

Article

Music Is the Space Between the Notes (Claude Debussy)—The Power of Connection: Exploring Motivations, Barriers and Relational Pedagogy in Adult Music Learning

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Abstract

This research endeavoured to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of adult music learners. A qualitative collective case study using creative facilitation approaches was adopted, as part of an established Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up event, to capture the voice of the adult music learner in relation to their experience of learning music within SETU Music School. Following inductive, thematic data analysis, emergent findings provided an insight into the motivations of adult music learners, barriers to their learning and strategies that they felt support their learning. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this paper provides evidence that adult music learners are intrinsically motivated. The research identified that a connection with the wider Music Community through Adult Learner Meet Ups provided peer support and helped to sustain motivation for adult learners. This research identified barriers that are specific to adult music learners, including time pressure, emotional vulnerability and comparisons to younger players. This paper posits that adopting a relational pedagogy including a coaching ethos can foster relationships and help to mitigate such barriers. Drawing on Debussy's metaphor of the "space between notes", this paper argues that while the development of musical knowledge and skills is important to adult music learners, their relationships with their peers and lecturers are equally significant. The adult music learner Community of Practice provided a space to foster these relationships and contributed to learners' motivation, engagement, and commitment to continued music learning. This paper will conclude by discussing how these findings could be applied to adult learners generally and highlight the importance of fostering connection in supporting adult learner retention and lifelong learning.

Keywords: adult music learner; creative facilitation; Self-Determination Theory; relational pedagogy; music; connection; motivation; barriers; coaching



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'Music saves people. Music connects people. Music awakens people. Music comforts people. Music challenges people. Music enlightens people. Music excites people. Music helps people. Whether it's in our schools, or in our homes, or in our communities, we all need music in our lives.' (Fleischfresser, 2022)

1. Background and Context of South East Technological University (SETU) Music School

South East Technological University (SETU) Music School is a department within the Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning at SETU. SETU Music School has been

the leading provider of music education in Waterford and the South-East of Ireland for over forty years. It consists of approximately 24 full-time and part-time lecturers in music and approximately 500 students. It is distinct from many other departments across the university in that, unlike the typical cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate learners, learners within the Music School can span from 4 years of age to their late 80s. The ethos of SETU Music School is *“to be an inclusive centre of excellence for performance-based music education for children and adults which values access, quality and developing the whole musical learner”* (South East Technological University, n.d.).

Initially, the Music School was established as ‘Workshop’ programmes for children and adults in 1982 in the Department of Adult Education within the Waterford Regional Technical College (WRTC). There were small numbers of students receiving individual lessons. In addition, the school offered orchestral rehearsals and collaborated with the newly developed BA Music Degree as part of its Community Choir and Orchestra led by the late Dr Eric Sweeney. The WRTC became a hub for professional standard music education and for orchestral and choral experience for the young aspiring musician as well as the interested adult, and also included a pathway to an Honours degree in Music at third level.

Following the move to the College Street Campus in 1994, the Music School developed and expanded. As a result of new performing spaces, more teaching rooms and practice rooms, additional programmes were developed and provided within the school for both instrumental and ensemble activities. The BA Honours degree in Music was subsequently developed, followed by the Master’s and PhD programmes in Research, Performance and Music Composition. Although the Music School sits within the Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning and the BA in Music sits within the School of Humanities within SETU, they collaborate regularly to design and provide initiatives, performances and masterclasses that benefit all students and staff alike.

2. Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Ups Within the Music School

Since its establishment, SETU Music School has adopted an inclusive ethos which has endeavoured to foster adult learning and continuous education and to highlight the importance of lifelong learning. Over the past few years, the cohort of adult learners has increased both for individual tuition and the Orchestra. At present, adult learners make up approximately 16% of the overall student numbers. SETU Music School has several initiatives that adult learners can become involved in to build a community within the school between themselves. These initiatives are actively encouraged and include performance opportunities, ensembles, music theory classes, masterclasses and collaborations with other music groups.

The Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up has evolved from informal and incidental opportunities to connect to a more formal space for adult learners to reflect, collaborate and share music. During COVID-19, it was observed that adults either returned to music themselves or taught themselves via online videos. Post-COVID-19, there was an increased appetite amongst adult learners to continue and for people to engage more with their music. For the adult learner that joined a choir or orchestra, the sense of community and opportunity to network was built into the fabric of the group. However, staff members were aware that an individual adult music learner would often only see their lecturer in their weekly music lesson. Acknowledging that adult music learners formed a distinct cohort within the Music School, with distinct needs and aspirations, the Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up was established. This coincided with the launch of an Adult Learner Performance Concert as part of Performance Week in 2024. The Community

of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up events are held at least once a semester, in December and June. Although it is a relaxed face-to-face evening, it includes themes for discussion, a sounding board for the learners and an opportunity for them to openly share their perspectives and experiences in a safe space with their peers. In addition to this, depending on upcoming adult learner performances, extra rehearsal time is also provided.

