the following subject areas.

Year 2—10 ECTS will form a choice from two of the three 5 ECTS Modules and the learning will be built on from the introduction modules in year one:

- Communication through Art;
- Culinary Skills and Money Management;
- Computer Skills- Assistive Technology, Social media.

This paper specifically focuses on the Communication through Art module. This module is designed to support the development of personal, social, and communication skills through engagement with a range of creative activities. Students are introduced to diverse art forms and materials, including painting, clay, collage, and mixed-media approaches, as a means of exploration, communication, and self-expression.

Activities are designed to encourage students to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences through both verbal and non-verbal means while developing confidence, problem-solving abilities, and collaborative skills. Through creative experimentation, students are supported to move beyond their comfort zones, make decisions, overcome challenges, and share their work with peers. Presenting and discussing their creative work fosters self-confidence and contributes to a supportive and encouraging learning environment.

The module aims to create an inclusive space where students can develop these skills, explore their identities, and engage meaningfully with others through creative practice.

2. Literature Review: The Role of Arts-Based Learning in Supporting Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

This paper aims to explore the role of arts-based learning within an inclusive higher education programme for adults with intellectual disabilities, drawing on reflective insights from teaching practice to examine how such approaches support communication, engagement, and participation.

Creativity and the arts are fundamental aspects of human experience and play a significant role in how individuals communicate and make meaning. Arts-based learning has increasingly been recognised as an important pedagogical approach within inclusive education (UNICEF, 2025; Mareza et al., 2025) because it provides multiple ways for learners to communicate, participate, and make meaning. Arts-based approaches enable learners to engage with subject matter both emotionally and cognitively. Eisner (2002) argues that the arts enable forms of meaning-making that extend beyond language, allowing individuals to articulate emotional and experiential knowledge that cannot easily be captured through words alone. This understanding of artistic expression as a form of knowledge is emphasised by Hickey-Moody (2009), who argues that arts participation generates embodied forms of knowing and communication. For adults with intellectual disabilities, such approaches may create opportunities to communicate and make meaning in ways that are not easily represented through conventional academic forms of communication.

Evidence also suggests that art education fosters social development and emotional wellbeing among individuals with intellectual disabilities (Mareza et al., 2025) and contributes to the formation of relationships within the classroom (Zander, 2004; Eisner, 2002). Contemporary literature emphasises the role of the arts in challenging deficit-oriented understandings of disability. Penketh (2023) argues that disability and art education have historically been shaped by changing social constructions of disability, with increasing attention now given to disabled people as creative agents and cultural contributors in the arts. Similarly, Hickey-Moody (2009) suggests that creative participation offers opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to be recognised through their capacities, relationships, and embodied forms of knowing rather than through perceived limitations. Therefore, arts-based learning has significance beyond skill development, in supporting identity formation, agency, and participation.

While education for adults with intellectual disability frequently prioritises vocational and skills-based outcomes, the importance of emotional learning should not be overlooked. Emotional learning plays a key role in building confidence, encouraging adults with intellectual disabilities to see themselves as capable learners. Greene (1995) highlights the transformative power of the arts to facilitate emotional connection, creating spaces where learners can express themselves and connect with others on a deeper level. Greene (1995) also emphasises the role of imagination in education, where engagement with the arts can open up new ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding the world. This highlights the potential of the arts to foster not only communication and engagement but also meaningful emotional learning within inclusive educational contexts.

Research in inclusive art education further highlights the pedagogical value of creative approaches for learners with diverse needs. Gerber et al. (2024) emphasise that arts-based learning can provide multiple pathways for engagement, communication, and participation when learning environments are designed around accessibility, flexibility, and strength-based approaches. However, while research shows that arts-based approaches can support empowerment, inclusion and participation for people with intellectual disabilities (Zimmermann et al., 2024), Collins et al. (2022) argue that inclusion cannot be assumed simply because arts activities are offered. Meaningful participation requires attention to accessibility and individual needs. Arts-based initiatives require careful attention to individual needs, responsive facilitation, and accessible pathways for engagement (Harpazi et al., 2025). These findings are particularly relevant within inclusive higher education settings, where arts-based learning may provide alternative pathways for participation, identity development, and self-advocacy. Such approaches align with contemporary understandings of inclusion that emphasise belonging, agency, and meaningful participation rather than simply access to educational opportunities.

