

# *Ar lorg na slí*

or

an inquiry into the possibilities of narrative for adult educator growth

or

a conversational record of a precarious educator and his critical companion's grand tour  
of their textured personal, educational, occupational and, indeed, epistemological  
landscapes

or

fragments of voices in a clearing

or

a textual performance of adult educator knowledge

or

the slow (un?)becoming of an adult educator

or

triskelion reflections

or

a creative inquiry into the adult educator subject

or ...

(Smyth, 1989)

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the possibilities of narrative approaches for adult educator growth. It is written and presented as a conversational walking tour between myself and a dialogic other through landscapes of personal, conceptual and occupational significance. This creative confluence of writing and walking is not merely a device to enhance reader engagement, but, after Richardson (1994); Speedy (2005); Gale & Wyatt (2006); Hall (2009); Ingold (2010); Shepherd (2011); McCormack (2013); and Gros (2014) is used here as a method of inquiry. Furthermore, these processes of embodied and contextualised dialogic practice perform a pedagogic function (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1997; Connolly & Hussey, 2013) which suggests our walking and talking tour can be seen as a research *and* learning text.

Interpretive (Denzin, 2014) and polyphonic (Bakhtin, 1984) fragments from a fictional tutor anthology of educational and occupational biographies are interspersed with four creative, autoethnographically-infused walks which take place over the four parts of the text.

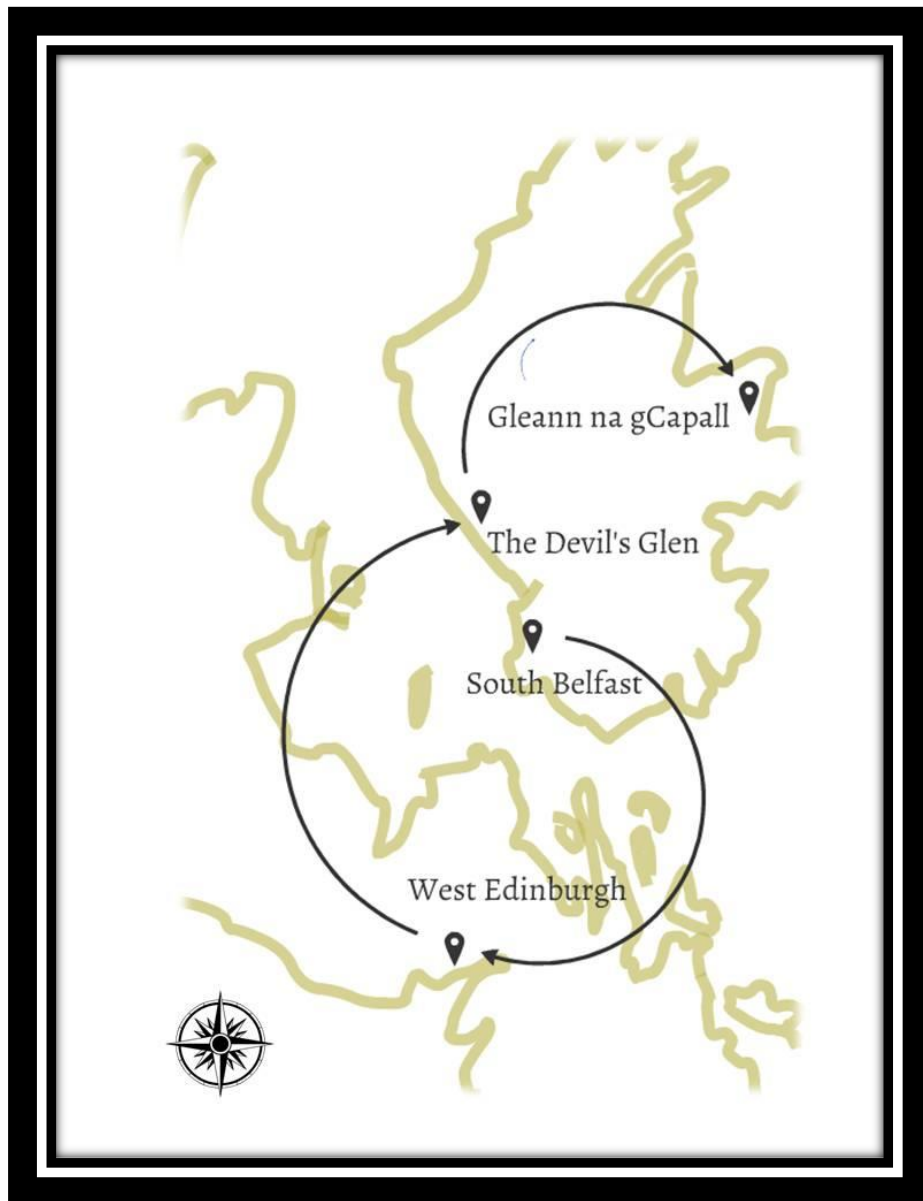
Part One (*Ways in*) commences with tutor stories of their ways in to adult education before our first walk takes us to Belfast to explore the theoretical ways in of this inquiry. On this walk we talk our way through the intersection between poststructuralist and postcolonial theories (Barthes, 1977; Kristeva, 1986a; Cixous, 1976; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1995) and cultural practice (Joyce, 1968, 1992a, 1992b; Morrison, 1992; Gilman, 1993; Duffy, 1994; Heaney, 1998; Welch, 2001) which reveals, for this inquiry at least, the significance of the discursive subject. In Part Two (*Values, Struggle and Growth*) fragments from tutor narratives on values, struggles and growth are interspersed with our walk through the western suburban and industrial landscapes of Edinburgh. It is here that we start to see the emergence of the educator subject and bear witness to an ever-emerging adult educator knowledge and practice (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Brookfield, 2005; Connolly, 2013). Our third walk, Part Three (*A Clearing*), considers the possibilities of the convergence of the cultural and educational concepts and practices, which the first two walks have rehearsed, in a methodological space which is ethically and epistemologically consistent with our endeavours to explore adult educator experience (St. Pierre, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ryan, 2001).

Our final, culturally-cautious (Enright, 2015) walk in Part Four (*Paths travelled; paths ahead*) takes place in an autobiographically-resonant, unmapped valley in the west of Ireland. As well as reflecting on the worth and the significance of this inquiry, personally, methodologically and for adult educators, the inquiry subjects consider occupational futures in education and care within a broader socio-cultural backdrop of precarious and, often, invisible work.

At one level this inquiry produces a troubled text – a messy product, or maybe, more accurately, a draft, of a theoretical, methodological and pedagogic practice which reveals itself from the slow process of the inquiry itself. And what does emerge, eventually, is, a ‘writerly text’ (Barthes, 1992), a textual something that sets the reader to work in the creative, playful, critical and perambulatory performance of knowledge and practice of a dialogic and intertextual adult educator subject in hard times: times of occupational and contractual precarity (Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2011; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015) and times of significant structural, ideological and discursive shifts in adult education in Ireland and further afield (Connolly, 2013; Murray, et al., 2014).

The journey comes to a pause in the end in, quite possibly, a post-qualitative space (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013; 2014), which resists demarcations between research, personal and professional development and creative acts. And in this space there may just be some hope for adult educators struggling to exist and to grow in these hard times of educator precarity and professional invisibility – a hope that lurks around critical and creative acts of narrative reflexivity which draw from triskelion flows of personal, theoretical and communal epistemologies to produce more plural, polyphonic and politicised texts - texts which unashamedly sing the fractured and unstable occupational ontologies in their very form and style.

## Off the beaten track - a guide to this walking tour



In 2011 I enrolled on a doctorate programme with the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. I was returning to study after several years working in adult and further education in Scotland and Ireland. It was my second time returning to education as a mature student. In the 1990s I returned to full-time education as a mature student at Queen's University, Belfast. The difference, when I

returned this time, was that I was returning as both an adult learner *and* an adult educator.

Throughout my years as a practitioner, I had become increasingly involved and engaged in various activities and roles which attended to my own growth as an educator. This interest was reflected in the area which I hoped to explore in my PhD: the developmental experiences of adult educators. In particular, I was interested in the experiences of my adult educator peers working, as it seemed to me, at the institutional margins of VEC/ETBs in Ireland.

As a humanities graduate and teacher of English and communications, I was aware, or rather I felt, that I was entering into a different epistemological space as I commenced my doctoral studies. I had, what now seems, a naïve notion that I would need to dispense with my interest and passion for the arts and humanities and, instead, become a serious researcher in the social sciences. And, more, given the responsibilities of family and work, that I had no time to lose to rush off and learn all I needed to become such a researcher.

But what I didn't appreciate then was that I was stepping into a learning space on the doctoral programme that was deeply informed by critical and feminist educational philosophies (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1997; Mezirow, 1997; Connolly, et al., 2007). This pedagogic space, wisely, held me back from my linear rush into becoming something I had never been, and instead, encouraged me to slow down and pause for a bit. Or rather, to take a deep and critical look at the ways of knowing that were embedded in my own educational and occupational biography. To consider, as Alheit might see it, the epistemological potential in the story of my own life (2009).

What emerged from this deep and prolonged act of reflection is the text that follows. My inquiry didn't shift from its original focus on the development and growth of adult educators. But the way in which this was conducted, and the form and style of the text which emerged from the inquiry, was shaped and re-shaped by the slow emergence and convergence of old and new knowledge flowing from, and through, personal and collective occupational and educational stories.

And so, although my PhD is concerned with the experiences of adult educators, in the end, it has also become an inquiry into the ways that story and narrative have



significance for practitioner research, growth and development and, as such, is as much a story of methodological discovery as it is the story of adult educator experience.

### **Unravelling narrative positions**

It is probably important to state that this text performs as much as represents this developing methodological understanding. And while I believe that this may be useful, and possibly refreshing, for adult educators to bear witness to the working-out and working-through of knowledge – to see the process as much as the product of meaning-making, I am also aware that you, the reader, willingly or not, becomes a fellow-traveller through a slow and messy epistemological wandering through personal and broader social landscapes. I imagine that at times you may long for more traditional methodological forms which present knowledge retrospectively with more structural and semantic neatness. I'm afraid that this isn't that type of text. So although this messiness is intended and, for this inquiry, was necessary, I understand that it may present a challenge for those reader who are more accustomed to, and possibly long for, tidier, linear research narratives. So, what might help, before we start, is to get a more coherent sense of the methodological positioning and ways in which I, and this inquiry, understand narrative and draw on it as a way of making sense of our world and experiences.

### **Narrative as a site for historical and cultural expression and struggle**

One thing that this inquiry has revealed is that my understanding and engagement with narrative is something that stretches back deep into my pre-doctoral life. In some ways, my own identity has been worked out in the telling, listening and re-telling of a multiplicity and heterogeneity of personal and family stories (Randall, 2014). But my first, scholarly, encounters with narrative – long before the PhD or before I worked in adult education - were developed through my interest in, and study of, historiography and the literary use of narrative in construction of hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic, national and cultural identities. Back then, I was also interested in the shifting material and socio-economic conditions of the nineteenth-century such as innovations in mass printing and primary school provision (Anderson, 1991) which allowed narratives to

take on a wider significance than the local and, in part, help create the idea of the national community (Cubitt, 1998; Foster, 1998). However, I was also intrigued in the oppressive play of acts of signification on a colonial (Daniels, 1998; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1995) and personal level – how naming, and the power to signify controlled bodies of people (Zinn, 1994; Said, 1995) and, indeed, people's bodies (Cixous, 1976; Kristeva, 1986a).

Yet in literary forms I saw that dissonant play with narrative forms, style and expectation drew attention to, and complicated power relations and, as such, I was drawn to the literary narratives of the likes of Edgeworth (1995), Gilman (1993), Joyce (1968; 1992a; 1992b) and Morrison (1992).

So, for example, the form-breaking and style-breaking narrative forms such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1995), which was first published in 1801, tells the story of the rise and decline of a Big House Irish family through the vernacular, and explicitly, unreliable narrator of Thady Quirke – a paradoxical and contradictory teller who is both loyal servant and subtle critic of the privileged, landed family he serves. The narrative style adopted by Edgeworth becomes a vehicle for a nuanced critique of late seventeenth-century, socio-cultural relationships and structures. About a hundred years later Charlotte Perkin Gilman presents a memorable narrator in her semi-autobiographical *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1993) – a narrator whose authorial subjectivity shifts and fragments under the oppression and forced seclusion brought about by patriarchal forces. Again innovation and dissonance in narrative voice is used by a writer to critique, in this instance, nineteenth-century attitudes to women's somatic and intellectual autonomy. Of course, the style and shifting forms of Joyce's work (1968; 1992a; 1992b) are as much articulations of an artistic voice struggling against socio-cultural tradition as the stories they contained (Van Boheemen-Saaf, 1999). And, jumping right up to the late twentieth century, the complex and ambiguous narrative and, again, often unreliable, narrative voices in Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) draws the reader into the plot of a work that forms the second in her trilogy of troubled and tragic personal stories that intersect with the story of Black Americans across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

So, I suppose what I began to see back then was that a narrative didn't just tell a story but that it could become a site for counter-hegemonic resistance and, furthermore, that the ways in which these narratives experimented with evocative styles and form in

meaning-making dislocated traditional notions of the passive reader and authoritative writer (Barthes, 1977). As much as my own identity has emerged in the inter-play of personal and familial stories, these texts, produced by writers who were, in different ways, marginalised, suggested how meaning was created not in, but between the interplay of narrative – or as Bakhtin (1984) and Kristeva (1986a) might frame it ‘intertextual’ meaning – that we come to know and understand a text, a story, ourselves in the ways in which it resonates, plays and resists all the other stories we have ever read and told.

In this sense then, in this pre-doctoral phase, my understanding of, and position to, narrative was as both a personal, cultural and political constructivist process (writing the nation) *and* product (the history of the nation, the family story). And, through ideas associated with *l'écriture féminine* as a form of revolutionary poetics (Kristeva 1986a) and in critically-infused creative writing (Edgeworth, 1995; Gilman, 1993; Joyce, 1968; Morrison, 1992), I was drawn to any work which challenged, in content, style and form, hegemonic narrative authority.

### **Narrative pedagogy**

Yet when I stepped into the ‘real world’ of teaching in further and adult education, as I did after my university studies, it seemed, before this inquiry, that I had left such musing about narrative forms and processes behind. And maybe after years of working as an adult educator in further and adult education settings, these somewhat esoteric notions of narrative did fade. What relevance did intertextuality, narrative dissonance and constructivist notion of nationalism have for my practice as a further and adult educator? However, as my autobiographic inquiries reveal throughout what follows, the underlying themes and processes at play in narrative still lingered somewhere just outside my vision. I was still interested and intrigued in notions of power and language. It was just that my gaze had shifted from the page of literary and historical texts to the educative context. Now, as a developing educator, I started to question the authority of teachers in the meaning-making that goes on in classes and was, increasingly, drawn to more horizontal forms of student learning and educator learning through peer networks and informal learning.

Of course, in one sense, my interest in narrative was sustained through my teaching - through my subject (English), but also in the way I approached classes as co-created narrative events – by creating a story of learning as a group (Mezirow, 1997; hooks, 2009) and by drawing on students experiences and stories as resources for learning (Dewey, 1997; Freire, 1996; Alheit, 2009). I also experimented with creating blogs as collaborative accounts of learning by incorporating student contributions. If, as Polkinghorne (1988) suggests, narrative is about making meaning by making connections, then this is how I saw these accounts – as pedagogic narratives that endeavoured to make connections between the bits of learning that can become fractured, unreadable, in the outcome-focussed, quality-assured-obsessed, silos of further education’s modularised curricula. I saw in narrative a way of preserving some of the human aspects of learning that can get culled in technicalised cultures of education (Ball, 2003; Avis & Bathmaker, 2004).

As yet, maybe ironically, I don’t think that I had made the connections between this double play of narrative in my practice – as teaching content (studying narrative forms with students) and process (teaching as a narrative act). Neither had I fully made the connection between these dynamics of narrative in my practice with the ways in which I had contemplated the critical potential of narrative in cultural and literary works which I outlined above.

### **A shift towards narrative’s methodological significance**

Instead these connections became, and are still becoming visible, through the long and deep reflection of this inquiry. They certainly were not visible at first when I turned again to the academy for my doctoral studies because, as I have already mentioned, I was moving too-exclusively in a forward, linear fashion – not attending enough, yet, to my own back-story. Yet, when I started the PhD, I was in search of a methodological something that could attend to adult educator occupational experiences in a way that was coherent with my critical pedagogic values and practice which, I hoped, would be able to draw on notions of knowledge co-creation and socio-cultural critique.

And so when I encountered narrative as a research methodology I embraced it as something that existed within, even if at the margins of, social science’s disciplinary boundaries. I liked and was drawn to ontological notions of narrative ways of being

and knowing - that we understand the world narratively. I was drawn to voices such as Barthes (1992), Polkinghorne (1988), Bruner (1991) and Niles (2010) who stressed the ontological and epistemological significance of narrative. I liked how Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew on Dewey's (1997) notion of experience for their narrative inquiry methods.

I liked all this and yet still I didn't quite see *this* narrative as something bearing relation to the way I understood narrative at play in history, culture and the classroom previously. It was, for me, initially, merely a method which seemed to resonate with my own bearings, my own knowledge. Eventually, and, again, thanks to the deep critically reflective aspect of the doctoral programme, I started to make the connections between the way I positioned myself with narrative in history, culture and pedagogic practice and the ways in which narrative was used in qualitative inquiry. I say connections but should really say fault-lines because as soon as I started to see relationships I also started to feel a sense of dissonance in these connections - things didn't quite join up neatly as I might have hoped. But my awareness of the fault-lines emerged slowly. In the meantime, I worked away for on an inquiry which I felt was a straight-forward enough narrative inquiry.

### **Narrative as method of social scientific inquiry**

So, to step back from the fault-lines for a moment, I drew initially on Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Clandinin (2007) and Etherington (2011) who are part of a broad school of narrative inquiry which, laudably, is interested in using participant story and voice as the core of their research encounters. They represent in Chase's (2011) terms, a pragmatic narrative approach which is interested in narrative as the story of the life and believe that narrative inquiry 'begins and ends with experience' (p. 421) and, in so doing, gently resists 'the academic impulse to generalize from specific stories to broader concepts' (p. 421). I was drawn to, what seemed, a democratization of voice between the participant and researcher – that we, as researchers, should be aware of and resist the impulse to re-frame participant narratives in our own terms.

I was also drawn to narrative researchers such as Holstein and Gubrium (2004) who seemed more constructivist in their approach and who encouraged researchers to see the research moment, and interviews in particular, as narrative encounters – to see the

way in which narrative meaning was created in spaces of open telling and listening – this resonated with my adult educator values of dialogue and sensitivity to power.

Those who identified themselves as narrative inquirers within the boundaries of social scientific, qualitative tradition, such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Polkinghorne (2007) and Riessman (2011), were alluring through the general claims of the democratic potential of narrative as a methodological process which would attend to, and make visible, participant experience and voice. So I drew on, in particular, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) notion of 'telling and re-telling' and Holstein and Gubrium's (2011) framing of research interviews as narrative events to create a method of working with tutor-participants which was coherent with my adult education principles. In some ways, my discomfort with a narrative inquiry bounded within traditional, if increasingly diverse, qualitative research came as I pondered on the next steps – how to, so to speak, name and frame these tutor narratives.

When I looked, particularly, at graduate methodological applications of narrative inquiry which positioned their work within qualitative research I was, to an extent, disappointed. The power relations which seemed to be challenged by acknowledging the presence of the researcher in the primary research process seemed, in much of what I read, to revert to hegemonic academic norms with the reassertion of authoritative narrative voice, style and forms which appeared to be not that far removed from post-positivist social scientific research: thesis after thesis followed the familiar structure of literature review, methodology, findings, analysis .... The stories, in particular, of participants seemed to get lost, if they were there at all, into the greater, meta-narrative project of the researcher. There was, in essence, much talk about being true to the stories of participants, but yet, the stories seemed either lost in the final text or framed and relegated as 'data' to be dissected, sterilised and re-interpreted by the researcher, who as author, had re-established their epistemological power. These anxieties associated with the socio-cultural 'crisis of representation' (Greene, 1994b, pp. 206-208; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, pp. 18-19) may be familiar enough tropes in the meta-narratives of qualitative research, but navigating to a space that resolved that crisis satisfactorily in my work was less clear to me.

So despite a lot of what I admire in this strain of work with narrative, as Chase (2011) points out in this, increasingly, broad church of narrative inquiry, there is also something, possibly the combination of a lingering critical sensibility towards

historiographic and creative narratives and an evolving critical pedagogic DNA, which heightened my awareness of issues of authorship, representation and power and which drew me towards other ways of working and inquiring with narrative.

Chase also draws attention to a strain of narrative inquiry which is attentive, not just to participant experience, but more broadly to the 'narrative environment' in which stories are told and to the 'ethnographic sensibility' of the researcher (2011, p. 422). It was this suggestion of attending to stories in their cultural context, a deep critical reflection on the power of the researcher-writer and making participant stories more visible in research texts which drew me away from the post-positivist-inflected, qualitative narrative methods to a more ethnographic methodological space.

### **(Auto)ethnographic, humanist and interpretivist narrative methods**

I came, then, to autoethnography as a separate strand which has narrative as its focus. This school is distinct by turning the narrative gaze towards the researcher-author's biography as a site of inquiry and, laudably, I felt, as Chase points out, aims 'to create a more equitable relationship between the researcher and those she or he studies by subjecting the researched *and* the researcher to an analytic lens' (2011, p. 423). This study of self in a cultural context also starts moving towards forms of writing, and research representation more generally, that valorises the aesthetic dimension of the research text. I was drawn to those who worked with narrative who developed and were interested in the creative aspects of (auto)ethnographic work (Richardson, 1994; Clough, 1996; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Cunningham Breede, 2013; McCormack, 2013)

And what came with this methodological space too was a shift to an interpretive lens (Denzin, 2014), which moved away from the traditional qualitative framing and analyses of participant stories by authoritative researcher/writers. The shift towards the personal and the acknowledgement of the presence of a biographically-loaded, thinking, feeling researcher-writer in the inquiry space seemed like a significant break from a post-positivist-influenced anxiety about maintaining, at least, some sort of scientific objectivity. And so the deep, biographic reflective work that I was engaged in as part of my learning and growth as a doctoral researcher migrated from the private pages of my ever-expanding research journal onto the public pages of the research text itself. I dragged myself, somewhat reluctantly at first, into the gaze of this inquiry.

And although I am, in the end, all over this text, in some ways, autoethnography drifted a bit too far into the self and too far away from what I am interested in: practitioners and spaces for practitioner inquiry and knowledge to develop. Again, to reiterate, my original and unchanging position throughout was, is as a practitioner who is doing some research rather than a researcher working with practitioners. I was still uneasy about the power of the authorial voice and, in autoethnography, this unease settled on the dominant focus on the self, the ‘I’ in the text – despite acknowledging that the autoethnographic self is explored within a cultural context.

I was stuck. I liked the methodological, aesthetic, communicative aspects of this type of narrative work but needed to resolve the dominance of the ‘I’. I wasn’t completely rejecting a humanist focus on the individual. I wanted to attend to the personal. But I also wanted to reveal the stories around the individual – to somehow hold the collective, the cultural and the individual. The adult educator part of my epistemological make-up kept drawing my attention to the other voices and cautioned me against ignoring them. I imagined the inquiry as adult education work and was cautious about my voice as tutor-inquirer dominating the space. I was really stuck.

### **Playing with the fault-lines: poststructuralist, creative and post-qualitative narrative inquiry**

Whilst holding this sense of unease of drifting away from participants/practitioners, but also intrigued and engaged by some excellent writing in autoethnography, I identified work within, or closely associated within this field, that shifts the focus from the self or participants and, drawing on Richardson’s (1994) disquiet with the literary dearth of sociological writing, put a focus on writing as inquiry. This threw upon new forms and styles which did not just become the means of communicating an inquiry but also became, in a significant way, a locus for the inquiry. So I drew on those scholars such as Richardson (1997), Gale (2010), St. Pierre (2014), and Speedy and Wyatt (2014) who write with, and through, an acknowledgement of not-knowing – again, something that resonates with an adult educator practice and values. And, in this strand of narrative, which is more about *storying* rather than stories, I saw a possibility, a space to work out, to work through some of the unease I had around the post-positivist and humanist



schools of narrative inquiry and autoethnography – a place to become un-stuck (St. Pierre, 1997b; McCormack, 2013).

There was, in the creative potential of writing as inquiry, the licence I was looking for to write through to knowledge. And, crucially, I feel that it was here that I could write-explore between the first and third voices - the 'I' and 'she/he' - to explore the second voice in writing, literally, to bring 'you' into the text – a space between the individual and the collective. A space to both hold and extend the 'I'. A space to appease my adult educator self.

My concern with a too-inward gaze was somewhat assuaged by reshaping an autoethnography as self-inquiry towards a poststructuralist, autoethnographic inquiry (Gannon, 2006, 2013) which re-frames it as a subject-inquiry through writing ... allowing more fluidity in lines of delineation for the subjects of the inquiry. It also allowed me to embrace fragmented narratives (tutor stories, researcher story) as a way of trying to resolve the methodological with my epistemological, ontological, practice and personal values, positions and experience. Imagining narrative research as writing as inquiry allowed me to develop a space, a vessel, which tries to hold the researcher and participant in focus at the same time, to go deep in personal stories, but not to evade socio-economic and cultural realities and which can, as a process, be regarded as a methodological, pedagogic and creative act. I had moved, in my evolving relationship with narrative within this inquiry as something which was far 'more than a method' (Holman, et al., 2013) bounded by qualitative research that lingered in the shadows of post-positivism. Instead, I moved, and still move, towards modelling a way of practitioner growth through creative play with our own subjectivities and contexts which may just enable us to become better adult educators and in the process draw attention to the conditions in which that must happen.

### **Locating a methodological bearing**

I've talked a bit about post-positivism and possible links with qualitative narrative inquiry. I think that many narrative inquirers would resist such paradigmatic association. Indeed Clandinin and Rosiek (2009) explicitly distances narrative inquiry epistemologically from post-positivism (pp. 43-47). However, if we take Creswell's (2003, p. 8) definition of post-positivism as position which takes its lineage from

scientific inquiry and which makes assumptions about a fairly stable and knowable reality that can be tested and validated, then, I think that much narrative inquiry could be seen as post-positivist in its epistemological positioning - the kind of work that is done by those researcher who see and talk of stories as ‘data’ and, especially realist researchers, who regard experience, as a phenomena which can be studied and analysed in a relatively objective way.

Creswell posits four methodological worldviews for research: post-positivist; social constructivist; pragmatic; and advocacy/participatory. Narrative, as it is used methodologically, can fit in different spaces on this axis based on researcher ontological and epistemological assumptions about experience and stories. My own perspective, after Ryan (2001) and Davies & Davies (2007) would question any unproblematic notion of experience and, at the same time, be wary of seeing a research narrative as something wholly pre-existing the research encounter (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). Such assumptions would locate me towards the social constructivist or, as Creswell also calls it, the interpretivist view. But I also regard myself as an adult education practitioner who feels a resonance with narratives that are co-constructed and can serve a purpose to advance the marginalised occupational status of educators who are near invisible in their work. So, using Creswell’s axis (Figure1), I would be located roughly at the X – somewhere high up the advocacy and social constructivist plain.

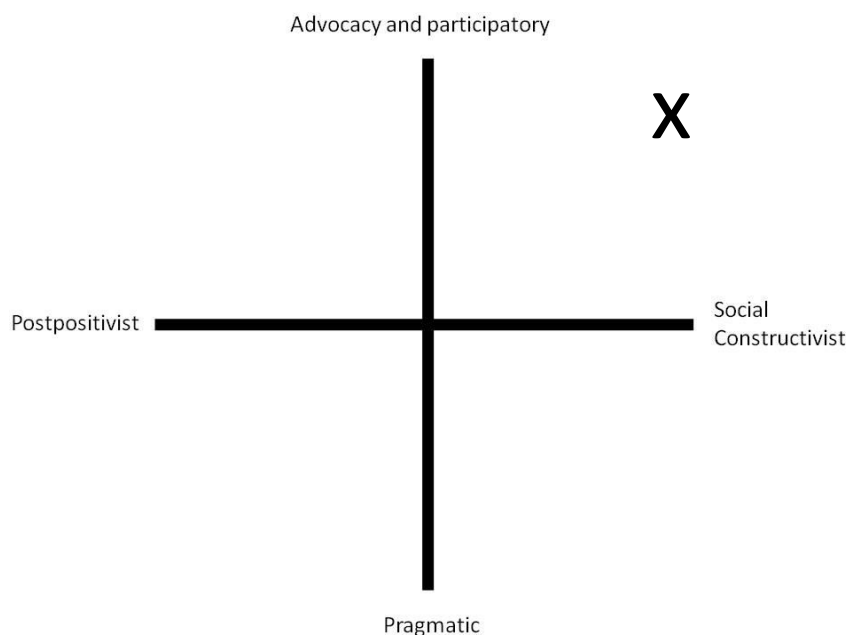


FIGURE 1

Why am I telling you this? I'm hoping that, in making my own position in relation to narrative and methodology clearer, that your journey as a reader through these pages will feel less bewildering – or, maybe, that there is a sense in that bewilderment.

What I am about to leave you with then is a critical and creative inquiry that takes the form of a dialogic walking tour through textual and geographic spaces of significance in my own growth as an adult learner and educator. And as a textual inquiry that was born out of a critical pedagogic catalyst that encouraged deep reflectivity, it is, as much a learning text as a research text.

Although its form resists the formal and structural conventions of a traditional thesis, there is, in these pages, the things that you would expect to find in a research text: there is theoretical positioning and methodological processes and discussion. It is just that these aspects are splintered across the text. They are never taken for granted and emerge from the learning act that the text itself performs – they are, in some ways, the findings of a creative inquiry of an adult educator into my own knowledge and practice. So, this thesis, which, methodologically rests finally at a post-qualitative space (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013, 2014) that might be called creative writing as inquiry and ends, in sympathy with its many contradictions, where most qualitative research starts.

### **Mapping the text**

As you will no doubt notice quite soon, there are a number of different voices in this text that cluster in different spaces. Throughout the text you will come across the fragmented narratives of the adult education tutors who were involved in this inquiry. Their stories weave back and forth between each other across the page. These are the fragmented remnants of a narrative inquiry splintered, but not destroyed, by a process of methodological emergence as discussed above. You will also come across an autoethnographic dialogue between myself and an unnamed and shifting dialogic other as we walk through landscapes of educational, occupational and personal experience. The adult educator narrative fragments and the dialogic walking tour are interlaced – neither of them assume a position of narrative authority. The tutor stories have been told and re-shaped through an interpretive process and are left to speak for themselves.

The tutor fragments and the walking dialogue gather, though, in four, broad thematic, sections: 1. Ways in; 2. Values, struggle and growth; 3. A clearing; 4. Paths travelled; paths ahead.

