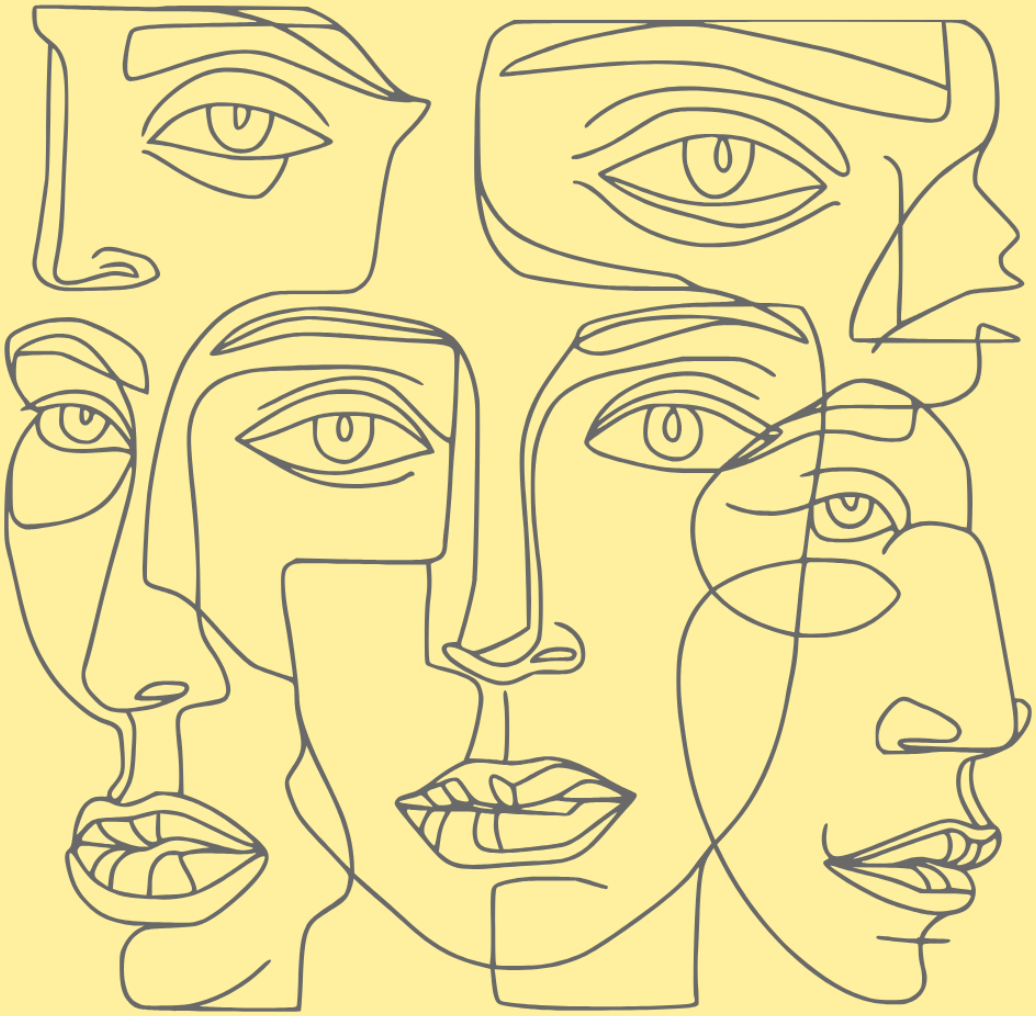
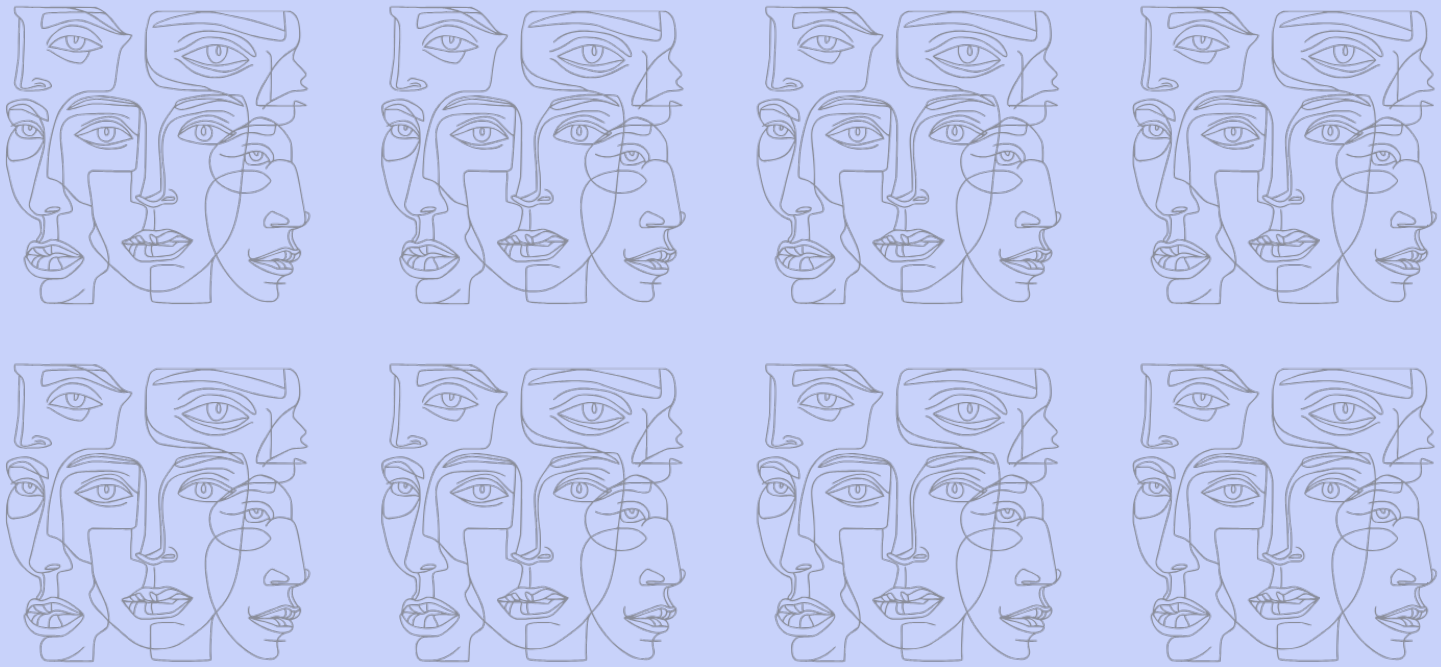