There has been growing recognition that participation in the arts for people with disabilities should not be understood solely through a therapeutic lens. Lee et al. (2018) argue that while arts-based programmes can support outcomes such as communication, confidence, and wellbeing, an exclusive focus on therapeutic benefits risks overlooking the expressive, aesthetic, and emancipatory potential of artistic practice for people with disabilities. Penketh (2023) also criticises ableist traditions within art education and calls for inclusive pedagogies that recognise diverse ways of making, knowing, and experiencing art.

Rather than positioning participants as recipients of art interventions, disability-informed approaches recognise disabled people as artists, and contributors to public discourse. These perspectives suggest that arts-based learning should be understood not simply as a means of developing individual skills, but as a pedagogical space in which adults with intellectual disabilities can exercise agency, express identity, and participate as valued members of cultural and educational communities.

Although there is increasing recognition of the value of arts-based learning for people with intellectual disabilities, much of the literature focuses on the outcomes of arts participation. By reflecting on the implementation of arts-based approaches within an inclusive higher education programme, this paper offers insights from teaching practice into how the arts may support engagement, communication, and meaningful participation for adults with intellectual disabilities.

3. Positionality

I am a lecturer within the LDC-SETU, specialising in pedagogy and teaching approaches in further and adult education. Through my work with practitioners within further education, including those teaching at NFQ Level 1, I have developed insight into the learning needs, contexts, and possibilities for students with intellectual disabilities. Although this cohort is not my usual group of students, these experiences shape my understanding of how arts-based approaches may support inclusive and emotionally engaging learning environments.

My interest in arts-based pedagogy extends beyond this research and informs both my professional practice and academic development. I established and facilitate an arts-based learning community of practice for adult and further education tutors, providing a space to share and critically discuss creative approaches to teaching and learning. In addition, I recently began teaching the Communication through Art module that forms the focus of this study. Alongside my teaching role, I am undertaking training in art therapy, which has shaped my understanding of arts-based practice. As a result, I am particularly drawn to approaches that prioritise exploration of self, identity, communication, and wellbeing, rather than the development of technical artistic skills alone. These experiences influence how I interpret and make meaning from the reflective data presented in this study.

This dual position, as both educator and researcher, forms an important foundation for the research methodology. The use of a structured reflective framework also encouraged critical examination of my own perspectives rather than accepting initial interpretations at face value. The following section outlines the methodology adopted to examine my reflections.

4. Research Methodology

This research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and emerges through individuals' interpretations of their experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This study is a first-person account with the educator voice being the only one captured. This paradigm was considered appropriate for the study as it enabled exploration of the emotional, relational, and transformative dimensions of arts-based learning from the perspective of the educator. Rather than seeking distance,

interpretivist research in education recognises that relationships between students and teachers shape interpretation of the experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is recognised as an active participant rather than a detached observer. This approach offers rich, deeper insights into the personal and professional aspects of using arts-based learning with students who have intellectual disabilities.

While subjectivity is an inherent feature of reflective practitioner research, steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, particular attention was given to credibility, dependability and confirmability of the findings. Credibility was supported through the ongoing maintenance of a reflective journal throughout the module. Dependability was addressed through the use of Lowry O'Neill's (2010, 2025) Integrative Reflective Template (IRT), which offered a systematic framework for analysing critical incidents. Confirmability was enhanced through ongoing reflexive examination of assumptions, values, and professional positioning. An audit trail including reflective journal entries, critical incident selection and stages of analysis was maintained to ensure transparency in interpreting findings. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, this study recognises it as an inherent feature of practitioner inquiry while employing reflexive and systematic procedures to make the interpretive process transparent and open to scrutiny.

5. Ethical Considerations

As this study draws on my personal reflective account of using arts-based learning with adults with intellectual disability, ethical approval was not required in accordance with SETU's institutional ethical guidelines (SETU, 2025). While this study focused exclusively on the educator's reflections on teaching practice, ethical principles relating to respect, confidentiality, and duty of care were considered throughout. Care was taken to anonymise classroom incidents and present them as reflections on pedagogical decision-making rather than focusing on individual students. No names, personal information, or identifiable characteristics were recorded, and critical incidents were selected and reported in a manner that protected anonymity.