Most of the tutor narratives in Part One, 'Ways in', are based on the stories of how these ten educators ended up working in adult education. Following these fragments, you will join myself and my dialogic other on our first walk in, in and around south Belfast, where we discuss the emergence of my theoretical formations as a returning mature student in England and Northern Ireland. As we walk around the suburban landscape which was once home, we discuss the emergence of cultural and literary critical consciousness which prompted and facilitated a troubled interrogation of accepted notions of knowledge, identity and the play of power and language in their construction. But we also come to realise how the notion of a non-unitary and transient subject, as posited by the critical voices within feminist poststructuralism and postcolonialism, offers some consolation and hope for a way forward for thinking and living an ethical life.

In Part Two, 'Struggle and growth', you will come across a few fragmented sections of tutor narratives based on stories of working and their development as educators. These are woven around our second walk, starting on Corstorphine Hill in Edinburgh and then down around the industrial estates of the west of the city. On our way we talk and walk our way through the development of my knowledge and practice as an adult educator in Scotland and Ireland. We discuss the challenges of my initial growth as an educator from my training as a secondary school teacher through to the rich, but often challenging, years of working in FE in Scotland to, finally, working as an adult educator on the margins of a VEC/ETB and a university in Ireland. We talk through the ongoing, process of my growth towards a knowledge and practice of education which endeavours to ground itself in democratic and critical pedagogic values.

This emerging educator knowledge, experience and values, rooted in the realities of the social practice of teaching, seems, at first glance, a long way from the esoteric knowledge of language, subjecthood and power which I developed in Belfast. And so, in Part Three, in which we get lost a bit around and about the Devil's Glen in Wicklow 'A Clearing', you will join us in a dialogic attempt to merge cultural theories with practice knowledge into a methodological space that works for this critical and creative inquiry.

On this final walk we start to see the ways in which the disorientating academic knowledge gained in Belfast allows itself to merge with practitioner knowledge and realities to become a kind of methodological knowledge. This, in turn, allows us to consider the possibility of exploring adult educator growth as a form of cultural inquiry – to inquire into, and to perform, the adult educator subject on and through a creative, playful text which doesn't represent but rather performs knowledge in formation.

In Part Four, 'Paths behind, paths ahead', the tutor narratives reflect on occupational futures in adult education. In our final walk, I make an attempt to retreat from the dialogic to an individual reflective space, to walk alone as I trace a familiar, familial path in the west of Ireland. This journey collapses walks from my past, present and future as I ascend a small hill in search of a modest, unmapped valley in Connemara – walking a final contemplation and reflection on the possibilities of narrative practice for inquiry, for personal and for communal growth as adult educators.

### **Final words**

This text emerged from an exploratory and non-linear writing practice. It is a long text, maybe too long, and although written in a way to engage, it may present a challenge for any reader who reads it against the manner of its formation – that is, to read it in a straight line. Instead, it may be more useful, to read this big text in sympathy with the spirit of its becoming – embracing a wandering, back-and-forth, fragmented reading style may just be the way to go ... grab the lines, the moments in the text, that speak to you and go with the flow for a bit ...

And here's another thing ...

We can be very precious about texts – particularly the ones which sit on shelves in university libraries. Our role, when we pick them up, is to read, and not be heard.

However, I like to think that all reading is dialogic in one way or another – that when we read, we are in conversation with the text and, by extension, but unseen to each other, to all who have, and will, read it. And in that way, it seems a shame that the

questions and thoughts that arise in our readings are usually carried away, invisibly, when we return a book.

So, as a small act of textual revolt, I'm asking you, if, by any slight chance, you happen to be reading this in its leafy, material form, to please feel more than free to read what follows with a pen poised between your finger and your thumb.

And if, in your reading, any thoughts, questions or images come to mind, please use that poised pen to leave a trace of them on these pages - join this textual conversation wherever and whenever you feel the impulse to unsettle the stillness of the broad white plains of this text ... go on, write on me ...

## Glossary

CID	<p>Contracts of Indefinite Duration (CID), common in education work, are similar to a permanent contracts but not regarded as such in Irish law. CID holders who teach less than 18 hours are paid at an hourly rate for the number of hours they teach each week. CID holders on 18 hours or more per week are paid a full-time salary.</p>
FÁS	<p>FÁS was a state-funded national provider of vocational and training programmes. It was dissolved in 2013 and its services integrated into the newly established national further education body, SOLAS.</p>
FETAC/QQI SQA	<p>Qualification authorising and quality assurance bodies. Up until 2013, FETAC was responsible for level 1-6 on the ten-point National Framework of Qualifications. Level 7 is equivalent to an undergraduate degree. From 2013 onwards FETAC and its HEI equivalent, HETAC, were merged to form QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) which have responsibility across all levels (1-10) on the National Framework of Qualifications. The equivalent body in Scotland is the SQA (Scottish Qualification Authority).</p>
LMA	<p>Labour Market Activation (LMA) programmes are vocational and training programmes aimed at the mid- to long-term unemployed. Typically, attendance on LMA programmes is monitored and linked to participants' social welfare payments.</p>
The Teaching Council	<p>The Teaching Council is the professional registration body for teachers. As a statutory body it sets the standards of academic achievement and professional training required of teachers. Since 2009, the Teaching Council has assumed registration and accreditation roles and responsibilities for educators working and training in further and adult education.</p>
VEC/ETB	<p>Up until 2013, there were 33 state-funded, largely county-organised, Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) that were responsible for the provision of, some primary, but mostly, secondary, further, adult and community education. In 2013, these VECs were restructured as 16 cross-county, Education Training Boards (ETBs). All the tutor-participants involved in this inquiry work, or worked, in VEC/ETBs.</p>
Youthreach	<p>Youthreach is a state-funded education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20.</p>





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## Prologue – foreshadows of a clearing





So there I was, standing alone amongst the fruit and vegetables in Lidl, pondering on the depth of our family's immediate need for an avocado.

It wasn't on the list, but I was nearly sure you had shouted out 'avocado' as I left the house.

Or was it 'aubergine'?

As I struggled with the profound banality of this domestic dilemma, an other presence seemed to slowly fade-up into my vision and consciousness. And then, all of a sudden, I was wondering who was this vaguely-familiar figure staring at me quizzically.

Catching you watching me, you approached, timidly, and ventured,

- Jerry?

- ... yes ...?

- It's me ...

I struggled to be coherent at your sudden apparition in the aisles of Lidl. Was that really you - middle-aged and shopping for cheap veg? And, to be honest, looking a bit worn-out, a bit faded with the years ...

But, getting past that, you started to become more solid, more real ...

And, yes, in fact, it was you. You and that big crooked smile of yours - as if we had just seen each other yesterday.

As if nothing had ever happened. As if everything was just fine.

- It is. It's you. Of course. ... who else?

And within the rhythm of the ensuing, initially awkward, conversation where we vacillated between the familiar and the strange, you soon asked, almost inevitably,

- So what are you up to these days? Are you still involved in music?

Having conversations with characters, like yourself, from our past can be odd sometimes. Unexpected invocations of our former selves can defamiliarise our present. Can make the naturalness of our now seem suddenly strange.

But I merely smirked, as I recalled with a certain fondness that former me, and replied,

- No, no. ... I'm a ... I work in ... I'm involved in adult education.

- Really! Wow. That is a surprise. Like teaching and ... stuff ... you were the last person that I'd imagine as a teacher. How did that happen?

There is so much in this short exchange that touches on many of the occupational nuances, complexities and contradictions of being 'involved in adult education': my faltering response and futile millisecond search for an appropriate occupational noun may have something to say about the sometimes precarious identity, and not unrelated contractual status, of adult educators; my qualification of the verb 'work' to 'involved' reveals something more than mere paid employment – maybe a hint of an ideological commitment to what I do. Your surprise and momentary, unsuccessful struggle to name adult education and your misconceived image of me as a teacher, on the other hand, reveals a wider discursive discomfort and incoherence with adult education that can only be resolved by positioning it, as you did then yourself, as a hard-to-signify Other ('and ...stuff') to more traditional forms of education ('teaching').

But, how, as you asked, did that happen?

Yes, it is true that, during our time together at secondary school, the possibility of a future occupational life in education was something I would have laughed at myself. I was, as they say, 'able enough' but by the time I reached Leaving Cert, I was jaded with the hysterical priority put on these set of final exams. My interests then, as you quite rightly remembered, lay with music – or maybe just the allure of something fresh, something exciting that seemed to be waiting impatiently outside the school gates.

Drifting slightly in that summer of 1988 and beginning to feel a thread of anxiety over the possibility of an occupational and educational vacuum within the context of the contracted horizons of a national recession, I was delighted and, it must be said, somewhat relieved, to be offered a place on a Sound Engineering Course in Ballyfermot Senior College.

Within a couple of weeks of commencing that course, I was unrecognisable from the apathetic school student from the months before, as I wholeheartedly immersed myself in the challenges and opportunities presented by a very different type of learning.

And so commenced a passionate relationship with adult education, which has endured, in various forms, for 25 years.

In those 25 years I have lived, worked and learned in England, America, Northern Ireland, Scotland and, now, again, Ireland. My career in music didn't quite hit the stellar heights, or rather subterranean depths, that I imagined as a teenager but I am slowly coming to terms with that now – time is, indeed, the great healer. Instead, a strong, if rather unfocused epistemological impulse, drew me into Higher Education as a mature student in my mid-twenties. Driven by a newly-discovered passion for education and its life-altering possibilities, I embarked on a couple of degrees and a post-graduate qualification in teaching before occupational aspirations and familial circumstances led me to work as a lecturer in the further education sector in Scotland.

The several years I taught and learned in colleges in Scotland were rich in terms of my own development as an educator. The college sector was a discursively complex place: at one level they were run, and conceived, as business enterprises which operated, if not for profit, for financial growth. Much of the language, culture and practice of business, as has been pointed out elsewhere, permeated the FE sector there (James & Biesta, 2007; Jephcote, Salisbury & Rees, 2008; Coffield, 2009).

I am reluctant to portray what could be seen as a reductionist dualism between neoliberal managers and emancipatory educators: the reality was more a complex ideological spectrum. I knew many socially-minded education managers and many market-advocating educators. The wide range of vocational and academic subject areas helped to nurture, largely unarticulated, but an equally-wide variety of assumptions about the core purposes of further education.

And yet despite what practitioners and managers felt or believed, the funding mechanisms and governance structures ensured that colleges were managed with practices and discourses associated with the commercial business world: learning was deconstructed into a complex system of measurable units (i.e. recruitment rates; retention rates at various points; completion rates etc.) which determined funding streams for colleges and academic and vocational areas within colleges.

Yet, competing against this dominant managerialist structure, were critical and dissenting, if often heterogeneous and marginal, educational voices embodied in many passionate and committed educators across the sector. Clashes between these discourses, not infrequently, left a trail of occupational victims.

But the interesting things that happened in the development of my own knowledge and practice were often found within spaces where I could engage with these clashes. Sensing the worth of such encounters, but also taking heart from scholarly voices such as Penlington (2008) who stressed the importance of institutions embracing dissonance in educator development, some of us endeavoured to create spaces for genuine critical dialogue which, to put it one way, asked questions about the business of further education (Lawson, et al., 2008-2010). And it was these conversations which occurred in the cracks of a neoliberal educational structure which nourished us through the hard times.

After several years in Scotland, and carrying these conversations with me, I returned to Ireland. I still work in adult education (as I name it now) but, as my faltering reply to you in Lidl reveals, my occupational identity and status is less stable these days.

Partly by choice, but more by way of lack of opportunity, I do bits and pieces: I do a bit of work as a tutor within the adult education services of an ETB; I do some research

within the adult education field; and I am involved in some adult education programmes within Higher Education.

Yet, and I nearly neglected to mention this here myself, all of this comes secondary to my primary occupational role in the home: my wife and I try to juggle her work in health care and my work in adult education around the work involved in the care of our children. This balancing of various lives is, as far as I have seen, commonplace for many adult educators. We slip in and out of different occupational roles and identities numerous times each day.

So, I have, in Ireland, a more fractured sense of occupational coherence and, indeed, as a relatively marginal practitioner in a marginal educational sector, I am unsure about what kind of occupational future in adult education, if any, lies ahead for me. But what sustains me, so far, is the deep belief, nurtured since my days in Ballyfermot, about the social and emotional worth of adult education and its capacity to transform lives and, possibly more pragmatically, that opportunities can come when we attend to our own learning, our own development.

...

Interesting, maybe. But, to put it bluntly, so what? What's the point of this condensed narrative of one occupational life?

Well, maybe there is no point, but let me explore the possibility of there being, at least, one. For a start, this chance meeting with you, your questions which made me step back and consider the narrative of my occupational arc, made, as I alluded to earlier, my own life feel less familiar. Making strange the familiar, as Wright Mills argued half a century ago, is the central task of a systematic study of society and its constituents, including in this case, adult education (1959). My meeting with you allowed me to stand outside the relentless linearity of my lived narrative and look, more critically, at its development. Such reflective and reflexive moments allow us to generalise within our experience and is a concept and practice, as adult educators, we are not unfamiliar with

(Kolb, 1984; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Dewey, 1997; Moon, 1999; Schön, 2003; Brookfield, 2005).

And if we acknowledge Eagleton's notion that theory is 'the moment when a practice begins to curve back on itself, so as to scrutinize its own conditions of possibility' (1996, p. 190), then, we might argue that this narrative reflexivity, this curving back, is the starting point for us in creating a theory of our occupational lives as adult educators.

Furthermore, rather than seeing theory as dislocated and irrelevant, we start to see it as an activity in critical self-reflection which is, in Eagleton's allure of possibilities, not self-absorbed but rather developmental in its purpose. What we might begin to imagine, then, in acts of narrative reflexivity, to borrow heavily from Thomson (2007) and Connolly and Hussey (2013), is the possibility of a really useful theory for our own practice and development as adult educators.

But it is not enough to start and end with our own narratives as the source of our useful theory. We must also develop this within a community of theoretical voices which speak to our story. Adult educators are familiar with marginal spaces: our practice, our knowledge, our learners and learning spaces often exist in spaces far from the centre of cultural, societal and institutional authority and validation. As such, it is no coincidence that many of us seek alignment with those who develop narratives and theories of the marginal. From the aesthetic and critical narratives of literature (Joyce, 1968; Gilman, 1996), feminism (Kristeva, 1986a; Moi, 1985, Ryan, 2001; Davies & Gannon, 2005) postcolonialism (Kabbani, 1986; Said, 1995), poststructuralism (Ryan, 2001; Foucault, 2002), and critical education theories (Horton & Freire, 1990; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Ryan, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008), we read the dynamic play (Bakhtin, 1988; Richardson, 1994) and pull of language and power in articulations of knowledge and being (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1991).

And what we read, or should, from the intertextual resonances between these narratives and our own stories is, for one, that our knowledge and ways of being as adult educators is proudly liminal – an occupational space that troubles binaries of known-not-known; teacher-learner; researcher-participant. This liminality enables our ways of knowing as educators to be multidimensional: dialogic, creative, affective, political, compassionate, critical ... . Our crooked paths into and around the diverse landscape

of adult education allows us, or at least has the capacity if we see its worth, to see the connection between things.

And maybe that's where our useful knowledge lies: our own rich educational and occupational narratives have equipped us with this vision to see knowledge as connections, relations. As with the respective poetic and critical gazes of Bhabha and Heaney, our interest and our knowledge is often found in the space between things (Bhabha, 1994; Heaney, 1998; Cole, 2013). But we know enough also, to know that there is so much we don't know. Occupying spaces of epistemological humility (Freire, 1996) allows us, for example, to acknowledge that not-knowing is a powerful place for learning and development to occur (McCormack, 2013). Or that knowledge ebbs and flows between tutor and student in the adult education environment. And that we grow, as educators, when we continue to explore and extend the boundaries of our own knowledge and practice.

But this exploration into useful theories and knowledge can be a lonely task and wrought with doubt if taken alone. It is important, yet not enough, to have some worthy but absent theorists as companions on our journeys of growth. As educators we sometimes miss the irony that what we advocate for the good of our students' development as learners, we rarely call for in our own development as educators.

Most of us would, in one way or another, believe in and practice a form of pedagogy that had a social and dialogic element (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Dewey, 1997; Brookfield, 2005). In trying to achieve this, we work hard to create appropriate spaces for such learning to occur. But do we fight as hard to create similarly appropriate spaces, temporal and physical, for our own development as educators? Do we need to be told that much has been written about the capacity for authentic, safe and critical peer-based learning groups in the development of educators across sectors (Wenger, 1998; Snow-Gerono, 2005; James & Biesta, 2007; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Scales, et al., 2011)? Or do I need to reflect that some of the most important moments in my own learning and development as an educator have taken place in formal and informal dialogic encounters with my peers?

Maybe. But, as I have already suggested, I suspect it does not come as a major surprise to any of us as such environments are the very things we endeavour to create for the development of our own learners. There is then, it seems, a certain responsibility on

us to create spaces for such encounters in the vital task of our own development – to find clearings within the relentless pace, density and messiness of our occupational lives in which we can pause to slowly name our practice, our knowledge, our useful theories.

It's important to note that the availability of, and access to, such clearings is not just crucial for our own development; safe, but critically robust spaces are also needed to name and sustain adult education itself. Acts of naming are often, possibly always, political acts (Andrews, 1975; hooks, 1994; Deane, 1997). Naming adult education is not a neutral activity – it is merely part of a wider struggle of values, ideas and purpose at play right now within the broad and heterogeneous field of adult education in Ireland (Connolly & Hussey, 2013; Murray, et al., 2014; Fitzsimons, 2015). And it is only if we are allowed to catch our breath in occupational clearings can we reflect on the broader, but fundamental, ideological, structural and educational significance revealed by the semantic tensions between terms such as 'further education', 'training' and 'adult education'.

Yet identifying the need for such clearings is, of course, an easier task than actually creating them. Institutional marginality and contractual precariousness, coupled with the occupational, sectoral and ideological diversity of adult educators makes it difficult for us to create these spaces alone.

The nurturing of authentic, peer-led development spaces for educators takes a leap of faith for institutional agents within the sector as it means putting a value (and yes, possibly, even money) behind a commitment to creating temporal and physical spaces for adult educator development. But as Coffield (2009), James (2007), Scales (2011) and Wenger (1998) have all pointed out, this requires the need for authentic and creative leadership which acknowledges and validates the centrality of the adult educator, and their development, in the evolution of a high quality service. That, though, is another story.

Let's pause for now by imagining, instead, what might occur in horizontal, slow, safe and dialogic developmental spaces for educators? Well, as Clandinin and Connelly propose, a good place to start would be for educators to share their occupational stories (1995). Such narrative collaboration may just, as Craig suggests, create 'knowledge communities [which] recognize and value teachers' personal practical knowledge and connect individuals to the communal ways of knowing' (1995, p. 141).



And in narrating our occupational lives, we may, in embracing the intertextuality of our knowledge and practice, explore, with a creative and playful criticality (Done, et al., 2011), encounters in Lidl, to make, a more important point about the conditions and possibilities for our growth as adult educators ...



Naming It      Leontia Flynn

Five years out of school and preachy  
with booklearning, it is good to be discovered  
as a marauding child.

To think the gloomiest most baffled  
misadventures might lead so suddenly  
to a clearing - as when a friend  
taking me to her well-stocked fridge says:

look

this is an avocado and this  
is an aubergine.

(Flynn, 2004)



Part One

Ways in



Found fragments from an anthology of tutor narratives #1

Occupational formations





Before I got into tutoring I was  
a full-time  
mother.

I was busy

I went to secondary school in the 60s. At that time, there were  
seven in our family. I was the second eldest.

My brother

never went to secondary school – he went straight into a job at thirteen.

My father

had a very low paid job.

We had a very good upbringing  
but we didn't have a lot of money.

My mother

thought that if I went to secondary school that I'd  
get a better job  
than my father or brother. And, right enough, very soon after secondary school, I was  
offered a job.

My mother

was working in the background  
the whole time.

She came from  
a farming family and always said that it was  
a tough life.

She didn't  
want  
any her children  
working on a farm – it was

hard, heavy work.

She was trying  
so hard herself to make sure we'd get

good jobs

jobs out of the weather

away from building sites

jobs inside somewhere.

And, in a sense,  
she achieved that for all us.

But going to college  
to do teacher training was never going to happen then.

It wasn't something we could have afforded.

I didn't yearn for it,  
but if the opportunity was there for me  
at the time,

I may well have gone for it.

And so,  
I ended up working in business for decades.

I went back to college myself

as a mature student

when I was twenty three.

Before that

I had worked in

office-based jobs.

I travelled

as well for a bit. When I came back from travelling I

worked in a hospital

to get experience as

a Care Attendant.

At the time I was keen to

get into nursing and I felt that this would

help me get there.

But, in fact, that experience of

working in the hospital put me off.

I just knew it wasn't for me. I

loved the actual work – but

everything

around the edges

didn't interest me.

Everything

seemed to be

a fight

a struggle.

But I stayed on as a Care Attendant for five years all the same. It was

the boom years

the money was good.

Many years ago

I completed a degree in

marketing which

I absolutely hated.

My background is in health

but I have

also taught on work-based and

university programmes in the UK.



I was busy  
doing lots of  
voluntary work  
and felt  
that I should contribute a little bit to  
the family.

I was sociable and felt that  
whatever I would do, that  
it would involve people.

And I suppose that  
this  
brought me around  
despite myself  
to  
the possibility of teaching.

What I really wanted to do  
was to work with

women who are struggling

women who are lacking in confidence

After school I worked for years before  
returning to education. I always felt that

I wanted to do something else

but for a long time was

never quite sure

what that 'something' would be. To help me work that out, I did

a Social Sciences degree.

Before I got involved in working in education

I had been

working in business for over twenty years.

I did well

at that and

ended up in a senior role.

But there came a time

when I realised that

I just didn't want to do it anymore.

Maybe it was



a bit about

getting a bit older

and having

a different view of life –

I knew that it was

something that

I didn't want to do with the rest of my life.

But I wasn't quite sure

what I wanted to do.



Somehow

I ended up

being asked to get involved in  
training for the marketing team  
on computer devices.

I started to realise that

I was quite good at explaining technical information  
and, what's more,

liked it.

Eventually, I ended up managing a team.

However, it was

the training aspect

of my work with this company that I really enjoyed.

One day while I was out

walking

I bumped into Catherine  
whom I knew vaguely on a social basis.  
Catherine ran a commercial IT training centre  
and,  
in the course of our conversation,  
she told me she needed a tutor to teach basic IT skills two nights a week.

Catherine  
asked me to try it out. I decided to give it a go. I went up the  
first night of a new course

to shadow

a tutor

to get a sense  
of what was involved.

The tutor didn't turn up.

Taking

a deep breath,

I decided to take the class myself. I ended up tutoring in the IT school for a year on day and evening classes.

Around the same time, I also got involved in delivering some private IT tuition through

word-of-mouth contacts.

This tuition work just grew and grew. In fact I started to get so much work that

I ended up setting up my own IT training company

We had this great tutor who really opened up my mind to approaching the whole area of maths in a different way.

But then we had a different tutor for the last two years and, to be honest, he wasn't really a teacher.

He struggled to communicate with us.

And yet because of this

I

somehow

ended up

helping the rest of the class

with the maths.

We'd maybe come in an hour

before the lecture and

I'd go through the stuff with some of the people from my class.

I remember thinking

I'd love to do this.

I'd love to teach maths.

And so,

I ended up working in business for decades.

But then

suddenly

thirty or forty years later

I found myself looking at  
my own young fella  
sitting at home  
doing his Leaving Cert.

He was  
struggling with the maths.

So I ended up teaching him a bit. Of course,

I had to

learn it

re-learn it

first.

And although

I was

working full-time,

I started to enjoy coming home and  
doing some trigonometry or geometry. It started

coming back to me then

it wasn't as hard as I thought it was.

Learning it again

became

an enjoyable experience.

... a friend, who worked in a  
Youthreach Centre,  
asked me to do  
some IT tutoring which had opened up because of a  
maternity leave.

I had no teaching experience

at the time at all and

my only experience of  
working with groups was some volunteering that I had did for a couple of  
months with a youth group.

My friend, though, encouraged me to give it a go –

I did.

### *Volunteering and one-to-ones*

Before joining the VEC I did a short ESOL tutoring course.

But then, about ten years ago, I heard about the VEC's



volunteer tutor training courses and decided to give it a go.

My expectation

was that it would be about

the mechanics of teaching

someone how to read.

However, I was

delighted to discover

that it was about

so much more.

I loved

the liberation philosophy

aspect of the course.

I hadn't expected that

was not familiar with

these ideas beforehand.

I worked as a volunteer tutor for about

five or six years before I started working with groups.

That transition from  
volunteer to group tutoring  
was  
managed differently than it is now.

Back then, the organiser would  
support volunteer tutors in their development,  
keeping an eye on them  
making the judgement when they felt the tutor was ready,  
if at all  
to start working with groups.

When they felt  
the time was right  
they would approach a tutor to see if they'd like  
to take on a group. There was

a real value  
in this long internship:  
tutors emerged  
from this process with  
a rich experience, awareness and deep commitment

to their work -

this route into tutoring is something that is,  
and will become,  
less of an option in the future, which is a shame.

This change from volunteer to group tutor  
meant more than a shift in teaching methods. It also

meant that tutors would

get paid for their work –

this opened up

the possibility of tutoring as a viable occupation.

My mother

had done the volunteer training course with the VEC

and I started to think that

I'd give that a go.

I felt that if

I even had that hour or so a week for me

to exercise my own mind

that I'd be happy. So, I enrolled on the course and

it was absolutely fantastic.

I worked with

one guy on a one-to-one for a year or so.

I had imagined

that

it would be quite painstakingly slow,

that

I wouldn't see much progress and

that

the learners would have a fairly profound learning difficulty.

But

it wasn't like that at all with my learner.

He was very bright

and it really

kept me on my toes to keep it

interesting and moving.

The volunteer training course was  
absolutely fantastic.

This idea of opening it up

... it just seemed ...

it was powerful ..

it really appealed to me ...

There were

far more layers

to this than I thought.

After I completed the tutor course,

I started working with learners on a one-to-one basis.

I have worked with about

six or seven people

over the years

in one-to-one contexts.

After about a year and a half of working with one-to-ones,

I started working with groups.

I also feel

that working initially with one-to-ones helped

with my progression to teaching groups

as my initial experience helped me to focus on the person's needs

– it really

focussed me on

the person

and

their experiences.

That experience with Aoife

in the one-to-ones

was so important in developing

my confidence as a tutor.

And it also made it clear to me

how much we need

to adapt

as tutors

all the time –

if someone doesn't understand us,  
then we need to try change our approach.

This is, of course, is easier with one-to-ones  
but becomes a bit trickier in a group situation.

At the beginning  
of a one-to-one learning relationship,

I feel that it's sometimes possible  
for the tutor to jump on the wrong thing.

It's important to have  
that bit of time  
to work out what they really want.

As learners relax  
and  
build a relationship  
and  
a sense of trust

with the tutor,

other things come out.

Every tutor will have

a different relationship

with their learner,

but what is common

is that these relationships are

intense and quite personal.

I know

that the volunteering route

into tutoring may be

under threat now,

but it would be

a shame to see the end of that

as the training was very good and was, for me,

a good counter-balance to

the very structured, curriculum-focussed training

that I got through JEB.

But I suppose



I have some reservations about it as well.

Although voluntarism  
is terribly important from a societal perspective,  
from a learner perspective it's

potentially paternalistic.

There's something about it that creates  
a sense of dependency  
a sense of obligation ...

*I'm being given something for free – amn't I lucky?*

I'd also be concerned about what it says about  
the status of learners in Community Education.

Would people accept

volunteer school teachers

volunteer university lecturers?

Another problem with voluntarism is that it creates,  
for tutors,  
a sense of insecurity  
about their status and qualifications –  
particularly for those who shift from a voluntary to a paid role.

Occupational heterogeneity

So my first experiences

as a tutor with the VEC were

both as

a paid tutor and,

at the same time,

a volunteer tutor.

I continued to do the volunteer tutoring for about two years.

I made the decision that

I would quit my main job

and work primarily with the VEC.

However, I was talked into staying in my day job which

has grown slowly but surely over the years very much into  
my main job.

These days

I am doing about ten hours a week with  
the VEC. Although  
I have come to adore my main job,  
it takes up a lot of my time and  
can be very admin heavy.  
I am moving away, in that job,  
from the 'face-to-face' work which is what I like most.

These days I work in

two different educational contexts:

adult education and the compulsory sector.

There's a nice balance of perspective between the two.

But the

core of what I do is adult education.

After I completed the H.Dip

I ended up getting  
a full-time job with the VEC  
on a project working with homeless people.

There  
wasn't much tutoring in that role –  
But because they knew about my tutoring background  
they asked me to take on some adult groups as well which I did  
every so often.

When my son started school  
I tried  
to negotiate  
a change in my working day  
to allow me to pick him up.

However,  
the VEC didn't agree  
to any of my proposals and  
I had to leave.

I held on to  
a couple of hours a week tutoring  
and  
picked up some teaching

on an access programme with a university.

So, gradually, with various

bits and piece

I increased my hours and

tried to organise work for the mornings

which usually suited groups and me as we all had to

pick up our children

in the afternoon.

This working rhythm

suit me and I continued to do it up until I had

my second child. When I came back from maternity leave

I made the decision to reduce my hours.

I had a third child last year.

So, at the moment, I'm more or less doing the hours that I want to.

However,

there are times when it's

out of my control ...



Theoretical formations and troubled subjects  
in and around south Belfast





**W**e emerged from the slightly jaded suburban railway station into the autumnal rain of Botanic Avenue. I'd only been back to Belfast a few times since I left over ten years ago, but I always enjoyed, on the times when I did visit, that feeling of familiarity and strangeness that we talked about before.

And you?

Well, you just took a moment to look around – gather yourself. It was clear you were unsure of your bearings.

- This way.

- Where to?

- I thought we'd head up to Queen's ... do a bit of a loop around the university ... sure, we'll just head up that way and see where we end up.

- So, why start here?

- Well, it's where this started really ...

We were, possibly even without knowing it, anxious to chat and almost excited to use this opportunity to talk and walk through the troubling things which lay between us. When we met at Connolly Station we were near bursting with reservoirs of conversational capacity.

But we struggled to find a satisfying beginning.

Although we did try at the station in Dublin. After some surface back and forth, and standing in line to use the ticket machine you asked me the question that, I think, I wanted you to ask me,

- So what's this thing all about then?

My attempt to answer was cut short by the familiar words on the ticket machine:

*Card declined. Please use an alternative method of payment.*

- Arse.
- What's up?
- Ah nothing ... need to use another card.

But the moment was gone. You could sense, I think, that more quotidian concerns had ruptured any fluency than I could attempt to articulate on higher things ... like this. And, in fact, we talked through other things, banal things, important things, on the familiar train journey up from Dublin.

### A sense of purpose

It wasn't until now, as we finally reached our destination, and the start of another journey, that we came back to it.

As we walked, with no great haste, up Botanic Avenue, past familiar cafés with unfamiliar names, you asked again.

- So, what is this all about?

This time I was ready. My answer had been forming itself most of the way up on the train in the silences and the spaces between everything else we talked about. Forming itself in union with the gentle, comforting rhythm of the train.