3. Clarification of Terminology

For clarification purposes, an adult music learner within the context of this study refers to an adult attending SETU Music School. This may include post-Leaving Certificate learners (students undertaking further education following secondary school), undergraduate or postgraduate higher education students, adults returning to music after a period of absence, complete beginners, and individuals who are employed or retired. As such, participants bring a diverse range of life experiences and musical backgrounds, ranging from those with no prior musical experience to those with substantial musical knowledge and experience. Regardless of whether they choose to undertake formal assessments, such as graded instrumental examinations, their participation is not constrained by the requirements typically associated with accredited programmes of study leading to certificates, diplomas, or degrees.

Reference will also be made to a traditional adult learner; this is distinct from an adult music learner and will refer to an adult learner who is pursuing a traditional programme of study such as a diploma, degree or postgraduate qualification of some description.

4. Rationale for Study

There are a number of factors which provided a rationale for conducting a study into the perspectives and experiences of adult music learners within SETU Music School.

Firstly, a strategic objective of SETU's "Connecting for Impact in Lifelong Learning" Strategic Plan 2025–2028 is that all lifelong learning programmes reflect the needs of adult learners, both in terms of academic study and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and by augmenting the range of student support available to part-time students (SETU, 2025). It is envisioned that, through gaining an insight into adult music learners' experiences of studying music, the findings of the study will be utilised to inform future practice within SETU Music School and to build on the teaching, learning and assessment practices for adult music learners.

Secondly, a significant rationale for conducting this research was to develop an insight into the motivations and goals of adult music learners. It is widely accepted that there is a significant distinction between adult learners and adolescents. While a child's primary purpose is education, adult learners must balance educational goals and other life requirements (Green, 2024). Adult learners must adjust to the role of a student and perhaps balance their schoolwork with working full time and running a household, which could stand in the way of achieving certifications or higher degrees (Bellare et al., 2023). Adult learners are multifaceted and their reasons for seeking higher education fall into different categories based on individual factors (Bellare et al., 2023). Whilst "traditional" adult learners often consider higher education as a bridge to better job opportunities, higher pay, promotions and an increase in knowledge (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Bellare et al., 2023), the profile of the adult music learner is perhaps distinct from this. Their motivations, given that they are not typically professional musicians, tend not to be related to career mobility and merit investigation.

Thirdly, higher education institutions should focus on adult learners' subjective experiences to gather a clear understanding of the appropriate institutional-level factors necessary to academically influence and motivate the adult learner (Rueda & Swift, 2024, cited in

[Green, 2024](#), p. 137). This provides further rationale for capturing the subjective experiences of the adult music learner, and specifically identifying potential barriers that they may be facing, which could inhibit their studies. In light of this, it was deemed necessary to gain an insight into institutional factors that can motivate adult music learners.

Finally, in order to address these aims, the study was guided by four research questions relating to the experiences of adult music learners within SETU Music School. Specifically, the research sought to explore: (1) the motivating factors that influence adults to undertake music learning; (2) the perceived benefits and outcomes associated with learning music as an adult; (3) the barriers and challenges encountered by adult music learners; and (4) the strategies, support and approaches that may facilitate successful engagement with music learning. These research questions informed the design of the roundtable discussions and provided the framework for the collection and analysis of data.

5. Methodology and Data Collection

Having established a rationale for exploring the experiences and perspectives of adult music learners in relation to their lived experience of learning music as an adult, a number of research approaches were explored. Initially, it was determined that creative, or arts-based research methods would be a suitable approach. [Leavy \(2018\)](#) defines arts-based research as a “transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research context.” It is of note that this can apply to both the research process and the dissemination of results ([Boydell et al., 2012](#)). It has also become increasingly evident that collaboration lies at the heart of arts-based approaches ([Daykin, 2019](#); [Foster, 2016](#); [Herron et al., 2023](#)). However, participants were not engaged in artistic forms of data generation or analysis; therefore, the study is more appropriately characterised as a qualitative collective case study ([Stake, 1995](#); [Yin, 2018](#)), drawing on adult music learners’ verbal accounts of their experiences and perspectives of learning music. In a qualitative case study, one wants to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of a case ([Stake, 1995](#)). In a collective case study, one issue is selected but the researcher selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue ([Creswell, 2007](#)). While artistic processes did not form part of the generation or analysis of the data itself, creative principles informed the facilitation of the research process and the representation of findings. Having provided an overview of a Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up within SETU Music School above, it was felt that an informal and discursive approach to data collection would align quite well with what the adult music learners had become accustomed to and would therefore put them at ease throughout the data collection process. In addition, SETU Music School is committed to a dialogic pedagogy whereby the voice of the adult learner is valued just as much as the voice of the lecturer ([Alexander, 2020](#)). The collaborative and participatory ethos often associated with creative facilitation approaches was therefore deemed to align with our overall philosophy and was considered advantageous in facilitating rich discussion and shared reflection. Indeed, throughout the data collection process, the voice and experiences of the lecturer were also included. In this way, the research approach could be described as a co-production whereby the lecturers and adult music learners work together to share power and responsibility from the start to the end of the project, including the generation of knowledge ([Malpass et al., 2023](#)).

