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**Three Countries, one Method:
A Comparative Study of how Sustainable Development
Goals Awareness is Developed in Adult Education
in the UK, Germany, and Spain.
Art School Development as an example.**

Introduction

This qualitative paper utilises an international-comparative approach. It considers the similarities and differences between three case studies set in adult learning and education (ALE) centres in the UK, Germany and Spain. It illustrates how, using an arts-based workshop, Connected Art, could aid in developing ALE awareness of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs). It compares the social, cultural and political contexts of ALE in art across the case studies. There will be discussions on the weaknesses and strengths whether there are some good practices worth 'borrowing' around art pedagogy and what might the consequences of SDG led art practice for adult learners might be?

Objectives

1. Firstly to construct a theoretical framework around comparative concepts, SDGs and arts-based pedagogic methods.
2. Secondly introduce the three ALE case study institutions and present the findings.
3. Thirdly the paper concludes with reflections on answering the research question.

1. A Theoretical Framework

1.a. Comparative study

What is comparative research? Reischmann (2021) comments that when the international-comparativistic perspective is used, it helps side-step ethnocentric blindness. This aids educators in better understanding ALE in their own contexts. Clover and Bell (2013) developed a cross-national study in the same way that this study has evolved. They work in ALE at museums and art galleries and find that the broad array of community

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participants allow them to create socially responsive activities to tackle power and identity, and are able to make valuable contributions to social justice and change. Slowey (2016) surmises that there is a growing global interest in comparative study and the international exchange of ideas it affords (Charters & Hilton, 1989; Bereday, 1964). Comparative studies are of academic research interest, encouraging explorations of new ideas, developing pedagogic practice and educational policy. Comparative study can contribute to the development of innovative theoretical perspectives.

Attention must be paid to an understanding of a nation's or country's historical, social, cultural grounding. Keeping in mind the power differential between the global north and global south. Phillips & Schweisfurth (2014) comment that comparative responses can be instinctive. Who and what we are comparing ourselves to has changed greatly the 'other' or 'elsewhere' has changed too. 'Elsewhere' has suddenly become, 'here', and 'other' has become 'familiar'. Our educational comparisons can range to places and peoples we have never encountered. The same good-sense and wise-judgement we employ must be applied in all our comparativist encounters, lest we make random comparative judgements. Conferences like ISCAE help to keep academics accountable and professional and meeting face to face.

1.b. Arts-Based Pedagogy & the Connected Art workshop

The relationship between practice and theory has traditionally been seen as a dichotomy but arts-based pedagogy brings theory and practise together into a praxis. Further, there is a growing body of arts-based academics across a number of disciplines who use arts-based pedagogy. Norton, Norton & Veciana (2024) state that epistemologically, arts-based pedagogy assumes that art can create and convey meaning. Adult learners in Connected Art may find the ideas behind arts-based research, transdisciplinary, creating transferable research skills that can be utilised in education, employment and in family life.

1.c. Adult Learners and SDGs

Cabral & Galvão (2022) believe that SDGs aim to end poverty, improve health and education. Awareness of SDGs can cause a reduction of inequality, highlight sustainability issues such as preservation of land, forests, oceans and an eradication of pollution leading to a halt in climate change. They consider that success of SDGs depends on accessing arts and culture as a means of raising awareness. Connections between culture and art can allow a re-imagining of sustainability and human rights. UNESCO states that digital literacy is a driver for SDGs which in turn promotes reduced poverty. It offers expanded life opportunities, when adult learners use autonomous, critical thinking engendered in Connected Art. It could be one method by which ALE can facilitate digital literacy within this

expanded definition, allowing cultural capital that can boost employment/research potential.

In Connected Art adult learners bring an object that represents their research interests, they receive sticky-notes and a ball of string. Like Theseus (of Greek mythology) in the labyrinth, they connect their objects and dialogue with other participants. Each with differently coloured string, participants find a physical path in the educational space, creating a web of interconnection as strings criss-cross, developing a web of new friendships and understandings, while sticky notes record words and phrases from dialogue.

Connected Art is designed for adult learners to connect with each other using visual arts and language (Clover & Bell, 2013) an sustainability awareness. It encourages SDG4 a Good Education by offering transformational pedagogic experiences. It addresses SDG3 Wellbeing, when participant's responses and feelings are recorded and SDG 12 Responsible Consumption in the recycled materials used.

Why would adult learners choose Connected Art? Datasets show Connected Art was useful for participants scaffolding dialogue and research skills, collaboration, visual literacy, and critical thinking. This developed cultural capital, fusing horizons and applying knowledge to coursework. It is stimulating and gives participants a break from qualification based learning. For the ALE centres it allowed extended academic discussion on curriculum development, was inspirational, and aimed to make pedagogic practice better.