- I suppose right now it's ... it's an inquiry into the possibilities of narrative for educator growth.
- That sounds rehearsed.
- It is. I was expecting you to ask me that.
- So narrative and its possibilities for educator growth?
- Yeh ... something like that ... Of all the things we have to talk about, all the things that have passed between us, is that what you really want to ask me?
- It is. For now anyway. Do you not want to talk about it?
- I do. I do. Just not so sure that you do.
- Of course I'm interested in it. Isn't that why I'm here?
- I suppose.
- But forget speaking like a thesis for a moment. What's the purpose of this? Why are we here? Why am I here at all? I feel a bit out of place.
- I'm hoping that that will become clear as we walk ... but I suppose I owe you some sense of an explanation for dragging you along.
- Just a bit.
- Well, I suppose the whole thing has a double-edge purpose to it. I'm looking at, at least, two things at the same time ... I'm interested in authentic, critical, sustainable ways of adult educator development and, at the same time, I'm interested in how narrative or creative ways of knowing and inquiry can both represent and rehearse that development.
- Ok. But why walk, why here, and why me - what's with the dialogue?
- I'll come to all this, but for now, let me just say that I have a really strong belief that my knowledge, indeed adult educator knowledge, is deeply and, at its core, dialogic (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996).
- Right ... But me. Why me?

- I suppose that gets a bit to the ‘who’ of you ... but then some stories are best left with at least some mystery. I’m pretty sure you’ll work it out as we go.

- Well, I’m not sure I like that but, for now, ok. Why, then, walking and here?

- Well, I also believe that our knowledge is embodied and contextual ... it emerges from the contexts, the story of our own lives, the places we’ve been, the people we’ve met, our experiences (Dewey, 1915; Polkinghorne, 1988; hooks, 1994; Ryan, 2001). So, if we want to uncover that knowledge, our knowledge, a bit more, why not foreground these contexts – these personally significant landscapes.

- By walking them?

- Well it’s one way of doing it. But maybe walking is a nod to a more active, embodied way of learning and knowing (Hall, 2009; Ingold, 2010; Shepherd, 2011; Gros, 2014) ... it takes our knowledge-making away from desks, away from this intense centring in our heads and, tries, at least to spread the process throughout the whole body. Walking has always been an important way for me to work things out ... creatively or personally. And, walking, what’s more, locates our body in a space ... moving through a location, a context ... So I suppose, maybe it’s ‘why not walking?’

- Maybe ... maybe. ... So, I get this sense that you are doing two things at once: exploring experiences and growth of adult educators and, at the same time, exploring, or performing, a creative way of doing that. So I’m starting to see the play here of the walking, the personal and contextualised landscapes. I get the importance of dialogue even. But I still don’t get why I am here? I get that there might be something in the dialogue ... but why *me*? Can you just make that a bit more clear – put it in black and white will you?

- ... To be honest, at this moment, I’m not sure I could give you an answer that would make sense. ... Do me a favour and trust me for now ... Leave that anxiety for now and just walk with me. It may become less important as we walk. Let’s just walk ...

And so we did. We walked. We walked a lot that first day.

I glanced into the small café, one of many on this short stretch frequented by students, where, in a different century, I often lingered for hours over a refillable coffee.

As we made our way up Botanic Avenue I had half an eye on passing faces. There was a time when I couldn't walk up this road without at least nodding to someone I knew. But I was a stranger once again here. And the familiar faces were now poor memories.

- Aren't these things supposed to have questions?

You were still bristling a bit about the things I was, or the things you thought I was, withholding.

- Well, I can re-phrase it as a question if you like.

- Go on then.

- It could be 'What are the possibilities of narrative for adult educator growth?'

Paths to a PhD

- Ok. *It could be* ... Jesus, but you can talk in circles. ... But ... what brought you to this? How did you end up, at your age, doing a PhD on 'the possibilities of narrative for adult educator growth?'

- Now, we're getting closer. I knew that you weren't so interested in what I'm doing. It's always being more about the 'why' with you.

- Well, humour me then. Tell me the story, as they say, of the why.

- Ok. I will.

But I paused and relapsed into silence. This was the story I wanted to tell you. And I had been over this story, my story, so many times before that I felt it should just spill out of me. But, as you know, I've always struggled with linearity. Weaving a straight line out of a circle, as we talked about once, a long time ago now, is never easy.

And in fairness to you, you sometimes know when to keep quiet. When you want to, you just let it slowly emerge, stuttering and unsure ... never demanding, or expecting, linearity.

I took a deep breath.

- Well ... I started the PhD in September 2011. But it had been something I had been thinking about for years. ...

We had reached the corner of Botanic and University Road. I glanced down towards the hidden streets, just to the left, where we first collided into each other with such passion so many years ago.

- And?

- Sorry. What's that? I wandered for a moment.

- I could tell. You were saying that it was something that you had been thinking about for years ...

- That's right. I suppose I had. And a moment, a crack, just opened up to do it. We moved back from Scotland in 2010. Eilidh was lucky enough to get a permanent job with the HSE and I was doing bits and pieces with the VEC, as it was called when all this started, as a tutor. Our positions had reversed since coming back. I was now at home more – looking after the lads and doing work I could around that – but mainly looking after the lads and all the home stuff. We'd always tried to organize our lives so that one of us could be around ... That's been hard though. Really hard ...

So, anyway Eilidh had encouraged me to think about doing a PhD. She knew that it had been lurking about in my head since we first met.

Again, my gaze drifted down University Road towards Magdala Street and Sandford Road.

- And?

- And ... I had a chat with a few universities around Dublin. At one stage it looked unlikely as there didn't seem to be any funding available. I couldn't do it without funding. But I had the right conversation with the right person in Maynooth – not only was she enthusiastic about what I was talking about but, and importantly, she suggested that there might be funding available through a small scholarship.

- And can you remember how you described what you wanted to do back then?

- I can't remember exactly ... but when I look back through my journal (O'Neill, 2010-2015), which I'd been keeping as a place to work through ideas, I can see that there were three things that I had identified as possible topics: one was about an inquiry into the skills-based curriculum in FE which probably reflects the occupational space I was coming from in Scotland; another was about investigating the broader structural and infrastructural contexts for further and adult education in Ireland which, now, looks both vague and completely unappetising for me; and the last was about, what I called then, professional learning in further and adult education. This is what was probably closest to my interest and something which I had been both involved with, and critical of, in Scotland. And it's the last topic which has grown into this – believe it or not.

- This?

- Yeh.

- Oh.

And you looked around, slightly bemused. Wondering, no doubt, what our walk through suburban south Belfast had to do with educator professional development.

But you thought better than to unravel that at this stage.

- So you were back in Ireland for a year or so. Not overly employed but ticking away with some work with the VEC and busy looking after the kids. And you felt that it was the time for this?

- Yeh. And not just as an intellectual vanity or indulgence – although it is all that. But there was a pragmatic side as well. I felt that I needed to do something to improve my chances of having any kind of a working life in further or adult education. I had managed to get myself into a comfortable occupational position in Scotland relatively quickly, but now, back home after such a long absence, I felt invisible to the sector and, even, to the organisation I worked for. I felt that I was just about hanging on to an occupation in education ...

- So you felt the PhD would help you in your own career?

- If you want to call it that. Although, it doesn't feel much like a career.

- And why not something else? Why not something that might guarantee a job?

- I did consider doing a more vocationally-based masters but I wouldn't have got the funding for that and didn't have the money for it. My only option, in terms of Higher Education, was through a funded programme – and for me, most of the funding was for research degrees.

- All sounds a bit self-serving when you put it like that.

- Well, it is. So it should sound like that. All PhDs are self-serving.

- Do you really believe that?

- Well, if we're not doing them for ourselves who are we doing it for?



I paused for a moment outside another ghost of a café – blocking any opportunity for you to reply.

- We spent most of our university years sitting in there.
- And we were the authors of some of our best learning in there.
- Jesus, yeh. ... Always talking about words. ... I remember we spent a whole afternoon discussing possibilities for one word in the first line of a poem you were writing.
- That's right. ... You came up with 'delta' ... I remember that ...

We moved on in silence dwelling a bit on these half-remembered conversations. Across University Road and up University Square. Each academic department, housed separately in neat Georgian-terraced grandeur. We started at law on one corner and made our way up towards English on the other.

### Narrative sensibilities

- So that's the immediate conditions for this. But I'd like to hear more about the back story? Where did this focus on educator growth come from? And where did this bit about narrative come into it all? You weren't talking about that when you started the PhD ... were you?

I think I've always used narrative as a ... a frame on things

- No, I wasn't talking about narrative then at all. Not at that moment when I started anyway – I thought I'd left such concepts behind me. ... But then, there has always been a narrative presence with me in my studies, my work and life – the way I think, the way I am ...

- What do you mean by that?

- Well, I mean ... I think I've always used narrative as a ... a frame on things. I have a memory of being a teenager, or even younger possibly, and thinking what kind of story of a life I'd be able to tell at 30, 40, 50 ... I don't know if that was an odd way to think or not, but I think it did guide me then – maybe it was part of what drove me towards new things, new experiences, towards creating a life-story that, if nothing else, would be interesting to look back on one day ... I didn't know it then of course but I suppose I had what a strong leaning towards a narrative ontology or way of being (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1991).

- But it wasn't something you were conscious of?

- No, I don't think so.

We paused a few doors past the history department.

- I spent so much time rushing between there and there.

I pointed, by way of explanation, to the history and English departments.

- I suppose that's where my theory started to form – running between the two.

- In the space between them ... (Bhabha, 1994)?

- Yeh.

We crossed the road. The slightly-tired monolith of the 1960s tower library stood as a companion to the austere, gothic grandeur of the main, early-Victorian building itself. And now we had started to find a rhythm in our walking – that unspoken negotiation of perambulant bodies that work, at some level, to find synchronicity with the landscapes we traverse (Macfarlane, 2008; Ingold, 2010; Chawla, 2013; Gros, 2014). We were, for a time at least, in step with each other.

- So a sense of narrative has guided you ...?
- Yeh, kind of. But I've also grown up with an interest, a thirst for stories. I wouldn't see myself as a great storyteller or performer of stories, but, if this is possible, that any skill I have in terms of narrative is, primarily, as a listener, as an audience for stories: a holder of stories. Does that sound strange?
- A bit. But go on ..
- Well, I suppose I'm thinking of how I've always been keen to absorb family stories. On my mother's side there are some great storytellers - some can stretch back in their story-telling to the Jacobite Wars when the first of my grandmother's family came to settle in the valley in Connemara where some still live. And these stories of family are so intertwined with the place. ... And then, on my father's side, I have access to a different ... anthology. My father, although originally from Kildare, led a rather nomadic existence when he was younger – largely because of the disruption to his family life caused by the Second World War: his father, born and bred in Athy, qualified as a doctor who, in need of work, ended up in the British army's Indian Medical Corp –
- Why the Indian Medical Corp?
- Well the prestige unit was, I believe, the Royal Medical Corp. So most Irish medics were directed towards the IMC - the RMC was reserved for British medics – or so goes the story that came to me.

Anyway, my father was born in Peshawar (now Pakistan, but then part of British India) in the penultimate decade of colonial rule in India. After the first three years of his life in Peshawar, he spent much of his earlier years between Ireland and England ... One of his earliest memories of school is looking up from the playing fields of his boarding school in southern England on a clear day to see the trails of a dog-fight high above ... His father, who was missing in action, spent most of the war in a Singapore jail ... But maybe I'm digressing. My point is, though, that these stories of Irishmen in India and Britain during the Blitz stand beside stories on my mother's side of her father getting injured in an ambush on the Black and Tans in Connemara.

- Right ... I mean this is really interesting, and I don't want to be rude, but what do dog-fights and the Black and Tans have to do with this?

- Right ... so the thing is that I didn't just grow up with an awareness of, or an ear for, a story, but also a sense of how my identity, in part, was somehow shaped in the space between these different stories. If you come from a space where there is no dissonance between family narratives then the narratives are invisible – your story is natural. But if there is dissonance then we may just start to see the shade of narrative mechanisms in the construction of our identities.

- And, of course, every family in Ireland, everywhere, recreates a fresh identity out of old stories coming together in new ways, new contexts ...

- If we listen.

- Yeh. If we listen ...

We were walking up towards Stranmillis, but I paused outside the entrance to the Botanic Gardens and lost myself for a moment - wondering how many times I criss-crossed this small, beautiful urban park. It was, in fact, walking in opposite directions through Botanic so many years ago now that we bumped into each other ... and co-smiled a protean thought of a shared-path.

- Would you like to head through the Botanic?

- Yeh, why not.

We passed in through the gates – under the impressive, imposing and deeply positivist statue of Lord Kelvin who seemed to look down on us with a sneer. This, we felt, was not an inquiry he would approve of. And yet on we walked – down to the impressive Palm House – a wonderfully ornate iron glass house which housed the horticultural bounty and taxonomical endeavours of the imperial age. A place which held, for public education, plants older than empires trapped in English and Latin names.

And then back in a broad loop around the gardens past the equally-colonial Ravine House before pausing at the steps of the unmistakable concrete certainty of the Ulster Museum. As if beckoned by this great cube of a building, we walked absentmindedly up the steps and into the foyer.

Once inside we didn't seem to have a thirst for walking through the museum and gallery – we weren't quite in the mood for our walk to be manipulated by the designers of, it must be said, an engaging museum experience. Maybe we felt it would be a distraction. Maybe we just wanted to be authors of our own walk that day.

Instead we popped into the shop, as many probably do, to archive our visit through a brief moment of culture-consumerism. I bought yet another postcard of Dillon's *The Yellow Bungalow* (Dillon, 1954). You glanced at the card.

- Don't you have that?
- I do ... I do.
- So ...?
- Ah ... y'know ... just ...

And we left it there. Hanging.

But you'd moved on anyway. Or back.

- So listening is important in all this?
- Listening? ... I think it's crucial and possibly the unexplored territory of narrative as well. A sense of narrative brings to mind something aesthetic, well-crafted and delivered, in writing or orally, by a performing story-teller (Sikes & Gale, 2006). When we think of narrative, we think of stories and the story-tellers.

But in terms of education and knowledge, we need to also be aware of the role of the listeners and readers of stories – the audience. .... And as I say, I've always liked listening to stories ... absorbing them. Of course, I didn't have any of this awareness when I was a child about the function of narrative – more a gravitation to them. I developed more sophisticated notions of narrative when I returned to university as a mature student.

- Right ... so, tell me about that a bit?

### Realist cracks in London

- Well, I had a bit of a stuttering start as a mature student. I started a degree in history and education studies in a university in London about twenty years ago now. In fact, it was here I first came across radical thinkers in education. We had this tutor, a middle-aged doctoral student – does that sound familiar? ... anyway he was passionate about Joel Spring's *Wheels in the Head* (1994). I can remember his passion so well. I still have the book on my desk at home. I'll probably come back to that ...

But I also remember writing an essay in which we were tasked to apply psychological theory to a literary character. It's funny but that's the only essay I remember from

This inquiry takes place in an epistemological space between disciplines

then. I looked at Erikson's (1980) stages of development in relation to Holden Caulfield from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1994). I liked this application of psychology to fictional characters.

- So maybe that's where the ideas for all this came from – this merging of academic discourses? This blending of the fictional and scientific.

- Well I don't think this was born in that moment ... but it certainly shows a sustained interest in this coming together of the social sciences and the arts, doesn't it? And my very choice of subjects way back in London (history and education studies) are playing out in this space here.

- How do you mean?

- This inquiry takes place in an epistemological space between disciplines – a kind of cultural inquiry into a social phenomenon ... And as I think of my first exposure to study in higher education then I remember this moment of what I might call now perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997) or maybe, if this isn't paradoxical, a slow-motion epiphany (Denzin, 2014) as I saw, for the first time, the cracks in realist epistemologies.

- Where did you see those cracks?

- Herodotus' *Histories* (440 BCE, 1994-2009). I think – I'm not sure the exact text matters. Anyway, as we studied and discussed the relative historical truths of classical historians, we looked upon, what I had previously regarded, if I thought about it all, as the uncomplicated truths of history, I started to see that these were merely the remnants of fragmented and much-translated versions of previous versions of stories written and re-written by numerous scribes across the centuries and continents. The sense of what I might later have called a constructionist ontological position suddenly became visible and intriguing to me as I started to see history as the stories which survived.

My favourite subjects in school had been English and history ... but slowly the divisions between them started to seem less distinct. I started, I suppose, to see the hand, and the power, of the writer in western truths.

- So, not only a sense of historical truths being constructed, but that sense that there were other stories lost or left untold?

### Counter-narratives in Salt Lake City

- Yeh. In fact I only did that first year in London as I got lost in Utah for a year. But it was a year rich in walks and dialogue. Do you remember that copy of Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1995) that you turned me on to when we were in Salt Lake City?

- Vaguely. It's a long time ago now.

- Well, that's the kind of counter-hegemonic historical narrative that I was drawn to – and continue to be. It's a great sweeping history of the US – but not through the lens of wars or high politics: instead it told the story of oppressed or marginal groups at various points in its modern history:

I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the standpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees ... of the rise of industrialism as seen by the young women in the Lowell textile mills ... (Zinn, 1995, p. 10).

I was always interested in history but Zinn's history was a fresh and radical narrative that started to make those first connections for me with power and narratives ... this re-focussing on a different subject than dominant, mainstream historical representations. And the possibilities of alternative modes of telling. A shift away from hegemonic narrative points of view.

- Right ... I suppose it's the same kind of history that often gets told and retold in ballads and folk music.

- Folk music?

- Yeh. Maybe, it's your mention of Salt Lake City ... it got me thinking of Joe Hill ... 'The Ballad of Joe Hill' ...

- Ok ... Well, I suppose you have a point. Song writers and musicians like Billy Bragg, Neil Young, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lead Belly and all the rest were, and are, important as tellers and holders of alternative stories of our shared past. And more important than any PhD that will ever get written as they will have an audience.

- And there is that sense of a more decentred sense of authorship in folk music. For example, when you think of a song like 'The Lakes of Pontchartrain' and its unknown origins in terms of authorship ... I mean it doesn't really matter at all, does it? And then how similar it is in melody to something like 'The Homes of Donegal' or 'The Lily of the West'. Folk songs are, generally, less precious about singular origins than other forms of text.



- Yeh. I wonder is there something important in this notion of origins ... It makes me think of Dylan's authorship of 'Hard Rain's Gonna Fall' (Dylan, 1962).

- Right. How he borrowed from the dialogic ballad 'Lord Randall' (Anonymous, c. 17th century)?

- Yeh, but that doesn't take away from it in anyway.


- No – not at all. The opposite in fact – I love this interplay of songs in the creation of new ones. It's what every artist does. Dylan's song, for me, is richer once you see the influence of an authorless folk ballad from the Scottish borders.

- And then when you get to the likes of Welch and Rawlings who mix up the authentic folk with a postmodern sensibility in songs like 'April the 14<sup>th</sup> Part One' and 'Ruinination Day' which blends Lincoln's assassination, the Titanic, the Black Sunday Dust Storm into a two-part ballad which mixes in their own story ... then ... well ... then I really think it starts to get interesting (Welch & Rawlings, 2001).

- And it's not just the singers and writers that have a role here ... I often think about the work done by Alan and John Lomax and their family in their creation of an archive of American folk music (The American Folklife Center, 2004).

This notion of the archivist or anthologist is an important one – again, this comes back to the importance of thinking narratively – it get us to think of more than just the teller and the tale and to think of readers and audiences – all of whom can become re-tellers: holders of stories.

I think this is something that we need to be doing at lots of levels in Ireland – just going around and listening to people, collecting and archiving their stories and songs of now – however banal, however hopeless the now seems, telling stories can transform the everyday into something infused with possibilities (Fleming, 2003; McCormack, 2013; Reid, 2014).



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- But how do we hold them? The stories ...
- That is the tricky part, isn't it ... that tapping into the stories and crafting them into a form that demands an audience. ... I notice that The American Folklife Center is also involved in an Occupational Folklife Project which 'gathers community-based interviews with workers across the United States, discussing their workplace experiences, training, and occupational communities' (The American Folklife Center, 2014).
- I've seen that too and this isn't a million miles away from what I have been trying to do with this inquiry. And it's how I see my own role on a much smaller scale – as a kind of critical anthologist.

And we let the thought of this inquiry being something associated with folk music, stories and critical anthologies pass between us as we walked out of the gates of Botanic. In fact, we had lost ourselves a bit in our conversation and had ended up back on ourselves within the university quarter.

### Reigniting in Queen's

You paused to take in the architectural grandeur of the university. In the years since I was a student here it appeared that a lot of money had been invested in development of new buildings. It was, in its own way, impressive.

- But you ended up back here?
- Yeh. There was other stuff going on (there is always other stuff going on) and I was keen to get back a bit closer to family – that's been a thread in my own narrative since I went to London for work over twenty years ago.
- Why London?

- Ah, a different recession but the same old story ... almost a cliché ... an Irish recession and off to London for work.

- Right ... so ... sorry, you were saying about getting closer to family?

- Yeh ... nearly as soon as I left, I was trying to get home, closer to family, but it took about sixteen years and a very circuitous route via London, Boston, Salt Lake City, Belfast, Aberdeen and finally Edinburgh. But there are other stories in that odyssey that aren't for now.

- Maybe they'll weave their way in ...

- Maybe ... but it was Queen's I ended up in. Here. These streets. This place ... .. so as well as this journey home I also had a desire to study more Irish history and culture and Queen's offered all that – in fact the two desires were probably all wrapped up as part of the same thing. Maybe my readings in history from other places – different perspectives on history and education – was giving me a thirst to read the history of my own country from a different space.

But, maybe it's an easy option to narrate some intellectual motivation for going to Belfast. At the time it was more affordable for me to continue studying in the UK system – I couldn't afford to study and live independently in Ireland.

Yet, all the same this pragmatic decision afforded me to view Irish history and literature from a contested space, a contested city, within Irish culture and society itself.

- But the material, the financial, determined the contexts or the framing of your education?

- Me and everyone else in the world, for better or worse.

- Yeh, I suppose.

- Anyway, I ended up staying here for seven years and did my BA, MA and teaching qualification. ... What I find interesting now as we look back through all this time was this choice to stay with narrative epistemologies. I only see that now as we walk here and reflect on that, so maybe it wasn't that conscious after all – maybe something more intuitive.

- Can you unravel that a bit? What do you mean by a 'choice to stay with narrative epistemologies'?

- Sure ... my first year in Queen's I took English, history and politics. Out of the three, I was getting the highest marks in politics. I felt that I could do quite well if I continued with that. However, I could only choose two subjects at the most. I dropped politics. There was something about the engagement with creativity, language and story which was obvious in English and, to an extent, history which drew me into them. Politics was interesting but there was something in the language of the discipline which left me cold.

## Narrating the nation

In my undergraduate studies in history I was always drawn to historiography – studying the way history was told: its narrative aspects – its fabricated nature (Bogdanor, 1996; Foster, 1998; Joyce, 1998; Jackson, 1999). This, of course, blended well with English which became my main subject. But in both English and history I was always drawn to stories and theories from the margins – I was drawn to ideas associated with poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism. And in history and English I was increasingly interested in how the story's style and content, its truths, were bound up with each other.

- Again, you'll need to flesh that out for me a bit more ...

- Ok. I've been thinking about this a lot and I think that all the things which interested me, and still do, involved some kind of interplay between language, power, and being or maybe, for being, the subject or ... identity.

- And knowledge?

- Well knowledge was in there but I'm not sure that I was seeing those connections very clearly then. I think that came later when I moved towards working in education.

- Ok ... can you give an example of the kind of thing that was engaging you back in Queen's?

- So in history, for example, as I just said I was interested as much in historiography as history – who was writing history and the construction of the story they chose to tell.

I studied Roy Foster, an Irish historian, and how he wrote, or as some would have it, re-wrote, Irish history in his sweeping narrative *Modern Ireland* (1989) – here there was this interplay between language (history) and power - the historian's privileged position which allows them to write - to create - a sense of an Irish subjecthood. But Foster also wrote about the role of narrative in the evolution of nationalism and this intrigued me too ... how the stories of the nation helped create the nation (Foster, 1998).

- So Foster was both a critical reader and writer of national narratives?

- Yes. But Foster was just part of the puzzle. Part of this intrigue that I had about language, identity and power that had been ignited first in London – barely a thread then that I had picked at and had started to tug at more and more ... unravelling at this fabric of realism. Not knowing first that it was even a fabric. This, I suppose, drew me towards theories which engaged me in these concepts explicitly ...

### Negotiating signs and subjects


Our aimless wandering had brought us back, another way, through the Holylands - a once working-class area whose streets celebrated early-modern European religio-imperialism: Jerusalem, Palestine, Damascus, Cairo, Magdala

... Magdala Street ...

... back through the Holylands to the newly-refurbished university library. We circumnavigated the small campus until we reached the front. And paused at the gates on University Road – looking through the arch at the heart of the red-bricked gravitas into the deserted Quad beyond.


I thought back to that tense July day many years ago when I graduated. Strawberries and cream rushed by talk that there would be trouble later on getting through the roads southwards. The Drumcree protests were at their height that year.

- You mentioned a thread you were pulling at ...
- Yeh, I suppose ... do you remember that beautiful Moroccan rug we had for years?
- The one you burnt with the ashes?
- That wasn't me. But yeh.
- Well ... for years, all I think I saw was its beauty. And then I started to get closer to it
- I used to love to lie belly-down on it ... stretch myself out and closer to it. ... I'd lie



I think acts of deconstruction should also be reconstructive as well. If we pull everything apart to reveal their parts, we should try and build something else. Something different. Maybe that's what I'm trying to do.

face down on it – my chin anchored by my overlapping hands ... and letting everything else slowly fade. You can lose yourself in its patterns and texture. But in this more detailed, careful looking you start, eventually, to see the tiniest threads, here and there, slightly raised from the rest ... and once you see it, you are drawn to it.



And being curious, I did pull at some of these threads gently to see how it was connected. I probably shouldn't have as it would have destroyed, eventually, all that was beautiful about the fabric.

- You destroyed it a lot more bluntly with hot ashes.
- I know .... but my point is the moment when we start to see the thread ... in a way we can't help ourselves once we see the lines of its making – we start to see it as that - a fabricated thing. And we need to follow it ...
- You could pull it apart and make something new.
- Yeh. I think acts of deconstruction should also be reconstructive as well. If we pull everything apart to reveal their parts, we should try and build something else. Something different. Maybe that's what I'm trying to do. ... Anyway, I'm straying a bit. Where was I?
- You were talking about pulling threads and ...

- Oh yeh, well I think that this study of history was my way initially to this way of thinking which challenged realist paradigms. I mentioned how Foster draws attention to nations, through writers and artists, particularly across Europe in the nineteenth century – this creation of the national subject (Cubitt, 1998; Foster, 1998). The invention of tradition as Hobsbawm put it (1983). And I think that this was something that started to come, very slowly, to me. This sense of the subject.

*Stumbling onto the subject*

- And what did you, do you, understand by this? The subject?

- Well, I think I started to see it, first, in textual terms ... so I thought of writing as something which should attend to people's subjecthood – so, if not quite realist, at least authentic representations of a story or a people which was often ignored or drawn very lightly in hegemonic or imperial texts.

- For example?

- Well, for example, and I mentioned this before, Zinn starts to develop a sense of subjecthood for communities of people who were rarely fully-fleshed out in the traditional stories of America's history (Zinn, 1995).

- So, it's about de-objectifying someone or a people?

- I think you could put it that way. It's what all good stories do anyway – gives that sense of depth and complexity to characters that seems authentic. Or at least attempts to be authentic.

- And what's the difference between that and realism?

- Well, to put it bluntly, I think realist writers point to their texts and say 'this is reality' and writers who try to be authentic point to their texts and say 'this will give you a sense of what that experience was like'.

- That seems a bit blunt ... but I'll leave it for now because I want to get back to the subject. So, obviously, the opposite of the subject is the object. There is a kind of binary here isn't there?

- Yeh, there is. So once we start to see this relationship, we see a kind of structure. And seeing things in this way, seeing the subject-object relationship drew me in turn to these binary meaning-making systems.

## Reading the signs

- Hence structuralism?

- I suppose. I was intrigued by the structuralist notions of signs, signifier and signified. Semiotics. The study of signs.

- Signs?

- Ok, for example, take 'occupation'. The sign is the meaning we construct from 'occupation' as a word, a signifier to the ideas and the concept we associate with that word – the signified (Saussure, 1960). So we hear the word occupation and we think vaguely that it's about the work or the things that people do. But the distinctions between the signified and signifier have become, for most of us, invisible. We see the word, we hear the word and something comes to mind – it evokes an idea of the thing suggested by the word, the sign. This is the signified. But when we look across languages, is arbitrary. The word 'occupation', as its Latin route might suggest, is not that dissimilar in French (*occupation*) or Spanish (*ocupación*). But in Irish 'occupation', according to the birth certificate form that I had to complete recently, is *slí beathie* – literally, 'the way of life'. So, the signifier, the concepts implied by the signified, in Irish by this phrase are quite different to the ones in English (and possibly French or Spanish). And the sign, then, is the meaning system of the signified and signifier combined.

- I like the Irish version – how would you pronounce that?

- *Shlee vaahaa* would be close enough.

- *Shlee vaahaa* ... I like this sense of a way or path we follow in life. Occupation has more of a disconnected sense – what you do, what your job is. But imagine, instead of people asking 'what do you do?' if they asked instead 'what path do you follow in life?'



- Yeh. I think, with the latter, it's more likely that you might get a more ethically-inflected response ... or responses which framed a life more holistically anyway. Maybe. ... .. But I suppose the point is that what structuralism and, then, post-structuralism started to make clear to me, at a very basic level, was that language was a cultural construction. It made language more visible ... and specifically language's connection with meaning making. Ok?

- Ok.

- Ok. So in cultural and literary criticism in the early twentieth century figures such as Saussure and Bakhtin drew attention, in quite different ways, to the play of text and language in the construction of meaning and knowledge (Saussure, 1960; Bakhtin, 1981).

Saussure is positioned, now, as the foundational figure of the theories associated with structuralism. He worked on the notion that meaning and knowledge develops at the linguistic level - between the signified and the signifier. So that our sense of an abstract idea or the meaning of something (signified) comes from its construction in language (signifier).

Ironically, when we refer to Saussure now we need to remember that he is what Foucault might call 'an author function' (Foucault, 1969) as Saussure never produced a singular account of his ideas in textual form. Instead, 'he' comes to us as the text constructed by his students who pieced together his lectures after his death. In fact, Foucault sees the author as 'a function of the subject' (p. 613)

- ... which is more how we should be thinking of ourselves, is that it? As textual functions ... or ... signs?

- I think so. It may be more helpful. ... Anyway, one of the problems with structuralism and its fetishization of the word is that it can draw the critical mind too far into linguistics - that we lose the social, the human in our fascination with words.

However, I think that it did serve, at least, to problematise natural and essentialist truths and epistemological certainties in language and texts. It drew attention to the socially-constructed nature of meaning and, in particular, the play of language in meaning-making. As Eagleton points out this was a significant moment in theory:

The structuralist emphasis on the 'constructedness' of human meaning represented a major advance. Meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it was the product of a certain shared system of signification

(1996, p. 93).