Beyond skills: The case for arts & humanities in ALE

Arts and adult education, an EAEA background paper

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

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MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE FINLAND

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At a glance

Adult Learning and Education (ALE), especially in its non-formal forms, plays a vital role in ensuring that Arts and Humanities remain accessible, relevant, and transformative. Arts and Humanities in ALE contribute not only to the acquisition of skills but also to the holistic development of individuals, communities, and societies. They provide creative and cultural competences, communication and critical thinking skills, and foster empathy, dialogue, and civic engagement.

Historically, Arts and Humanities have often been instrumentalised, framed as "supportive" disciplines that enrich or complement technical and professional learning. Today, this view persists in approaches such as STEAM, where Arts are frequently positioned as a means to enhance STEM learning. While we recognise the value of STEAM education, its instrumental role risks overshadowing the inherent worth of Arts and Humanities as drivers of personal growth, cultural understanding, and democratic participation.

Within ALE, Arts and Humanities can serve as gateways to lifelong learning, helping hesitant or insecure learners take their first steps into education. They also make tangible contributions to health and well-being, with creative engagement shown to support mental health, social inclusion, and rehabilitation. At the same time, their intrinsic value – in nurturing imagination, moral reasoning, and human-centred knowledge – becomes even more relevant in the age of digitalisation and artificial intelligence.