In order to retain a creative dimension within the project, a creative facilitation approach was adopted as part of the qualitative, collective case study. Following data analysis, the collated findings were shared with a professional graphic designer who worked with the research team to develop visual representations of participants’ experiences and perspectives.

6. The Creative Facilitation Research Workshop Adopted the Following Format

6.1. Step 1: Selecting the Space and Introductions

In light of the creative facilitation approach to be adopted during the collective case study, a decision was made to host the workshop in the Growth Hub within the main campus of SETU. This is an open and creative space which is designed to support both academic staff and students with idea generation and entrepreneurial ambition. Due to the space and layout of dynamic roundtables/chairs, it facilitates the movement of all participants throughout the workshop.

All participants (10 in total) were welcomed into the workshop and encouraged to introduce themselves over cakes and biscuits whilst the facilitator reiterated key information regarding the data collection process, confirmed consent and addressed any questions from the participants.

6.2. Step 2: Setting up Roundtables/Graffiti Activity/Flip Charts

A series of roundtables with flipcharts were set up around the room—each focusing on a broad question related to learning music as an adult learner:

Roundtable 1: What are the motivating factors to learning music as an adult learner?

Roundtable 2: What are the perceived benefits/outcomes of learning music as an adult learner?

Roundtable 3: What are the barriers to learning music as an adult learner?

Roundtable 4: What strategies/approaches can help adult learners to study/learn music?

All participants were invited to circulate throughout and contribute to each flipchart and subsequent discussion. Post-its were made available at each table. Each roundtable was manned by one of the researchers, who took anonymous field notes in an effort to capture the general essence of discussion.

6.3. Step 3: Whole-Group Discussion and Member Checking

Towards the end of the workshop participants were invited to participate in an overarching discussion which was facilitated by one of the researchers. This discussion was recorded for transcription purposes. This provided an opportunity for member checking, as the facilitator was in a position to summarise Post-it notes and clarify the essence of each roundtable discussion with the participants within the timeframe of the session. At this point, participants were invited to add, delete or amend these notes accordingly.

6.4. Step 4: Feedback Collected from Participants Post-Workshop

Unexpectedly, a number of participants emailed the researchers directly following the workshop. In some cases, this was to share their experiences of participating in the workshop. *“Delighted to participate in yesterday’s research. It was lovely to chat and share ideas and connect with others. Happy to participate/volunteer in future projects that make come up!”* In other cases, it was to make an additional contribution that had occurred to them in the subsequent days. Each participant was asked if these could be included in the data set and they were agreeable to this.

The workshop was conducted over a period of 2 h and 30 min. Data was generated through multiple sources during the workshop, including participants’ written responses on Post-it notes, photographs of flip charts containing participant-generated comments and reflections, an audio-recorded and transcribed group discussion, and researcher field notes recorded throughout the session. Together, these sources provided insights into participants’ experiences and perspectives of learning music as adults.

7. Data Analysis

The data from the creative facilitation session were analysed using an inductive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Analysis was undertaken collaboratively by the research team using a combination of Quirkos 3 software and manual theme development. An inductive approach was considered most appropriate as it allowed patterns, ideas, and themes to be identified from participants' own contributions rather than being shaped by predetermined categories or assumptions.

To begin the analysis, the researchers reviewed the discussion transcript and participant notes several times to become familiar with the data. The transcript was then imported into Quirkos 3, a qualitative data analysis software package selected for its visual nature and support for inductive coding. During the first stage of coding, descriptive codes were assigned to sections of text that reflected recurring concepts, experiences, issues, and concerns raised by participants.

Following the initial coding stage, the descriptive codes generated in Quirkos 3 were transferred to a whiteboard using Post-it notes to support further analysis.) This created an opportunity for the research team to review the codes collectively, explore relationships between them, and reorganise them where appropriate. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and subsequently examined for common patterns and connections across the dataset. Through discussion and ongoing comparison of the categories, a number of overarching themes were developed (See Figure 1). Throughout the process, the developing themes were checked against the original transcripts and participant notes to ensure that they remained grounded in participants' experiences and accurately reflected the views expressed during the research workshop session.

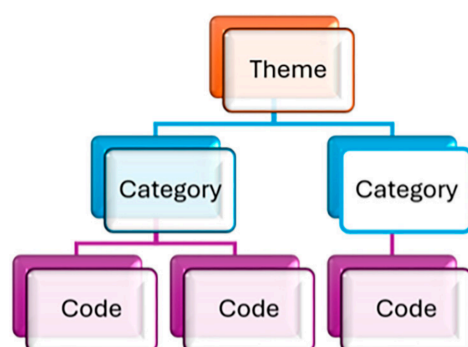


Figure 1. Development of Themes, Categories and Codes from Qualitative Data Analysis.

The analysis identified **44 descriptive codes**, **8 categories**, and **4 overarching themes**.