And I suppose that it's this shared system of signification that interested me then ... and now. How meaning is created through some form of dialogic encounter in language.

- But structuralist thought framed dialogue at the linguistic level – signs gaining meaning from their interaction with other signs: language in conversation with itself – is that how you see it?

- Maybe ... I'm not sure if I've ever quite imagined it like that but you might be right. And, yes, at the core of structuralist thought is the concept that meaning is created through binary constructs in language. Thus concepts of 'male' are derived from its opposition to 'female'. Without the binary other, male cannot construct itself, know itself.

But for me it started to get interesting when I started to see the play of power in these systems. These binary oppositions are deeply inflected with power relations. Female, in this semantic system, is merely imagined as something that is used to help define male with little or no sense of its own subjectivity. Numerous examples of power-inflected binary oppositions can be seen in society and culture: man-woman; white-black; good-evil; city-rural; imperial-colonised; economy-society; teacher-tutor; teacher-student; tutor-learner ...

- It seems a bit too neat. That the complexity of our appreciation and sense of reality is mediated by simple binaries.

- Well the relative simplicity of the closed meaning-making binary system was challenged by later writers such as Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva who I suppose we may group together loosely as poststructuralist (Barthes, 1968; Derrida, 1978; Kristeva, 1986a). Although they might resist such signification themselves. Derrida was

instrumental in developing on the ideas of Saussure and argued that meaning was never directly located in the oppositions of the signified by the signifier. Instead, he argued that meaning was implicated by absence, by what was not there. He argued that meaning was to be found in the displacement between signified and signifier - in the space between them (Derrida, 1978).

- Spaces between ... you've mentioned this before I think ...
- Have I? Maybe ... anyway, where was I?
- Saussure. Signs.
- Yeh. Thanks. So, while Saussure might have argued that 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'dog', Derrida may have argued that 'cat' is 'cat' because it is not 'dog' nor 'mouse' nor 'house' nor 'tent' nor 'river'... and you could go on to the very end of language.

So, in that sense, meaning is always displaced, never fully present. This concept of a never-fully-present semantics was encapsulated in Derrida's notion of *différance* - a compound signifier made up of the words for 'difference' and 'deferred' (Derrida, et al., 1982). Derridean thought argues that meaning is never, or can never be, fully resolved in language. As Moi, in her discussion of the legacy of poststructuralism, puts it,

There can thus be no 'transcendental signified' where the process of deferral somehow would come to an end. Such a transcendental signifier would have to be meaningful in itself, fully present to itself, requiring no origin and no end other than itself

(1985, p. 106).

So Moi and poststructuralist thought would have it that this elusive closed system of meaning - a space where meaning is complete, whole and fully defined – manifests itself in western culture through mythical figures such as god or, in writing, the omniscient author.

- Right ... and, just to complicate things, some of this myth-making was happening on a deeply personal level – the crafting of our own deeply symbolic stories in the unconscious.
- Which brings us to the legacy of Freud.
- Well, I think that the ideas associated with Freud and this theoretical narrative really opened up a conceptual portal into the internal landscapes of the individual (Freud, 1955). These new vistas created shockingly-new possibilities in our understanding of what it is to be human. The role of sexuality, the unconscious, the ego and the id have, possibly more so than any other group of related theories, permeated into the discourse of everyday life. We had moved to the notion of the feeling subject of Romantic culture to the unconscious subject of modernist society.
- And you see a link between the two - from a Romantic sensibility to a psychological science?
- I think so – even at its most obvious is this common project to explore the emotional landscapes of being. And of course, artists were a few centuries, or millennia, ahead of the game here.
- You think?
- Of course. Lyric poetry has been exploring and representing the emotional aspects of being since Sappho. And if you are interested in euro-centric lines, this is continued on through Elizabethan sonnets and, later again, through likes of Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti.
- And if you are not interested in the canonical?
- Yeh, you're spot on. We really don't have to look far to see the same endeavours. In fact I often think that the aisling poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Ireland adds another dimension – although they can be read as deeply personal lamentations of broken and troubled relationships, their real currency comes in their political readings. And again, we see how power, this time in terms of a colonial relationship, shapes a discourse – creates a secret language through art to explore oppression.
- So using the personal to make broader political points?

- I think that's the power of these old Irish poems – the real and recognisable pain of the personal crafted and woven into a political pain.
- So, this inquiry into the emotional landscape, the internal, was nothing new when Freud commenced?
- Well, I suppose it's yes and no isn't it. His language, his frame, his tools were different.
- And his position?
- Yeh. Very much a scientific position. Much the same way that early modernist writers like Joyce (1968) and Woolf (1977) and, going further back, I'd argue Gilman (1993), Stoker (1994) and Conrad (1995) explored in their writing the play of language in making meaning of the affective domain of the individual. And possibly even further back again, Edgeworth and Sterne (Sterne, 1912; Edgeworth, 1995). And that's just prose.
- But, then, there is still a value in looking at the theorists – looking beyond the literary?
- Of course, but I suppose my sense is that it's even better to try and keep both in focus – the theorist and the artist.
- Remember our interest, here, though is in the notion of interplay of knowledge, language and being. And Lacan was one theorist who sought to combine structuralist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic modes of thought (Lacan & Fink, 2006). In the pre-Oedipal stage Lacan posits the state of being he refers to as the 'imaginary' - a place where notions of subject and object positions have not formed in the infant's mind - she/he is both part of and different to her/his mother. The 'mirror stage' for Lacan is an important part in the child's developing sense of identity as its delineated representation in the reflected two-dimensional space of the mirror helps to develop a sense of a unitary subject (Lacan, 1968).

As Eagleton points out 'the child ... finds in the image a pleasing unit which it does not actually experience in its own body' (1996, p. 143). For Lacan the father figure represents what he calls the Law - the child's first notion of a wider, power-laden social reality beyond the simpler, libidinal dyadic mother-child relationship. The transition

from the pre-Oedipal imaginary to the post-Oedipal symbolic order is, for the child, an immersion into a reality where meaning, language and identity conspire to create a new reality, a sense of being for the developing child. Lacan develops the concept of the Other which becomes, as Moi, puts it ‘the locus of the constitution of the subject’ (1985, p. 101).

- And this Othering of course, doesn’t, just happen on the individual level ... concepts of the psycho-social Other were developed, again, in culture and theory – developments which led, eventually, to a deconstructed colonial subject or Other (Joyce, 1968; Andrews, 1975; Pratt, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1995; Daniels, 1998; Van Boheemen-Saaf, 1999).

- But aren’t we straying a long way from adult educators working in ETBs with all this?

- Well it may seem these critical discourses seem a bit far removed from this research project. However, maybe I need to stress that the values and perspective of this inquiry is located in the broad field of qualitative research - a methodology which, according to Denzin can trace its origins to understanding the colonial 'other' (2000). And I suppose, it’s part of the naturalised ethics of what we are doing, that we are, at every step, acutely aware of this notion of the play of Others and subjects in our inquiry (Denzin, 2000).

- Ok ... and I take it we are part of that?

- That?

- That act of playing with or deconstructing the subject?

- But – hopefully a reconstitution as well - as you used to say about teaching poetry, ‘never leave a poem on the floor in pieces after an analysis ... show it the respect that it deserves and return to the poem as it was meant to be heard ...’.

- So ... what are you saying ... deconstruction is just part of the process – we need to leave something else, something aesthetic in its place?

- Yeh something like that – I’m not sure yet ... it’s early days.

*Healthy signs*

- And you mentioned Barthes a while ago. What was he playing at? How does he fit into all this?

- Well, I think Barthes in particular drew and developed on what may be seen as poststructuralist thought to draw attention to the politically and culturally loaded nature of the 'sign' in language and literature. Barthes, indeed, may be seen as one figure to rescue poststructuralism from the apolitical position, or rather its politically ineffective capacity, which it has been accused of (Cole, 2003; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren, 2004).

Barthes stresses the cultural and historical contexts of signification and sees in the notion of literary realism the equivalent of social ideology. For Barthes, the healthy 'sign' is the one that draws attention to its own arbitrariness, draws attention to its productive character as much as its representational function (Eagleton, 1996, p. 117).

- But yet the whole talk and focus on signs does seem very apolitical – a de-peopled landscape ... I mean... that thing you said about retreating to language.

- Well, again, possibly with structuralism, but I think poststructuralism really politicised this type of criticism. It looked at context and very much was concerned with power in language. Eagleton points out that for Derrida 'deconstruction is .. an ultimately political practice, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force' (Eagleton, 1996, p. 128).

But I also think that the conflict set up between critical theory and poststructuralist theories is problematic in the first place as the former is sociological in focus and the latter is cultural ... writers in both are often interested in power, injustice and social justice ... but they play out their ideas, carry on the struggle in different fields.

- And Derrida was operating in the cultural?

- Yeh .. and it was the intellectual space, as I said earlier, that I seemed to have gravitated towards .....

Derrida's notion of the decentred subject – especially the writing subject, resonated with Barthes' notion of the death of the author (1968). This had intrigued me as well

previously. Again, there was this constant back and forth in my thought across my studies and life. I thought of Barthes notion of the 'writerly text' (Barthes, 1992, p. 4) - that is the meaning created by reading the text: the reader as a re-writer of its meanings:

... the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.

(Barthes, 1992, p. 4)

- Ok ... there seems to be a lot in this for us ... this reversal of 'literary work' to 'literature as work': it seems to collapse a lot of your stylistic and occupational concerns into one idea. And 'The reader as ... a producer of the text'? So, what, the writer has no say in this?

- No, the writer has some say, but maybe not the last word ... think of it this way: once a writer sets a text loose on the world, it isn't his/her text anymore ... the meanings, the text, is created by those that receive it ... read it. And an aesthetic work will allow space for lots of ways of being re-produced, re-written ... that is the enduring appeal of Shakespeare after all ... every age re-writes Shakespeare.

- And are you aiming for that kind of semantic looseness with this ... to make the reader do the work?

- Just a bit ... it'll be something to do along the way at least ... But there is something else in this too.

- What?

- Well as I thought about the things which Barthes was getting at – this deconstruction, or maybe destruction, of the author, I thought of the anonymity of the writers of classical narratives – those that read and re-wrote the narratives handed down from and through the likes of Herodotus.

And he draws our attention to the author as a relatively modern conceit:



... in ethnographic societies the responsibility of a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose 'performance' – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his [sic] 'genius'.

(Barthes, 1968, p. 142)

- But surely, there are great writers – we can't deny that?
- No, we can't and there are – but I think the point is that great writers invite the readers to collaborate in the meaning-making process. They let go a bit of semantic authority.
- A bit like great teachers?
- Yeh ... exactly ... So think of writers who are known, even more known, than their texts (like Shakespeare and Joyce) and how each generation re-writes their texts as they re-read them. Particularly when they read them against or with another text.
- What do you mean?
- Well, even in my teaching, students were re-writing Shakespearean sonnets as they read them with other poems. I used to teach Sonnet 130 (Shakespeare, 1996) alongside Carol Ann Duffy's 'Valentine' (Duffy, 1994).

After some experimentation I realised that students were more comfortable and confident in making meaning out of poems like these when they looked at them together – again this notion of meaning coming from the space between things. But the meanings they made were, after Barthes, re-written – and always new because of the unique temporal and cultural contexts in which we re-read them. They read these texts between the lines of their own lives.

- But isn't that touching on something else?
- What?
- This sense of meaning, subjecthood, being produced in the interaction between things, between texts.

## Intertextuality, dialogic imagination, forms

- Yes ... I think you may be hinting at the intertextual aspects of meaning making which Kristeva has always been interested in (Kristeva, 1986a) but she draws on Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) which I also think has importance for what we are trying to do.

- So tell us a bit about Bakhtin then, what's his role in all this?

- Well, this sense of meaning arising from the play between texts can be traced back to the early twentieth-century Russian intellectual, Bakhtin. He developed his ideas about language and meaning against pure Saussurean linguistics.

Although accepting the concept of the signified and signifier, his view, foreshadowing later poststructuralists, was that meaning was created in the multitude of social contexts within which signs were communicated.

For him the sign 'was less a neutral element in a given structure than a focus of struggle and contradiction' (Eagleton, 1996, p. 102).

Bakhtin rejected the notion of an abstract concept of language existing beyond us, but saw it more as a social, embodied and material process existing simultaneously inside and outside of the subject.

- So through conversation?

- Yeh ... on a fundamental level. He drew attention to the performative nature of language in the creation of meaning and knowledge. In particular, he saw language creating meaning through a dialogic social dynamic. Bakhtin draws attention to the heteroglossaic (Bakhtin, 1981) nature of language – where meaning is non-unitary - and representation as it appears in novels. He also highlights the role of parody and laughter in literature and the evolution of literary form. And the polyphonic or polyglossaic in language (Bakhtin, 1984).

- Poly what?

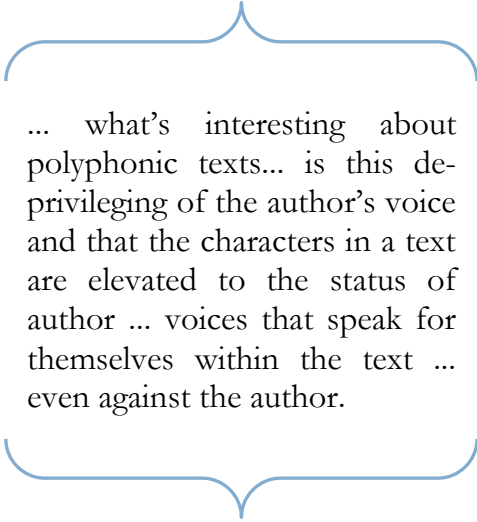
- Ok ... so that sense of multiple voices in a text ... he was looking at Dostoevsky. But what's interesting about polyphonic texts, and we can see this in the work of Joyce too (Joyce, 1968), is this de-privileging of the author's voice and that the characters in a text are elevated to the status of author ... voices that speak for themselves within the text ... even against the author.

- Ok ... that interesting. Voices like mine?

- Yeh ... but, when we come to it, maybe participant voices too – voices that can speak for themselves ... but, of course, I need to think this through.

- Ok ... so he sounds important for you in this?

- Yeh ... possibly ...



... what's interesting about polyphonic texts... is this de-privileging of the author's voice and that the characters in a text are elevated to the status of author ... voices that speak for themselves within the text ... even against the author.

So the intertextual, dialogic and polyglossaic nature of meaning making, then, dislodges, as Barthes did later, the agency of the author or even the individual text, but instead views meaning and knowledge as something which is created between the intertextual play of a heterogeneous body of texts, and through the polyphonic of the many voices within a text, through and across time and space (Bakhtin, 1994).

- What does that mean then?

- What?

- That 'meaning is created through an intertextual play of ..' whatever ...

- It means that we read texts against and beside each other – we don't, we never read a text in a cultural vacuum, there is always another text, at some level, mediating our reading of that text ... so we read a new crime thriller not on its own but amongst a community of texts of a similar genre ... or we re-read an old Conan Doyle story, for example, in the context of our reading of a TV adaptation from two years ago – the TV programme will, whether we like it or not, mediate our reading of that text.

And read Macbeth, for example, against the broader narrative of Scottish and British politics of our lifetimes – or *The Portrait of the Artist of a Young Man* (Joyce, 1992b) against the tropes of exile and a messy secularisation that are part of the narrative of Irish society today.

- Or the meanings we infer from the narrative of an adult educator are generated by that narrative's intertextual resonances with our own occupational biographies ... maybe?

- Yeh ... maybe ... now you're getting it.

- Ok – so tell me a bit more why you think Bakhtin's dialogic imagination is important for all this.

- Well, I was drawn to Bakhtin quite early on in my undergraduate studies as I liked his ideas about play and parody in literary forms. He makes the point that parody and playfulness with form and language is an important part in the evolution of narrative forms – particularly, for him, in the evolution of the novel (Bakhtin, 1981). He saw the novel as the newest and most exciting of literary genres but traced the evolution of the novel back through other literary genres and forms and argues that the novel emerged from this creative dialogue between an established form and its laughing, periodic other. In fact, he argued that no literary form exists without a parodying other. His idea was that reality is too rich, too contradictory to be represented by any homogeneous literary form (Bakhtin, 1994).

- Might there be a bit of play and parody here? Is it playing a bit with traditional forms?

- It might be, but if so, it's serious play, serious parody ... no narrative form is static – not even the established forms of the PhD thesis.

- But is it just not play for play's sake?

- Not at all. Surely all the constantly shifting complexity, messiness and contradictoriness of our lives can't be held by an unchanging academic literary form which is heavily based on natural scientific epistemologies and methodologies?

Maybe the relatively material and ontological stability of, say, a rock demands a similarly stable scientific representational form. But if we are studying ourselves ... our own

experiences and growth ... think how much you have changed over the last ten years - never mind how much human culture and science has changed over the last, say, couple of hundred years. If content and form are all wrapped up in one, then, if we want to push the boundaries of our evolving and circling knowledge and experience, then we need to push the boundaries of the forms which knowledge take.

- But are form and content all wrapped up in one?

- Well, if you read like a poststructuralist and particularly a feminist poststructuralist like Kristeva (1986a) or Cixous (1976) then, yes, you would accept that form and content are inseparable – that the distinctions between the signifier and the signified are, at best, complex.

- Was Bakhtin a poststructuralist?

- Well, he's never really framed like that. He was writing in Russia in the twenties when Derrida was in short pants.

- So he couldn't have been a poststructuralist because the tidy linearity of a historical narrative of poststructuralism precludes him?

- Yes, I see the irony. But I think his concerns were different. His focus of study was the novel rather than the sign. Yet, I like your question because I've always thought that there are foreshadows of poststructuralist thought in his ideas - like Joyce and Wolff and even Gilman ... all these writers were, in different ways, doing poststructuralism before it was invented as theory.

... I suppose it wasn't for nothing that Kristeva was drawn to Bakhtin – she must have seen a commonality in their ideas at some level.

- Which was?

- Well, again it's this notion of the intertextual – that we construct meaning, in terms of literary texts, not from our reading of one text but through our reading of one text against and with all the other texts that we read. And that the meaning then comes from spaces between texts – meaning isn't intrinsically located in any one text. So, for example, that what you're reading now you read with and against all the other academic papers that you have ever read. ... But my hope is that it's also read against and with creative forms as well.

- So form is quite central to all this?
- Yes – this. But I can see now how this PhD was forming even back then in my negotiation of the position of the text and the author in a fluid and turbulent space between language, power and identity. ... In the last year of my undergraduate year I wrote an essay on Joyce's *Ulysses* (1968) in which I explored how his experimentations in literary form were central to meaning-making and identity construction. Van Boheeman (1987), in her discussion of Joyce, saw stylistic innovation more as a theme in Joyce and echoed others who located his work as part of a proto-*l'écriture féminine* which resisted the phallogocentric certainties of nineteenth century narratives (Pykett, 1995). Anyway, my point at the end of that essay was that Joyce's experimentations in form and style were not a consequence of a struggle to articulate identity, but rather part of that struggle (O'Neill, 1999).
- So that form, content and style are all wrapped up together in the same project for Joyce?
- Exactly. I don't believe that form was subservient to content for Joyce.
- And for you too.
- Well, yes, I think so. I'm no Joyce but I'm interested in collapsing the distinctions between 'the dancer and the dance' as Yeats puts it (Yeats, 1991).
- And were you bumping up against this anywhere else?

#### Feminist ways of writing

- Everywhere – and I still am. Back then it appeared to me that this formal experimentation was often happening in texts written by women who were conscious of marginality at one level or another. So in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* the unreliable narrator Thady and the layers of his story are, in fact, part of the intrigue and success of that novel (1995). If it was written a different way, in a more conventional narrative style, it would probably be largely unread and forgotten.

And then there was Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1993) which was published first in 1898. Again, the sense of ambiguity about the narrator and identity of characters, the mix of fiction and autobiography and the journal form are all central to the endearing success and power of that narrative which, in the end, is about patriarchal attempts to keep women from writing – the pathologizing of the critical thought of 'dangerous women'. In fact, I used the story myself as a class text when I was teaching later in Scotland. It was always hard to choose a text that everyone engaged with, but this went down well –

- Yeh, I remember that myself ... what I really liked was that sense of mystery about the characters ... and in particular this morphing and 'creepy' woman in the wallpaper. I don't think I was ever clear who she was.

- But why do we get so hung up and resolving and solving every mystery in a story? Isn't it great to just let some things remain unsolved and unresolved.

- Maybe.

- And then there was Morrison's *Jazz* (1992)... I still remember that class we had with Jessica in third year ... such a wonderful experience ... and that day when we discussed the identity of the narrator - who 'I' and 'you' might be ... and that sense of delight in Morrison's innovation and touch when Jessica suggested who you were. But I was also a bit disappointed that none of us worked that out. We read and loved the whole novel and accepted this ambiguity and it didn't really make a difference to our understanding. But when we saw you, it made us want to go back and read it all again.

- I do hold such possibilities, if I say so myself.

- You do. But you're not Morrison's, 'you', although you remind me of her.

- So with writers as different as Edgeworth, Gilman and Morrison you could see how form, style, content and theme all merge and hint at exciting possibilities. And then there was also something about this experimentation in style and form being part of writing from a marginal position?

- Yes ... and Jessica's class in the final year of my undergraduate year on *Women, Discourse and Theory* really helped to bring a lot of that together for me. She introduced us to radical ways of thinking and writing. And I think that the work that I am doing

now, this thing here, whatever it is, began to form, theoretically, from the intellectual journey I started then.

- Do you remember one of the first articles she introduced us to? 'The one by Tompkins (1987)?

- I do. I read the journal that we were asked to keep from the time every now and again (O'Neill, 2000). That, in itself, was a new form of critical writing for me which I really engaged with. Anyway, I was reading back on my initial reaction to Tompkins who, in the middle of writing an academic piece on epistemology, suddenly rejects the dominant discourse of academia and, instead, starts to write how she feels about her father's illness. After years of reading conventional journal articles and books it was exciting to see this eruption, for the first time, of the personal into the academic.

*02 March 2000*

*An interesting start to the module. The Stevens' piece on Jung's notion of the shadow seemed straightforward. I'm still not sure what I think of Tompkins' 'Me and My Shadow'. It was refreshing to read a critic vent some frustration associated with literary criticism. Jessica asked the class at one stage which 'voice' did people find most intelligible. I didn't answer because I wasn't sure I could answer decisively either way. I am used to reading some literary criticism, so, although I found her 'critical voice' difficult, it wasn't unfamiliar and I felt I got a handle on her response to Messer-Davidow's essay. While her 'personal voice' was easier to follow, it was only intelligible up to a point. That is, I think I understood what she was saying, but I found it difficult to comprehend how it would impact on approaches to literary criticism. She argues that traditional epistemology omits areas of our lives that, she believes, are crucial to literary criticism. My 'gut' reaction to this was to think that although it may omit areas of our lives as an agent in the process of knowledge-building, it doesn't deny their existence, but more their appropriateness in that context. Nobody would deny the legitimacy of Tompkins' pain over the illness of her father, but how can we make a connection between that pain and a critical response to an essay written by Messer-Davidow on epistemology? I realise, as I write this, that I may be having difficulty in making such connections because my knowledge has been formed by a traditional epistemological process that delineates the private and the public, the emotional and the rational. If that is the case, is it possible for me to transcend the limits of my own knowledge-structure? If everything I know is structured by a particular epistemology, how can I know anything beyond that, or even accept that other epistemologies*



*exist? Reading back over the last few lines, I feel that I'm descending into a self-perplexing spiral. I should pause. I'm not sure about the validity of any of this and am hesitant in expressing my thoughts on something that I don't quite understand.*

(O'Neill, 2000)

- Well you've got over that at least.
- What?
- Being hesitant about expressing thoughts on things you don't understand.
- Yeh – and I wasn't then either really – because I expressed myself at great depth in that journal about things I didn't understand.

And as I read back on that journal from over fifteen years ago, I can see that I was disappointed that Tompkins herself bracketed this writing revolt and seemed to apologise for her own outburst; 'So for a while I can't talk about epistemology. .... This one time I've taken off the straitjacket and it feels good' (Tompkins, 1987). Her references to 'for a while' and 'this one time' seem to locate this eruption of the personal as a once-off rather than an attempt to rupture the hegemonies and attending styles of academic discourse.

*Writing the body*

- But you saw hope for something more radical elsewhere?
- Yeh this de-centred notion of the epistemologically and semantically certain was developed by feminist poststructuralists such as Kristeva (1986a). She saw the radical potential of a new epistemology which rejected the monolithic writing and research projects of patriarchy. This traditional focus on the unchallenged primacy of the word (or logos) and the allegiance to unitary, monolithic systems of meanings of patriarchal thought (phallus) combined, in this version of feminist post-structuralism, to imagine the discursive dynamics of phallogocentrism.

Furthermore, feminist poststructuralism, along with postcolonial critical discourses, drew attention to the politically loaded nature of signification – language with teeth. But we've talked about this earlier.

- So who else was part of this?
- Well Cixous was another who saw that language itself could be radical ...

writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures

(Cixous, 1976, p. 350)

- So writing is something more than a representational or aesthetic process with Cixous?
- I think that's certainly part of it – writing, then, can be a transformative, even, radical act.

In a way Kristeva rescues the human in poststructuralism by arguing that its object should not be linguistic systems, but, rather, speaking subjects (Kristeva, 1986c). The focus, she argues, needs to be on the processes of language rather than notions of static structures.

... writing, then, can be a transformative, even, radical act.

And she draws further attention to the power dynamics at play in the naming function of language. She replaces Lacan's notion of the pre-Oedipal imaginary order with the semiotic:

a fluid place, material and embodied place and aspect of language which is repressed in later development (Kristeva, 1986a).

As Eagleton puts it, the semiotic is 'the other of language' which can be 'discerned in as a kind of pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence' (1996, p. 166). Furthermore, Kristeva after Bakhtin developed the

notion of the intertextual relationships and meanings going backwards and forwards in time and place between texts.

- So we have a radical function of writing that resists patriarchal thought ... and experiments in form and thought by writing the body?
- But isn't this a kind of apolitical retreat to the individualised body?
- No, I don't see it like that – or I would if we didn't have a more nuanced understanding of the body in culture. So, it's not a 'retreat' but a turn to the body and the body is political. So this radical poetics resists and rejects any notion of the personal, the body as apolitical.

And Irigaray enhances this notion of the universality of the body and, while she's at it, connects a plural female sexuality with a plurality of ways of knowing and writing.

In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history

(Irigaray, 1985, p. 352)

### Consequences for the subject

- And what is the significance of all this plurality, this intertextuality for any sense of a knowable subject? Where does that leave us?
- Well, I think that one of the most important learning experiences from that was the way in which we problematised the notion of the autonomous subject (Belsey, 1997). Do you remember that?
- Do I remember, I feckin' live that! Yes, I think we all found that hard at first – we all struggled to let go of our sense of individuality. And we didn't really, not completely. But I think that people like Hollway (1984) and Moi (1985) who argued for a different type of subjectivity helped us to imagine a more vibrant, non-unitary discursive position and the liberating possibilities of that.

- Yes. Hollway is interesting as we seem to keep crossing paths with her. I think that what I liked in her writing back then was that she saved us from any sense of nihilism that a poststructuralist critical discourse might have invited. She refers to her idea of subjectivity emanating from conceptual positions which acknowledge:

the non-rational, non-unitary character of subjectivity; its social and historical production through signification; power relations and the re-production of systematic difference

(Hollway, 1984).

- This sounds a bit like your power-language-knowledge-being/subject conceptual matrix which you hinted at earlier?

- It does, doesn't it? The bit that isn't in Hollway there is the knowledge bit, but maybe that's intertwined with language or signification.

- Maybe. And what I liked in Hollway was the allowance for the notion of contradiction in our own discursive formations.

- And not just contradictions, but multiplicities. And this resistance in language – a radicalisation of language which the likes of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva tried to achieve.

- I remember struggling with some of the counter-intuitive notions of their work.

- Yes, but I think that was part of their project. And the journals we kept were so important for us working through all that (O'Neill, 2000). And I come back to their writing and my writing on their writing ... these intertextual frissons help me explore other ways of speaking, writing, communicating – to resist the univocal certainties of patriarchy.

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think

so? Listen: all around us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same ... Same ... always the same

(Irigaray, 1985, p. 205).

- There is something in this sense of the aridity of sameness which I think is important. Irigaray is right. What is the point in speaking the same language to each other over and over? There is no sense of capacity for change or transformation in this sameness. And she goes on to point to this failed opportunity if we don't try to find new ways of speaking to each other:

If we keep on speaking sameness, if we keep on speaking to each as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again ...

(p. 205)

- So this is part of that attempt to resist sameness?

- I hope so.

## Journals

- Can we just come back to the journals for a bit ... you mentioned them a couple of times just now?

- Yes. I remember the journals. They felt like such an innovation at the time. But also Jessica set them up so well – she encouraged us to be creative in language and thought, but always critical. To let the writing take us where it would. I think we

found it hard at first – after years of getting the ‘I’ knocked out of our writing, we were suddenly allowed to let it back in.

- And these journals are one of the few pieces of writing that I produced throughout my whole academic career that I come back to. And I agree, they did allow the ‘I’ back into our writing. But more than that, they validated the personal as a form of knowledge and meaning-making. Our own personal subjecthood became something we didn’t have to mask or hide behind the language of the academy. We became visible in academic discourse. And in some ways, I think much of this started in that journal text ... I look back on the last entry for the journal – one that attempts to review my learning for the course – and I see it ends with a sense of growth and wandering ...

