

Cut, paste, connect: Making meaning through collage

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, Simon Abbott, a Work-based Learning Advisor at City St Georges, University of London, and Charlotte Stevens, an academic developer at the University of Warwick, responded to a call to join the events team for Creativity for Learning in Higher Education (#creativeHE), an open collaborative community for creative practitioners and students. Over the following year they extended their practice, both within and beyond the #creativeHE forum, shaping their identities as higher education professionals – all through the medium of collage. In this article they explore how they used collage in a variety of different ways: as a means of communication; collaboration; to facilitate reflective practice and develop research and scholarship. They also explore how the medium played a key role in nurturing a positive and supportive professional relationship, leading them to cultivate skills in artmaking and writing. Drawing on arts-based theory and research, they tell their story through an illustrated journey.

Finding a canvas

In the summer of 2023, we (the authors) answered a call to become more involved in Creativity for Learning in Higher Education (#creativeHE), an international open collaborative community providing an inclusive space for staff and students to exchange knowledge and develop creative practice across disciplines (#creativeHE, n.d.).

We had not met before this initial expression of interest, and we came from very different creative backgrounds; however, we both had a shared interest in the potential of using arts-based practice in our work as higher educational professionals.

Simon: I am artist and regularly started using collage in my practice in 2016, in artwork, illustration and animation. I am passionate about fostering creativity within higher education and my focus over the past 10 years has mainly been on promoting creativity outside of academia (such as within administrative teams). Since joining #creativeHE, and taking on some teaching responsibilities in my role, I have become excited about the benefits of creative approaches in teaching and research too.

Charlotte: I have no formal art and craft qualifications, but I have always liked to make things. I joined #creativeHE during the pandemic and felt inspired to think about how I could integrate arts-based practice into my work, rather than it being something I messed around doing at weekends. As I engaged more in community activities I felt encouraged to use art and craft as a creative way to facilitate reflective practice.

During the 23/24 academic year, we co-convened a programme of monthly online #creativeHE sessions, designed to showcase creative practice. We welcomed international educators to facilitate sessions on subjects as diverse as designing card games and escape rooms to promote student engagement in learning, to integrating music into teaching practice to support student wellbeing.

From our initial meeting, we discovered that we shared a passion for collage which, over the course of the year, we began to use in different ways. This mutual interest not only enhanced our working relationship across geographical boundaries but also empowered us to develop our identities as creative professionals, both within the #creativeHE community and in our wider higher education practice. Here we seek to inspire others as we share some highlights from our journey, drawing on theory and arts-based research, as well as our journal entries and some of the artwork we completed along the way. We have structured the narrative around the process of collage.

Collecting the materials

Collage, in basic terms, is an image constructed from different materials (magazine clippings, adverts, photos, fabric, wood), which comes from the French word 'coller' to paste, stick or glue. Collages may take different forms: paper, digital, mixed media, photomontage. They may include pictures and words, but don't have to.

There are different approaches to collage: one is more conscious, whereby the theme of the artwork informs the materials used, and the maker chooses images purposefully to create an image with a specific message. The other is more unconscious, where the materials 'ask' for the collage to be made, and the maker allows the images to speak for themselves (Abegglen et al, 2021, pp.83-84). In the latter approach, perspectives can shift; for example, you might find yourself wanting to locate the 'the right word' in a magazine to convey a particular

feeling, only to discover that a different word finds you. In this sense, collage can become a transformative process; as the artist, John Stezaker stated that it 'allows the opening up of conscious, which is very direct...it's also a way of looking at what you are consuming all the time' (TATE, 2020).

As #creativeHE convenors, one of our first tasks was to introduce ourselves to the community via a blog. We established a brief, if quite broad – to produce an image that could represent us and our relationship with creativity in higher education. This became our first venture into collaborative collage. Collaboration is a key aspect of the way in which collage is used as a medium and as well as a communication tool (Kolaj Institute, n. d.). Of course, collage is, in many ways, always collaborative. Stephen Knezovich (2018) asserts that when you start making a collage 'you are always working with someone else's work: an old photograph or postcard or advertisement or book that someone else at some other time created'. In playing and creating with items made by others we can establish shapes and compositions beyond our own imagination (Depelteau, 2014). However, working together to produce something new adds another dimension. It can also present some challenges. Neal (2015) writes that collaboration requires:

an active openness to working with others to allow creative journeys to be co-created rather than shaped by a single author with a predetermined vision; taking what's offered rather than pushing for what is expected, trusting that surprising possibilities emerge and staying with some difficulty and discomfort. (p. 90)