6. Methods

This study adopts a reflective approach from the sole perspective of the educator as the researcher within this study, drawing on my experience of using arts-based learning to teach adults with intellectual disabilities within higher education. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the duration of the module to document observations, responses to teaching, and emerging insights.

From these reflections, two critical incidents (Brookfield, 1995) were selected as significant to the teaching and learning experience. Each critical incident was further subjected to in-depth analysis using Lowry O'Neill's Integrative Reflective Template (IRT) (Lowry O'Neill, 2010, 2025). The IRT is a structured model of reflective practice that guides practitioners through eight interconnected stages of reflection that explore experience, emotional responses, contextual influences, assumptions, and alternative perspectives, before identifying implications for future practice. These stages are presented in Table 1.

The IRT is an advanced model of reflection that integrates cognitive, affective, and imaginative aspects of reflection, incorporating personal beliefs as well as wider social and theoretical influences (Lowry O'Neill, 2010, 2025). This structured approach to examining my practice facilitated a layered analysis, moving beyond descriptive accounts towards a more critical examination of my practice.

Table 1. Integrative Reflective Template (IRT) [Lowry O’Neill \(2025\)](#).

Stages	Reflective Questions
Experience	What happened? When? Where? Who?
Explore	What did I feel?
Examine	What was the context? What assumptions can I identify?
Expand	Can I imagine from another perspective?
Exhale	Can I suspend my beliefs?
Extrapolate	What do I think and feel now? What conclusions can I draw?
Extend	What future actions can I take?
Earth	How do I move forward with respect for myself, others and the earth?

7. Research Limitations

While this study provides valuable practitioner insight into the use of arts-based learning within an inclusive higher education programme, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The findings are based on reflective accounts of my practice and therefore represent one interpretation of the teaching and learning experience. As the study did not collect data directly from students, the perspectives of programme participants are not represented. Consequently, the findings should be understood as reflections on practice rather than a comprehensive evaluation of student experiences or outcomes.

8. Results—Critical Reflections

The following are reflections on two critical incidents drawn from my experience of teaching adults with intellectual disabilities on the programme. Through engaging with these incidents, I developed a deeper understanding of my role and decision-making processes. What I learned from the students on the programme was particularly significant, as their responses and engagement offered insight into effective practice, communication, and the importance of adaptability in supporting diverse needs. The narrative account of each critical incident is presented below while Table 2 presents a structured analysis of each critical incident using [Lowry O’Neill’s \(2025\)](#) IRT.

Table 2. Analysis of 2 critical incidents using the IRT ([Lowry O’Neill, 2025](#)).

IRT Stage	Guiding Questions	Critical Incident 1: Owning Creativity	Critical Incident 2: Teaching Beyond Comfort Zones
Experience	What happened? When? Where? Who?	Students confidently identified themselves as creative individuals	Students encountered barriers to engaging with artistic materials
Explore	What did I feel?	Feelings of admiration alongside imposter syndrome regarding my own artistic identity	Feelings of uncertainty and concern about adapting activities and outcomes
Examine	What was the context? What assumptions can I identify?	Assumption that artistic expertise requires formal training. Dominant societal narratives about artistic talent and expertise.	Assumption that specific artistic processes were necessary to achieve desired outcomes.
Expand	Can I imagine from another perspective?	Creativity is rooted in participation and self-expression rather than technical skill	Alternative materials and approaches can achieve equivalent learning outcomes

Table 2. *Cont.*

IRT Stage	Guiding Questions	Critical Incident 1: Owning Creativity	Critical Incident 2: Teaching Beyond Comfort Zones
Exhale	Can I suspend my beliefs?	Letting go of the belief that I needed formal artistic credentials to facilitate meaningful arts-based learning.	Letting go of the expectation that all students must engage with the same materials or processes to participate successfully.
Extrapolate	What do I think and feel now? What conclusions can I draw?	Greater recognition of educator creative identity and confidence in arts-based teaching	Increased commitment to flexibility, co-construction of learning and responsive pedagogy
Extend	What future actions can I take?	Continue to embrace and model creative risk-taking, while creating opportunities for students to celebrate their creative identities.	Incorporate greater flexibility in lesson planning, discuss potential barriers in advance, and provide multiple pathways for participation.
Earth	How do I move forward with respect for myself, others, and the earth?	Foster inclusive learning environments that value diverse expressions of creativity and support authentic participation.	Promote equitable access to learning by respecting individual preferences, adapting resources, and recognising diverse ways of engaging in creative activities.