2. Case Studies

Three ALE centres in the UK, Germany and Spain wanted to develop a creative, dialogic, language development workshop for adult learners, using SDG values. They ALE centres were looking for a range of European participants to pilot Connected Art workshops. The intention was that participants might gain a deeper understanding of their own research, develop interdisciplinary connections and sustainability transitions. Workshops aimed to enabled students to become change-agents through transformative learning (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2018). This paper collects datasets from transcribed videoed group discussion, with thematic analysis. A constructivist research ontology is used and a hermeneutic epistemology is employed fusing horizons of experience. It soon became apparent that the three ALE centres who had agreed to pilot Connected Art were very different culturally and geographically and so a comparative study could best look at the similarities and differences.

2.a. UK

It is said that Britons value politeness, understatement, they avoid confrontation and direct language, use self-deprecating humour. In the UK adult education takes place in Further Education colleges, night classes in Higher education at Universities (usually postgraduate) and in community education settings. Although there have been many budget cuts to adult art classes in the last thirty years, Pearce (2016) reports that ALE can offer participants enhanced well-being (SDG3) and a sense of belonging. In addition adult art classes can help with self-confidence, strengthen relationships within the local community and encourage more active lives. Karampela (2023) states that adult learners in art classes in the UK are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are underrepresented in higher education. They often have non-traditional qualifications. Once adults are in art education, it can help satisfy their personal needs and achieve their professional goals. But, more than this, adult learning can be life-changing.

Fleige (2017) comments that despite global cost of living crisis brought on by COVID19 and conflicts there is a burgeoning sociological interest in human creativity in education as escapism, as retraining and as a way to process huge global imperatives such as SDGs. Connected Art can become societal action, offering students new perspectives, skills, competencies, practices and becoming agential in their own reflexive transformation.

The UK workshop was facilitated at an ALE centre where critical thinking is an academic approach, with fourteen postgraduate adult learners, from advertising, fine-art, design, and creative writing. UK research includes SDG16, Justice and Peace in their research looking at emotional impact of education on ALE students, seeing a whole person as important in educational contexts. UK participants were initially wary, resistant, and challenged by the workshop. They felt out of place and were confrontational and disruptive. Participants worked towards SDG10 Reduced Inequalities when they persevered were inclusive and used curiosity and creativity to work collaboratively. Through the workshop, participants reported moving from being tentative and apprehensive to being more open and confident. They commented on being able to think about things differently, letting process direct creative flow. Another participant mentions that it offered them an opportunity to discuss ideas without coursework pressure. They reported deepening competencies in critical thinking in their art practice. Discussions were at first hindered by British 'polite' nature, unlike German directness or Spanish emotiveness.

Societally the UK is becoming more isolated, conservative and extremist, post-Brexit, this is very different from Germany where logic and a direct approach increase productivity and diverse from the Spanish island that is patriotic and romantic. German policy on 'open door' immigration

may mean it is less embattled than either the UK constantly fortifying sea borders or Spain where tourism sees a large transitory and small home population. This idea of open-ness or closed borders is an interesting question when thinking about the acceptance or wariness that participants approached Connected Art.

2.b. Germany

Germans are often thought to be, direct, punctual, system-based, they work hard/play hard, and are said to value philosophy and logic, are thrifty and sensible. The 'open-door immigration policy has led to a background of a growing societal differentiation, when planning adult education provision, managers consider diverse individual and cultural needs as well as organizational expectations.

German adult education has a rich history of Bildung, similar to the Nordic Folk School which places relationship, personal development, culture and community empowerment at the centre of creativity, learning and life. Bildung is an approach that encourages participants to think for themselves and together, offering a process of holistic growth and self-realisation. This is something that the adult learners in our dataset were initially wary of (bringing change) but one that they attempted.

The German workshop was conducted at an ALE centre working with twenty-five undergraduates, from sustainability, social sciences, political science, and pedagogy. The centre has interests in RealLab approaches for transformative learning (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2018) and sustainability research. Working with SDG15 Life on Land they look at ideas of the city/country as ALE students interact with both as part of their learning experience and SDG13 Climate Action.