Figure 1 –Welcome to #creativeHE 2023/24

October 2023

Simon: Charlotte had mentioned that she often made images on postcards. I was keen to explore how I might combine aspects of these with some of the marks, textures, patterns and ephemera that I incorporated into my own work. So, we had some old materials, and some new ones, which I blended to create a digital collage. Combined, they represented a colourful new creative connection and sparked a little excitement in what the next year might hold. But working collaboratively - and cutting up and reworking another person's materials - was more of a challenge than just assembling collages on my own. I'd found this making our initial collages; how to rework the images that Charlotte had sent into something coherent, that would represent us both.

Charlotte: I remember seeing this collage for the first time. It really embodied how I felt about the year ahead: enthusiastic and maybe a little nervous. Simon had created a sense of direction through the use of figures, one leading the way, and the other getting ready to dive in. As I looked closer I could see some of the images I'd produced incorporated into the finished picture. This was the first time I'd collaborated with someone on an artwork, and it was an immensely powerful feeling. Having to 'give up' my work to someone else took courage. What would Simon – the artist – think of it? That all-too-common fear of being judged was something I'd encouraged learners not to dwell on in my professional practice, but now it was happening to me! Seeing the final result was inspiring.

Folding, cutting or tearing into shapes

First established in 2015, #creativeHE grew rapidly in 2020 when all activities moved online; as of 2023, it had almost 700 members (Nerantzi et al., 2023). It is described as 'a greenhouse for creative practitioners, researchers, students and risk-takers' (Nerantzi et al., 2023). Events are interactive and participatory, providing a safe space to experiment, and try out new ideas, even if they don't work; indeed, following on from Henriksen et al. (2021), engaging in activities which have the potential for failure is seen as key in creativity and learning.

For Kolaj (n.d.), the production and promotion of collage created by communities is integral to its position within the art world. Inspired by our first foray into collaborative collage, we had the ambitious idea of adapting our approach to involve more contributors from the #creativeHE community in creating a 'live' online collaged canvas. However, collaborative collage can become even more complicated when you add other people into the mix!

Participants at our festive-themed online workshop were tasked with contributing to a collaborative digital collage by moving, duplicating or adjusting shapes and images from a selection of digital and hand-made images we'd made. If participants (who were from a number of different institutions) were able to get past the first hurdle of accessing the MS Teams Whiteboard, some were then slightly unsure what their role as collaborative collage contributor involved. That said, over the next 20 minutes a seasonal scene evolved quite unlike anything we could have constructed on our own.



Figure 2 – #creativeHE festive collage

December 2023

Simon: A snowman moves erratically across the screen, then disappears behind a green circle. Gingerbread men multiply below, travelling towards the mountain under the spiral sun. Part of the joy of collage can be the freedom that comes with cutting up your own collected materials; giving something a new life through its inclusion in an artwork. We were now asking our participants to do the same thing,

albeit with a predetermined set of materials. They set about reworking and remixing the image until we had something unique. But encouraging people to have a ‘messy’ approach is not easy, particularly when you are asking them to be playful with the work of others, not just their own.

Charlotte: Technology proved to be a challenge in this session, but I wasn’t going to let that put me off. In fact, whereas previously I might have felt uncomfortable that this activity hadn’t worked out as planned, in this forum, it really didn’t matter. And I could see the potential in the mayhem. Online activities like this can boost interaction, but also challenge learners to reflect on what it means to be part of a community and the value of engaging in a shared learning experience – it’s ok for someone to move ‘my’ snowman around the canvas if they want... Teachers play an important role in creating that supportive environment (Altowairiki, 2021).

Developing the idea

Collage has gained currency as an arts-based methodology in a number of ways. It has been used as a form of elicitation and a means of conceptualising ideas and stimulating visual thinking (Burge et al., 2016; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Culshaw, 2019; Loads, 2009). It has also been used as a means of facilitating reflective practice. Culshaw (2019), invited established and experienced secondary school teachers to explore what it meant to be struggling as a teacher through collage and Hunter & Woolham O’Brien (2019) used the medium to explore academic identity amongst participants on a PGCert Learning and Teaching in HE programme. These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of collage as a tool for understanding changes in our professional identity; as a means of exploring how

phenomena can impact on our practice within HE, and how we articulate this – as Meng Tian (2023) writes, arts-based methods such as collage allow us to deconstruct and reconstruct lived realities (p. 6).