The collated data was subsequently shared with a graphic designer to facilitate the presentation and dissemination of research in a creative manner.

8. Sample of Participants

Through self-selection sampling, the participants were found to have varied backgrounds in music, as outlined in the table below. The study involved ten adult learners representing a range of musical backgrounds and experience levels. Participants included continuing learners, returning learners who had resumed musical engagement following a break, an experienced musician undertaking study of a new instrument, two long-term learners with sustained engagement in music education, and one complete beginner with no previous formal music learning experience. Participants represented string, piano, and vocal learning pathways. Table 1 presents an overview of participant characteristics. To protect anonymity within the relatively small music school community, participants are

described using broad categories of instrument family and learner background rather than specific instruments, years of study, or other identifying details.

Table 1. Overview of participant musical backgrounds and instrument families.

Participant	Instrument Family	Learner Background
1	String	Returning learner studying a different instrument following previous musical experience
2	Piano	Returning learner
3	String	Continuing learner
4	Voice	Returning learner
5	Voice	Returning learner
6	Piano	Experienced musician undertaking study of a new instrument
7	Voice	Complete beginner
8	String	Long-term learner
9	Voice	Long-term learner
10	Piano	Continuing learner, switching instrument

Attention was paid to identifying similarities and differences across learner backgrounds during thematic analysis. Codes and emerging themes were compared across participant groups, including complete beginners, continuing learners, returning learners, long-term learners, and experienced musicians undertaking new instruments. This process enabled consideration of whether patterns reflected shared experiences across the sample or were associated with particular learner backgrounds. While some variation was evident, particularly in relation to prior musical experience and pathways into learning, the final themes were retained because they were evident across multiple learner groups.

The researchers judged the richness of the discussions to be sufficient to address the research questions. Participants from different learner backgrounds described many similar experiences and concerns, and the analysis did not identify significant gaps or contradictory perspectives that would warrant further investigation. As a result, additional data collection was not considered necessary.

9. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this collective case study including the use of creative facilitation research methods for data collection and publication purposes was granted by SETU Research Ethics Committee on 19 March 2026. This covered the processes of recruitment, use of a graphic designer, disseminating information regarding the data collection process, confidentiality agreements and gaining informed consent from adult learners. Before commencing the data collection, at the start of this workshop, the researchers reiterated this information to the group with a particular focus on how to ensure anonymity, and addressed any questions that they had in relation to the research process.

10. An Overview of the Key Findings

Figure 2 provides a creative depiction of the emergent themes. Figure 3 provides an overview of adult music learners and factors which impacted their decision-making process. Figure 4 provides an overview of strategies that can support adult music learners and how best to support them. Figure 5 provides an overview of the outcomes for adult music learners.



Figure 2. Emergent Themes Identified Through Qualitative Analysis.



Figure 3. Barriers Facing Adult Music Learners.



Figure 4. Strategies to Support Adult Music Learners.



Figure 5. Outcomes for Adult Music Learners.

11. Intrinsic Motivations of Adult Music Learners

This research identified key motivating factors for many adult music learners. Developing a good understanding of what motivates adult learners is important in supporting them to achieve their aims (Scruton & Ferguson, 2014). Motivation is important not only because it apparently improves learning but also because it mediates learning and is a consequence of learning as well (Włodkowski, 2008, p. 6).

As will become apparent, the analysis identified motivating factors which prompted adult learners to learn music generally. It provided an insight into their decision-making process, influential factors and their personal circumstances which facilitated learning music. In addition, the analysis identified the factors which motivated these learners to continue to develop as musicians. It highlighted what motivated them to practice, and to continue to learn music.

It is evident that the participants were intrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivation pertains to activities performed by individuals “for their own sake,” or for their inherent interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants reported learning music for fun, for escapism, or for a time-out: “You have the calm and peace amongst the busyness”; “It’s a time-out, a relaxation from regular life.” The theories of intrinsic motivation fit very well with a neuroscientific understanding of motivation; behaviour that people find intrinsically satisfying probably conforms to what their brains are physiologically disposed to want and induces or is compatible with a positive mind–body state (Włodkowski, 2008, p. 19). “It’s so uplifting—gives you a buzz.” Such comments consolidate the argument that music can induce emotional health benefits and positive therapeutic effects (Bodkin-Allen et al., 2019, p. 24). One participant reported a positive mood shift following a lesson: “I feel like I’m kind of buzzing for the afternoon, or I feel like I find myself humming or singing back, which I maybe wasn’t before that”.

Intrinsic motivation can be explored through a number of theoretical frameworks. For the purposes of this paper, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory will be considered. These participant experiences can be better understood by considering the theoretical frameworks that underpin intrinsic motivation.