Introduction

Why should the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) focus on the Arts and Humanities in ALE? At first glance, the connection between non-formal adult learning and fields often perceived as "impractical" or secondary might seem limited. Yet, a closer look reveals their profound importance for the individual learner, for communities, and for society as a whole.

Arts and Humanities in ALE go beyond skill acquisition: they foster self-expression, empathy, intercultural understanding, and critical reflection. They support active citizenship by encouraging dialogue and civic engagement, and they contribute to social inclusion by offering accessible entry points to education for adults with little or no recent learning experience. From pottery workshops to literature circles, from theatre courses to history seminars, such opportunities help adults rediscover the joy of learning and build confidence for further educational engagement.

Moreover, in light of contemporary challenges such as democratic decline, rising inequalities, and the disruptive impact of digital technologies and AI, the Arts and Humanities bring renewed value. They strengthen the human dimensions of learning – communication, ethical reflection, and the ability to formulate and address complex problems. In this sense, they are not only instrumental for broader societal goals, but also indispensable in their own right as sources of meaning, creativity, and resilience.

ALE therefore plays a crucial role in defending, revitalising, and reimagining the place of Arts and Humanities in education. By doing so, it ensures that adult learning contributes to more democratic, inclusive, and humane societies.

Instrumentalising arts and humanities

The first and most important question that must be addressed when dealing with Arts and Humanities as an educational field is that of instrumentalisation. For many students, policymakers, and the general public, these subjects are seen as important, but mostly in the sense that they help people gain the "real," practical skills that are believed to lead to jobs and higher income. This way of thinking has been around for centuries, and it still – perhaps even more so today – shapes how Arts and Humanities are valued today.

Looking back, this hierarchy can already be traced to the Middle Ages in Europe. At that time, students first learned the seven artes liberales before moving on to the main university subjects: law, medicine, or theology. While these liberal arts do not exactly match today's understanding of the field, they gave rise to the terms "Bachelor of Arts" and "Master of Arts." The first part of the curriculum, the trivium – rhetoric, grammar, and logic – can be seen as an early form of what we now call Arts and Humanities.

During the Renaissance, the studia humanitatis emerged after debates between humanists and traditional university scholars, eventually becoming part of university curricula. The scientific insights and achievements of the Renaissance also illustrate one thing: that art and science are part of a whole. Perspective drawings – such as developed by Leonardo da Vinci – were not only art, but also a prerequisite for technical drawings, and conversely, scientific achievements also had a fundamental influence on motifs and methods in art. Yet even by the late 18th century, the Arts were once again framed as just a preparation for the "higher" faculties, especially theology.

A major turning point came with the industrial revolution and the rise of modernity. Engineering, natural sciences, and positivist thinking began to dominate as they were closely linked to economic growth and technological progress. Compared to these, Arts and Humanities were often seen as "impractical" and had to fight harder to justify their place in education. Interconnections between the Arts and science, e.g. botanical drawings, were a means to an end, although they also had their own artistic value. This sparked passionate defences of the field, some of which we still draw on today.

This pressure to prove their worth has continued ever since. After the 2008 financial crisis, interest in Arts and Humanities dropped sharply, while STEM subjects gained even more prominence. Even initiatives like STEAM, which aim to bring Arts into the picture, often position them as a way to make STEM subjects more engaging and accessible,

rather than valuing them for their own sake. In many ways, this repeats patterns we have seen throughout history.

Of course, this is not necessarily negative. One could argue that being "instrumentalised" has helped Arts and Humanities survive and evolve over time. And it is clear that they do have great instrumental value. Still, it is important to remember that these fields also hold value in and of themselves – something that is too often overlooked.

In this background paper, we look at Arts and Humanities in adult education through these two lenses: as tools that serve other purposes, and as areas of learning valuable on their own. Both perspectives matter, but we place particular emphasis on the latter, as it is the one most often forgotten.