21 May 2000

*Reading back over my journal entries it is evident that in earlier journal entries I was worried about a sort of critical Catch-22 – that is, if we accept that our dominant discourses and ideologies are formed by a traditional epistemological process centred around phallogocentrism, how can we escape their nets, or even know they exist? Isn’t the very theories that seem to challenge a phallogocentric hegemony a product, and, thus, in a way, complicit with such a discourse? These questions were with me throughout the module, but frustration is most apparent in Journals 3, 4 & 5. As the module and journals progressed, I think that I was, in some way, able to reconcile myself with this by loosening the grip on the need for a unitary meta-theory that would resolve all my questions and would somehow patch-up any holes in any of the critical perspectives that I found interesting. This can be witnessed by the decline in related questions that I ask myself – or do I ask my journal? By this, I mean how much do I own the articulated thoughts of this journal? It would seem that I only have possession of them fleetingly as I write. After that ... who knows? I feel that I can draw on what I learnt during this course to comment on how I learnt – and the journal, in a way, is the liminal zone where the substance of the ‘what’ fuses with the ‘how’ of my knowledge. It has become, now that I am finishing it, something almost independent of me that has both form and movement – it is a record and a recording of learning. I’m not sure if I could, at the beginning of this course, have accepted some of the counterintuitive perspectives that have led me to articulate such thoughts about this text that I am writing (a foetal-text, as it only exists now, at this moment, as something on my computer screen, but will soon be black and white presence and absence on*

*an A4 sheet of paper). The journal has helped me to get to grips with difficult theories but it also plays out in microcosm some of the notions that writers like Cixous, Irigaray and Smyth voice. That is, that there may be as much meaning (or maybe I should say value) in the performance of my journal as the content of my journal. In a sense, I have been trying to write my body, albeit a masculine one still very much grounded in phallogocentric thought and hanging onto a bruised notion of the autonomous self. However, holding onto this autonomous self doesn't seem to be as important after reading critics like Hollway if I can move (albeit unconsciously) in and out of a myriad of different discourses. If Hollway revealed to us that we are all subjects of only three or four discourses I might feel different – but there is comfort in feeling that I am immersed in a multitude of invisible discourses.*

*In my first journal I wrote about what I hoped to get from the course – I expressed a desire for a fuller understanding of theories like post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. I feel now that I was, in a way, chasing the tail of some transcendental signifier – I was looking for some stable sense of unitary meaning that would allow me to confidently proclaim, 'I understand post-structuralism!'. However, having reached the end of the course, I don't think that that is what the module has given me. Yes, it has provided me with a fuller understanding of some difficult critical discourses. But it has also engaged me in a process - a process that will hopefully continue - in which I can chase the tail of various critical perspectives without being too anxious if I ever catch the tail, if the tail even exists. It is as if I expected in looking back over my journals to find some neat discernible trajectory of my learning that started at confusion and questions, and ended at meaning and answers. But when I find this linear movement absent and in its place a wandering but all the same a positive (I think) growth, I realise that I was posing phallogocentric questions to a module which never intend to supply purely phallogocentric answers.*

(O'Neill, 2000)

- That's intriguing ... to witness in this textual self of a decade and a half-ago undergraduate student a rehearsal of some of the things we are doing now ... this notion of the text as the 'what' and 'how' of your learning ....

- Yeh ... I really thought that all that stuff was gone ... until I started this ... this exploration of the intertextuality of the self through writing *and* reading myself (Primier, 2013).

And I can see throughout my educational journey, this sense of importance of journals ... Jessica's class really made clear the power of journaling in learning.

But journal writing was something I had really started to engage with around then ... but as a critical reader as much as writer.

- Expand on that a bit.

- Well, I've already mentioned Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1993) which was written in journal form ... but that form, so rooted in the "I", the private and the internal was a really revolutionary mode of writing. Or the way she used it anyway – her decentring of authorial and narrative certainty. It really challenged patriarchal representational truths (Showalter, 1993). And the slow disintegration of the narrator was heightened by the use of the journal form ... it really allowed Gilman to critique western medical approaches to women's health and their bodies through a wonderfully crafted symbolism and a deeply, claustrophobic personal narrative ... she created a subject, a troubling reality, which challenged dominant discourses.

- So you see echoes?

- Well, I see that the personal and the creative can be very effective as modes of social and cultural criticism. And maybe as Cixous suggested 'a springboard for subversive thought' (Cixous, 1976, p. 350).

- You mentioned other journals ...

- Yeh ... I've always loved Stoker's *Dracula* (1994) and Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1969). In part, I think, it's because of the form they take ... their epistolary and journal form add to their tension – a narrative can, and does, just stop with the violent death of a narrator.

- And you are keeping a journal now too?

- Yes ... I told you that already ... keep up. But it's been a crucial part of the puzzling out for me. A space to write fluidly and honestly about what this is and what I want it



to be. Jessica's classes really opened my eyes to journaling as a learning resource – it has been something I've tried to sustain in my personal, teaching, and now researching life (Moon, 1999).

- So, Jessica's class opened up a lot?

- It did. It kind of brought together a lot of my interest in postcolonial and poststructuralist critical discourse which had engaged me up to then, but it also opened up the possibilities of the personal and the creative combining with the political and critical in acts of individual and communal transformation.

It was you who broke the silence first.

- This is longer than I thought ... it is necessary do you think?

- Ah I think so ... this isn't just setting up what is to come – all of this, this walk, these steps ... all of this is part of it. It's not possible for me to separate my theory from my story ... I don't know how anyone can ... (Mc Niff, 2007).

Again some moments of silent walking settled us again. But it didn't take long ...

- So, all of these ideas about the subject, language, power, identity came together into your masters?

- It did ... a lot of it was exploring in more depth the ideas that I had already interested me. I became more interested in form – I remember when it was my turn to lead a seminar on O'Casey, I chose to discuss *The Plough and the Stars* through an interview I did with an actor in a recent production and through a reading of the accompanying brochure which that theatre produced. My point was, in deconstructing the brochure, was that any meaning which we drew from O'Casey now was produced in an hermeneutic act involving numerous readers – the actor who read, interpreted and performed a character; the marketing staff who composed a text (the brochure) which

mediated the audience's own reading; and, of course, the designers, director, other cast and conversations in the bar about the play. So, the meaning of *The Plough and the Stars* was created in a dialogic interplay of a whole community of readers located in a specific cultural context (Bakhtin, 1981).

- And why is this relevant?

- Again, and I am probably labouring this now, but I suppose it shows how I was really interested in how diluted the author's hand is in scribing meaning when considered this way.

- And what about your hand?

- Well, that's one reason for you being here.

- You have timed this walk well.

As we turned onto Ridgeway Street, the Lyric Theatre, transformed since my days, loomed tall and odd against the red-bricked suburban surroundings.

- I learned a lot there. And had some great times.

- What did you do there?

- Well lots of things ... bits and pieces ... just work to keep me going while I was at college. I started off in the Box Office, then bar – I also helped out in administration and various projects. In fact when I finished my Masters, the year Joseph was born, I deferred the teacher training post-grad and worked there for a year. But, I might save all that for our next walk. ... Except ...

- Do you remember your found poem which you constructed from the computer commands of the box office booking system?

- I do ... vaguely ... we spent a long time just looking at those words ... *account, advance, agent, assign* .... all the way to *unclaim, unbold, unset*.

- That's right ... and you found the aesthetic there amongst these functional commands on a computer console:

My account will never accumulate

or advance in this small place .... (O'Neill, 1998)

- Oh let's not get into that, it's so very long ...
- It is ... but there is something in that which seems promising ... possibly for all this.
- What?
- Something in this notion of found poetry ... finding the aesthetic, creating meaning from the utterly banal.
- But it's not just finding is it? It's making.
- Yeh and another thing about the theatre ... just that mention of O'Casey and this place reminds me of a certain paradox that I stumbled across here.
- Which was?
- Well ... I worked here for years when I was in Queen's .. in the bar, the box office, admin and other stuff ... I was thinking of the plays about oppression of marginalised that were put on here ... O'Casey, McGuinness, Mitchell ... and yet how the place would fill with the, generally, well-healed watching plays about the oppressed ... and getting served by low-paid temporary workers at the interval. Some of us were students so there was a sense of it being temporary. But for others it wasn't – it was their main source of employment. The front-of-house staff were on precarious contracts (Standing, 2011) – even though many of them worked there for years ... in some cases nearly twenty years. ... So a couple of us got together and, eventually, unionised front-of-house workers.
- Interesting ... that theme of power again ...
- Yes ... and it will, no doubt, be something we will keep bumping into ...

## The mythic tourist

Again, we paused in movement and conversation – taking in this impressive building on the south bank of the Lagan and, as our gaze extended, contemplating the union flags flying over the flats at Annadale.

- Let's go off our route for a bit ... follow the river up a bit ... the towpath brings you along a nice walk for a bit.
- Ok ... what about what your friends used to say? That you should stick closely to South Belfast – that you look too Catholic. Something like that.
- Ah ... we'll be grand ... sure you're with me and you take the edge off my Catholic look.
- Thanks ... I don't even know what that's supposed to mean.
- Me neither really ...

We continued for a time in silence. Walking the two path against the slow and heavy movement of the Lagan. After about ten minutes we had left, or so it seemed, the city behind us.

- And didn't you have to write a dissertation?
- For what?
- Your MA?
- I did.
- What was it about?

- It was called 'Naming the West, Framing the West: Discourses of Tourism in Nineteenth-Century Connemara' (O'Neill, 2001).
- Oh .. so ... is that why we ...?
- Are walking off beaten-paths? ... Possibly ... everything is connected.
- Ok ... and what was that about?
- Well I looked at a selection of travel and tourist narratives about Connemara written at three moments during the nineteenth century and explored the development of a discourse of tourism in a colonial and post-colonial context. I still look back on it now and again – but less and less.
- Why?
- I'm not sure. ... Maybe because of the language ... I see lines like

In the signification and aestheticization of the west, we can sense the anxieties of the writer and detect a certain fragility inherent in a privileged social and cultural origin where the authority to signify resides (O'Neill, 2001, p. 53).

- And?
- And ... it makes me cringe slightly. Not for what I'm saying, more for how I say it. It reads like some kind of inculcation into an academic discourse which can only speak to itself.
- And isn't that your audience?
- Well, yes, you're right it was with that.
- And this surely.
- Yes and this ... up to a point. I know I'm writing for an academic audience primarily – for you – I need to prove myself to you in my writing. But throughout this whole process I've devoted so much thought to how writing about adult education, in particular, needs to be written to be read by adult educators. I know you're at my

shoulder but adult educators should be my first audience. They're here too. You're not the only one. So although Barthes points the way to a writerly text (1992), I'm also keenly aware that it needs to be readable too (Richardson, 1994, 1997). There has to be a way, surely, for the two ...

- Is that what this is all about? This dialogue. These walks.
- It's a part of it ...
- You're not one for committing yourself to a definite statement – are you?

As I glanced over to gauge what kind of a response you could take at this stage, it was clear that you'd moved on. You had paused to gaze upon a crane delicately balanced in the middle of the river on a half-submerged shopping-trolley.

- Wonder where that came from?

I wasn't sure if you meant the crane or the trolley.

- But there is stuff in that masters dissertation which is useful. It shows, for a start, my interest in the landscape and how mapping and naming it is a political and discursive act. I always remember the epigraph to *A Paper Landscape* (1975), Andrew's study of the Ordnance Survey. It's a quote from Lord Salisbury from 1883:

The most disagreeable part of the three kingdoms is Ireland, and therefore Ireland has a splendid map (Andrews, 1975).

- That says it all really.

- Yes ... Salisbury knew that semiotic and political control were, at least in part, synonymous. And I write a lot in there about imperial anxieties about difficulties in signification – the complexities of mapping hard to name places – like the difficult terrain of the west. And how aesthetization is, in part, a response to that incapacity to name/own – the creation of the wild and sublime west. Although I also note that elements within these narratives act in discursive revolt against colonising signification.
- Watch it, you're slipping into it again ...
- You're right. It's hard not to sometimes.
- So I see where your interest and ideas for this tour came from ..
- Possibly ... but it was never my intention starting out on this inquiry. In fact, when I started this I had a sense that I needed to leave all that behind and become a different type of writer-thinker.
- And what happened to bring you back to it?
- I don't know, once I engaged on a narrative mode of inquiry, I was drawn almost inevitably, back to my own story, and through that, to my ways of thinking. Buzard, who I draw on in that thesis, develops the notion of a 'mythic tourist' which might be a useful way of imagining ourselves on our own grand tour (Buzard, 1993).
- A 'mythic tourist'?
- Yeh – he argues that we should

construe 'the tourist' as a mythic figure, a rhetorical instrument that is determined by and, in turn, helps to determine the ways ... nations represent culture and acculturation to themselves (Buzard, 1993, p. 4)

- So we are just rhetorical instruments helping to determine ... what?
- Relax, you are real ... I'd say we are, partly, mythic and rhetoric – and that side of us is helping us move forward constantly, if not linearly, in this inquiry.

- And then?
- And then what?
- Well, what happened after your masters? Why didn't you do a PhD then if you had that draw? Why now?
- I did consider it. A couple of the academic staff felt that I could develop something out of my masters. And I was tempted. ... There were lots of things going on. ... I was no longer single and young Joseph was on his way. I think I felt at some level to do it without any guarantee of a job at the end of it was too self-indulgent. But I also wondered about its value which was a funny way for me to think about it. I questioned whether the world really needed a doctoral thesis on discourses of tourism in nineteenth century Ireland. Maybe it did. But I doubted it.
- But the world needs this.
- No. The world doesn't need this. But I see it as having a utility, a relevance outside of myself – as self-centred as it may sound right now.
- For who?
- Well ... for adult educators like myself .. particularly those who are in precarious or marginal position who, like many of our learners, feel that their story, their knowledge doesn't amount to much. And it wouldn't be hard for them to think that when they are losing jobs because their experience and knowledge has no currency with the Teaching Council.
- Ok. I think you are running away with yourself now.
- Maybe ... maybe not ...
- So what then has all this being about? This walk – today.
- Well, I think we've walked out a clearer sense of my theoretical foundations.
- And what are they?



- I think that before I even went back to university I had a creative and narrative sensibility. But very soon after engaging in undergraduate higher education I began, first through history, to question any notion of completely knowable history. The power inherent in the writing of history and literature became more apparent.

And I suppose, through historiography and literature, I became interested in the writing subject – the whole notion of the author and the anxieties around that. To frame it in social science terms, I was developing a strong sense of a constructionist ontology and epistemology.

And lots of theoretical and poetic ideas combined: Barthes' notion of the death of the author, Joyce's polyvalent literary forms in exploration of identity, nineteenth century fiction's exploration of writing forms in articulating marginalised voices, Cixous and Irigaray's revolutionary and rupturing writing projects, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic and the intertextual, Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, parody, polyvocal and intertextual and all the feminist and postcolonial explorations and theorising of the Other in society and art ...

.. all these things left me, I think, in a place where I saw meaning, identity ... subjecthood as something discursively formed in a struggle, and between the spaces of competing and complementary voices – back again to this notion of this chaotic dynamic between power, language, and being/identity.

And that we shouldn't mourn the loss of our individual subjecthood – the sense of an autonomous identity or self, but, instead celebrate the heterogeneity of our inter-relational, even intertextual, subjecthood.

We are never fully in ownership as authors of our life-narratives – they exist, to an extent, before us and we breathe some life into them as we set them out in the world to play with a community of ever-evolving stories.

- Jaysus ... and how did all this book-learning make you feel?

- Liberated in one sense I think ... as it confirmed that dominant storylines are merely those that have, one way or another, muscled their way into hegemonic thinking.

- And how was that liberating?

- I suppose that if we can see a bit more clearly where power resides, then we can start to see ways to trouble it and challenge it ... at least play with it for a bit.
- So that's the theory bit then is it?
- This thing will never be finished with theory. Although this walk has been about trying to make my theoretical starting positions a bit more distinct.

... we shouldn't mourn the loss of our individual subjecthood ... but, instead, celebrate the heterogeneity of our inter-relational, even intertextual, subjecthood.

Freire makes the point about the fluid, non-fixed nature of the theoretical. In his own dialogic perambulations with Myles Horton, he refers to theory as always 'becoming' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 101). This notion of theory as defined by its organic or metamorphic quality is very useful and appropriate for what we are doing.

Remember the theoretical is just one narrative thread in this inquiry, it weaves through the personal and the communal throughout.

We had been walking against the Lagan for a long time and, now, the day was well-stretched. Just past Shaw's Bridge we turned up into an ancient wood. We had been this way once in our early days together.

The words between us had trailed away ... they had served their purpose for the day. But our bodies hadn't finished yet ... they still ached to walk the thoughts through.

And so we walked on – our bodies, at least, remembering the route which brought us out of the woods, across the Ballynahatty Road and onto a path flanked by agricultural land.

And then, all of a sudden, there we were.

What had started earlier in the day as a looped walk around the leafy, suburban environs of south Belfast's university quarter had, somewhere along the way, become a tangential pursuit of the Lagan and to here ... the 4,000 year-old earthen henge known as the Giant's Ring.

We paused and lay, as we did so many years ago, on the grassy bank of the henge.  
Saying nothing but lost in thought as we pondered on the sedimented beauty, rituals  
and knowledge suggested by the dolmen at its centre.

We lay there, alone-together, for some time.



## Part Two

### Values, struggle and growth



Found fragments from an anthology of tutor narratives #2

Values and purpose





When I started, about ten years ago now,  
the tutor's role  
wasn't about certification.

For me  
it's always been about  
meeting people where they were

working with  
marginalised groups  
in some form or other

just  
working some way along that journey with them.

The core purpose of my work as a tutor  
is more to do with social inclusion  
rather than a narrow focus on specific skills.

I feel that  
the development of skills is a means towards social inclusion

and that my work, at the core, is about

helping students on their personal journeys  
instilling them with the confidence to make those journeys.

I believe that the work of the tutor is about  
helping learners gain the confidence in their ability to learn.

As I work mainly within

the context of

accredited programmes,

the explicit core purpose of the tutor's role is about

ensuring that learners pass courses.

And indeed, for lots of people,

getting the FETAC cert is part of a process of development ...

but I feel that it should never be seen as

the sole, or even core, goal of the learning.

I am very clear that my core role is about

ensuring that people's

learning is as

comfortable and positive

as possible.

I am there to give people the

confidence

to appreciate the skills and experiences that they bring into classroom,

and to give them the

confidence

to go on with that journey.

But mostly,

my role is about

making people feel that they have the ability and

confidence

to learn what they want to learn and the

confidence

to say

‘I haven't a clue’.

I see myself as

someone who is there to

help learners

do what they want to do.

Mostly they can do it anyway and

what they need is

a nudge,

a hint or

a push along the way.

A lot of what the

core role of the tutor comes down to is,

not so much the subject,

but

giving people

confidence

in themselves.

I get a sense with a lot of the adults that I have come across is

that their secondary education experience

was not great for them –

they may have

struggled

for one reason or another.

And so, they come into that first class with

a lack of

confidence.

It may not just be in maths – it may be other things as well.

But, I see that my job is to help them get

confidence

in themselves.

Learning is all about

confidence.

It's a step-by-step process

it's like building a wall.

A lot of what I need to do is

work on that

foundation

so they build up some

belief

in themselves.

Learners walk

into that centre for a reason

it's up to me to work out what that reason is

and if I can work out a learning plan to help them reach that goal ...

well, then

that's my purpose.

On a broad level, I feel that

many people are

disempowered

and that adult learning can offer possibilities to deal with that.

I believe that my main purpose as a tutor

within the ETB is

to support students with their

personal development

or

personal growth.

I realise that there is a broader perspective which is about a  
formal recognition of students' learning  
that getting a certificate for that is important.

I see my role in helping them  
gain that recognition

by consolidation of what they know –  
but also bringing them on a bit further and  
helping them

to grow

personally.

I believe that our core role is

defined by the group in front of us.

People need to come to us

when they're ready to learn – that's important.

If someone isn't ready,

we can work with them a bit

to build up their

confidence

possibly get them to a place

where they know what they need to sort out in order

to come back and give it a go. So many learners come in

without

confidence

I talked about

me being prepared to show respect if they did.

I talked about

it not being school.

I talked about

it not being a school-teacher and pupil relationship.

I kept coming back to

them being adults and

the idea of mutual respect.



I had the same feeling myself  
going back to college myself.

It was the same for them –  
going back  
into something  
or somewhere  
where they didn't feel comfortable.

One of the learners said to me one day,  
'And we get coffee breaks and all – I wish school had them.'

Although it's early days for me,  
all these little exchanges  
spoke volumes  
about the differences  
between school and  
the adult learning  
environment for young adults.

If that's all they get from that first year-  
that sense of it being

a different space –

then maybe that's enough at that stage.

Having that sense may allow them, in their second year,  
to actually start getting into the learning.

But I needed to shift too.

I think that there is  
a real need and value for adult education –  
possibly now more than ever.

It seems that in some ways that the  
education gaps are increasing.

I suppose I do see  
the broader social role of learning but I feel that having  
explicit discussions on  
society and politics in class  
can be delicate.

Sometimes institutions can be wary of tutors making the classroom

too political.

But the danger in keeping it

too safe

is that we can end up with situations which

feel a bit false.



In search of the teaching subject  
in and around west Edinburgh



**A**nd then there was the day when we seemed to find ourselves at the top of one Edinburgh's seven hills - absorbing the serious beauty of Scotland's capital.

Corstorphine Hill, a few miles west of the city centre, is easily ascended and it was on its eastern side where we had been standing in stillness for some time. Always a bit the outsider here, I was a bit subdued by the sheer extent of architectural heritage written on the cityscape before us which hinted at centuries of stories of power and privilege. But all this was kind of new to you and you were greedy to map it all there and then.

- What's that?

I traced your gaze.

- That's Herriot Watts – a private school. Very expensive.

- And that?

- That's Fettes. Another private school. Tony Blair's old school ... You've an eye for elitist institutions of education.

- And that?

- That .... that's part of Edinburgh University. I think. Or maybe the College of Physicians. I'm not sure really. I suppose I should know. ... I found out a while back that my great-grandfather went there ... he would have been a near contemporary of Conan Doyle who studied medicine here around then ... Anyway, come this way ... I'll show you another view.

I drew you and your gaze away from spires and domes. We followed a track across the top of the hill, passed the communications mast which, or so someone told me once,

had something to do with the nearby airport. Then down a bit the western side of the hill.

- Oh. ... This is a bit more ... ordinary.

From our new position the city's tableau evolved, as it stretched away below us, into rows of suburban houses, then, past these, to even more compact housing, then flats, until finally settling out to a vast expanse of industrial and commercial units - only restrained from spilling into the Pentland Hills beyond by the motorway which semi-embraced the city.

- See that white, seventies office-block kind of thing?

- Where?

It was your turn to follow my gaze.

- Right. That one?

- Yeh. ... That's the college where I worked.

- Ah ... and which way are we going to walk?

Your eastward-shifting eyes more than hinted at your preference. But I nodded my head in the opposite direction – towards the college.

- That way ... west.

- West. Always west with you.



- Well, you know what Gros (2014) in his discussion of Thoreau and walking said?
- No. But I sense you're going to tell me.
- 'The sources of the future lie in the West' (Gros, 2014, p. 99).
- Are you not slipping into this romanticisation of the west - this sublimation as you called it in your critique of touristic discourses of the Irish western landscapes (O'Neill, 2001)?
- Possibly. But I think Gros sees the west here more as the space of the setting sun rather than the savage or untamed west. He's thinking more of the western space where the western horizon holds our tomorrows, our futures – that a walking west, or writing west, is a developmental trajectory.
- Maybe. Maybe. But you of all people know that west and east are loaded terms in culture (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1995) – I'm concerned that you are linking west with development and, by extension, east with ... what? Something backward?
- I wouldn't position them like that. West might be my future, my tomorrows; and east my past. ... But I take your point about diminishing the east. We need to tread carefully as we go.
- We do. ... But let's follow the sun then for a bit all the same.

After a final moment in which we took in Edinburgh's cultural capital one last time, we started down the track which soon brought us into the woods. The deciduous canopy soon closed down our view of the city. And before we got a chance to appreciate the beauty of our simple walk amongst oak, beech and elm we had emerged from the woods and started the slow descent down the steep and wealthy suburban incline of Cairnmuir Road.

- It's very nice up here ... nice views across the city ...
- Yes ... they're very much above it all around here. Nice though I suppose. If you like that kind of thing.

You nodded politely and self-consciously to an elderly couple out for a morning stroll. I smiled at your attempt to camouflage your own sense of strangeness in this place by engaging in this small, casual act of social etiquette. Or maybe you were just being friendly.

- Right. So?

- So what are we doing here?

- Yeh. What now?

- Well the last walk, in Belfast, was really about teasing out my theoretical positions and predispositions. On this walk I want us to walk through my occupational landscape – the landscape of the adult educator.

- Is that why we are in Edinburgh?

- Yeh. It was in Scotland that I served my apprenticeship as an adult educator. In the north first and then for years in the central belt.

- And it was a very different knowledge that you walked through after your cultural and literary entanglements in Belfast.

- Yeh. I left Queen's with such esoteric knowledge of semiotics, power and play in literary and historical narratives ... it intrigued me and I was so passionate about it – I suppose it helped make sense of life for me – this notion of a dialogic, intertextual subject had profound personal significance for me ... the consolation of theory as ... who said that?

- Well, you may be thinking of Boethius (2008)? But that was 'The Consolation of Philosophy' ... mind you he mixed it all up as well .. poetry, prose, the personal – he even had an interloper.

- I know ... don't kid yourself that what we are doing is new ... it's all been done ...

- But never quite the same way ...

- No ... 'there must be another song left to sing ...'
- '... nobody can have thought of everything' (Welch & Rawlings, 2003)

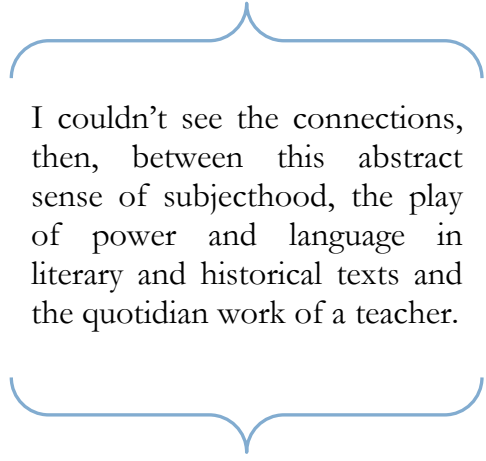
And for a moment we both let the traces of Welch's simple melody push other thoughts aside. But not for long.

... but you might be thinking of hooks too (1994) ...

- Sorry?
- She wrote about coming to theory in a response to pain:

'I saw in theory ... a location for healing' (hooks, 1994, p. 59)

- Ah right, maybe that was what I was thinking ... although my pain wasn't that great. But it was a societal, cultural discomfort all the same. A sense of things not being quite right ... as we were told they were. As passionate as I was about all that knowledge, it didn't seem to have a place or a role in the world of education that I stepped into after Queen's. I couldn't see the connections, then, between this abstract sense of subjecthood, the play of power and language in literary and historical texts and the quotidian work of a teacher. ... Or maybe it's more accurate to say I sensed the relationships but it took me a long time to see them ... to make the connections ... and maybe only through this.



I couldn't see the connections, then, between this abstract sense of subjecthood, the play of power and language in literary and historical texts and the quotidian work of a teacher.

- Through this?
- All this walking ... this talking.

- Right. And are there connections? Is this exploration of the more practical domain of your work as an educator not something to be held in balance *against* the theoretical knowledge of signs, signification, discourse, phallogocentrism, polyphonics, writing the body... all of that ... stuff?

- Yeh ... no. Not in opposition to each other. Again, I think putting them in opposition to each other is part of a more structuralist epistemology that I have always resisted. It's the space between the various ways of knowing and working that is the fertile ground. And it's making the connections between the two that interest me. This I suppose is the point of all this ... by walking and talking we make that connection – work on those spaces.

- We make the path by walking (Horton & Freire, 1990)?

- Very good - I really like a lot of that dialogic work and love to see texts taking that form. And what I'm doing here takes work like that as some of its validation. Yet it's a different story. We are not just making the path.

By walking over a route again and again, we reveal what's beneath – maybe all this is a kind of clumsy archaeology. And in doing that we are working in a number of dimensions at the same time: back and forth on the path – but also, and more subtly, down into the sediment below our feet ... revealing what lies beneath our paths. ...

We were reaching the end of the long stretch of Kaimes Road ... still surrounded by the comfortable, desirable sandstone residences of west Edinburgh. We came out, all of a sudden, on to the busy Corstorphine Road. This main route from the airport to the city centre bulged with impatient traffic.

- Where now?

- We just need to cut across here ... somewhere ...

We risked a momentary lapse in the uniform rush of traffic to run to the other side. Someone beeped and shouted an unintelligible insult muted by his own noisy haste. And we moved on again in our own slow haste.

- Okay ... down here.

- Do you remember your first day in the seminar group?

- I do. Seems like an age now.

- Well, I was thinking about that recently. Remember we all went around and introduced ourselves and our topics.

- Yeh. But don't ask me what you said. I won't remember.

- Don't worry. We only speak for ourselves to listen at the seminars anyway. ... No, I remember, as it came to my turn, I said something like 'I'm interested in the possibilities of narrative in exploring adult educator growth' ... or something like that. And, you said, just as a minor point of clarification, 'So, when you say "educator growth", do you mean professional development, CPD ... that stuff?' And I said, without really thinking at all, 'yeh, that stuff, yeh'.

- Ok. And I was right - I don't remember that. Should I?

- No not at all. But I went away with this slight feeling of unease. It took me a while of going through what I had said and a conversations with you all to work out what my problem with that was. And what I started to realise was that what I should have said was 'no ... I don't mean that stuff'. Or rather 'yeh ... but not the way you are framing it'.

- Ok. You'll have to be clearer.

- I know, I know. What I mean was that I am interested in the development of adult educators, but that I am uncomfortable with the accepted notions of professional development or CPD. And it's that which I want to talk about on this walk.

- Ok ... so CPD?

- CPD – if that’s what you want to call it. So I am passionate about the whole area of our own growth as educators on lots of levels. However the way I’ve experienced this, CPD, in various working environments is as something separate to us – something managed and imposed by Human Resources usually. But I can’t see it as something separate – and I can’t separate it as something exterior to me as an educator if I can call myself that.

- What else would you call yourself?

- Not sure ... it’ll do for now.

- Anyway ... you can’t separate CPD from your own development? That makes sense because it’s about your development. Surely it shouldn’t be separated.

- No of course it can’t. And you’re right it shouldn’t be separated. I suppose what I mean is that I can’t separate it here. I can’t present some disembodied theoretical consideration of what CPD might be – or I probably could but that’s not what I want this to be. And if I can’t, or won’t, separate CPD or educator knowledge from my own development, my own experiences, my own story ... and I don’t think any adult educator can ... then what does it mean for us in this moment? Where do we go with that?

- Well, wasn’t it Foucault, for one, who argued that our knowledge cannot be separated from our practice and contexts (Foucault, 1975)? So, doesn’t that give you a license to mix your story, your practice in with wider knowledge of what CPD is ... maybe?

- Yes ... I think so ... just as the theory emerged when it needed to out of our last walk through part of my story.

- So a theory of CPD will emerge from this walk?

- Yes – or rather it will appear when it needs to. My story of growth as an educator and the theoretical or academic framing of growth will walk together. But it shouldn’t be any surprise to you what my theory of CPD, if you want to call it that, will look like?

- Why?

- Because you are walking it now.

- Jesus, sometimes you talk like Yoda.
- Sorry – although I think I put my subject and objects in the usual order.
- You know what I mean. Jesus, you're slippery sometimes.
- Yeh ... ok ... What I mean, I suppose, is that I need to walk and talk the story of my own growth as an educator to explore what CPD means or should mean.
- So, you'll show rather than tell?
- Yeh ... you could put it like that ...

We turned into Traquair Park East - buffeted on both sides by impressive Victorian homes. As we reached the end of Traquair Square we turned left into Carrick Knowe. There was a noticeable shift from wealthy, Victorian and early twentieth-century large family homes, to a more condensed housing landscape of, what estate agents called around here, 'villas': four-in-a-block, two-bedroom housing that dated to post-Second World War social housing initiatives.

- This is different.
- It is ... We used to live around here.
- Did you?
- Yeh – we lived for five years down there by the park. We're heading that way. I'll show you.