11.1. Self-Actualisation for Adult Music Learners

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides a lens for us to further examine intrinsic motivation of adult music learners’ motivations. Self-actualisation enhances motivation because

the adult learners increase their understanding of self, potential and intrinsic values (Compton, 2024). Maslow's theory of human needs has shed light on music as one of the most powerful arenas of peak experiences, during which one feels at the height of their powers (a sense of self-actualization) (Greene & Burke, 2007). Self-actualisation can be described as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming (Greene & Burke, 2007). Indeed, participants describe their motivation to learn music "for brain training", "for memory" and indeed for physical improvements. "I can teach my body how to do something completely different in music". Participants acknowledged the health benefits also. "That deep breathing is good for your body, you know?"

Self-actualisation is described as one of the constructs of human development, and is a desirable life-long outcome for all individuals. It is noteworthy that each of the participants shared that they had been learning music for 2–10 years. This consolidates the argument that intrinsic motivation is likely responsible for the preponderance of human learning across the life span, as opposed to externally mandated learning and instruction (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Perhaps this provides an insight into the prolonged commitment of many of the learners to learn music, far longer than the parameters that would otherwise be set by a traditional two–four-year programme of learning. While Maslow's framework helps illuminate the role of self-actualisation, participants' experiences can also be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

11.2. Adult Music Learners and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation is fostered when three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Participants provided evidence that autonomy and connection contributed to their sustained levels of motivation and dedication to music. Strategies that have been adopted by SETU Music School to support learners' competence will be discussed during the subsequent section.

11.3. The Importance of Autonomy for Adult Music Learners

Personal circumstances of the participants contributed to both their autonomy and their decision to learn music. Free time was a key factor for these adult learners: "You've looked and you've said, there's a slot of time here, and I have time to do this". The locality of the lessons was also identified as a motivating factor and the participants acknowledged that convenient access to SETU Music School contributed to their motivation to learn music. "Having the facility such as SETU locally—in a captive area". Indeed, one participant described this autonomy as "being in the driver's seat." Such findings provide evidence of "self-directed learning", the process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). It is likely that this is quite distinct from that of younger cohorts of learners, given that parents or older siblings may impact their level of autonomy regarding their learning of music.

11.4. The Importance of Connection for Adult Music Learners

The importance of connection, or relatedness, was also identified as a motivating factor for many adult learners. Within Self-Determination Theory, relatedness is described as a sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture providing a purpose (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 64).

Many participants provided anecdotal evidence that familial influences impacted their decision to learn music. In some instances, these examples described parent or grandparent figures performing music or appreciating music. "There was an old piano in my grandmother's

house, and one day I saw her about it. That drew me to the piano. . .” This has been identified as a socialisation factor. Indeed Włodkowski (2008, p. 100) argues that collective family can contribute to adults’ feelings regarding success. It is noteworthy that these formative childhood experiences helped to sustain their motivation to learn music into adulthood. In some cases, participants spoke of these role models with nostalgia or sentimentality. *“He loved listening to music and opera”*. In some ways it was felt that music provided a strong familial connection, a connection with roots, or a connection with childhood.

It also emerged that participants placed huge value on the connections that they had formed with fellow students and the wider musical community. This connection was facilitated through Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up events and group rehearsals for upcoming performances. One participant described this as *“building a community of new friends”*. Another described it as *“improving our social life.”* This connection with peers was a positive outcome of learning music and was identified as a key motivating factor for them: *“people are getting on well and chatting, and it’s just nice, and going to rehearsals every week, and. . . seeing everybody and kind of having that connection is nice.”* It is noteworthy that although this relatedness was undoubtedly a factor which supported their motivation to continue to develop as a musician; it was not necessarily an outcome that they had anticipated: *“I’ve definitely met people through music that I wouldn’t have ever met. You know, and it’s been unexpected. . .”* It became apparent that although it was not a factor which influenced their initial decision-making process, it supported their ongoing engagement with the Music School.

This consolidates the argument put forward by Ryan and Deci (2000) to generate the motivation required to engage intentionally, the learner needs to feel not only competent and agentic, but also personally connected or related to their peers in the immediate community (E. Hargreaves et al., 2026, p. 198). One participant encapsulated this in their community: *“The community feeling is great. Because everyone is doing something that they love”*. Such findings are positive, particularly as in the context of later-life music-making, these social benefits have important implications for supporting wellbeing and for combatting illness and disorders related to loneliness and isolation that many older adults face (Dozois & Mental Health Research Canada, 2021). While participants identified many factors that supported their motivation and engagement, they also described a number of challenges that influenced their learning experiences.

12. Barriers Facing Adult Music Learners

The analysis revealed a set of interconnected barriers that shaped adults’ experiences of learning music. Rather than appearing as isolated difficulties, they reflected the broader pressures of adult life, where learning must be balanced against responsibilities, emotional demands, and social positioning. Many of these barriers could also be analysed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

Recent studies on adult musical engagement reinforce these points, emphasising that motivation and persistence largely depend on how effectively these needs are supported (Creech & Enright, 2025; Evans & Bonneville-Roussy, 2016).