The final #creativeHE session of the year presented another opportunity to explore how we could use collage as a means of connecting as a community group online. It seemed a natural step for us to explore the potential for collage to act as a catalyst for reflective practice. We invited participants to collage their ‘creative selves’ and we did the same. This session felt more assured, a reflection of our learning over the past year and some of the strengths we’d identified in our practice.



Figure 3 – Simon’s ‘creative self’ collage

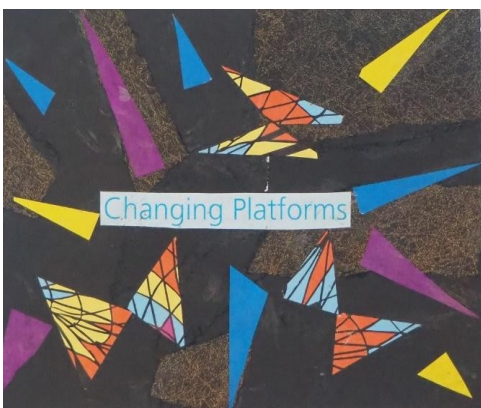


Figure 4 – Charlotte’s ‘creative self’ collage

July 2024

Simon: A few minutes before the session started, I grabbed some materials to create an example collage I could show the group when introducing our activity. The closest magazine to hand had a nature theme which proved to be a perfect source for visually representing my creative self at the time. I thought about the protection I find in creativity, sheltering me from the noise of the outside world and providing a space to explore my identity. As ever, I was amazed at the imagination and individuality of the collages created by the other participants throughout the workshop. These sessions always provide so much inspiration for my own practice.

Charlotte: My collage includes some fireworks and abstract butterflies to express excitement, and the words 'Changing Platforms' jumped out at me as a means of conveying a shift in focus. Over the year, we'd been encouraging participants to be reflective, to think about their place in the world, whether through the music they'd listened to, the stories they told, the pictures they drew, the technology they'd experimented with, or the rooms they'd tried to escape from...using collage to capture that sense of creative self felt like a natural extension of our practice.

Assemblage

Outside the #creativeHE platform, we decided to embark on a side-project in mail art: preparing packages of collage materials to send to each other. Mail art - an artistic movement centred on using the postal service to share materials and small art works – has

been recognised as a precursor to digital collaboration. The movement, which first emerged in the 1950s and gained currency in the 1970s, focused on establishing connection and communication amongst artists (Gangadharan, 2009), and continues to have considerable reach. Since 2011, the Postal Collage Project, an annual mail-art collaborative collage venture, instigated by Round Table Collaboration, brought together over 900 collaborators from 25 countries to exhibit over 1000 individual collaborative collages (Round Table Collaboration, 2025). This kind of collaborative collage can work well because of its ‘universal accessibility and material diversity’ (Kolaj Institute, n.d.). Introducing the concept of mail art into our work fuelled spontaneity and creative expression through the use of a range of unexpected materials. It also meant stepping away from the computer screen.

Unlike the images and workshops we’d produced for #creativeHE, there was no specific theme for our mail art output. We approached it as an exercise in connection and communication, of sharing materials and processes, and also as a way of seeing what ideas and stories might emerge from using collage as a means of visual expression. We were reminded how Abegglen et al (2021) conducted a ‘collage conversation’ across continents to explore playful practice in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 5 – Simon’s desk

April 2024

Simon: There are two things I love about mail art. The first is that you never really know where it's going to take you – when I was picking materials to post I was letting my conscious do some of the work, with a vague idea of how Charlotte might interpret and reuse them. But, as is often the case with collage, what Charlotte returned to me in the post was nothing I could have imagined myself! I realised I had a certain view of what I felt collage 'should' be, and Charlotte's images showed me a whole new approach. The second thing I love is the tactile nature of this art form. As I sat with my laptop open in front of me watching the emails rolling in, the process of cutting, ripping and sticking together pieces of paper felt much more natural than typing. And then there's the process of wrapping it all up in the envelope, adding a stamp and posting it – much more exciting than sending an email!