STEM vs. STEAM vs. others

Over the past few decades, the rise of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) has often come at the expense of the Arts and Humanities. While the term STEM became popular in the 1990s and 2000s, the shift toward science and technology really began earlier – back in the "Sputnik moment" of the Cold War, when Western countries, fearing they were falling behind, poured resources into technical projects and education.

More recently, after the 2008 financial crisis, concerns about "China out-STEMming the West" only strengthened this trend, with many students moving away from Arts and Humanities into STEM fields. In response, the idea of **STEAM** (STEM + Arts) was introduced – not as a replacement but as an extension. Bringing Arts into the mix can evidently boost engagement, creativity, well-being, and interdisciplinary thinking ((UNESCO, 2024). Still, from the start, the Arts were usually seen as playing a supporting role, especially in creative fields like design, helping to make STEM subjects more accessible and appealing.

Of course, some thinkers and projects have tried to flip this perspective, suggesting more equal partnerships between disciplines – or even placing Arts and Humanities at the centre. But in practice, most policies and programmes still treat them as secondary.

Much of the discussion about STEM vs. STEAM has focused on schools and universities. In adult education, the picture is less clear. Non-formal adult education often works on shorter, course-based formats, which leaves less room for the kind of broad interdisciplinarity promoted by STEAM. While lessons from schools and universities can be useful, they cannot always be applied directly to adult learning without careful consideration.

And even STEAM itself does not fully cover the range of disciplines left out. This has led to new labels such as **STREAM** (adding Reading and Writing) and **SHTEAM** (adding Humanities). One notable example is the British Academy's SHAPE campaign – "Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy." **SHAPE** highlights

how these fields contribute to society, culture, and prosperity, taking a step toward valuing them on their own terms. Yet even here, the argument often circles back to economic benefits, showing how strong the pull of instrumental reasoning remains.

Arts and humanities as a gateway to education for adults

Although partially covered in the whole STEM vs. STEAM discussion, this supportive role of Arts and Humanities has particular importance in the context of the paper, not least because it has to do with adult education as such.

There is a common perception that these subjects do not require prior knowledge or technical skills to get started. Whether or not that is entirely true, this idea has made Arts and Humanities – and especially the Arts – feel more approachable. For many adults who have not been in education since school, it is far less intimidating to join a watercolour class than to sign up for an introduction to programming. That sense of accessibility makes Arts and Humanities an important gateway into lifelong learning.

Of course, this does not mean that Arts and Humanities are "easier." Learning a foreign language is no less demanding than learning a coding language, and mastering pottery can take as much patience and practice as solving mathematical equations.

But when it comes to encouraging hesitant learners to take the first step, perception matters more than the actual level of difficulty. Overcoming these psychological barriers – the willingness and readiness to re-enter education – is often the most important step, and the Arts provide a welcoming path forward (Cross, 1981).

The argument is based on an assumption that the first engagement with adult education brings the future ones. The EAEA and its members have seen and highlighted many examples when Arts courses have served as a kind of a gateway to adult education.

Good practices

Among the many examples of good practice, we would like to highlight those that illustrate these areas: social inclusion and improving access to adult learning and education, cultural heritage and new joint approaches to culture, trauma therapy and body expression, art and STEM as parts of a whole in second-chance education, and intergenerational dialogue and community engagement.

- social inclusion and improving access to adult learning and education

One inspiring practice that shows the power of Arts in Adult Learning and Education is the Act 4 Inclusion – Life in Theatre project (Erasmus+). This initiative used social improvisation theatre to promote inclusion and empowerment among adults with diverse backgrounds, including people with disabilities, migrants, and individuals in prisons.

Through workshops and trainings, participants engaged in theatrical methods that allowed them to express emotions, build confidence, and connect with others in safe and creative spaces. The activities were particularly impactful in contexts of marginalisation, where participants often face isolation, anxiety, or exclusion. Educators reported seeing learners gain self-confidence, develop communication skills, and improve their ability to collaborate.