Time emerged as the most consistent challenge. Participants described having to deliberately *“look at your diary”* and carve out a *“slot of time”* for lessons or practice. Musical engagement rarely happened spontaneously; instead, it required deliberate scheduling *“ensuring practice time is on the calendar”* and, in many cases, the rearrangement of other commitments. They spoke not only about the limited availability of time but also about the difficulty of balancing learning with other responsibilities and commitments. This supports research showing that adults often struggle to balance their musical ambitions with limited schedules, requiring careful planning within daily routines (Creech & Enright, 2025;

Hallam & Creech, 2016). While autonomy typically boosts motivation, some participants found it a burden. Several expressed guilt over missed practice sessions, aligning with studies showing that adults often feel guilty when learning conflicts with work or family commitments (Hallam & Creech, 2016). What became clear was that the barrier was not simply time itself, but the emotional weight attached to it.

Vulnerability was another strong theme. Many participants reported feeling anxious, overly self-conscious, or uncomfortable, especially during performances or unfamiliar tasks. Adults often bring long-standing habits of self-criticism into learning settings, with some hesitant to appear inexperienced or to make mistakes publicly. Many of the self-deprecating comments captured this. Describing an adult music learner performance, one participant suggested: *"We had the good, the not too bad and the clumsy (moi)"*. Recent research supports this, showing that adult learners frequently fear negative judgement and are reluctant to take risks in musical settings (Fernholz et al., 2019). For some, this led to hesitation or holding back, even when they wanted to improve. Participants noted that this affected their confidence and sense of competence.

Issues related to competence were especially common. Some found music theory overwhelming, comparing it to learning a new language. Others struggled with memory and retention, often attributing this to age, fatigue, or the mental demands of adult life. Recent studies on adult instrumental learners report similar difficulties, such as slower processing and challenges in retaining new information (Bugos & Kochar, 2017). Comparing themselves to younger learners also exacerbated these issues. One participant questioned why, starting at 40, they could not *"play the same as a 7-year-old who's playing the same length of time"*: *"I was outside to be talking to a 7-year-old, you know, and they're going in to do their lesson and they told me all the pieces that they could play."* Although unrealistic, such comparisons are common, and research indicates that adults tend to judge themselves harshly against younger learners, which can erode confidence (Hallam, 2010; Harrison, 2014). This aligns with SDT's view that competence is a core psychological need: when adults feel inadequate or overwhelmed, their motivation declines.

Participants also talked about the early stages of learning as slow and sometimes discouraging. They felt that progress was minimal, and enjoyment often only appeared after sustained effort. Research on adult practice habits supports this, indicating that early learning can resemble a "slog", with motivation typically increasing only after persistent effort (Evans & Bonneville-Roussy, 2016). Expectations, whether internal or external, sometimes made this worse. When progress did not match what they thought it "should", some participants questioned their abilities or whether they should continue. In practice, this meant that the gap between expectation and reality became a barrier in itself.

Finally, connection also shaped adults' experiences. Although many participants valued the social dimension of music learning, comparisons with others created a tension which was also identified a barrier. Some learners felt intimidated by more experienced musicians, noting that *"you're in with people who know what they're doing."* This sense of not quite belonging, whether due to age, experience, or confidence, directly undermined the need for connection. Recent studies show similar patterns, with adults often feeling out of place or unsure whether they *"deserve"* to take part musically (Varvarigou et al., 2015). In some cases, the social environment amplified insecurities about competence, especially when comparison was involved. When connection is weakened, learners are less likely to persist, even when they enjoy the music itself.

Overall, these barriers illustrate how adult music learning is influenced by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They emphasise the need for learning environments that acknowledge adults' real-life challenges and actively support their psychological needs.

These findings highlight the importance of pedagogical approaches that respond to the unique needs and challenges of adult music learners.

13. Relational Pedagogy to Support the Adult Music Learner

This research captured adult music learners' perceptions of strategies that best support their learning. Developing an understanding of their motivations as well as the barriers inhibiting their learning contributed to this understanding. This research identified strategies that were very specific to music education. These included using *"a variety of music genres"* and *"recordings"*, providing opportunities to perform, and studying music theory alongside their instrument of choice.

However, the importance the participants attached to relationships with both lecturers and peers was particularly evident and aligns with the principles of relational pedagogy. Relational pedagogy positions learning as fundamentally grounded in human relationships, emphasising mutual respect, trust, care, dialogue and responsiveness between learners and educators (Quinlan, 2016; Cossette et al., 2024). Relational pedagogy challenges us to understand that positive learner–teacher and peer learning relationships do more than *support* learning—rather, relationships among teachers, learners, and learning environments *are* the intersubjective spaces within which meaningful learning and participation may emerge (Cossette et al., 2024, Quinlan, 2016).

This study extends existing understanding of relational pedagogy by demonstrating its relevance for the adult music learner. As will become apparent, participants attributed meaningful learning experiences to a coaching style of instruction and to their participation in an adult learner Community of Practice.