Charlotte: When Simon suggested a mail-art project, I was intrigued and excited to receive a package in the post. Simon had selected these materials, but it was up to me to decide what to do with them. I took a collage kit on holiday and sat quietly at the back of a hired motorhome creating little artworks to send back to him. I will never forget the sense of wonder when I received the images he had created, wrapped up in a collaged envelope. The different techniques Simon had used – layering of paper, use of textures, position of words – really challenged me to think about using different methods. As a maker, the exercise felt liberating; as a recipient, a valuable learning opportunity. I wondered whether I could use the reciprocal principle of mail art as part of a reflective activity in my teaching sessions. Could it be a creative way to foster connections and meaningful exchanges between learners?

More assemblage

As the year progressed, and we moved from one project to another, experimenting with different uses of collage, we often talked about how our involvement in #creativeHE had impacted on our own professional lives. As a welcome test bed for activities, the space had given us the confidence to extend our practice further beyond the forum in our respective roles. We started to make a note of all the different teaching and development activities we'd organised in our shared journal.

Simon:

- April 2024: Incorporated a collage activity within an interview skills session for undergraduate students to help explore their motivations and career goals.
 - October 2024: Delivered a session for our Teaching and Learning community on my DIY approach to creativity in HE, creating a website of collaged images and text to present my experiences.
 - May 2025: Co-delivered a session on 'projective techniques' for the MA Academic Practice Symposium, with staff using collage materials to respond to prompts.
 - May 2025: Designed and delivered a research workshop with staff for my MA dissertation, using collage as the methodological tool.
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Charlotte:

- April 2024: Chaired a reading club meeting focused on Culshaw (2019) which included a collage session.
 - May 2024: Proposed and delivered a workshop at a conference designed to capture staff/student experiences of assessment and feedback through collage.
 - July 2024: Ran a session for colleagues undertaking technology-enhanced learning projects which used collage to define what success looked like to them.
 - March 2025: Introduced zine-making to explore thoughts and feelings about AI on a postgraduate award in digital education.
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We discussed whether others might be interested in reading about our experience and whether it might be worthwhile to write some kind of narrative around our evolving practice. Could we publish an article about our journey?

August 2024

Simon: Charlotte suggested quite early on that we might write something together. It was interesting that this seemed to be her response to a shared idea or creative project; that we should record it in an academic way. I had come clean about my lack of experience writing anything for publication, it was daunting and I was not sure I would actually be able to do it. But that didn't seem to matter to Charlotte; the important thing was that we had something exciting to write about, the writing would work itself out. I was on board: it would be a nice way of switching comfort

zones. I'd been comfortable making collaborative images, but Charlotte less so, and I'd appreciated her sending her work even if she did not feel confident about it.

It mirrored my view of working with artworks she had sent me; the images themselves were just a part of the larger creative act of visual collaboration and communication. So I felt assured that my initial words could be scrappy, that they would be woven together into something special later on, and we began to talk about how we might put together an article.

Charlotte: Until I read Simon's journal entry above, the idea of switching comfort zones had not dawned on me. I had always turned to writing naturally as an outlet, so much more than art. And as the year unfolded, something told me we might have an interesting story to tell. Curiously, I had started to visualise how the article could fit together; indeed, I was drawing the article in my head as Simon might draw a picture.

And, just as I had shared how I found it difficult to share my artwork, Simon shared how he had struggled with academic writing. The year had undoubtedly prompted us to venture into new and sometimes unfamiliar territories, and with that, face some of our insecurities. Without formally realising it, we'd been coaching each other.

At this point, it is relevant to refer to a concept which linked us both together, and one that is familiar with many people working in higher education: the third space, 'an emergent territory between academic and professional domains' (Whitchurch, 2008). Whilst both of us were from different backgrounds, we both identified as being in that space: one of us in an

academic development role, widely considered as ‘third space’, and the other having recently moved from purely administrative roles to one which involved teaching for the first time.