9. Critical Incident 1: A Reflection on Imposter Feelings and Owning Creativity

When I first met the students, we began with introductions. As each student shared their name, they also began telling me how they express their creativity. As we moved around the room, I heard accounts of writing poetry, composing songs and rap, painting, and crafting, among other pursuits. What struck me immediately was the extent to which they owned their creativity. Although one or two participants expressed uncertainty about their artistic ability, most confidently identified themselves as creative individuals.

This surprised me. In my experience working with adults, particularly adult education tutors, many are quick to disclaim their artistic abilities, often stating that they are not good at art. In contrast, these students spoke with confidence and pride about their creative practices. I felt honoured to be in the presence of individuals who so openly celebrated their creative identities. Their perspectives prompted me to reflect on how dominant narratives, particularly those that position creativity as the domain of the ‘talented’, can discourage people from engaging in artistic expression. These students appeared not to have internalised such limiting beliefs.

I began to question why this sense of creative ownership is often absent in other groups, and whether this confidence might in some way be distinctive within this cohort of learners with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, I became acutely aware of my own positioning in the creative space and the feelings of imposter syndrome that I carry around art. Despite having used arts-based methods in my teaching for many years and having conducted research in this area, I have no formal training in art. I am entirely self-taught. This sometimes undermines my own confidence in my ability to teach using methods that I have not formally studied. This feeling is not unique to me. Within arts education, imposter feelings can stem from the assumption that educators must also be skilled artists. Holdstock (2026) found that many trainee teachers report feeling ‘not artistic enough’, often equating competence in art with technical skill rather than pedagogical understanding. However, flexibility and the ability to adapt are far more significant than the artistic ability of the teacher (Casciano et al., 2019).

At the same time, McNiff (1998) highlights how doubt and fear are intrinsic to the creative process, suggesting that uncertainty is not a barrier but an essential condition for meaningful creative engagement. He observes that education systems, and consequently teachers, can be resistant to open-ended, process-oriented creative work, often seeking certainty and clear outcomes. This tension resonates with my own experience of working within an outcomes-driven educational system, where there can be pressure to prioritise measurable results over exploratory learning. Biesta (2013) conceptualises teaching as a risky practice, in which outcomes cannot be fully predetermined or controlled. Risky education involves a willingness to engage with unpredictability and to remain open to what emerges in the learning process. This framing helps to re-position uncertainty not as a weakness in teaching, but as a necessary space in which creativity and authentic learning can occur.

Witnessing the students' confidence, I found myself wondering what it might feel like to embrace my own creative identity in the same way. What would it mean to name myself as an artist without immediately qualifying that I am 'not very good'? Throughout my career, I have supported others in recognising and developing their creative selves. Yet, in this moment, I realised that I cannot fully honour the creativity of others if I do not first acknowledge and value my own.

This incident highlights the importance of arts-based learning as a space where creative identity can be expressed and affirmed, particularly within inclusive educational contexts. It also centres the role of the educator in navigating uncertainty and self-perception when facilitating arts-based learning. This experience provides insight into how arts-based pedagogies can support confidence, engagement, and participation for students with intellectual disabilities, while simultaneously shaping the educator's own reflective practice.

10. Critical Incident 2: Finding Solutions and Teaching Beyond Comfort Zones

Throughout the module, there were numerous instances where students demonstrated adaptability when faced with challenges related to materials or processes. For example, when working with clay, some students found the tactile experience uncomfortable. Rather than disengaging, they identified practical solutions, such as wearing gloves to enable participation. These moments highlighted the importance of anticipating potential barriers and creating opportunities for open dialogue.