13.1. Coaching for the Adult Music Learner

The findings of this study suggest that participants perceive their relationship with their music lecturer as non-hierarchical: *"We're a team, we're working together"*. One participant described their experience of studying music with their lecturer as *"closer to an apprenticeship—you're actually learning something practical—if this instrument's involved obviously"*. Another participant described that their experience of studying music was akin to being coached. They acknowledged the benefits of adopting a coaching approach to focus on the process of learning music rather than on the end point: *"That's helped me, because it's like an endless journey. You could think, I'll get there someday, but actually now you can rethink yourself, because you realise—this is a journey"*. The analysis highlighted how participants placed particular value on their rapport with their lecturer. This consolidates Brookfield's (2006, p. 54) argument that students do not want to measure a teacher's effectiveness solely in terms of a particular command or technique; they want to feel confident they are learning something significant, and that as they are doing so, they are being treated as adults. This coaching ethos reflects principles of andragogy and relational pedagogy, emphasising self-directed learning, collaboration, and supportive teacher–learner relationships (Knowles, 1975).

In line with this coaching ethos, one participant described their lecturer's role in helping them to set goals for themselves. *"Say for us in the band—your first piece with the band, you know? Your first... exam piece."* Another aspect of goal setting is helping learners to manage expectations and reality. *"I guess it's reminding people you don't have to be brilliant straight away: Certain instruments, it just takes time for your muscles to develop"*. Setting goals with adult music learners requires a lecturer who is empathetic. According to Włodkowski (2008, p. 56), for instructors of adults, the pillar of empathy has three parts: (1) having a realistic understanding of the learners' goals, perspectives, and expectations for what is being learned; (2) adapting instruction to the learners' levels of experience and

skill development; and (3) continuously consider the learners' perspectives and feelings (Włodkowski, 2008, p. 59).

Competence concerns the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 2). The need for competence is best satisfied within well-structured environments that afford optimal challenges, positive feedback, and opportunities for growth (Ryan & Deci, 2020, p. 2). According to Włodkowski (2008, p. 112) competence builds confidence; it allows a person to become more confident, which provides emotional support for an effort to learn new skills and knowledge. In addition, it is necessary for the "coach" to be a highly competent in their discipline or instrument. Indeed, teaching strategies that incorporate hands-on practice and cognitive engagement are crucial to maximising the benefits of music education for seniors (Hanna-Pladdy & Mackay, 2011).

Such findings suggest that personalised feedback and collaborative goal-setting may be particularly important for sustaining adult learner engagement in online and blended environments.

13.2. Peer Support for the Adult Music Learner

A consistent emergent finding was that participants place huge value on peer support that they received as part of their music learning. This provides further evidence of the importance of connection for adult learners. Peer support refers to the informational, emotional, and practical assistance exchanged among learners and serves as an important source of social support (Wu & Cai, 2025). One participant acknowledged: "*we need our peers the same as the children need their peers.*" E. Hargreaves et al. (2026, p. 198) argues that the sense of relatedness that most people crave is characterised by experiences of closeness, warmth, belonging, respect, acceptance, value, trust, participation, shared purpose, cooperation and/or care.

According to Tonic Music, peer groups play a crucial role in supporting musicians' mental health by providing a sense of community, shared understanding, and at times practical assistance within the group (Tonic Music, n.d.). Furthermore, peer groups offer a safe space where musicians can express their feelings, share experiences, and receive empathy from those who truly understand their unique challenges, the good and the bad (Tonic Music, n.d.). One participant encapsulated this point in their description of a recent Community of Practice: Adult Learner Meet Up event: "*It was as ever full of comradery, conviviality and unqualified support for those like me that are playing for enjoyment rather than tangible reward. I'm not sure performance is my thing but I am happy playing away myself anyway*". This participant's description of enjoyment as an alternative to "tangible reward" is noteworthy. It could be insinuated that fulfilment is sometimes regarded as less tangible and less important than the performance itself. For this participant, however, enjoyment itself is a meaningful outcome. Having highlighted the barriers facing adult music learners, including vulnerability and anxiety, this is particularly significant. Adult Learner Meet Ups, group rehearsals, and performances within the SETU Music School Community of Practice were identified as valuable sources of peer support for adult music learners.

14. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article has captured adult music learners' voice in relation to their experience and perspective of learning music.

- It is evident that participants perceive music as being highly advantageous and beneficial. It can lead to an improvement in individual and collective wellbeing and have a number of physical and neurological benefits. This consolidates existing findings that learning an instrument can engage both cognitive and motor skills, which are crucial for maintaining neurological health in older adults (Song, 2026). This finding

highlights the importance of ensuring adult learners have access to music, particularly as it can lead to improved daily functioning and a better quality of life for them as a result of the improvement in processing speed, working memory and executive function, all of which tend to decline with age (Bugos et al., 2007; Hanna-Pladdy & Mackay, 2011; Song, 2026).