Whilst the third space is often considered a locus for creativity and collaboration, its liminal nature can also make it feel uncertain and unstable (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024). A reflective exercise we set ourselves towards at the end of our #creativeHE year highlighted this. Challenging ourselves to come up with five words to describe our experience resulted in: ‘free, imposter; colourful; sharing; understood’ (Simon) and ‘innovative; purposeful; empowered; collaborative; courageous’ (Charlotte). Our choices reflected the transitional and uncertain nature of the spaces we occupied, and the complexity of our identities within those spaces; whilst we both had strengths, we also had insecurities and room to grow. Indeed, in as much as we felt a sense of positivity and self-assurance, the ‘imposter’ still lurked beneath; this was a journey that required ‘courage’.



Figure 6 – Simon’s words



Figure 7 – Charlotte's words

For Buckley et al. (2024), writing for publication can offer third space practitioners 'an opportunity to establish a narrative thread that may stabilise their liquid roles in academia' (p. 2). We decided to take that opportunity.

However, we quickly learned that, just as collaborative collage can be tricky, collaborative writing can be a hard and difficult landscape to negotiate (Nairn et al., 2015). To counterbalance this, we used a number of different approaches to facilitate the process. Firstly, we started using Padlet canvas as a content curation tool, to digitally collage our thoughts and ideas, as well as images, readings and resources. The canvas filled up quickly.

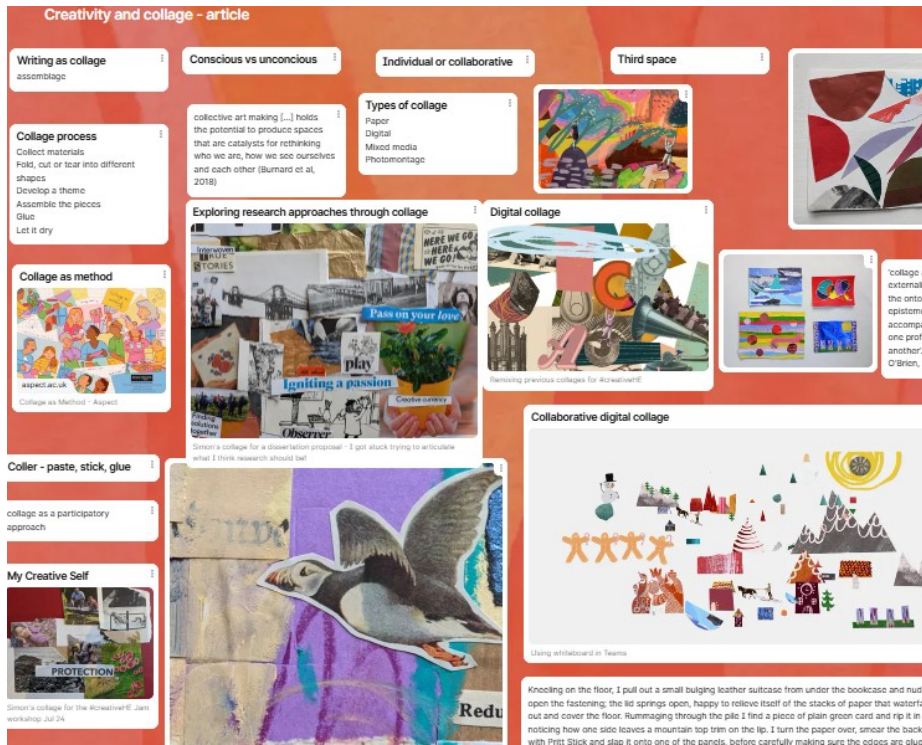


Figure 8 – Padlet canvas

We also decided to meet up in person, something we had not done before as thus far all our collaborative efforts had taken place online. Indeed, whilst collaging in a virtual space had helped overcome the issue of physical distance (and a lack of messy spaces), it felt like meeting in person might make it easier to start writing something. So, on a hot sunny day on the terrace of a visual arts café we started to imagine what the article might look like. And, as the day drew to a close, we turned to collage.

The medium of collage has become a tried-and-tested means of helping researchers advance their ideas. Butler-Kisber & Poldma (2010) consider how collage making could be used to inform qualitative research, whilst Richmond (2022) suggests that ‘the process of making collage, enables researchers to draw upon embodied and affective ways of understanding the world’ (p. 145). Abegglen et al (2022) envisage collage making as a useful way into academic writing. We asked ourselves what do we want this article to be?

This became our prompt for a collaborative collage.