Beyond individual benefits, Act 4 Inclusion created ripple effects at the community level. By involving educators, social workers, and cultural organisations, the project demonstrated how arts-based methodologies can bridge divides and foster empathy. The approach is transferable: the toolkit and digital platform allow other ALE providers to integrate theatre methods into their work with learners.

This project underlines a key point of this statement Arts in ALE are not just “add-ons” to skill acquisition but essential spaces for participation, creativity, and dignity. They show how cultural practices can serve as vehicles for inclusion and wellbeing while also providing meaningful entry points into lifelong learning.

- cultural heritage and new joint approaches to culture

An other interesting initiative the ArteMIA project (Italy) demonstrates how cultural heritage and art can become tools for accessibility and inclusion in adult learning. Designed for people with cognitive disabilities, ArteMIA combined art therapy workshops, digital tools, and museum-based activities to open up cultural spaces to new audiences.

Participants engaged directly with artworks in museums of the

Umbria Region, co-creating accessible guides in Easy-to-Read formats and photographic language. They also took part in the digital reprocessing of artworks and collaborated in designing new, inclusive visitor pathways. By doing so, participants not only accessed cultural heritage but actively shaped how it is interpreted and shared.

The impact was significant: learners gained confidence, developed communication and creative skills, and felt empowered to take part in cultural life. Museums reported that the accessible guides produced in the project improved their engagement with diverse audiences. The project has since sparked interest in expansion to other museums and cultural institutions.

ArteMIA shows how ALE can transform the cultural sector into a shared space of belonging. It proves that art is not a privilege for the few but a collective good that can connect people, foster accessibility, and encourage inclusion in meaningful ways.

- trauma therapy and body expression

Cie Essevesse, a Marseille-based member of EAEA, specialises in this specific connection between the Arts and non-formal adult learning and education. The organisation shows how the Arts serve not only as gateways into learning but as powerful spaces for inclusion, expression, and collective transformation. Rooted in a trauma-informed and embodied approach, their work shows how dance and movement can unlock forms of learning that are often inaccessible through traditional educational pathways.

As an organisation led by dance artists and therapists, they use embodied practices to create environments in which adults can reconnect with their bodies, emotions, and sense of agency. In doing so, they exemplify the broader argument of this paper: that the Arts carry intrinsic value for personal development, well-being, and democratic participation, and should not be seen merely as tools serving other educational or social goals.

Their initiatives – ranging from HeArts of Youth, which fosters intercultural belonging among young migrants, to Move to Connect, which strengthens empathy and dialogue within families – demonstrate how arts-based methodologies can support marginalised learners while building bridges across diverse communities. Projects such as Dance Against Bullying and TRANScenDANCE highlight the transformative potential of dance in addressing social challenges, from school bullying to gender identity and visibility in the cultural sector.

Through these practices, Cie Essevesse shows that embodied learning is not an “extra” but a vital dimension of ALE: a way of cultivating confidence, empathy, and connection in times of social fragmentation. Their work reminds us that the Arts, when understood

on their own terms, offer fertile ground for lifelong learning – strengthening individuals while contributing to more inclusive, resilient, and humane societies.

- art and STEM as parts of a whole in second-chance education

At the former CVO Toekomstonderwijs in Antwerp, Belgium, the integration of Arts into second-chance education offered a striking demonstration of how creative, experiential methods can reshape adult learning. In programmes designed for adults striving to obtain their secondary education diploma, teachers experimented with hands-on, experience-based approaches to subjects often perceived as intimidating, such as mathematics and physics, that is, the classic STEM subjects.

One memorable example involved learners designing and building paper bridges capable of holding a person's weight for several seconds. This required them to apply principles of geometry, stability, force distribution and material resistance, translating abstract concepts into tangible, collaborative problem-solving. Yet, these lessons did more than demystify STEM subjects: by weaving in artistic perspectives and discussing how figures like Leonardo da Vinci moved seamlessly between artistic imagination and scientific inquiry, adult educators showed learners that creativity and technical reasoning are deeply interconnected modes of understanding the world.