- This research also yielded evidence which confirmed that intrinsic motivation is fostered in adult music learners when their three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2022). The need for connection was particularly noteworthy as although it was not an initial consideration for many of the participants during the process of deciding to learn music, it undoubtedly impacted positively on their sustained motivation and retention. This highlights the importance of providing ample opportunities for peer support and engagement. An adult music learner focused Community of Practice approach may be helpful in this regard, as well as opportunities to engage in musical groups and ensembles. This finding may also be true for traditional adult learners, particularly those who engage in online or distance learning, and may not encounter incidental opportunities for peer support which would otherwise arise from face-to-face learning environments.
- This research identified many barriers which were experienced by the participants including time pressures, comparisons with younger players and feelings related to vulnerability and inadequacies. In supporting adult learners to achieve their aims, it is imperative that one has a good understanding of what the possible barriers are and how to help learners overcome them (Scruton & Ferguson, 2014).
- In light of these barriers and the importance of relationships to many adult music learners, lecturers of adult music learners could consider instigating a ‘relational pedagogy’ emphasising relationships as not only the means to effective learning and wellbeing but also *as the desired outcome* of these (D. J. Hargreaves et al., 2026, p. 198). Adopting a coaching ethos is one recommended approach that can support the adult music learner. The potential value of a relational pedagogical approach extends to adult education more broadly, particularly in programmes delivered remotely, where purposeful efforts to foster connection and learner engagement may support successful learning outcomes as well as student retention. This has implications for the professional development of all educators of adult music learners.
- Lastly, it is important to be cognisant of the finding that for many adult music learners, their focus tends to be on the musical journey, the “space between the notes”, rather than on the final performance or an aspired level of accomplishment. This study’s findings suggest that this space is characterised by shared learning experiences, support and connection, highlighting the importance of community alongside musical development. Beyond the context of music education, these findings reinforce the importance of designing adult learning environments that prioritise connection and collaboration, recognising that meaningful relationships can be central to learner engagement, retention and success.

15. Limitations of This Research

Throughout this process a number of limitations were identified pertaining to the scale of the study, the scope of the participants and the dissemination of research.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that this was a small-scale, qualitative study. As the sample size (10 participants) was arguably limited, the researchers acknowledge that the findings may not always capture the experiences and perspectives of the broader population of adult music learners. During the interpretation of the data, and during the dissemination of results, every effort was made not to make unnecessary and unhelpful

generalisations. Although the findings are situated within the context of adult music education, aspects relating to learner–teacher relationships, peer support, and community may have relevance for adult education more broadly. While further research across diverse adult learning contexts is needed, these findings may offer transferable insights for educators of adult learners working within arts-based disciplines where connection, peer support, and opportunities for creative expression are important dimensions of the learning experience.

Secondly, due to the voluntary nature of the recruitment process, it became evident that the sample included a broad spectrum of adult music learners. These included complete beginners, continuing learners, and learners who were returning to music, having learned it as a child. The age range of the participants was also quite diverse. This necessitated careful consideration during the interpretation of data and could have been alleviated had a more structured sampling process been adopted.

Lastly, this research yielded additional findings in relation to participants' recommendations regarding music theory. However, because only a small number of participants had engaged in music theory classes, it was felt that these recommendations could not be used to support broader conclusions or generalisations. As a result, these were excluded from this paper to maintain the integrity of the analysis. Future research with a larger cohort of learners engaged in music theory may provide greater insight into this area.

16. Recommendations for Further Research

In light of such limitations, a number of recommendations for further research have been identified.

It would be beneficial to conduct research into this topic with a larger sample—using purposive sampling to investigate and compare the perspectives and experiences of the various subsets of adult learners. As an example, young adult learners continuing to study music as graduate and postgraduate learners may have a different experience to mid-life/late-life music learners.

In addition, SETU Music School have established a staff choir, which is currently in its third year. Aside from the documented benefits of singing, it is argued that workplace choirs can help to establish a sense of belonging, as sense of camaraderie, a shared purpose amongst the employees (The Workplace Choir). In light of the emergent findings regarding the importance of connection and community, it would be useful to capture the voice of this particular cohort of adult music learners regarding their participation in a workplace choir.

Similarly, the SETU Orchestra within SETU Music School consists of a diverse group of members, including under-18 and adult learners, third-level and post-graduate students who may or may not be studying music, SETU staff members, and experienced local musicians with an interest in orchestral playing. It is therefore considered a hub for both aspiring instrumental students and experienced musicians. This differs from the approach adopted by other orchestras, including the *Blow the Dust Orchestra* at the National Concert Hall, which caters specifically to older people and is orientated toward fostering a social community. This orchestra adopts a more informal format and they rehearse on a more sporadic basis. In light of the emergent findings regarding vulnerability sometimes experienced by participants, particularly as a result of comparisons to more experienced musicians, it would be advantageous to investigate adult learners' experiences of the various approaches to determine best practice in this regard.

As this study primarily reflects adult music learners' experiences of learning music at an individual level, future research involving participants in the staff choir and orchestra could further explore the distinction between individual and collective musical development.

17. Final Thought

‘When someone sings or plays in a music ensemble, they’re never the same again. Once you’ve experienced the joy of music making with others, the joy of connecting with others, and the joy of growing and expressing with others, there’s no turning back. There’s nothing like it.’ (Fleischfresser, 2022)

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