Figure 9 – Collaging the article

Back at home, we started piecing together our stories, reflections, events and ideas in a shared document, a process used in creative writing. Acharya & Ghimire (2010) examine how collage techniques are used in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* through the adoption of different literary devices and patching together different sources. Similarly, Xiang (2021), explains how writers Michael Ondaatje and Kazuo Ishiguro use a collage technique to collate stories, characters and events.

Our own collaborative approach echoed that of Abegglen et al (2021):

We 'free write' thoughts, ideas, observations, descriptions, opinions and references. We write synchronously and asynchronously. We return frequently to our document, going over what we have contributed, finding patterns, good quotes and key points; after a while, as Bowstead (2011) says, we go where the writing takes us, instead of finding what we were already looking for. We start to see what is emerging as a key theme or set of themes. We then edit shift text around cut and extend. We engage in sustained collaborative writing to produce a formal written piece on a given topic, based on our joint expertise and findings.

As we wrote, threads started to emerge, from those threads, a sense of direction and structure: a picture started to form. For Abegglen et al (2021), collaborative writing offers 'a powerful transgressive alternative to academic silos and isolation' (p. 7). One of the joys of our collaborative writing project was opening the document to find that the other person had added something new (rather like writing a wiki entry) or had commented on sections or moved things around.

We continued writing in this way for the next six months.

Glueing

In January 2025, we agreed to take the article out of the shared space and work on it individually, crafting and refining, passing it back and forth to one another.

We took our work to an online conference in June 2025, seeing this not only as a chance to share practice and maybe inspire others, but also a moment to take stock and consolidate our thinking. We included a collaborative collage activity using Padlet, which was a success.

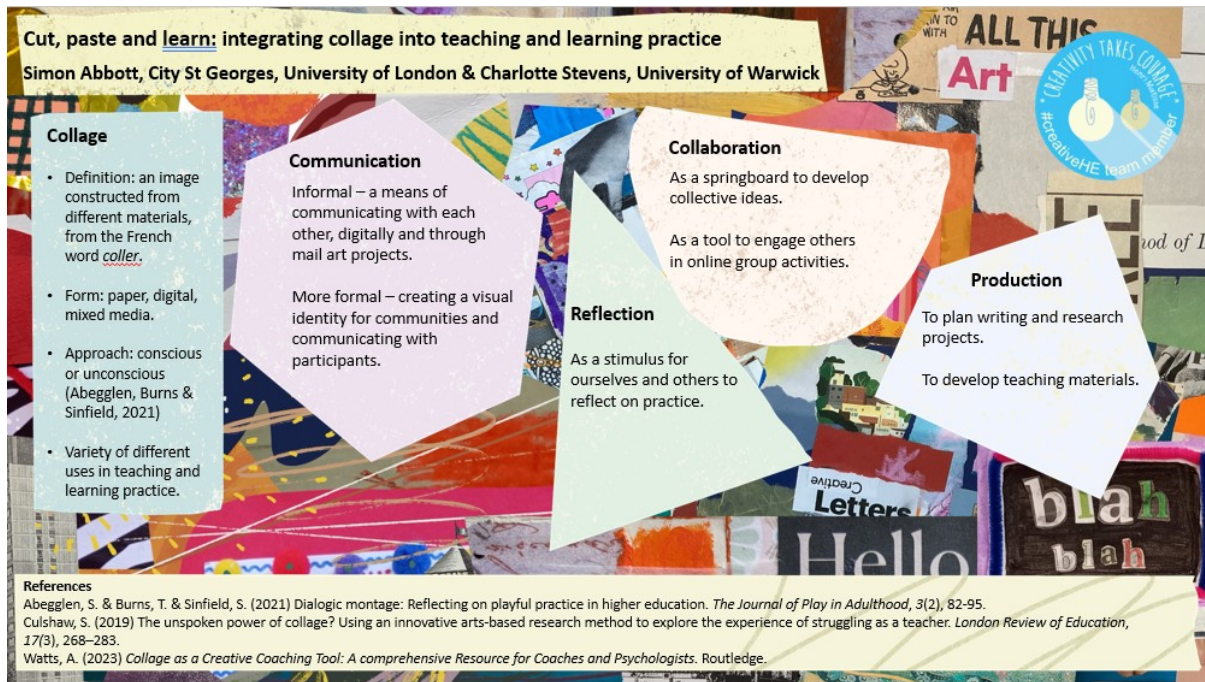


Figure 10- Presentation slide from Islands of Innovation festival, 2025

Inspired by the session, we returned to our writing.