#### The emergence of an educational path

- So, how did you end up working in education – give me a sense of your way in ...
- Well, I think I touched on this on our last walk. I told you that when I went back to university first as a mature student it was to start a degree in history and education

studies in London. And maybe that year was all about my first stumbling conceptual steps towards an educator knowledge. Maybe that's where all this started ...

- Don't get so hooked up on defining unitary, single points of origins. Remember? We talked about that.
- Have we? I didn't think we were at that bit yet ... but maybe we did.
- Oh yeh ... you could be right ... go on then ... sorry for interrupting.
- Right .. so as I've mentioned, I subsequently transferred to an English and history degree at Queen's. But something drew me all the way back then to education as a site of study. And here I am - still inquiring into it.
- What was it that drew you to education? You don't talk very fondly of school.
- No, it wasn't school – not directly anyway. But possibly it was partly due to my experience as a student in Ballyfermot Senior College. I was only there for a year on a VEC Cert. course – but I saw this whole other world of education – something meaningful, something which I looked forward to ... it was a very vocational course in sound engineering and I loved it ... The only problem was that we were all stepping out of that into a recession with little chance of work ... and after a while I think most of us, frustrated with the inability to get work, just drifted, reluctantly away from that into work that promised a wage at least.
- That's a shame.
- Yeh ... but I was thinking about this lately - drifting as I am occupationally in another recession - I was thinking that would have been useful then would have been if the college provided a space for us to come together and develop our skills after we finished. Allow us to continue to develop and learn from each other after they'd finished with us so to speak.
- But that would be a resource issue for them?
- Resource issue – yikes, listen to you. But yeh, I see where you are coming from. But I don't think that they needed to pay staff to be there – just to let us use the facilities once a week on an evening or weekend – partly to develop our skills but partly to sustain us in the work that we loved – to help create the conditions, if you like,



for a community of practice to emerge (Wenger, 2000). But before that develops practitioners need a space and place for that to evolve to feel part of something: an organisation, a body of practitioners or just some sense of common collective identity.

- Sounds like Anderson's imagined communities (1991) which you interested you in the study of the emergence of nationalism ... that sense of a community of strangers bound by something more than geographical proximity?

- It does ... and do you know that I just recently found out that Wenger acknowledged Anderson as a source for his development of communities of practice (Wenger, 2000, p. 228)?

- That's interesting ... everything is connected.

- Sure don't I keep saying that. Anyway, that drift away from an occupation that I really connected with because of employment issues and a dearth of a sense of an occupational community worries me again.

- You think it might happen again?

- Possibly ... hopefully this will help.

- This?

- Yeh ... us, walking and talking, and you writing it may stop that drift.

- I thought you were writing this.

- Am I? It doesn't matter ... Anyway, where were we?

- I was asking you about your way into education and you started talking about Queen's, then went back to London, then back again to Ballyfermot ..

- I did – that's right. Isn't it funny how, no matter what starting point we choose, we keep edging backwards in our stories? That narrative draw towards the deferred point of origin.

- Yeh – and I think the deferred nature of origin is important. Glad you qualified it this time. You're learning.

- Thanks.

- So, you were saying how you had this interest in education and history which got you into a university in London?

- I did ... and although I was only there for a year, it was important to me because it opened up this world of critical education which I felt an affinity to. It was here I am across the names Dewey, Freire, Illich, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Giroux, Steiner for the first time. Mainly, as I mentioned before, through tutorial sessions with a post-grad who drew heavily on Spring's text, *Wheels in the Head* (1994). But it opened up for me this whole critical questioning of power in education and the purposes of education. These were the first prolonged and informed conversations I had about power and purpose in education. I don't remember much except that I was hungry for these conversations.

- And isn't it when we come back to fundamental questions about purpose in education that we can't help but being critical?

- I think so ... and criticality, in many ways, is about what level of scale you choose to view education. If your scale is the classroom, your critical horizon is somewhat limited – you will probably care and advocate passionately for the individual and the group of specific students in front of you, but unless you scale back to see them in broader context, then your criticality will never address deeper issues of power and injustice.

- And Spring's text opened that up to you? This critical perspective on education.

- It did. And as I say I seemed to have a real passion for it. These were things I wanted to talk about. And still do.

- Any other memories of that time?

- Let's see ... we spent some time, if I'm remembering rightly, studying A.S. Neill's Summerhill educational project.

- I was reading a while ago that they do well, now, in their inspection reports – they get 'outstanding' in lots of things – except teaching.

- Why not teaching?

- Apparently their ethos around assessment makes it impossible for them to get an 'outstanding' for teaching.

- It just shows how official perspectives on teaching conflate teaching and assessment.  
... Anyway, that year gave me a sense of a more radical view of what education could be  
– and what a teacher might be in such educational spaces. I remember wondering  
would it be like to be a teacher as much as a student in somewhere like Summerhill.  
What would they do? How would they be different?

We paused at a small crossroads. I nodded down to the right – towards a sprawling  
one story complex.

- That's where the boys started school.
- Right. Did they like it?
- It was ok. A bit cold at times. Joe's teacher spilt the beans on Santa when he was  
about seven. That'll be my endearing memory of that school ... They had a lovely  
Deputy Headteacher though – she was all smiles and very gentle and kind.
- These are the things we hold on to
- They are ... but we're not going that way ... c'mon.

We crossed the road heading along a tired road that would curve just ahead to make  
way for an equally tired iron-railed green space with a couple of playing fields.

- And this nascent educator knowledge then ...that's what we're talking about, right?  
This knowledge ... you developed it more in Belfast?
- Yeh ... I kind of left the educational stuff behind for a while as I negotiated the  
epistemological plains of history and English at Queen's. Although, I knew that the  
most obvious career trajectory coming out these subjects would be teaching – so  
education was never completely absent for me. ... And in fact in my English degree I  
came across interdisciplinarians like Foucault, Levi Strauss and hooks who would  
reappear again.

- Where did you come across hooks?
- She mediated our readings of Morrison's work (hooks, 1991)

I paused and, after a half-step, so did you. We had reached Union Park, but my gaze settled on the ground floor dwelling in the block which was beside it.

- We lived there.
- In this one here?
- Yeh.
- It looks nice.
- Ah, it was grand. A bit noisy at night with stuff going on in the park. We slept lightly. But it was a happy home for us. I could walk to work.
- Did you plant any of those yokes?
- I did .. in fact I planted that 'yoke' - it's a Silver Birch - around the side. See? ... Christ, it's grown. ... C'mon, let's keep moving.
- Do you not want to hang on here for a bit? Linger a bit on the aborescent beauty which you planted.
- No, let's keep moving. ... You can't live in the past.
- Ha! That's rich.
- It is - come on. ... I'd be more interested in what its roots are doing anyway these days.

We cut across the park, ducking through a gap in the iron railings, past the sparse and partly-burnt play park, past the boarded-up pavilion and its single but long-lingering

scrawl of loyalist graffiti - a fading echo from Belfast. We had taken a diagonal line across Union Park – emerging in the far corner onto the busy Saughton Road. It was me who took it up again.

### Training to teach: school semiotics and shovelling shit

- So, I had the experience of vocational education in Ballyfermot, being a mature student in university and a brief exposure to some radical voices on education in London and critical theorists of history, literature and culture whom I thought for a long time that I'd left behind, but here we are ... In a sense I was already working my apprenticeship as an adult educator, wasn't I?
- An invisible apprenticeship as you weren't aware of it yourself.
- Yeh, that's true.
- And then?
- And then I did the PGCE in Queen's.
- PGCE?
- The post-graduate certificate in education – that'd be equivalent to a H.Dip in Ireland. Teacher training.
- Ok.
- Only the one I did was for secondary school teaching.
- Ah ... why?
- Well ... I wanted to get into adult education somehow but wasn't quite sure how.
- Why?
- I suppose I felt that I'd be able to do something half-useful with returning students like myself. I saw myself working in a FE college or adult education space with mature students. Maybe there is something in that idea that mature students tend to gravitate to occupations which supported their own access routes to education (Fleming, et al.,

2010). And then, there's the play of the accidental, the small moments in a life that can define a career.

- What do you mean?

- When I was in London – that first year as a mature student, I bumped into my history lecturer on campus one day. He was, as Duffy might say, one of 'the good teachers' (1994). We paused to chat for a few minutes and he started probing me a bit about what I'd do when I graduated. I must have mentioned teaching. And he said that I should consider further education teaching – said his wife worked in FE and that he thought I'd like it. And that was it. Just a quick chat. No more than a couple of minutes. But ...

He was, as Duffy might say, one of 'the good teachers' (1994).

- But ... it got you thinking?

- It did ... funny how such an innocuous chat from over twenty years ago stays with me.

- And how career paths can be defined by such random moments of significance.

- Maybe. ... I'm not saying that I would have ended up doing something very different ... but these small moments are often significant all the same.

- So ... just to stop you slipping backwards in your chronology again ... so the PGCE in Belfast?

- Sorry ... the PGCE. I really was quite ambivalent about doing it. In fact I had applied, and was accepted twice before I finally did it.

- Twice?

- Yeh. The first time I did the masters – the second time Joseph was just born and I got the offer of work with the theatre for a year. So I did that. ... I might even have stayed if I could've seen some kind of future in it.

- But there wasn't?

- Well, maybe ... but one where it would be hard to feed a family on. I was offered a job running a small independent theatre company – which sounded great. But I

couldn't do it for the money they offered ... it was something like £13,000 for a very-full-time-with-lots-of-travelling job. It was a job for a young drama graduate.

– ... and even then ... it'd be a graduate who didn't need to worry too much about money.

- Yeh, true. ... So, feeling that I really needed to get some kind of career going, I accepted the PGCE the third time.

- And what was that like?

- ... to be honest, I found it very tough. ... For lots of reasons. For one, I was a mature student again and all that brings in terms of contracted income ... but this time, and for the first time, I was a parent to a very young child ... and that was tough. Balancing everything and being broke.

- So some things don't change.

- No ... I'm certainly retracing those steps again. But I suppose what was really hard for me, in terms of entering the world of secondary schools, came down to values and ethos ... I think, from the very start, I knew that there would be a degree of selling-out in terms of any space for radical thought or practice. I didn't see much scope for a revolutionary poetics of the semiotic in schools ... but maybe there was ... and I wonder how much I actually learned in that year about being or becoming a teacher. So much was instrumental ... lots and lots of conversations and fussing about creating lesson plans, units of work, schemes of work - I could see the point of doing these but something seemed to get lost in the process. It was like there was a conversation around all this that was missing – a critical conversation which would make this conformity more palatable.

- And what was it like stepping back into a school considering your own ignominious departure?

- Well, there's possibly a bit of myth-construction about my own departure from school – although I'd like to go back some day and see how it was recorded, officially ... But that's another story ... no, I found it tough walking back into a school, the smells, the sounds, the uniformity ... the need to control everything: voices, time, dress, structures, even smiles. .... We had two long placements: one in a grammar school,

the other in a secondary school. The north was the only part of the UK which still operated the 11-plus entry process at the time. The grammar school was supposed to be the easy placement – motivated and bright children. And I suppose, I'd have to admit, in some ways it was easier in terms of classroom dynamics and management. But it was a place very conscious of hierarchy and its own elitism. I think, without being that aware of it, my experience as a mature student and the ideas which I had been introduced to on education in London, put a texture on my thoughts and approach to the PGCE.

I remember the A level exam results for previous years being displayed on the staff room wall as a mark of pride, and possibly, to remind teachers of their focus. My abiding memory of that school though is the large staff room in which everyone had their place – including, of course, at the bottom, student teachers. There were a couple of us on placement from various places and we were told very clearly where we could sit in the staff room – around a tiny little table in the back corner of the staffroom. I was in my early thirties at this stage but I remember feeling a sense of familiarity of secondary school's authoritarian impulse. And maybe my reading of texts in their broadest sense as a humanities came into play after all ... there was a sense a semiotics of schools: a way in which we can read the play of language, power and identity through significations. And the staff room was a heavily signified space – a chair in a certain space at a certain table signified a position in the school hierarchy.

- The semiotics of schools ... ok ... what about your second placement?

- Well, this was supposed to be tougher – and it was hard at times. It was a large secondary school in west Belfast and I was given a lot of large second-year classes. ... In fact, I think I did really struggle at times. ... But there much more sense of community and support amongst the teachers – less pretence and lots of laughing and off-loading in a staff room where you could sit anywhere. ... Another strong memory is my first day heading in to the school. It was a fairly run-down, seventies building surrounded by a high fence.

I made my way to the staff room. It was empty save for one sole, tired-looking man in his sixties reading a paper. He looked up casually as I came in. 'Who are you?' I replied enthusiastically that I was the new student teacher. He sighed and replied



- Christ. You'd be better off shovelling shit than working at this game.

And then returned to his paper. I think that was the only conversation I had with him in my three months there.

- That was a nice start.

- Yeh, it unnerved me a bit I have to say ... but those two staff-room memories from my two placements are the things which stick out for me from that year.

- What about university-based learning? How did the enhance your growth as an educator?

- Well, we were only in the university for about a third of the time ... after the intellectual intensity and excitement of my degree and masters, it felt much tamer ... maybe what I was looking for was a more critical edge to the curriculum – it was more about training us to be teachers. And even then, I still wonder what the learning value of a course of such a short length can achieve. There is so much work on ourselves that we need to do – and this takes time for me anyway.

But I looked for opportunities to avoid instrumentalist ways of thinking and I remember getting a chance to stretch my critical legs in an essay on my experiences of the hidden curriculum in my placements (O'Neill, 2003).

- So, there are moments, for you at least, that the opening up of a theoretical space allows for a catharsis of sorts?

## Reproduction in education

- Yes, I really needed to write that essay. And I think in the often solitary physical and ideological work of educators, we often search for scholars, writers as intellectual and ideological allies. I was reacquainted with Illich whom I had crossed paths with briefly in my studies in London (Illich, 1971). And it was in that essay that I had to write that I first came across Kathleen Lynch - her discussion of the ways in which inequalities are produced on many levels in schools (Lynch, 1989). And the first time too, that I came

across, through her work, Bourdieu's notion of reproduction in education (Bourdieu, 2006).

This essay was also the first place, I think, where I started to blend some of my BA and MA knowledge about discourse and power with issues of market influences in education. I drew on allies such as Lawton and Cowen to help make those connections (2001). There was in that chaos and tough work in the everyday life of a teacher, again, a real consolation in theory. A space to make sense of the things which troubled me in schools.

- So what you are doing here is not new?

- I'm sure I keep saying that. ... I'm just going around in bigger circles – spiralling possibly.

- Out of control?

- Maybe.

- So there was learning going on in the PGCE?

- Of course. But, if I was honest, I think what it gave me was the official recognition which allowed me to teach. Anything I have really learned about teaching came afterwards ... when I started working in Scotland and, after that, Ireland. Yet, it certainly helped form my sense of the kind of educator I wanted to be – even if it was negatively defined. I knew I didn't want to be 'Mr O'Neill' for the rest of my occupational life. But maybe that longer road into education is more acknowledged now.

- How's that?

- That the road to becoming an educator is a career-long one. Other sectors in Ireland acknowledge that and it's the way the Teaching Council frame educator development (Dolan, 2012; The Teaching Council, 2011).

- Yeh ... but it's a job that keeps you on that long road – without work, you drift – can drift away ... you of all people must know that.

- I do. And you're right ...

And I drifted as we walked into thoughts of all the things which have challenged us in maintaining our way ... embracing change when we saw its potential, resisting change which we felt threatened our educational values ....



Found fragments from an anthology of tutor narratives #3

Challenges



... but it's hard to know how to fight that change ...

There's no point in me saying "I'm not doing it".

Nobody will gain from that.

I'm not big enough,

I don't mean enough

as one tutor

in one institution

to make a difference.

Teaching can be lonely

and

particularly lonely

for tutors who don't have a staffroom.

And if tutors are doing, as so many are,

really good work,

it can

largely be invisible outside the classroom –

there is very little opportunity for

validation.

So, despite knowing tutors for years and  
working there for years, I feel that there

isn't a sense

of tutors all working together.

Despite being there for a long time,

this does make me

feel less permanent and

in some way more

isolated.



But because tutors  
rarely share  
the same space  
or  
conversations  
it's sometimes hard to see this diversity in values and principles.

We generally come to know of each other as tutors  
through learners' stories of us.

On a more general level

I don't feel part of  
a wider community of tutors.

I have been out socially occasionally with tutors  
but not in any organised or regular way.

One reason that  
conversations with other tutors  
doesn't happen informally  
is that  
we are all in different centres –  
people don't get to see each other much.

I work pretty much alone.

There is a real contrast to the

isolated

nature of the way I work now

when I compare it to the way I worked

as part of really strong team on the homeless project years ago.

Tutors

though can often be made to feel,

intentionally or not,

somehow excluded

from the broad life or

community of an institution.

I remember one centre where

part-timers and other casual staff

were not invited

to the Christmas party.

At the point that I am in my career

and life,

I am happy to just turn up,  
teach and go,

but I feel that other tutors,  
particularly younger women, are troubled by the

isolated nature  
of their working environment.

I remember striking up a casual conversation  
with one, younger tutor by a photocopier one evening.

After a while she remarked that  
I was the first person that she had a conversation

with, in any depth, about tutoring -  
we ended up having a good chat and  
I asked her how she was getting on.

Conversations like this  
have happened to me  
more than a few times throughout my time as a tutor.

I don't think  
that it requires much to help tutors feel

more connected.

One of the tutors,

for example,

was accosted a while back

for parking in the car park down in the main ETB centre.

And I was down there not long ago and

when there was a coffee break I went into the staff room –

but I got this sense of ‘who’s she?’

There was a real sense of ownership of the staff room.

It was quite pointed.

Maybe when a new breed of tutors come through

they won’t settle for that.

But these

small things

are part of the environment

and can start to affect you after a while

There is a danger of tutors taking on  
the marginalised status of their learners

I worry about how long someone  
who is marginalised  
can keep reaching out to others  
who are marginalised.

I don't think tutors always verbalise it in this terms  
but when a few, or even a couple of, tutors  
come together  
who trust  
each other,  
you can really pick up on the  
anxieties and fear  
about their  
status.

I wonder then

is that why we

align ourselves  
with our learners so much  
as  
we are experiencing what they are  
to an extent?

*Precarious work*

I dread the summer.

So, at the moment, I'm more or less doing the hours that I want to.

However,  
there are times when it's

out of my control.

Last year,  
for example, some classes that I thought were going to happen

fell through at the last moment.

I have always being told that any hours I get are based on  
the ETB's ability to recruit students. However, over the  
previous six/seven years  
that didn't really happen.

So it was a bit of a surprise last year when it looked like it might –  
that was a bit worrying.

One of the other challenges for me as a tutor

is the more

general uncertainty

which comes with the tutor role.

It is difficult to get the balance right

in terms of

commitment to work with the VEC.

Because of the

uncertainty of work

it is important to keep other options open.

However, then there is  
the danger of being excluded  
from future opportunities

if a tutor says 'no' to any work.

One of the problems  
of being in this

uncertain contractual position

is the difficulty in saying “no” to work.

It took me a while  
to feel I could say “no”.

I think it's a  
bit of an Irish thing

as you feel like someone is  
doing you a favour by giving you a job.

I think I was probably



alone as a tutor  
in terms of saying “no” to work.

I would make it clear when I was available.

I think the other tutors felt,  
even if it didn’t suit,  
that it was very hard to say “no” to any offer of work.

There is a real fear with tutors  
that saying “no” will have an impact on work  
that you may, or may not, be offered in the future.

But even when you said “yes” to something, there was  
no guarantee that the work would be there.

I remember committing to a morning group  
that was supposed to start in September.  
I even gave up some other teaching to do that.

But when September came  
the course didn’t go ahead as  
there wasn’t enough numbers.

I only  
ever saw myself  
as a  
part-time  
temporary person  
and because of that

I kept my original vocational skills up-to-date:

I had to.

I remember telling the Centre Manager that

I felt so insecure in terms of work.

I know that since I've left, that

at least one or two tutors have left and  
gone back to work in their vocational area.

I remember afterwards

one of the permanent tutors

who had been there for years,  
made a comment in the staff room,

‘These part-timers are so unreliable’

Comments like this

really annoyed me and

showed how

little understanding the more

permanent staff had about

part-time tutor working situations.

All of the part-time tutors

had jobs for the summer again

this is something that

permanent staff found it hard to understand

At one stage,

I was working

up to about twenty hours

but nothing was permanent.

In my last year there

I was on several contracts. To be fair to the Centre Manager,  
that was the  
only way of keeping me there.

She tried her best to make it work for me  
in terms of offering me various hours and contracts.

But that was probably

the primary reason that I left –

I eventually knew that

they'd never be able to offer me anything full-time.

I was getting fed up with

this bitty-ness.

The centre manager was upset when I was leaving –

I don't think that they thought that I'd ever leave.

I was there for so long.

But I needed to have a career.

I couldn't see the work with the VEC as a career

because no matter what I committed to it,

what they offered me was

always dependent on what hours were available

for that particular term.

I was away from Ireland for so long

that I didn't know how the system worked.

I assumed

when I started that I'd start off

getting some hours and

build that up to a position where I'd eventually

get

a full-time or permanent post.

I assumed that it would happen.

I was there about two or three years before

Very gradually

I started to see how it worked.

And it's

precarious

enough

work

- you might be grand one year,

but you wouldn't know

if you'd have something else the next year.

There are people who've had

loads of hours

and then

very few the next year.

I've learned so much being a tutor.

But

a sense of security,

benefits

or

a potential career path

all these things are important too

just to continue existing as a tutor:

the things that are

taken for granted

in other jobs.

I do feel sometimes that I am

‘just a tutor’

in the sense that

I’m a little bit dispensable.

It may be that

society sees our roles as somehow trivial.

I don't like thinking about it,

but at least part of that

must come down to

contractual arrangements.

Although, I've been

working for years now as a tutor and

I get good feedback,

I'm still temporary and part-time.

I suppose if

I was to be honest,

if in ten years' time I was still

just a tutor,

then that would probably

piss me off a bit.

But we also need to be careful

and realise that



tutors are not a homogenous group  
there are many  
categories of vulnerability or marginalisation  
within the tutor body.

Some are quite middle-class  
and are happy with, but not economically reliant on,  
the supplementary income that their work generates.

There are others who rely on that money  
as core part of their income. But I think these latter  
may be  
fewer and fewer  
as the work is just  
so precarious.

And that's a real shame  
because it  
determines the nature of the tutor body.

Another

big challenge

for tutors in general is

the availability of work.

There is definitely

not much of a surety in the work.

It's only fairly recently that there seems to be

specific courses popping up for people

who work in adult education.

But then there may be a danger of a

saturated market

with all the

qualified tutors.

Are there

enough jobs for

all these newly qualified tutors

coming out year after year?

In my first couple of years  
when I tried to  
balance volunteering with my job,

I didn't regard tutoring as a job at all.

When I started doing group work at first  
it was nice, rather than essential,

to be getting some money for those hours.

But, as the work in the VEC increased,

there came a moment

when I had to sit down and

think hard about

whether I could seriously consider

tutoring as my main job.

Could I survive on my hours from the VEC?

This was a huge decision for me.

I was under no illusions about the nature of the work.

Nobody was telling me

that it going to be

stable work or

that there was

a clear career progression where you can

work towards something –

for tutors

there is nothing

to go towards

there is nowhere to go.

I am fairly philosophical about the  
relative

precariousness of a tutor's status.

It can be a pain because

no one is sure in June

if they'll have a job in September.

This contractual instability

may reflect

the profile of tutors working in the sector –

people who have, in some sense,

got themselves settled.

Although I don't like the phrase, there is some truth in

the cliché of

tutors being

'middle-aged and middle-class'.

The unsecure nature of the work

may create

barriers for people  
who may have  
the potential to be excellent tutors  
but can't afford to even consider it.

For many they just can't take the chance

it's not a real job.

Being a tutor is a very important part of my life.

In fact the  
two most important things in my life are  
my family  
and  
my work as a tutor.

However, I am aware that,  
despite my passion  
for what I do,

tutoring is not a viable career path for many.

For instance, I feel that my own son is very interested in learning  
would probably make a really good tutor  
but  
he would never consider it as  
it's not something that promises much in terms of  
career stability.

For younger people  
it doesn't really seem to exist out there  
as a career option.

This may put people off

I know that  
many of us worry  
at the start of each term about whether there will be  
enough hours  
to make a decent income.

However

I believe that any sense of  
contractual permanency in education,

as elsewhere,  
is fast becoming

a thing of the past.

Instead I envision a future where

employers contract employees

for the shortest possible time.

I am aware of the existence of

Contracts of Indefinite Duration

but I'm not sure

if they would have any relevance

for me as the programmes I work on run on

precarious funding streams.

I have a

zero-hour contract

with one of the VECs

I work with but I'm unsure what the implications are of that.

I know that a more

secure future

could be possible if I got a

Contract of Indefinite Duration.

However, I need to be more active



in working out what that entails

and if I'm entitled to it.

I don't think the ETB come offering this to you

you need to go after it yourself.

I now have a

Contract of Indefinite Duration.

I'd forgotten how insecure my contractual position

had made me feel back then.

Having this allows me, for the

first time as a tutor

to say 'no' to work

with a degree of comfort.

Another thing which

worries me

a bit is

the common-enough practice of

tutors being asked to deliver

subjects or modules

outside of their expertise.

This is often a

result of institutional mechanisms  
to do with spreading work amongst the tutor body  
in particular tutors with  
CIDs .

### *Validation*

I get

validation

as a tutor when I see

learners growing in confidence.

I think this

validation is necessary

but that doesn't mean that we need to hear it explicitly –

I certainly don't need to hear it

from learners

but it helps you

to know that you're doing something right

when you see people grow.

In terms of the VEC, I

think tutors are

valued within the adult education services.

For example, a coordinator or resource worker  
will make a point of letting you know if something is going well  
if they heard something good about what you're doing.

And that's important

because sometimes  
you don't realise that  
what you are doing is good or working yourself.

However,

I'm not so sure  
that tutors are regarded with much worth  
within the wider body of the institution.

In fact, I think we're pretty

invisible as tutors  
amongst the wider institution –

I don't think that any of

the powers-that-be  
would recognise me as a tutor.

If they were in the centre they may have walked by and  
would not have known whether I was a learner or a tutor.

I don't mind really

but

I wonder do they care.

A more general challenge is that

I feel that

the work of a tutor

really isn't

acknowledged

enough.

I feel that it's unlikely

that this

acknowledgement

will be expressed

in monetary terms,

but there are

other ways of

recognising the work.

For example, some form of communicated

acknowledgment

would be welcome – but this

isn't always forthcoming.

The validation

for me

came from the students

more than the VEC.

It would have been useful though to get, and give,

some kind of feedback about the programme –

the opportunity to do so hasn't arisen yet.

I think that

tutors

don't feel very valued

within the organisation.

It doesn't bother me

but even

the words

“unqualified” on your payslip

is, at best, insensitive.

There is  
encouragement and validation  
at more immediate level:

the coordinators that I’ve worked with have  
always been very supportive and  
learners, of course, give you

the encouragement  
that you need to keep going.

But it’s important that  
affirmation

comes from a more senior level.

There are times

when you think

‘Am I doing this right?’

So it’s good for someone to tell you that you are

– or not.

I got good feedback from the students I’ve worked with.

But, to be honest,

I don’t feel that I’m good enough

I feel that I need to improve.

Sometimes

if you don’t get that feedback

from anyone but your students

you’re never quite sure

if you are doing it right.

I do feel sometimes that I am

‘just a tutor’

I think a teacher has a status in society that tutors don't have.

I don't necessarily want that kind of status

but

a little bit more recognition

would be nice.

It may be that

society sees our roles as

somehow trivial.

I don't like thinking about it,

but at least part of that

must come down to

contractual arrangements.

Actually, that first year, I probably I saw

that value mostly

through one student;

Aidan.



The others would wreck my head for the most part

but Aidan,

who had so many things

going on in his life,

was so keen to learn.

And sometimes

that's all you need

to see the point of it all –

to see the positive impact

on just one learner.

I think that Aidan's experience

impacted me to the extent that

when I was asked to do it again this year that

I said 'yes'

despite part of

my brain saying 'no'

This age group are at such a disadvantage.

I wouldn't be someone

who would ever say anything is

hopeless

but I see so much

hopelessness

in their lives,

their families

and

in the whole country at the moment.

Aidan's experience, though,

offers

some sense of hope

through all this.

And when I was really  
struggling with being back  
along came Margaret.

Margaret had enrolled on the childcare course because  
she had to.

She needed the FETAC accreditation  
to continue to work at a crèche.

Margaret, who was in her late fifties or early sixties,

had left school early but, as she later confided,

had an almost

secret

but un-validated feeling that she was bright.

Nevertheless she came along to the VEC nervously with

modest expectations

of both herself and the course.

But within a month or so she had become

overwhelmed

both by

her engagement in the course content and

maybe more profoundly

that sense of

validation to herself that she was able for the work.

In fact, she was much more than just able –

Margaret excelled.

So, in the midst of my own struggles

and doubts

about returning to work,

Margaret hangs behind

after a class one night

- approaches me.

She tells me

with a

deep emotion

and sincerity

how much she is enjoying my class.

She tells me

she has been shocked

by the extent to which it has become important for her.

She tells me

that her husband has remarked on

a new spark in her eye.

And

she thanks me.

This moment

with Margaret

this brief moment of feedback was,

looking back now,

really important for me in

taking stock and confirming that this is why I do what I do -

this is why I'm here.

It really helped me get over my own anxieties about being back –

after that it was much easier.

As I say,

it's the little things

but

they're not little at all.

Sometimes we don't see the value

we're busy in the day-to-day of our work –

we can get that sense of

validation in our work

from coming together with others

and sharing practice and ideas.

The other day one of the tutors asked me

to have a look at a FETAC folder

to see what I thought.

There were a couple of things which I suggested

which she took on board.

But it was nice on one level to get the

validation

that my opinion mattered

and we both learned something from each other

in that exchange.

And it's very hard for anyone

to acknowledge weaknesses

or

mistakes when they are in

a precariously-paid position  
and hoping to get hours next year.

Sometimes it can be hard  
to get tutors to share things.

Initially I felt that it came from  
lack of opportunity –  
it's really hard for tutors to come together outside of contracted time –  
but  
then I came to feel that it had  
more to do with  
tutors' sense of insecurity.

There may be a link between that  
sense of tutor vulnerability  
and marginalisation  
and a reluctance to share.

For some, it may have a bit to do with  
maintaining their job security:

'if I'm looking for more hours, why would I share my work with somebody?'

So, in a way,

the system that tutors work in  
works against things like sharing and reflective practice.

We teach in such

isolation

that it's difficult for any of us to know

if we are doing it right.

My concern,

though, would be that if

tutors' good-will is exhausted  
on coming in for administration activities

then they wouldn't be so inclined to come in for the  
practice-based activities and workshops that really matter.



One thing, however, that

I feel strongly about is

that tutors need to be paid when they come in

for, especially mandatory, workshops or training.



Edinburgh (continued)



... and, of course, the big change for me was our move to Scotland.