In response, I began discussing upcoming materials and activities with students in advance, enabling them to voice concerns and prepare for subsequent sessions. This also gave me time to develop alternative approaches. I found it challenging as this was my first experience in a teaching context where I needed to consistently design flexible pathways and adapt activities to meet diverse needs. At times, this was overwhelming, as it required ongoing creative problem-solving in both planning and delivery.

This experience reminds me of Biesta's (2013) conceptualisation of teaching as a 'risky business', where outcomes cannot be fully predicted or controlled. Teaching, much like art, is inherently messy and contingent. Arts-based learning, in particular, invites uncertainty and requires both teacher and learner to engage with ambiguity. In this context, I learned to adapt my teaching plans, while students simultaneously adapted to materials and processes. This mutual adaptability became a defining feature of the learning environment.

One particularly memorable example involved a student who strongly disliked using paint and initially refused to engage in activities involving it. As many sessions incorporated painting, this presented a challenge. We collaboratively explored alternatives and the student chose to engage with pastels and markers, participating in the same creative task through different media.

This flexibility, however, introduced uncertainty for me as an educator. For instance, when decorating clay sculptures, the student opted to use permanent markers instead of paint. I found myself concerned about the outcome and whether the work might be ‘ruined’. In these moments, I was required to embrace uncertainty and relinquish control over predefined expectations. This experience prompted a shift in how I understand my role as an educator. If I aim to encourage students to take creative risks, I must also be willing to do so. I cannot shield students from the possibility of unwanted outcomes, as these are intrinsic to both artistic practice and learning. As [Biesta \(2013\)](#) suggests, meaningful education involves a willingness to remain open to what emerges, even when it diverges from intended outcomes. Instead of control, my role is to support and guide students through the process of exploration, including its unpredictability and imperfections.

As [McNiff \(1998\)](#) suggests, creative practice requires a willingness to ‘trust the process’, accepting doubt and uncertainty as necessary conditions for authentic expression. Through this incident, I have come to view teaching not as the management of outcomes, but as the facilitation of a shared, evolving process of creation that embraces risk, responsiveness, and the productive possibilities of messiness.

11. Discussion: Implications for Teaching Practice

This study highlights the value of arts-based learning as a pedagogical approach that supports communication, identity formation, and participation for adults with intellectual disabilities within inclusive higher education. Drawing on reflective insights from two critical incidents, several key implications for teaching practice emerge, particularly when considered alongside national and institutional commitments to widening participation.

Arts-based pedagogies create spaces in which students can express and affirm their identities as creative individuals. As demonstrated in Critical Incident 1, students confidently articulated their creative practices, challenging dominant narratives that position creativity as the domain of the “talented.” [Hickey-Moody’s \(2009\)](#) concept of becoming helps to appreciate this process. Rather than viewing learning solely as skill acquisition, Hickey-Moody suggests that participation in artistic practice contributes to the formation of new identities. The students’ claiming of their creative identities illustrates this process of becoming, where participation in the arts supports alternative understandings of self beyond dominant disability narratives.

This also aligns with [Eisner’s \(2002\)](#) assertion that the arts enable forms of meaning-making that extend beyond language. This is particularly significant in the Certificate in Personal Development at SETU, as the programme is designed not only to develop skills but also to enhance students’ sense of self, belonging, and participation in university life. In this way, arts-based learning directly supports the broader aims of inclusive higher education initiatives.

The findings emphasise the importance of flexibility and adaptability in inclusive teaching practice. Critical Incident 2 illustrates how both students and educator engaged in ongoing problem-solving to support participation. These findings are also consistent with [Harpazi et al. \(2025\)](#), highlighting the importance of responsive and individualised creative approaches when working with adults with intellectual disabilities. This responsiveness aligns strongly with the principles underpinning the ALL Strategy (2021–2031), which emphasises accessible, flexible, and learner-centred approaches. By discussing materials in advance and providing multiple entry points to activities, teaching moved beyond standardised delivery towards a more inclusive, responsive model.