Participants were tasked with developing local creative projects using sustainability transition approaches, SDG15 Life on land, SDG11 Sustainable Communities and SDG12 Responsible Consumption. Participants had to engage in analytical, critical, strategic, and value-oriented thinking to address real-world SDGs. They cultivated interdisciplinary, creative, and interpersonal competencies to tackle individual and group challenges using SDG17 Partnerships. Aims developed quickly because of German directness in working together, saying when things were not working and engaging with publics who wanted to join because of its 'good for the neighbourhood' sustainability values. Participants commented, that they felt they had to work very hard but that they enjoyed the whole experience, particularly developing connections through their objects between participants. Overcoming initial shyness, interviewing strangers or being rejected several times helped participants overcome perceived bubbles of sustainability on campus. They were more able to get in touch with real-live people and real-world

problems which helped initiate critical thinking about their own research. They developed a feeling of enjoyment, collaboration and investment in SDG group values rather than competitiveness.

2.c. Spain

Spaniards are often renowned for being proud people with a deep love of Spain with an open and lively communication style. There is a governmental imperative for ALE to assist individuals to adapt to the educational system, to society and to labour demands. These governmental aims are not always well received and this can lead to an unresolved tension between adult learners and society. The Spanish workshop was facilitated at an ALE centre with twenty fine-art undergraduates, it takes an embodied/ performative learning, cognition and island/sea-life sustainability approach. SDG14 Life Below Water is important because the centre is on an island where sea-life and conservation is essential for business, tourism and for people who live, study and work there.

Connected Art evolved into sculptural representations of human bodies, and it enhanced students' creative interaction and ideation skills. Using SDG12 Sustainable Consumption participants used waste materials, creative upcycling techniques to create art works exploring memory and emotion. It also embedded a political context, centred on urban and beach waste and endangered marine species considering SDG14 Life Below Water. The workshop resulted in sculptures representing conceptual ideas related to human bodies, the soul, body dysmorphia and experiencing a kiss (SDG3 Wellbeing and SDG5 Gender Equality). The workshop resulted in an exhibition featuring body sculptures made from waste materials (SDG11 Sustainable Communities) and a performance involving a piñata shaped like an endangered seal, filled with beach waste. The Spanish emotive and proud nature allowed love of the island and their home as well as ideas of interpersonal relationships to be the focus of art, this would have been less likely and more taboo with 'polite' UK social norms, or a logical and theoretical approach of Germans.

3. Discussion and Reflections on answering the research question.

3.a. Discussion

ALE participants inhabit the Anthropocene, during late-capitalism and Neo-Liberalism of the West, struggling in an over-abundant 'green washed' consumer society, during a cost of living crisis, in post-pandemic anxiety. Adult learners are pushed by advertising media to see their image and identity as wrapped in desire for 'must have' consumables of cars/

fashion/ phones/ technology/ dwellings/ endless stuff for houses instead of sustainable and just consumption called for in SDGs.

There were strengths and weaknesses the ALE centres overcame (Reischmann, 2021). These included negotiating specialist subject-specific language in interdisciplinary work, finding educational spaces to engender clear creative and caring thinking for participants. They addressed wariness and confrontational behaviours. Participants engaged with unfamiliar peers, tried experimental pedagogies with surprising interpersonal issues. These challenges can trigger fear of failure, a lack of self-confidence, however, relational and socially engaged, sustainable art practices can offer transformative pedagogic contexts to connect people, ideas and values.

One of the difficulties in this comparative paper is that of generalising or transferring findings from the three workshops with only 59 participants to other settings. Analysis of more workshops would be needed. Another limitation is the papers' scope, which does not allow us to extend the workshops with more detail from collected data. Qualitative research design is not complemented with statistical findings and does not include explicit interdisciplinary comparisons. In further research, more evaluation tools could be developed to determine effectiveness of the Connected Art in different contexts and specific improvements for their practitioners.

3.b. Reflection on the Research Question

Answering the research question of how a comparative study on Connected Art in art schools in the UK, Germany and Spain might develop understanding of SDGs, Connected Art creates transformative, sustainability learning environments. They address helping students understand themselves in relation to others, while also preparing them to be aware of their own awareness enables them to engage and intervene, creating new possibilities for sustainable action. Connected Art enhances adult learner skills in artistic expression, communication, collaboration across disciplinary, social, and cultural boundaries.

ALE centres and participants benefitted from Connected Art enabling them to establish deeply creative and complex learning environments that promoted social, sustainable and personal interaction (Fleige, 2012). The workshops also overcame potential barriers arising from participants' many different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds allowing them to create competencies in practical, generative and creative projects addressing social issues such as awareness of SDGs.

The study contributes to valuable discourse in comparative educational research. It may be useful for institutions interested in fostering interdisciplinary engagement and transformative learning for enriching curricular activities. This paper demonstrates that Connected Art offers some good practices worth 'borrowing' (Reischmann, 2021), it enhances

adult learner competences in artistic expression, communication, awareness of SDGs, self-reflection and collaboration. It enables ALE centres to work across disciplinary, social, and cultural boundaries.

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