You saw my drift and helped pull me away from erupting thoughts and back, again, onto our own track ...

- So tell me about Scotland then, how did you end up here?

#### The slow becoming of an adult educator

- Well, I was keen to work in further education ... so was keeping my eyes on jobs. Eilidh was keen to move to either Scotland or the south ... there was very little coming up in the south though. I looked and continued to look for years for opportunities for work but rarely saw anything ... I'm still looking. I still don't quite know how people get jobs in Ireland.

- 'The long interview' (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 127)?

- Yeh ... maybe ... very long. Anyway, out of the blue a couple of permanent, full-time jobs for communication and English lecturers were advertised on the TES website in a FE college in the north of Scotland. I hadn't even finished the PGCE when I applied, was called for interview and, subsequently, offered the job.

- I can't imagine that happening here ... you'd need to do your fifteen year part-time and temporary apprenticeship first ... on the off-chance that something would come up.

- Yeh ... when you live in the UK, it just seems that there are more opportunities for work. I suppose that's obvious really – but you kind of take it for granted when you're there.

- So ...?

- So we moved over to Scotland that summer and I started work in August.
- What was that like? Do you remember your first class?
- I do, it was a Monday morning 8.30 start in a satellite campus in an industrial estate which hosted all the technical and engineering courses ... it was a communication class with a large group of students on an access to an engineering apprenticeship course. I was anxious, but from the start it felt so different to the secondary school experiences from before the summer .. I felt much more at home.
- What kind of things were you teaching? What was your teaching life like?
- Well, I was part of a small, but really close, team of teachers, actually we were called 'lecturers', who taught across the full range of the college's vocational spectrum. There was a sense that English was the first love and loyalty for most of the staff - a lot of them, like me, were trained as secondary school teachers. Many taught the communications almost reluctantly. So there was a certain degree of coveting and protecting of the teaching on the Higher English course (this would be equivalent to the Leaving Cert or A Level). ... After a while I was invited to take on some of the English teaching ... in fact, I enjoyed both the communications and the English. They were very different but both curricula were flexible enough to allow me to do what I wanted to do. The communications curriculum wasn't over-assessed: across all levels there were three broad learning outcomes that needed to be assessed in some way but within that we had a bit of space, to an extent, to be creative ... to find your way as a teacher.
- And what kind of teacher did you become?
- Well, I embraced the more democratic space of adult learning ... a more equitable relationship between learners and educators – although we still had the power, the capital (Bourdieu, 2006). But still I felt I could do things that I wouldn't get away with in the secondary schools ...
- Like?
- Let's see ... ok ... so, for example, I was asked to take over a Higher English class in my first year – this was regarded as a privilege – they were the high prestige classes of the department. Most of the lecturers were, as I said, trained as secondary school

teachers and would have preferred to spend their time teaching English rather than communications ... Anyway, we had a degree of choice on what texts we could choose. Most went with fairly canonical stuff ... Burns, MacDiarmid, Muir, Morgan or maybe Dunn, Lochhead, Duffy. And I taught some myself ... in fact I came back again and again to Duffy in one way or another (Duffy, 1994). She's knocking about here somewhere – we may bump into her later.

So, taking a slight step away from canonical thinking, I decided to introduce them to something they wouldn't know – I hit them with Rita Ann Higgin's 'Some People' ... and they loved it (Higgins, 1988). Possibly because they'd never seen such language in a poem before ... but they got it. They saw in her poem the social critique ... for many it was a poetic voice articulating something close to their experiences.

- And you felt you wouldn't, or couldn't, do a poem like that in schools?

- Well not in the schools that I did my teacher training in ... in Belfast. But maybe I would now ... I am quite cautious really – a very slow learner.

- Yet this teacher you were slowly becoming felt like you had more control over the content?

- Well, yes and no.

- Go on ...

- Well, I think I did have more control over content but it wasn't a control that I held to myself ... I think I've always tried to be, from the beginning, a teacher that works with a group to negotiate, as much as I can, content. There were outcomes that had to be met ... evidence that needed to be produced. But we had a fair bit of autonomy what that learning looked like ...

So with the groups I had we would explore in the first sessions the possibilities of things we could do together ... we didn't always have a lot of time so I usually made some suggestions of how we might do things. And generally it worked out ok.

- But you must have preferences, things you were drawn to?

- I did I suppose ... and my university experiences and learning influenced me ... I still held with me the potential of reflective writing and journals for learning and it was

something I worked on with various groups over the years ... in fact, I often modelled it to give learners a sense of what they could do. After a few years, I think it was much later actually, I started to use wikis and blogs to write reviews and reflections on classes (O'Neill, 2008-2009). They became the story of that class ... in fact when I described them to learners I usually framed that like that ... I'd say that the blog was like the story of the class.

- And why did you start doing that?

- Well, I felt that the learners had so much coming at them from their various modules ... and even in my class, so many outcomes ... I felt there was so much to process, so much to get a handle on that they, and I too, needed something to help make all that chaos of learning more coherent. It was, in some sense, intuitive, although I know it was effective as a learning tool from my time with Jessica in Queen's. And I did pick up on the importance of reflective and recursive in learning from my PGCE. The form of that was something I worked on as an educator ... how would that look. I felt, in the first instance, that I needed to author the learning ... it wasn't their reflections at first, but mine on the class, but I think there was too much content for them to get to a space above it all to make those connections ...

- This sounds like a kind of narrative pedagogy?

- Yeh I suppose it is but not exclusively – I mean first and foremost I suppose it's reflective (Schön, 2003; Moon, 2004)... it wasn't until so much later that I started to become more explicitly aware about the role of a more narrative reflectivity in learning (Bruner, 1991; Mezirow, 1997; Alheit, 2002; Carlile & Jordan, 2007; Clark & Rossiter, 2008).

- So what's the difference between being reflective and being narratively reflective?

- Maybe nothing because when we reflect we are reflecting on experiences and acts of reflection on experience will work by creating some kind of narrative of that experience. But what I mean by saying 'narratively reflective' is, I suppose, a bit more stress on the aesthetic forms of that reflectivity – an aesthetic reflectivity. Maybe just highlighting the narrative play in reflection. Clark and Rossiter make this point about narrative in the reflective act



Every day we are bombarded by a dizzying variety of experiences and we make sense of those by storying them, by constructing narratives that make things cohere. Coherence creates sense out of chaos by establishing connections between and among these experiences.

(2008, p. 62)

- Yes .. I suppose narratives do make things cohere ...
- And, as I say, how else can we engage in reflective practice if not narratively – it's back to Yeats' dancer and the dance again (Yeats, 1991).

And it wasn't just about making narratives out of the learning. When you work in an adult education space you begin to realise, or you should, that the learners bring with them such a richness and diversity in life experiences (Knowles, 1984; Dewey, 1997) which, if acknowledged as such, can become a wonderful source for learner narratives – the first space in learners acknowledging their life narrative as a source of knowledge. The biographic potential in learning as Alheit might put it (2009).

- And Brookfield and Mezirow (Brookfield, 1998; Mezirow, 1998) take this a step further and see in the biographical a potential for a more radical educational transformation.
- Yeh. But I think at that stage, in Scotland, these ideas, these principles were more felt than visible to me – then.
- So you were developing into this teaching subject that valued narratives, learner experience and ...?
- And, maybe the thing we haven't talked about, creating dialogic spaces for learning ... again working, to an extent intuitively, but I think that at the back of my practice was my readings into Freire (1996) in London and the resonances and implications of Bakhtin (1981) and Kristeva's (1986a) notions of dialogics was at play at some level too. ... And this comes back a bit to the semiotics of schools again, I remember this real struggle with an invisible other in creating dialogic spaces, literally, in classes.

- Ok, sounds interesting ... go on .. reminds me of Freire's reference to educators as 'cultural workers' (Freire, 2005).

- Yeh ... we are I suppose. And it allows us to see how various practices are enacted in the cultures of places. So, for example, in both of the big colleges that I spent most of my time with in Scotland I'd usually go into a class that had the desk in rows. This was common-place. So myself and the students would spend the first five minutes or so

getting them into more appropriate configurations – U-shaped usually as we often used the whiteboard. But they'd always return to the rows by the next time we came back – almost always.

'Oh, you're the guy who keeps moving the desks around'

- So it was this invisible other, your teaching-subject nemesis, that tried to usurp dialogic environments?

- Yeh ... it happened a lot. And then you get this name – people say 'Oh, you're the guy who keeps moving the desks around'. As if the default position was this transmissive environment.

- And wasn't it?

- Well, yeh, I suppose it was in large part – but by no means with everyone. And, in fact, it often depended on subject or department identities – for example Social Care class rooms never had desks in rows whereas Business and Tourism classes invariably did.

- It says something about the kind of learning going on in those spaces, doesn't it?

- Well, it suggests something alright.

- And isn't part of that focus on a dialogic pedagogy about the importance of learning relationships ... and building relationships built on trust and care which are at the core a teacher's work (Noddings, 1996; Avis & Bathmaker, 2004; Coffield, 2009)? And, what's more, an awareness of the power dynamics at play in learner-teacher relationships (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996)?

- Yeh, you're right, this attendance to the power-laden and affective aspects of learning is possibly something I focus on a lot – getting everyone to a place where they feel they can expose themselves to the sometimes-uncomfortable possibilities of learning.
- The uncomfortable-possibilities of learning?
- Well, I suppose what I mean by that is that learning that shifts us, as all learning should do, can be uncomfortable, we can feel vulnerable ... and it's hard to embrace that in a learning space that isn't sensitive to that affective dynamic.
- So how do you attend to that?
- Well, and I mentioned this early in our walk in Belfast, I think the way I do that is just by creating opportunities to listen to learners – collectively or individually. Really listen. Listening to the said and un-said.
- So you were becoming, despite these small struggles over space, the kind of teaching subject that felt more authentic as the educator you aspired to be?
- I think so ... I was on that journey, and I'm still on it of course, but, yes, I the work I was doing felt more like education to me than whatever was going on in secondary schools ... not that it has been an easy path ... the struggles over desks was microscopic compared to bigger struggles going on institutionally and nationally. And it wasn't always easy for me, or anyone, to be or become the kind of teacher we felt we wanted to be ... our development was, and is, not something exclusively individual or private - it also takes place within a communal and wider context ... and is subject to a different gaze than our own self-criticality.

### Growing under the shadow of managerialism

- Well, ok then, now that you mention that ... if we focus then on your development – this is what this is about after all – can you focus a bit on that, tell us a bit about that and what facilitated, or not, your growth as an educator?
- Well, as I said, the PGCE gave me the opportunity, the accreditation to teach in FE – and it was useful in terms of some of the technical aspects around lesson and unit

planning ... I had the vocabulary around lesson plans, units of work, schemes of work ... and had developed some useful resources for all that. In fact this kind of instrumental knowledge was really valued in the college. But I had a lot to learn in terms of teaching ... and that happened as I went ... I don't know how it could happen any other way. ...

The college I was in Scotland first was renowned for its tough management style and audit culture – of course I didn't know that when I applied – although, in hindsight, maybe I should have suspected something considering the disproportionate amount of time spent at the interview talking about stress and the management style of the principal. There was almost this leadership cult around this particular principal which rippled out and down from the centre ... there were lots of conversations which started with 'The principal likes ...' or 'The principal doesn't like ...'.

- So what was it like working in a place with that type of management style?

- Well, there was a lot of stress – lots of people were off sick. In fact, I left that college in the end after a stand-off because of a protracted and, I have to say, exhausting struggle with Human Resources on the deeply profound issue of a cardigan.

- A cardigan?

- Well it's a long story which one colleague and friend dubbed 'cardi-gate'. Without getting into it too much, I was approached by a member of management who claimed that I was the kind of person that they'd like to promote, but that, as the college operated a business-like culture, they'd like to see me tighten up a bit on my dress code. This took me aback a bit. I remember standing in the manager's office going through every item of clothing that I wore to check it's appropriateness. Slightly panicking at this stage herself she finally settled on my cardigan as the offending article as it may have, she argued, seemed a bit too casual for the professional ethos of the college.

- Seems a bit bizarre.

- Very. Of course, it was never just about a cardigan. It was all about control. I've never worked anywhere in education so obsessed with control. And this came from the very top and was passed along through, often terrified managers, to teaching staff.

- What happened?

- Well, we were thinking of moving to Edinburgh anyway, but it certainly accelerated my departure. In the end I was escorted off the premises by a very embarrassed manager just after I handed in my notice – they wouldn't let me work my notice. There was a bit of an uproar from colleagues after I left. Management responded with a compulsory CPD workshop called 'Dressing for Work' which was met with derision.
- That's your semiotics at play again. .... Sounds like a difficult place to work – very combative.
- It was. But like lots of combative situations, there was a strong sense of collegiality amongst the teaching staff. ... In terms of my own development, I learned a lot from my peers ... it became clear to me, very early on, that there were two types of staff development: the institutional, outward-facing development and then the informal, peer-based learning which happened amongst ourselves. The sharing, the discussions we had about what we did – what worked, what didn't. I was always hungry for these types of encounter. I got jaded very quickly with the other.
- Why?
- Well, very quickly I came to question how authentic it was as a form of development.
- Can you give some examples?
- I remember very soon after I started, I had to do an SQA-accredited assessment and moderation module. This was delivered by a small two-person staff-development team. This could have been a useful learning experience – instead we were rushed through various packs to 'get it out of the way'. But the thing that I remember most from that is a conversation I had with one of the facilitators. They had been advocating early summative assessment in module delivery. I questioned this and timidly suggested that maybe the students needed to learn something first. The facilitator responded by saying that the best thing was to assess first and then, if there was time, do the interesting stuff – like learning.
- Was this typical?
- Well, there was huge pressure on pass rates – there was a whole series of measurements: student retention rates at different stages, student completion and pass

rates. And all of these came up in our annual reviews. Again, it was the fixation there on control – control of educators, control of all educational data.

- Annual reviews?

- Yeh ... this was the fairly brutal measurement of your worth to the organisation. At your annual review you would be placed on a scale of one to four – one being unsatisfactory and four being excellent. Or maybe it was the other way around – you get the idea anyway.

- And this was determined by pass and retention rates?

- In part ... But also by unannounced classroom observations by an internal QA team. They were big into their QA. Again, they would observe your lesson and place you on the same scale. Those figures would feed back into your annual review. Of course, all of this was sold as part of enhancing our development and improving the quality of provision.

- And did it?

- I doubt it. I did see it nearly destroy people with stress. ... Maybe it did actually destroy some ...

- Do you believe that ... really?

- I do. And, for once, I'm not talking metaphorically ...

We lapsed into our own separate silences for a moment – muted momentarily by our dawning awareness, and surprise, of snow falling faintly ... faintly falling (Joyce, 1992a).

- But that was a painful time and I don't want to linger there too much right now. Not yet anyway. ... But I do think about the consolation and power when we stumble across research which supports educators and wonder why more people weren't pointing to people like Avis (2005) and Coffield (2009; 2012) who over the years have questioned the whole notion of graded observations as a basis for educator development and quality improvement.

- But you know as well as anyone that FE teachers don't get that opportunity to engage with research ... or the kind of research that speaks to their experiences anyway.
- Yeh, I know and I might come back to my efforts to try to open those kind of spaces ... But even without the knowledge of the existence of these academic allies at the time I quickly lost any confidence in the process of observations.
- Why?
- Well, I suppose because I found out fairly quickly that they weren't really educationalists – they were bureaucrats. It was all about taking measurements. So, for example, this QA guy popped up, unannounced as they did, for my lesson - sat through an hour in which I worked with a group on the purpose and practice of learning journals. There was a box in his form for 'enhancing reflective learning' – he had marked me down for that. We talked about it after. He said that I should think of introducing students to reflective learning. I asked him if he saw any connection between journals and reflective learning ... he hadn't heard of journals in learning contexts before – for him reflective learning was something measured on a tabulated proforma ... But, in fairness to him, seemed interested in what I was trying to do. But I suppose my point is that the college were assessing staff on aspects of practice and professional learning that they had very little knowledge of themselves.

What I didn't know then, particularly, in my early years of working was that there was stirrings of dissent against this audit and managerialist culture which was taking over FE.

- For instance?
- Well, Keep & Mayhew (1988) who critiqued the policy formations which linked educational assessments with economic aims. And Ball (2003) who warns against quantitative-obsessed educational policy reforms which create educationally distorted cultures and teachers as 'terroised' subjects (216).

And then there's Avis (2005) who cautions against 'progressive possibilities' of professional 'learning communities that link practitioners to wider social movements' (p. 218) unless such work is accompanied by an active, and activist, critique of neo-liberal discursive, and structural, framing of education.

And Coffield, et al. (2007) who criticise the distorting impact of top-down, one-way policy processes that pulls teaching staff into more bureaucratic work and fails to acknowledge the crucial, and core, role of tutor-learner relationships at the heart of further education (p. 736). James and Biesta (2007) also refer to the distorting impact of managerialism (p. 134) which shouldn't, they argue, be confused with management or leadership. They make the important point that managerialism distrusts any sense of ambiguity and works to control and eradicate any sense of organisational ambiguity (p. 134)

And then there is Jephcote, et al. (2008) who like Coffield, stress the primacy of learner relationship-building at the core of FE teachers' work and the 'creative tensions' (p. 163) that educators in FE work in between policy demands and educational value. And, what is interesting for us, also, is how important narrative was for the educators in their study in building a teacher identity:

The ways in which they saw and understood themselves was infused with stories about their own interactions with other teachers and their learners

(Jephcote, et al., 2008, p. 166).

- Ok, I get the picture ...
- Hold on there's more where that came from ... Tedder & Lawy (2009) refer to a 'paradigm shift' in UK practitioner education which is 'evident in profound changes in the control and regulation of teacher training for the further education sector' (p. 414). Their work is quite interesting for what we do as well because they trace the development of FE teacher training and accreditation in the UK – although it starts a bit earlier in the UK. But maybe not as far back as you might imagine considering the long history of FE in the UK – it wasn't until 1999 that the the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) was given the task to set the standard and design principles and markers for initial FE teacher training (p. 414). But again, as Coffield as pointed out elsewhere (Coffield, 2009), they make the point about policy, and the accompanying practice-distorting, obsession, with 'excellence' (p. 414).



Scales, et al., 2011, writing a bit later, and in the context of professional development in Lifelong Learning educators, are also highly critical of managerialist policy and practice which, they argue, positions educational activity as something that can be compared and, more worryingly managed and controlled, as an industrial process:

at its [managerialism] heart is a rejection of the notion of professionalism and it is structured by the belief that organizations - whether they be colleges, supermarkets or car manufacturers - have more similarities than they have differences and that their performance can be optimized by the application of generic management theory and skills and audit culture

(p. 7).

And out of such re-imaginings of education is the notion of 'products' that can be 'delivered' and checked and verified against an objective list of quality criteria (pp. 6-7).

Avis and Bathmaker, who in 2004, and in work with with FE teachers which stretches right up to now, worry about the neoliberal focus on individualisation in terms of educator development and their own self-care

Whilst valuing the individual learner they need to be able to locate both themselves and the learner in the wider structural context. By recognising such a context they will be able to ameliorate some of the costs of the emotional labour in which they are involved

(p. 309).

- And you weren't aware of any of this at the time?

- Well, I wasn't aware of this literature, but I was certainly aware of the themes ... I was working and living through them. I just didn't have the space, the clearings, for any of this to become visible.

Mind you, I should have been able to make the connection to what Lawton & Cowen were saying about the impact of markets on schools (2001). But then, that's the problem with teaching – once you are in it, you are immersed in a dense linearity of dealing with the now. There is very little time or energy to pause to explore new ideas or even to reflect on the relevancy of knowledge that you once had but has been pushed below the surface by the chaotic present.

- Until now maybe ... But this QA guy and his clumsy measurements of quality – he was part of this bigger picture of course.

- Absolutely ... most of the internal QA systems in colleges were modelled on the external monitoring systems of the inspectorate – in Scotland it was called the HMIe. But it was all part of this bigger notion, imported from industry, of having a rigid QA system to ensure a high quality, indeed an excellent, product.

- Ah, excellence ... such a loaded word.

- 'Excellence' became almost fetishised in educational policy discourse. Tedder and Lawly (2009) and Coffield (2009) all nod to the distortion to practice caused by policy and institutional fixations and pursuits for mythical 'excellence' in practice. Coffield, in fact, asks jokingly, as he traces the discursive shifts from 'good', 'best' to 'excellent' practice, what comes next and, ironically, posits 'perfect practice'.

And, what's more, 'excellence' was enshrined in the very name of the major curricular development in Scotland which had an impact on all sectors in education – *The Curriculum for Excellence* (Education Scotland, 2015)

- So it was hard to avoid that discourse ...

- It was ... and, what's more, it wasn't just an education discourse, it part of a wider discourse that linked education and FE, in particular, to economic growth – that sense that a high quality education system will turn the economy around – will give employers the kind of employees they need.

- Sounds familiar ..

- It does doesn't it? But I think it's just part of a wider discussion about neoliberalism and education that's going on everywhere (Colley, et al., 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Jephcote, et al., 2008; Grummell, 2014) – we just don't often get the opportunity to make the connections.

We came out of the park onto the busy Saughton Road north.

- Which way?
- Up here, under the bridges.

About two hundred yards ahead the road passed under a railway and tram bridge. As we approached a tram passed over.

- They're new.
- Weren't here when you were?
- No. They would have been handy.

### Cultures of performativity

As we emerged from the smells and sounds which seem universal to urban underpasses, we came quickly to another crossroads. You peered, almost longingly, to the east, your eyes following the new tram lines into town and the cultured landscape that your gaze left behind up Corstorphine Hill.

But now, you looked around inquiringly. Trying to remember the route which seemed uncomplicated enough when we looked down on it from the hill.

- So where are we now?
- Saughton.
- Ok.

The urban landscape had now evolved into a mix of well-kept industrial units to our right and jaded council flats to our left.

- Which way then?
- This way.

We turned right, following the train and tram lines out of the city and deeper into the industrial estate beyond.

- So, if we could just step back a bit. We've talked about your growth as an educator through to your first job in Scotland. And what I find interesting is how educator growth or development happens in this managerialist culture that you describe. You've just thrown a whole list of names at me – can we unpack a bit what these folk were saying?

- Sure. Maybe someone like Ball (2003) would be a good place to start?

- Why's that then?

- Well, when I started to reflect critically on the hard time I had in FE in Scotland, mostly in the college up north it has to be said, I was drawn to articles like his 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity' (2003).

- Sounds good.

- Yeh. And I think it was just that, how it sounded, with drew me to it first. It seemed, even in that short title, to get to the heart of a lot of the struggle that I witnessed in FE in Scotland and, which I'm afraid, can see in places in Ireland now.

- So what was his argument?

- Well, essentially, he was arguing that the marketisation of education had brought with it an 'epidemic of policy reform' (2003, p. 216) which created suffocating hierarchical and panoptical systems of performative technologies.

- Sounds like a nod to Foucault.

- Well, yes, and to Lyotard as well. In particular, Ball gets this notion of the 'terrors of performativity' from Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* (1991).

- That's interesting, considering your background, as Lyotard writes about culture and literature.

- Yes, and I suppose I was drawn to Ball's piece, and work like his, which make those connections across disciplines.

But what interested me about Ball here, how it resonated for me, was how he theorised the struggle that I lived and witnessed. And how this powerful audit culture, this performativity, was having a devastating impact on the values and identity of educators. In fact, he argues that this culture creates, as he says, 'new kinds of teacher subjects' (p. 217). So we start to imagine ourselves, as educators, differently – develop distorted visions of ourselves and our roles.

- The cracked looking-glass of the educator servant (Joyce, 1968)?

- Maybe. Maybe all this .. this fractured reflection on individual and collective educator identities is a result of that struggle.

- What do you mean?

- Well, I think Joyce was playing with Proust's sense that the mirror, the novel, can unproblematically, represent a life, our experiences. He takes Proust's mirror and creates fractures, cracks – distorts the image. And maybe that's what I'm doing here too in a sense – fracturing educator experience. But not just for the sake of it. I think the cracks in Joyce's mirror come from his own struggles with representation and

authenticity. And the cracks in our mirrors come from a struggle to represent our authentic selves as educators in a culture of performativity which is only interested in projections of unproblematic and compliant educator realities which serve that project.

- Can you untangle this notion of 'performativity' a bit?

- Yeh. In fact, Ball provides a fairly succinct sense of what he means by this which I'd go along with:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)

(Ball, 2003, p. 214).

- Ok. So, for you one of the rewards was an offer of promotion?

- Yeh. But, when I resisted, they went for the sanction and brought down the full weight of Human Resources on me. And it seems that Human Resources have taken on a very powerful role in this culture and technology of performativity. I've seen it – in Scotland, Ireland and across educational sectors - and Ball acknowledges it too (p. 218).

- So, what's the consequence of this?

- Well, I think there is a huge price to pay. Values and principles and, as Ball himself argues, 'the inner life' or soul of educators are at risk from the performative exercises of neo-liberalism:

The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space for an autonomous or collective ethical self. These technologies have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner-life of the teacher (226)

- And this inner-life, that's the soul which is being threatened ... is it?
- Yes, I think it is, but more than that as well. This threat to the 'inner-life' also relates to the affective dimensions of teaching. So that the ways that educators care for their students and themselves (Noddings, 1996; Palmer, 2007) can be deprioritized in cultures of performativity which reduce educators, learners and education itself to manageable data for performance reviews at various levels.

And, it's not just Ball, of course. James and Biesta (2007) in their study of Further Education learning cultures trace the distorting impact of managerialism which, they argue, should not be confused with management or leadership. They make that link between macro-policy projects and micro-management that creates this thing called 'managerialism' which 'is underpinned by an ideology which assumes that all aspects of organisational life can and should be controlled' (134).

- And this was obvious to you in Scotland?
- Absolutely – at lots of levels. And not just Scotland, I could see this tight control at work in Ireland when I came back too.
- In the same ways?
- Well, as I worked in more adult education environments, albeit within ETBs, this control was less about dress-codes, but came up in the instrumentality of curricular control – particularly around FETAC/QQI. And as in Scotland, there were, what Jephcote et al. (2008) saw as the 'creative tensions' for practitioners in balancing policy demands with educational objectives. But, as Coffield et al., argued the relationship between policy and practice, in FE, is not a dialogic one: policy has an impact on practice; but there is very little sense of practice impacting on policy (Coffield, et al., 2007).
- So, the impact of managerialism, as you saw it, was on a policy level?
- Yes, no. I mean, it has an impact on policy. But also a very real impact on, going back to Ball, educator's souls and their very sense of what they did – who they were as educators. Ball, elsewhere, writes about the 'barbarism' of new policy reforms destroying educator's sense of authenticity (Ball, 2005). So, its impact is very much on us – on our very bodies. Remember what I was saying about the aftermath of

‘cardigate’ when I left that college in the north of Scotland? Management introduced a compulsory CPD workshop on ‘Dressing for Work’.

- But you said it was met with derision.
- Yeh. People had to go though. Or felt they had to. Again there was a strong sense of sanction which compelled staff there. But they went and resisted within the safer confines of the workshop space – reflected their dissent inwards and horizontally amongst themselves and, at, some poor unfortunate external facilitator brought in to deliver the sessions. I suspect she got a hard time from staff who, for many, felt they had nowhere to go with their resistance to management’s desire to control, in very limiting ways, the clothes they wore, which, I learned later, were deeply gendered and conservative. Hey and Bradford (2004) claim that audit cultures and managerialism amount to ‘practice written on bodies’ (2004, p. 693). That’s exactly what was going on there.
- Written on bodies. That’s very reminiscent of the *l’écriture féminine* work of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray which we talked about earlier.
- Yes. And Hey and Bradford do adopt a poststructuralist epistemology and analysis in their examination of managerialism.

But I also like what Avis and Bathmaker have to say about managerialism and audit culture and its impact on the values and emotional life of the educator. They have argued that developing a Freirean politics of hope and, more widely, a sensibility of critical pedagogy, is essential in resisting the decontextualised and over-individualised aspirations of education which are promoted by neo-liberal practices such as managerialism (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004).

- Everything is connected.
- But someone needs to make the connections visible. We need to make them visible.
- Yeh ... I think that’s a large part of what we are at there. And I often think that this is where the substance, if there is any, in my own thinking ... seeing the connections between things. So rather than having a narrow, deep knowledge base, my knowledge is more about connections (Dewey, 1915; Irigaray, 1985; Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Maybe



it's part, or a symptom, of a fairly nomadic adult like. It's only relatively recently that I've allowed roots to grow under me.

- And roots can go in all kinds of directions, can't they? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) ... But I think that type of knowledge is quite common for adult educators ... people who have often had more circuitous paths into education and teaching than their counterparts, traditionally anyway, in the compulsory sector.

We had been walking for some time westward - parallel to the new tram lines which shuttled tourists and commuters from the city centre to and from the airport. We turned left up Bankhead Drive. Almost immediately we came across an entrance which announced in shiny new letters 'Edinburgh College'.

- So, this is where I worked.

- Right. Edinburgh College.

- Well, it was called Stevenson College then. Even college names are dispensable in the power plays of educational managerialism. There was a merger of the three big colleges in Edinburgh just after I left into a very big one.

- Why?

- The same story as everywhere: efficiency, rationalisation, streamlining. You know, all the words that meant that lots of people lost their jobs or were forced into positions they didn't want. There was a lot of resistance, but it went ahead all the same in the end.

- So was it like the college in the north?

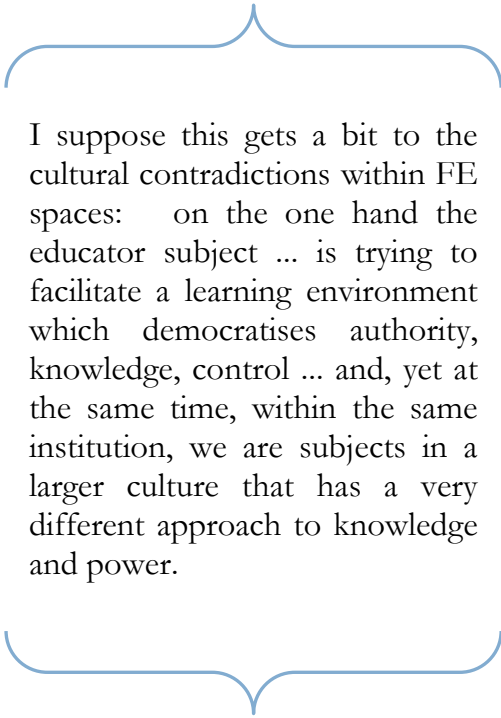
- Nowhere near as bad when I was there – although there were managerial elements which aspired to that type of culture. But the union was quite strong and active here and challenged management regularly. The local union presence up north was very weak. ...

- So, you see a link here between the cultures that unions fight for and professional development?

- I hadn't ever really thought about it like that. But, yeh, maybe. For me anyway, after my experiences in the northern college, Edinburgh had a culture where you could relax a bit more as an educator ... explore the possibilities of your own practice.

- What were you teaching?