The study also highlights the co-constructed nature of learning. The negotiation of alternative approaches positioned students as active contributors to their learning experience. [Hickey-Moody \(2009\)](#) also emphasises that arts-based learning is relational, with

understanding emerging through shared creative experiences, negotiation, and engagement with others. This is particularly important within the context of programmes developed through initiatives such as PATH, which aim not only to increase access to higher education but also to ensure that participation is meaningful and equitable. The classroom became a shared space of adaptation and dialogue, reflecting the broader goals of inclusive programme design.

While the findings show the potential of arts-based learning to support communication, participation, and self-expression, the study also highlights challenges for educators. These include balancing structure with flexibility, supporting creativity while meeting educational goals, and creating opportunities for self-expression without assuming that all learners are comfortable engaging in artistic processes. This can be demanding in terms of planning, facilitation, and emotional labour (Biesta, 2013). As illustrated in Critical Incident 2, educators must respond to diverse learner needs, requiring ongoing scaffolding, adaptation and negotiation with learners. These tensions do not diminish the value of arts-based learning but highlight the importance of responsive teaching.

Both critical incidents highlight the significance of this uncertainty and risk in teaching (Biesta, 2013). The findings demonstrate that meaningful education cannot be fully predetermined. The unpredictability inherent in arts-based learning required a willingness to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. This aligns with the ethos of inclusive higher education programmes, where teaching must remain responsive to diverse needs rather than fixed outcomes. The ‘messiness’ of teaching is not a limitation but a necessary condition for authentic and inclusive learning.

Finally, reflective practice emerges as a critical mechanism for bridging policy and practice. Through structured reflection, the educator was able to adapt teaching approaches in ways that align with both pedagogical theory and national strategy. The use of Lowry O’Neill’s (2010, 2025) Integrative Reflective Template supported deeper engagement with both the emotional and practical dimensions of teaching. This demonstrates how practitioner research can play a key role in realising the ambitions of inclusive education policies, translating them into meaningful, context-specific practice.

Overall, this study suggests that arts-based learning, when supported by reflective and flexible teaching approaches, can meet the goals of inclusive education policy within higher education settings. It provides a practical example of how programmes such as the Certificate in Personal Development at SETU can move beyond access to support genuine participation, engagement, and transformation.

12. Conclusions

This paper has explored the role of arts-based learning within an inclusive higher education programme for adults with intellectual disabilities, drawing on reflective insights from teaching practice within the Certificate in Personal Development at SETU. The findings demonstrate that arts-based pedagogies support communication and meaningful participation, while also fostering environments in which students can express and affirm their identities as creative individuals.

The study demonstrates how such pedagogical approaches contribute to the wider policy landscape. The inclusive, flexible practices developed within the module reflect the priorities of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy (2021–2031), while also supporting the aims of PATH-funded initiatives to widen participation in higher education. The Certificate in Personal Development provides a tangible example of how these strategic commitments can be realised in practice, creating opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in and experience higher education in meaningful ways.

Future research could build on this work by exploring student perspectives within such programmes and examining the longer-term impact of arts-based learning on confidence, identity formation, and participation beyond the university setting. As higher education continues to expand access to diverse learner populations, approaches that prioritise creativity, flexibility, and inclusion will be essential in ensuring that access leads to meaningful and transformative educational experiences.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.B. and C.P.; methodology, K.B. and C.P.; validation, K.B.; formal analysis, K.B.; investigation, K.B.; data curation, K.B.; writing—original draft preparation, K.B. and C.P.; writing—review and editing, K.B. and C.P.; visualization, K.B. and C.P.; project administration, K.B. and C.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to this study draws on the researcher’s personal reflective account of using arts-based learning with adults with intellectual disability, ethical approval was not required. No primary data were collected from students enrolled in the programme, and no individuals or groups are identifiable within this reflection. Consequently, the study does not involve human participant research as defined by SETU’s institutional ethical guidelines (SETU, 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Patient consent was waived due to this study draws on the researcher’s personal reflective account of using arts-based learning with adults with intellectual disability, ethical approval was not required. No primary data were collected from students enrolled in the programme, and no individuals or groups are identifiable within this reflection. Consequently, the study does not involve human participant research as defined by SETU’s institutional ethical guidelines (SETU, 2025).

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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