By grounding learning in experimentation, imagination, and embodied experience, CVO Toekomstonderwijs demonstrated that mathematics and physics need not be dry, inaccessible, or detached from learners' lives. Instead, when approached through an artistic and exploratory lens, they become opportunities to rebuild confidence, foster interdisciplinary thinking, and reconnect adults with the joy of learning.

This practice exemplifies how Arts can soften psychological barriers to learning, invite hesitant learners into complex subjects, and restore a sense of curiosity and capability among adults who may have struggled in earlier schooling. In this way, the centre's work stands as a vivid reminder that the Arts do not merely "support" other disciplines – they expand them, enrich them, and help open pathways into lifelong education for learners who might otherwise remain excluded.

- intergenerational dialogue and community engagement

Finally, the Silver Books project (France, Portugal, Italy, Belgium) highlights how digital arts and storytelling can promote lifelong learning, intergenerational exchange, and community engagement. Its core idea was to empower seniors to create digital books that capture their memories, experiences, and perspectives.

Participants received training in digital literacy and storytelling, supported by professionals,

caregivers, and family members. Together, they co-created 11 e-books enriched with photos, audio, and video elements. Alongside this, the project produced an e-learning module for caregivers and an implementation guide to help other organisations replicate the model.

The results were striking: seniors reported increased digital confidence, reduced isolation, and greater engagement with their communities. Over 64,000 people were reached through dissemination activities, showing the project's wide resonance. Beyond individual empowerment, Silver Books created bridges between generations, as younger people became involved in the digital production of the stories.

This project illustrates how ALE, through the Arts, can preserve memory, build identity, and reduce digital divides. It exemplifies how creative processes support wellbeing while opening new opportunities for learning and connection.

Gateway into learning – but also to mental wellbeing

Considering all these observations, the role of Humanities and especially Arts as a gateway to adult education should not be underestimated.

The Arts play an important role in supporting adult mental health and overall well-being. The contribution of the Humanities in this area is less researched and less often discussed, but there is a broad consensus that vulnerable groups – such as women, older adults, prisoners, migrants – as well as adult learners in general, gain real benefits from creative engagement.

Research from neuroscientists, psychiatrists, and educators shows the positive effects of activities like painting, making or listening to music, or expressive writing. In some cases, these effects can be striking: music, for example, has been shown to slow the progress of Alzheimer's disease, while creative expression in prison settings can give inmates new tools for self-reflection and reintegration (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

At times, the line between art education and art therapy becomes blurred (Shukla et al., 2022). It may be more accurate to speak of the therapeutic effect that arts-based learning has, particularly for adults. By creating space for creativity, expression, and connection, arts education can nurture both emotional resilience and social inclusion.

That said, as Stuckey and Nobel (2010) point out, many of the studies in this area have not been carried out with the level of rigor needed to clearly separate the specific effects of arts engagement on health and well-being. More robust research would help to better understand and confirm the impact.

Art for art's sake

The phrase "Art for Art's sake" here is not meant in the strict sense of aestheticism, meaning art should exist for its own beauty and expression. While we do not use the term in that narrow way, it is a helpful reminder that the value of art doesn't always need to be justified by what it leads to.

Of course, every kind of education has an instrumental side – whether it is about gaining job skills, improving health, or supporting personal development. For STEM subjects or health education, that value is usually obvious. For Arts and Humanities, it is less visible, which has often led to them being treated mainly as tools for teaching, therapy, or other purposes.

In this section, we want to shift the focus and look at the direct value of learning in Arts and Humanities – not only what they support, but what they bring on their own, both for individuals and for society. This means going beyond the usual abstract discussions about the "moral value" of human knowledge. We also want to connect these fields to today's urgent issues – from the disruption caused by artificial intelligence to the democratic challenges faced in many parts of the Western world – and explore the unique role Arts and Humanities can and should play in this context.