As the corrections became less and less and the pace of writing slowed down, we reflected that the year had not only given us professional confidence but also personal confidence. In fact, one spoke to the other.

June 2025

Simon: Since being involved with the #creativeHE community my confidence in adopting creative approaches within my professional practice has increased. I felt encouraged to use collage as the research method in my recent MA Academic Practice dissertation and to tentatively experiment with its use in my employability teaching with students. I have been striving for a sense of belonging in HE for many years, and in #creativeHE I have found not just a community of practice but a community of

different thinkers, of risk takers and experimenters (Nerantzi et al., 2023). The increased synthesis between my creative practices inside and outside of my work in HE, my 'day job' and my research interests has strengthened this sense of belonging.

Charlotte: Creative and arts-based practice is now a key part of my teaching and the workshops I lead, in fact, colleagues have come to expect it of me. Alongside this, I've also felt inspired to enhance my artistic skills through workshops and self-study. I have gained more confidence and have started to frame my work and show it to other people. I'm less hung up about what people think about the things I make.

Let it dry

So what can we conclude from our experiences? Creative practice can be empowering (Abegglen et al, 2021). Engaging in collage activities, whether individually or collaboratively, has moved us to reevaluate the dominant discourse around creativity as a 'serious' pillar of teaching and learning. It has played a key role in us integrating creative and arts-based approaches into our professional practice, incorporating it into spaces we normally wouldn't have considered before, for example, teaching sessions, staff development sessions, reading groups, project planning workshops and research. Importantly, these initiatives and ideas have often emerged in the gaps of the responsibilities and projects which constituted our roles in HE. It follows then, that our experience has led us to reflect more broadly on our roles and identities, to consider and question the structural spaces we inhabit as 'third space' professionals; to some degree, it has given us the agency to redefine what those spaces are.

It's significant to note here that, whilst the sessions we've organised for #creativeHE have been well-received (even if they didn't quite go to plan), we acknowledge that it can be tricky to replicate this beyond the forum. Some of the activities we've organised outside the group have taken our learners by surprise and, though we've received positive feedback, we recognise that finding validation and recognition for creativity can also be challenging. Creativity requires - and will always require - courage.

What communities like #creativeHE offer is an inclusive space in which to nurture that courage (Wenger, 2002). Having the occasion to test and learn with a group of like-minded others has motivated us – and undoubtedly others - to expand our horizons beyond the forum, taking with us an openness towards risk-taking, a willingness to experiment, and less fear of failure.

An added benefit, of course, is that involvement in such circles can facilitate lasting connections with peers; in our case, across disciplines and institutions. For us, what started as an expression of interest has evolved into an opportunity for informal peer coaching, which has promoted both professional and personal growth in a multiplicity of ways. And on that journey, collage provided a roadmap. All it needs is time to dry.

September 2025

Simon: Eighteen months after our first mail exchange I'm once again excitedly opening another package from Charlotte. As I lift the envelope a stack of materials tumbles out and I immediately see how Charlotte's confidence in collage (and our collaborative ability) has developed over the past year. I've been provided with paper, cellophane, string and fabric. All sorts of colours, images and shapes. This is going to be fun!

In the past couple of years not many days have gone past when I haven't been exploring how creativity can be used in higher education, and each little experiment, workshop and conversation has brought excitement and meaning to what I do in HE. But none have really embodied what I love about creativity, and collage in particular, as much as this collaboration with Charlotte. For me, collage is making something unique from what's already there. It's exhilarating, this process of ripping and rearranging. A purposeful freedom, with value far beyond the material.

Charlotte: Simon has sent me four small canvases he has started to collage himself, as well as an envelope of materials. I'm looking at four canvases an artist has made, which I'm being invited to work on myself. Eighteen months ago, this would have sent me into a spin. Here and now, I'm looking at the canvases thinking: 'What do I want to say?' I dive in.

The practice of collage has pushed me to express myself in alternative ways, to record my thoughts and reflections. A little like journaling, I find myself turning to collage

to capture significant moments and carry a kit with me on trips away (you never know where the inspiration will come from). It has given me a new means of expression, and one I want to keep encouraging others to try.

Acknowledgements

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