Narratives of moral value of "Human Knowledge"

It is hard – and maybe unnecessary – to pinpoint who first argued for the personal value of Arts and Humanities. After all, the idea of grouping these subjects together is relatively recent, and for most of Western history the Arts and Humanities followed different paths: the Arts were taught in workshops and guilds, while the Humanities were part of university study. Here, the focus is mainly on the Humanities.

Already in Antiquity, we see the roots of defending what some might call "impractical knowledge." A famous example comes from Cicero, who, while defending the poet Archius in court, praised literature for nurturing the human soul, building rhetorical skills, and shaping morality.

Centuries later, during the Renaissance, humanists began to build a more structured defence of the Humanities. They believed that studying "pure" Latin through ancient Greek and Roman texts – and carefully interpreting them – didn't just make people more skilled speakers and writers but actually better human beings. Their arguments often rested on the almost sacred value they placed on classical texts and authors like Cicero, along with a sharp rejection of the so-called "dark" Middle Ages.

In the 19th century, the rise of rational thinking and modern science forced the Humanities to reinvent themselves once again. German-speaking intellectuals played a key role here (Reiter & Wellmon, 2021). Thinkers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism stressed the intrinsic value of knowledge gained from the Humanities, especially for personal growth. Their ideas were often tied to the concept of Bildung, which goes beyond "education" to mean the moral, intellectual, and social development of the whole person. For philosophers like Kant and Niethammer, the Humanities were most valuable because they weren't bound to external demands like law, medicine, or applied sciences. Instead, they offered the space for true self-cultivation.

In short, defenders of the Humanities have consistently highlighted two main contributions: helping individuals grow and develop personally, and strengthening their sense of belonging to a broader "humanity."

Civic value

Another way of looking at the value of Arts and Humanities is to focus on what they bring to society as a whole. Supporters of this view argue that in European democracies, the skills developed through studying history, languages, culture, and the social sciences are vital for keeping societies open, resilient, and healthy.

One of the strongest voices in this debate is Martha Nussbaum (2016), who makes a passionate case for Arts and Humanities as essential to the survival of democracy. She highlights several key reasons why these fields matter, not just for individuals but for the way societies function.

(1) Humanities foster the **culture of dialogue**, since, unlike natural sciences, they focus on qualitative methods and open questions. And if the fora that an open society provides are left vacant for the lack of those who would participate in an open discussion, the society drifts towards atomisation and disintegration.

(2) Humanities are essential for the development of **critical thinking**, which is crucial for independent decision making, which in turn is the premise for the functioning of democratic systems.

(3) Arts, Literature and Humanities are essential for **empathy and cultural understanding**. These are especially important in a society which pursues inclusiveness and is guided by humanistic values.

Nussbaum's arguments are made in a fairly defensive way. This is not surprising: as Reitter and Wellmon (2021) point out, the Humanities have long struggled to justify their place, and Nussbaum was writing in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, a time when STEM education was heavily prioritised.

Her reasoning has also been challenged. Small (2013) argues that Nussbaum's case is overly

politicised and, in its own way, still treats the Humanities as a tool for other goals rather than valuing them on their own. He also points out that her arguments lack strong evidence and risk sounding too idealistic. Instead, Small highlights other benefits that qualitative knowledge can bring to society – from its moral value (as discussed earlier) to its economic contribution (see the SHAPE movement) – as well as the broader advantages of having an interdisciplinary mindset and skillset.

Whatever position one takes in this debate, one thing is clear: the foundations for these "civic" skills are often laid early in schooling. But adult education also offers unique opportunities here. Unlike children, adults usually choose their own learning paths, which means their engagement is more deliberate and genuine. This makes Arts and Humanities especially powerful in ALE, where the freedom to learn is at the heart of the experience.

Digitalization, AI and the revival of moral narratives

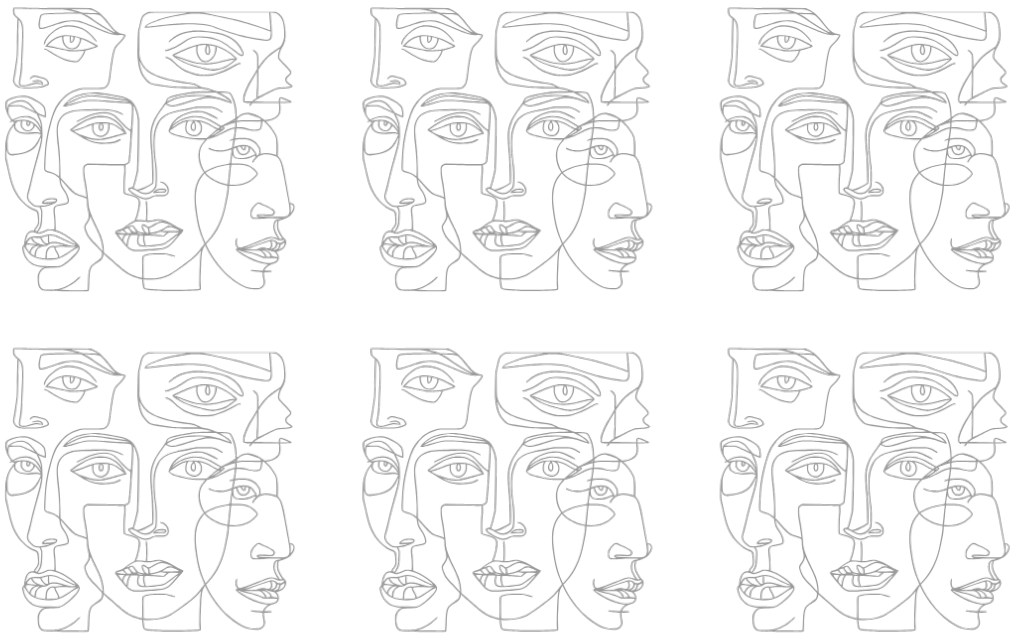
The last aspect to take into consideration in our overview is the disruption that modern societies face because of the rapid digitalisation and development of AI technologies, and the new role that Arts and Humanities might start to play in this renewed context.

Although the invasion of the Large Language Models (LLMs) into our daily lives is sometimes regarded as the final blow to "human knowledge", we would argue that the opposite might be at least just as persuasive.

Competent prompting is among the most important skills when working with LLMs such as ChatGPT or Le Chat, and at the core of this skill are the communicative abilities (Smith, 2023): that is, the ones that Arts and Humanities foster. In turn, some argue that prompt engineering, which demands good command of language first and foremost, is going to become obsolete with LLMs getting better at guessing what a user needs; still, they point instead at the rising importance of "problem formulation": another "interdisciplinary" skill for the development of which Arts and Humanities are so crucial (Acar, 2023).

Next, when it comes to the educational value that LLMs can bring, one might argue that competent self-learning with the help of Artificial Intelligence, just like any self-learning, requires a certain level of independence and, again, communication capabilities, as dialogue lies at the foundation of the Chat-Bots. The risk of the latter's hallucination must decrease in the coming years of development, but just by the way LLMs work, they remain prone to biases, logical fallacies and other errors inherent to humans.

Finally, the moral narratives on Arts and Humanities, that is, those that emphasise their human- and personality-forming impact, start to look differently in the light of the digital revolution and imminent transhumanism. Moral advocates would say that it is precisely now, in the times when human reason is emulated, that we should not abandon the “human” – qualitative and subjective – knowledge. Past humanists as Kant or Niethammer might have claimed that philosophy, history, literature and arts differentiate a man from an animal, and nowadays it is the AI that becomes humanity’s greatest challenger.



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