- Again, English and communications mostly – but across such a wide vocational and curricular context. Some of the courses were access to HE and operated at first, or even second, year degree level. Or we could be working with young adults on early-



I suppose this gets a bit to the cultural contradictions within FE spaces: on the one hand the educator subject ... is trying to facilitate a learning environment which democratises authority, knowledge, control ... and, yet at the same time, within the same institution, we are subjects in a larger culture that has a very different approach to knowledge and power.

school leaver programmes – the kind of programmes that are delivered by YouthReach in Ireland. Or then there were such a range of vocational programmes where we'd deliver the communications – business, computing, social care, health care, media, hair and beauty ... whatever the college was offering.

- That's a wide range of areas alright.

- It is and I think that this is part of the difference which marks out the knowledge base of a lot of adult educators – especially those working across vocational areas. This

sense of a generalist knowledge base. We never became experts in business or social care or hair and beauty, but we became quite good at working out what specific vocational or academic areas needs were.

- How?

- Well, the obvious way really ... through dialogue. And for me, again, this importance about listening really acutely ... listening to students talk about challenges and expectations in developing a relevant programme for them.

- So, it's never the same is it with groups? You need to reinvent each course based on the new group in front of you?
- Yeh. Well, no, not quite. It gets easier as you develop resources and knowledge of what works and doesn't. But the way you bring all that together is different with each group – each group has its own story which we work out together.
- So educator knowledge is very contextualised?
- Yes, contextual and very local knowledge (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Coffield, 2009; Scales, et al., 2011).
- And it's hard for instrumentality that operates on a national level to account for the local.
- It is if they want a high measure of control. And I suppose this gets a bit to the cultural contradictions within FE spaces: on the one hand the educator subject – me, you, - is trying to facilitate a learning environment which democratises authority, knowledge, control ... and, yet at the same time, within the same institution, we are subjects in a larger culture that has a very different approach to knowledge and power. It's like what Murray says ....
- What's that?
- What happens in the classroom, stays in the classroom (Murray, 2013).
- I don't see the link ...
- Well, I suppose that what Murray discusses is the canvass of education experience – how an authentic adult education class can be truly transformative. But the challenge is to nurture and sustain that change outside the space of the class. And, in a similar way, we work to create democratic and transformative space for growth for our students – but we are often doing that in organisational cultures that don't buy into that kind of democratic practice.
- Yeh ... and those who advocate for spaces for development spaces for educators, do point out some of the tensions between these educational aspirations and institutional cultures. Wenger (2000), advocating for social learning systems, points out that embracing such cultures also means letting go of control too ... something that

individuals or even communities of practice might manage, but can be more difficult for institutions and organisations to achieve:

Organizations can take part in them [social learning systems]; they can foster them; they can leverage them; but they cannot fully own or control them. ... This paradox could be bad news because the organizational requirements of social learning systems often run counter to traditional management practices (p. 243).

And nurturing cultures of learning, or systems thinking - as Senge (2006, p. 67) might put it - requires dissolution of the Other in organisations in the sense that it holds the blame for what isn't working. And it is Senge's system thinking which is one of the five disciplines required for learning organisations which really goes against, as Scales et al., point out the 'silo-thinking' and silo processes of educational managerialism (p. 13).

And, in continuing with this educator growth thread, Penlington (2008) also stresses the importance of institutional cultures in educator development. She refers to the 'importance of embracing debate and dissonance as crucial aspects for teacher learning' (p. 1314). So, practical reasoning dialogues, as she frames them, need to operate in a professional learning culture which should challenge assumptions and embrace dissonance. Part of the responsibility, then, of those involved and responsible for the development of effective professional learning is to support the growth and sustainability of an institutional culture which encourages and sustains such dialogues.

Vescio et al. (2008) provided a literature review of the research on effectiveness and impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)<sup>1</sup> on teaching practice and, ultimately, the enhancement of learning. Although the research is not extensive, what does exist suggests that effective PLCs have a beneficial effect on teaching culture and learner achievement. However, there are a number of conditions that need to be made

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<sup>1</sup> Vescio et al.'s definition of Professional Learning Community identifies five characteristic of any professional, evidence-based, dialogue forum which shares the following five characteristics: 1. shared values and norms; 2. clear and consistent focus on student learning; 3. reflective dialogue; 4. 'deprivatizing practice to make teaching public'; 5. a clear focus on collaboration.

for a PLC to be effective: collaboration; focus on the student learning; teacher authority; and continuous teacher learning. PLCs allow for a shift away from the isolationist culture of teaching that pervades the profession and opens up the possibility for change. What is clear, according to the research, is that authentic and ongoing professional dialogue is not quick-fix solution to poor achievement statistics. Furthermore such professional dialogue forums need to be part of a wider culture of openness and trust – if this institutional context does not exist, dialogues, if they happen at all, will not be sustainable.

But, I just want to respond to that point about the disconnect between educator practice and organisation practice - isn't part of the answer then, obviously, to take that practice out of the classroom ... to start working that practice with peers and in organisations?

- It does seem obvious doesn't it? And in fact before I started working in Edinburgh, I did make some attempts to get something approaching a dialogic forum going for teaching staff in another college where I was working.

- And what happened with that?

- Not much really. It's so hard to get things moving when you are very marginal in an organisation. I was on a temporary contract in that college although I was working there for a couple of years with the usual anxious break at summer. But I approached my manager there about the possibility of setting up an occasional discussion group for teaching staff. I even contacted academic staff at the University of Strathclyde to get some ideas about ideas for journals and research that would be useful resources for a discussion group (O'Neill, 2006).

- And?

- Well, my manager made all the right noises for the duration of that conversation but neither he nor the college had the will or drive to get behind something like that. I think it was hard for them to see any immediate and measurable outcomes – that's the way they thought. No space for slow knowledge there (O'Neill, M. et al., 2014).

- So nothing came of that?

- No, nothing. He was a nice guy and had a good soul in many ways. He talked a pretty ethical and democratic educational policy but I think he struggled to practice it. But he's not alone in that.

- Ok. So you made this false start at trying to get some kind of critical and dialogic space going. So was it in Edinburgh then that you started to have more luck in getting involved in something ... something developmental, transformative outside the class?

### Beating new paths – in search of spaces to grow

- Yes. I think it was there that I really started to engage with peers more actively in terms of development. But I went walking a couple of paths with that. I started to become more involved and engaged in union conversations about educator rights and conditions as much as exploring professional development pathways. I suppose that I've always seen the connection between the two.

- So professional development isn't just about knowledge and skills?

- No, of course not, more fundamental to that is the conditions of practice. How can a culture of educator development be really authentic if educators are just about hanging on at the margins of their organisations. I will probably come back to this as I experienced it first-hand in Ireland, but in FE in the UK, this occupational and contractual difference amongst educators has been noted in terms of capacities to engage with cultures of growth (James & Biesta, 2007).

James & Biesta, in a discussion about 'the long interview' for educators in the FE sector in the UK, make this link between contracts and the positions which educators can take up within organisations:

The widespread use of fractional and temporary contracts has laid down some distinctions between core and peripheral staff (128).

- This notion of core and peripheral staff is interesting. What are you?

- Well, since coming back to Ireland I am peripheral and I started off that way in Edinburgh. But I got a permanent post quite quickly in Scotland and, I suppose, that shifted me more towards core staff.

- In what ways?

- Well, mostly in ways outside the class. I had an office, a desk – my physical space within the organisation was defined and secure. Permanent staff are also more in the loop in terms of organisational communications – they go to meetings and events outside class time.

- And peripheral staff don't?

- No. Well rarely. And why would they? They get paid for their contact hours and that's it. Permanent staff have a steady income over a year that isn't directly linked to class contact time – they are paid for something more than being in a class.

We always tried to facilitate opportunities for temporary staff to come to meetings – but there were so many meetings, people had other work. I never thought it was ethical to expect temporary staff to come to meetings and not get paid.

But anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. I suppose I'm just making the point that work on contractual positions is as important to professional development as workshops on using IT to enhance learning or whatever.

- So a kind of politicised professional development?

- Maybe, but one that, at least acknowledges, the power at play in and around educator subjects.

We had entered the grounds of the large industrial-like complex of the college. This big factory of education was relatively dormant. There was plenty of activity – maintenance, administration, management and summer students and teaching staff constituted the depleted population at this time of year.

We sat on a bench fairly near a smoking stall and basked in the eight-story glory of the college.

Your interest in the practice of hierarchies soon furnished you with a question.

- So what was on the top floor?

I smiled.

- Guess.

- Well, it depends on the culture a bit doesn't it. ... Let's see. Did your management ever talk of inverting the pyramid?

- Ha. They did. They certainly did *talk* about it.

- Ah *talk*. So then, let's see. Senior management had the top floor.

- They did. And, of course, the praetorian guard ...

- And they were ...?

- Human Resources.

- Not a fan then?

- Not really, no.

Your eyes scanned the floors again.

- So where was your office?

- Our department crammed into an office on the first or second floor. I can't remember. ...



- I do remember. I remember your messy desk with folders, work to be marked, resources in various stages of development, pictures of the family, kids drawings, half-drunk coffee mugs ...

- And I remember your desk ... so tidy. So professional. I asked you once why you didn't have any pictures of your family on your desk. Do you remember?

- Not really. But I like to keep the two separate: work and family.

- That's exactly what you said then.

- Oh. Well, there you go then ...

- Yeh ... I like to mix it up ... the personal, the work ... the whole thing.

- I've noticed. ... But coming back ... This was a good place for you?

- Yeh, it was in many ways. Having that stability which comes with permanent contracts allows you to just set your roots a bit and allow yourself the space to grow.

I enjoyed my teaching ... found it challenging at times. But tried always to make the work relevant and useful for the students. I think Eilidh felt, and probably still does, that I put too much of myself into it. Maybe she's right.

But it was here that I started to make connections with some like-minded educators and we started to do interesting things.

- Such as?

- Well I got involved in a critical discussion group called EDDG (Educational Development Discussion Group). It was the kind of space that I was trying to sound out as a possibility in my previous college. And you were just trying to get it set up at the time ... do you remember sounding me out about it?

- No.

- Well, I do. And I remember being really excited about this new path that was opening up. I hadn't met anyone before who had that level of passion that you had about their work as an educator and it was so refreshing, so nourishing.

Anyway, I got involved with that group. And I took it upon myself to set up a blog for that group. A place to capture and reflect on the conversations. You see even then I was thinking about audience and narrative. We suspected that only a core, committed group would come regularly to the meetings which we held over lunch (we were right) and I suppose my hope was that a blog would capture some of our discussions (Lawson, et al., 2008-2010).

- And what did you discuss?

- Well, we tried to be led by the things which we felt people were concerned about. And we wanted it to be more than just a local discussion. We both valued the importance of theory and research. So we tried to find, edit, if necessary, and circulate an academic or research article on the theme of the next discussion. So, for example, we used the research that Paul Martinez did with the Learning and Skills Development Agency as a backdrop to a really pertinent discussion on student retention (Martinez, 2001).

And we highlighted work by Carol Craig for the foundation of our discussion on confidence and well-being with our learners (Craig, 2007).

- Sounds good?

- Yeh EDDG was a wonderful space. But I suppose it was critical and reflective conversations between a fairly small circle of committed educators.

- Who could come?

- Anyone. It was open to anyone. We encouraged students, management, admin staff to come.

- And did they?

- Sometimes. Management often were quite defensive at these meetings. But we did try to create and celebrate a space that allowed for authentic and sometimes challenging dialogues.

- And this sense of dialogue and community embracing uncertainty and tension, or dissonance, is something that, it is argued, is an important part of a authentic culture of professional development (Snow-Gerono, 2005; Penlington, 2008).

- It is, but it is not the way management imagined it I think.
- No?
- No. I ended up working half-time in a small group of three Teacher Fellows in a cross-college education development role. I was sceptical of applying at first despite my passion and interest, but you educated me in the ways of strategic compliance ... remember?
- Maybe ...
- You used to say things like ‘just agree to what they [management] are suggesting in vague terms, and then do you own thing’.
- Sounds like me alright.
- Well, I think their vision for us was to ‘fix bad teachers’ – a deficit approach to educator development
- Well I suppose it comes down, doesn’t it, to very different definitions of professional development (CPD).
- It does. This is central. And CPD was something that was managed by Human Resources and management. There was a real resentment to the acronym – just even on a discursive level.
- Yeh, Friedman & Phillips refer to the ambiguity in the usage of CPD and how it is often regarded with resentment by practitioners (2004).
- And Evans points out that even agreeing on a definition of CPD is problematic (Evans, 2008).
- And comes up with her own definition:

the process whereby people’s professionalism and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced (Evans, 2008, p. 30).

Although I don’t like this definition.

- Why not?
- Well, it immediately opens up another contentious issue, within Irish adult education contexts anyway, regarding professionalism (Fitzsimons, 2010). And what's more who is the authority that, in these terms, considers professionalism to be enhanced.
- Yeh. And I think another issue with the management concept of CPD was the 'sheep-dip' approach as described by Scales, et al. (2011) that we mentioned earlier. In fact, they argue that educators need to regain control of their own development and should become 'researchers and developers of their own practice' (1).
- They speak a lot of sense. They too are wary of 'best practice' discourses of educator development and, with Coffield, frame CPD as much as a right as a responsibility (Coffield, 2009; Scales, et al., 2011).
- What's interesting though is that they develop what they call the 'paradoxes of CPD' which includes things like compulsion or voluntarism. In other words, they ask us to question whether educators are engaged in CPD based on intrinsic or extrinsic motivation.
- Yeh, but I also think they make the point that educators are very engaged in their own development. The issue or the tension is often down to the way it is reported (Scales, et al., 2011, p. 5).
- And that's often because CPD is managed by HR or a specific quality assurance mechanism. And with all that, coming back to managerialism and instrumentality, are the sterile proformas which litter the path of the complex growth of an educator. Remember this (Fig.1)?

Staff Development Application (SD1)		ref: 20___/___
first name:	<input type="text"/>	last name:
faculty or section:	<input type="text"/>	job title:
full title of course, event or activity:	<input type="text"/>	provider:
location/venue:	<input type="text"/>	date(s):
<b>Please tick here if this activity leads to a recognised qualification</b> You may be required to complete an Application for a Course of Study. Please ask for advice. <input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Was this identified at your Staff Development Review?</b> If no, please comment on why you have chosen this activity and what benefits there will be for you and/or the College. Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 30%;"> <p><b>Costs</b> Please include in the box on the right details of all costs for which funding is sought. If necessary you should provide estimates and confirm actual costs when known. These costs will be taken into account when assessing your application for approval.</p> <p><b>Travel &amp; Subsistence</b> You must indicate the mode of travel and include realistic estimates of costs on this form.</p> <p><b>Expenses</b> Your pink expenses claim should be completed after the event, countersigned and returned to Staff Development. You must obtain and attach receipts for all personal expenditure. Pink expenses claim forms are available from HK.</p> <p><b>Booking</b> Unless and until this application is approved any bookings must be made on a provisional basis only. If you attach all relevant documents then we will book on your behalf once your application is approved. If your application is incomplete booking may be delayed as a result. Please tick as appropriate below.</p> <p>Activity I have made a provisional booking..... <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>            Please book for me - I have completed and attached all relevant documentation..... <input type="checkbox"/></p> </div> <div style="width: 40%;"> <p><b>activity fee (including VAT)</b> <input type="text"/></p> <p>exams <input type="text"/></p> <p>other (please detail) <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>travel</b></p> <p>bus <input type="text"/></p> <p>rail <input type="text"/></p> <p>air <input type="text"/></p> <p>car ( <input type="text"/> miles @ <input type="text"/> p= <input type="text"/> ) <input type="text"/></p> <p>taxi <input type="text"/></p> <p>parking/tolls <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>other</b></p> <p>accommodation <input type="text"/></p> <p>meals <input type="text"/></p> </div> <div style="width: 25%;"> <p><b>office use only</b></p> <p>not approved <input type="text"/></p> <p>partial funding % <input type="text"/></p> <p>amount <input type="text"/></p> <p>budget code <input type="text"/></p> <p>subject code <input type="text"/></p> <p>training agreem. <input type="text"/></p> </div> </div>		

FIGURE 2

- Oh Jesus but I do.
- I mean, these were the kind of documents that you were up against when you wanted to do something that might be beneficial to your growth. I really think that the resentment around CPD was often based largely on the paperwork involved with it. The dictatorship of instrumentality.
- And also, to have the individuality of your growth reduced, as it was, to another proforma that your manager filled in a rush once a year over a quick chat. ... no wonder we often referred to the various colleges where we worked as ‘the factory’.
- Yeh – so there was the distancing of CPD from our own sense of development.
- Which everyone attended to anyway.
- Well, maybe not everyone. But most.
- And when we took on that role as Teacher Fellows we were expected, weren’t we, to be a quick fix?

- Yeh, to go into departments with poor retention and pass rates and fix it. Somehow. What did they expect us to do, do you think?
- I think they felt what we'd do would be to show them, somehow, 'perfect practice' – they'd go, thanks for that, apply it and fix their teaching – or maybe more importantly their results.
- Yeh. But I remember what we did instead, which was really not encouraged by management, was we asked if we could attend staff meetings across all the departments and listen to concerns and challenges for people in their teaching.
- That's right. And the problems coming back were not mechanical aspects of teaching. But broader structural and ideological ones.
- Not so easy to fix.
- No. But you know, I was thinking of this recently. I think this inquiry started then.
- How's that?
- Well, I was put in this position where I could do something around staff development and the first thing that I wanted to do, the most natural thing to do, for me anyway, was to listen to and gather the experiences of staff in their local contexts.
- Which is a bit like this ... how?
- Well, I'll come to this again possibly, but when I started the PhD and I was circling the topic of educator development, again, my first inquiry impulse was to go and listen to the experiences of adult educators.
- And was that successful – what you did in Scotland? Drawing on the experience of staff?
- I'm not sure it was. .... Management were really not interested in lots of those stories. In many ways, when I look back now, what management wanted us to be were conduits for policy reforms (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). A way of informing staff of the content and practice implications of new national policy initiatives such as the *Curriculum for Excellence*.
- But you had other ideas?

- We did. And we really tried to do things which opened dialogue ... I would send all-staff emails or post blog entries on things which would demand some kind of response. Holding on to Snow-Gerona and Penlington's advice (2005; 2008), I was trying more to be the conduit for dialogic dissonance rather than a transmissive device for new policy initiatives.

- Give me an example ...

- Ok ... so, one day I sent an email out about an off-the-cuff survey I did with my students. They were due to sit a practice assessment. But before they did that I got them to write at the top of their papers a list of what they had for breakfast. It contained a hell of a lot of junk food – most of it bought from the college's vending machine or the large multinational catering contractor (which I believe also fed the US army at the time). Anyway, there was a massive response to that email which reflected a wide range of opinions: some feeling that the college had a responsibility to offer affordable, healthy food. Others felt that, as our students were adults, it was none of our business. But what was interesting was the passion in the responses. Anyway, I was invited by management to attend the next catering committee meeting – most agreed that the college environment and culture should reflect sustainable and healthy food choices. But, we were silenced by the non-negotiable voice of a senior manager who said we were 'locked into' a long-term contract with the catering company.

- So?

- So, I suppose, my point, is that sometimes we don't get the results we want, but we still need to keep nipping at the ankles of those with power somehow. We need to make ourselves uncomfortable presences. We need to have conversations, and not just in private spaces, that cause organisational dissonance. Even for just a bit.

- And when we did try to raise awareness of new policy or curricular initiatives I tried, at least, to do it in creative ways and participative ways. Remember the blog entry I wrote entitled 'The customer is dead: long live the learner' about my reflections on a conference in Glasgow ... or the reflections on the HMIe inspections (O'Neill, 2009a; 2009b)

- Oh yeh ... they didn't do down to well with some.

- Maybe not ... and they were tame enough in their tone ... but I think that's what we were trying to do ... embrace and name the dissonance in education when we saw it.
- We did, I suppose. Like, for example, using participative methodologies to really critically interrogate what *Curriculum for Excellence* meant for us as educators in our local context. I also remember writing a fictional dialogue between a slightly cynical educator and more positive proponent of this policy development – I set it in the staff room over a coffee.
- So again, shades of all this in a past occupational life.
- Yeh, I was really wandering in the dark I suppose but I felt that there had to be a way of attending to our own development in creative ways. I think that has soon as CPD was mentioned it was like pouring a bucket of cold water over anyone's passion for their growth.

And as we talk now I remember another foreshadow of all this ... as part of an annual suite of CPD activities, I organised a trip to the Scottish Storytelling Centre for a session on narrative.

- Ah ... why?
- Well, I suppose I was circling this notion that there had to be some potential in narrative in terms of teaching and our own development. That there should be a role for story in terms of our learners' and our own development. Again, I was acting intuitively (Lipson Lawrence, 2012) here rather than with any developed ideas about narrative in education.
- And how did that go? The Scottish Storytelling Centre event?
- It was ok. The facilitator was good. We created a collective story by taking over where the previous teller started. It was a bit of fun. But maybe a bit of a missed opportunity. I suppose I was looking for something different – something that went a bit deeper for participants to take away with them.
- What?
- Well, I really didn't know then. I have a clearer idea now. I suppose what I wanted, without knowing it, was for all of us to develop a sensitivity to the possibilities of



narrative approaches to learning. On lots of levels. So how learners bring stories with them. And our need to really listen to them and watch for themes, metaphors and narrative positions, unresolved endings, challenges ... all the things which occur in narrative. But also, and this is where our role as educators is crucial, and comes back to this sense of the teacher as a curator or anthologist, but we need to be able to hold all our learners' stories in balance with each other and with our role and purpose in that context.

- And our stories too?

- Absolutely. We can't say we are interested in democratic practice and hold back or use our power to cloak our own stories.

And this was another layer that I was just beginning to think my way through then and what made me seek out the Scottish Storytelling Centre as a place for a CPD event. This sense of the importance of our own narratives, our own stories in our development as educators.

It's funny how all this is helping me understand things I did years ago – how it grafts a meaning on them.

- And isn't that then one of the possibilities of narrative that you set out to explore right at the beginning ...

- Maybe. But I was, as I said, or so it felt, operating intuitively.

- But isn't that a part of our knowledge, adult educator knowledge (Lipson Lawrence, 2012)? Our knowledge is located in our practice, what we do and what we believe. If we are interested in growth, there must be some dialogue, some flux between that knowledge and the knowledge of others – peers, scholars.

- Yeh ... and I knew that there was justification and worth in exploring narrative because I could see in it the reflexivity that was so dominant in discourses of professional development at the time (Schön, 2003).

- But the notion of narrative added something more? You've talked about this before?

- Yeh, have I? I'm losing track myself now. But yeh, narrative added a creative and organising dimension to that reflexivity.
- But, coming back to our last walk, isn't there a complication in that too?
- How do you mean?
- Well, your booklearning (Flynn, 2004) years at university, as you've said, really complicated notions of narrative – stable storylines and reliable narrators and even audience as narrator. So how does that all impact on the play of narrative in professional development? If narrative becomes complicated, messy in literature and culture, do we need to worry about complicated and messy narratives of professional development?
- Worry? Not at all. In fact, I think this is the exciting bit ... this is where there may be real possibilities for us.
- Go on ...
- Well ... I hadn't joined all the dots back then. I did have a vague sense of a constructionist paradigm for professional development based on the localised experiences of educators. Again it seemed obvious that adult education principles which prioritised the lived experience and knowledge of learners (Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Dewey, 1997; Brookfield, 2005) should be applied to educators learning and development. But this seemed to be a blindspot within the sector. Maybe because CPD was a developmental experience constructed and organised by managers and HR rather than educators. ... But, coming back to your question, I hadn't really thought through the significance of this notion of the messy texts and troubled subject. Then.
- And now?
- Well. I'm still walking it through. But this whole walking tour has started, to make those connections, I can start to see that there is a way to think about professional development, if you want to call it that, as a discursive activity in which the adult educator as subject names their practice in a space where language, practice and knowledge can be contested. And that through narrative, through our stories, and

crucially, the telling and re-telling of our stories, that we can attend and even fight for our own growth.

- Fight?
- Well, what else do you do when struggle to grow?
- And growth was, is, a struggle?
- It was. It is. Because for many of us are still struggling to grow as educators in ways that resist the dominant discourses of what an educator should be.
- So is part of your growth then this struggle for the educator subject?
- Yes. And again so many of us are working through this in practice on an intuitive and individual level – and we are guided by ethics, values, ideological positions, theories we have gravitated towards in our own education. And we start to see that our practice, our growth is performative ... it is what we do with our bodies as much as our minds (Gale, 2010).

And, what's more, what this tour has started to reveal to me ... all this walking and talking ... is that our growth can be a creative act. In fact, Done, et al. (2011) explore this notion of professional development being a creative writing act. That we can, and should, attend to our development through creative acts such as writing. But what they also point out is that such acts of writing, which embrace troubled subjects, are not just individualised accounts of teacher experience but, drawing on Richardson's readings of Mill's call for the intersection of sociology and biography, have real sociological teeth. So maybe we can create a space where voices that may be marginal in scholarship (i.e. practitioners) get to interrogate the academy's theory through creative dialogues with embodied and practice knowledge (Done, et al., 2011).


- And hence all this then? Is that what this is?
- I think so. Embracing a creative sense of educator learning allows me to create a space where personal, practice and theoretical knowledge interplay with a bit more equity. To write about the personal or even practice from deep inside the stylistic conventions of the academy seems, in some way, to be looking down on these forms of knowledge ... to be writing from a position of dismissive authority.

And if our professional development is contested, troubled and messy, then its creative performance will reflect that state ... this text, its form and style, performs these tensions in my own attempts at growth.

But then, as I say, I didn't know what I knew then.

- Until?

- Until this moment I suppose.



And if our professional development is contested, troubled and messy, then its creative performance will reflect that state ... this text, its form and style, performs these tensions in my own attempts at growth ...

We paused to get a sense of our bearings.

Like so many times across this walking tour we had lost ourselves so much in the talking that the walking just took care of itself.



A sort of homecoming

We found ourselves on the deserted council playing fields behind the college. Our walk around it's perimeter was probably about enough to give you a sense of the place. You were keen to move on.

- So where now?

- Well, let's head back in towards town. That'll cheer you up.

- Is it far?

- Ah no. Not really. .... And we've a bit to get through yet.

And so we turned our back on the college and headed eastwards. On the far side of the field there was a vast empty space littered with rubble.

- What's that?
- They used to be high-rise flats. They blew them up the year I left.
- Deconstruction as reconstruction?
- Yeh, something like that. They were probably built around the same time, with the same hopes for this area, as the college was built.
- Which was?
- Well, the college was built in 1970.
- Ah, as old as yourself.
- Yeh.
- As I say, 'deconstruction as reconstruction' (Bleakley, 2000, p. 22).

I looked at you sideways - not for the first time on our walks. I considered probing you on that but, let it go. I had a sense of what you meant and that was enough.

We came out on to the busy Broomhouse Road. After a moment's hesitation, and with a guiding nod to you, we headed left.

- So it seemed like you had developed a really interesting space for yourself in the college?
- Yeh, the balance of work between my teaching role and the education development role made it interesting. It was certainly challenging at times but it was, I always felt anyway, good work.
- And that's always been important?
- That's always been crucial – since I returned to university anyway. In fact, it's probably a major reason for me returning to university as a mature student twenty years ago. I think, after a couple of years of working in the commercial world in my early

twenties, I made a pact with myself that whatever work I did would always have to be ethical. Work, that at the very least, would do no harm. You know? Good work.

- Ok. Good work. ... So why then throw that all away and come back to Ireland?

- Well, it's the pull of the other thread that has been weaving its way through this ... maybe it's less visible to you.

- And that is?

- The personal.

- The personal?

- Yeh, the personal. ... So, going back to Ireland was always a discussion with Eilidh and me and, I suppose, we thought, in terms of the children, it was the right time to go.

- Not in terms of the economy though.

- No. Probably the worst time to return to Ireland in terms of the economy. I left during the midst of a previous recession and returned during another. I had been keeping an eye on things in Ireland for years and there never seemed like a good time to go back. But as it happened Eilidh got a permanent job in the public service – possibly the last in the country for a few years.

- And you?

- I got a place on a panel for temporary adult education tutors with a VEC.

- And what did that guarantee you?

- Not much. The possibility of a call for hourly-paid work *if* it came up in the next academic year with the adult and community services of the VEC.

- That was a change for you both then.

- Yeh, we kind of reversed places. Eilidh and myself.

- In what ways?

- Well, in Scotland, I probably had more paid working hours and Eilidh was at home more – although latterly she did a Masters.

- And in Ireland?
- In Ireland, she was working full-time and I was working part-time and doing the stuff at home ... the invisible work (Daniels, 1987).
- Ah, the invisible work ... you know that Daniels refers to your old pal Gilman in that piece?
- Does she?
- Yeh ... look it up. It's not about patriarchal wallpaper though ... she refers to Gilman's call for women to make public their domestic work (Daniels, 1987; Gilman, 1998).
- Ah, I love Gilman. She shifts from the poetic to social commentary ... exists in both places as a powerful voice.

We lost ourselves for a moment in thought. I don't know what you were thinking about, but I was dwelling on the longevity of Gilman's ideas.

- So how did you feel about that then?
- What?
- Being the invisible worker?
- Well, I suppose, you might think that with my adult education background and debt to feminist ontologies that I would be able to accept this marginal societal position with a degree of humility and even celebrate the invisible value that goes with the invisible work.
- But you didn't?
- Well, I did find it difficult at times.
- In what ways?

- It's hard to say ... I mean I loved being around for the children. Maybe 'loved' is the wrong word ... it just felt right. Eilidh had done a lot of that work before in Scotland ... although we tried to balance it there too ... so it seemed fair and right that the balance of domestic work should shift to me. And I suppose we both have always felt it was important that one of us, it didn't matter who, was around for the children – before and after school.

And it wasn't like I wasn't working. In fact, there wasn't even a break in my work in coming over to Ireland. I finished in the college in Edinburgh in June and started with the VEC in September.

It was just that I was working a lot less and, because Eilidh, was working full-time, my work needed to fit around childcare.

- So could you have got more work if you needed to?

- With the VEC? Yeh, probably. And in fact in the beginning I was offered quiet a lot of work but as some of it didn't fit with childcare I just had to say no. And I felt once I had said 'no' a couple of times to the same person, they stopped asking.

- So what kind of work were you doing with the VEC?

- Well, I shifted I suppose into more community, work-based and literacy work. It was different in some ways – smaller groups, different curricular contexts. Probably the biggest difference was this sense which I became, as a tutor on a temporary contract, something quite marginal to the organisation.

But it wasn't just me ... all of the tutors were on temporary contracts (although I didn't quite grasp this at first). There was always this sense of irony that the educators of this large educational organisation seemed to occupy the most peripheral of positions.

- How was that?

- Well, largely to do with the contexts of our teaching. When I started I was coming in to teach evening groups in a very small centre that was mostly used during the day. I got to know the security guard well. He was the only other staff member there. But that was it. Eventually, I got some work with the same VEC in another centre – and there was more interaction between tutors there. But again, it was a slow process of integration as we were just paid for our teaching hours and there was no space for us to



work or prepare collectively. So I think tutors generally just came in and went home. My office was my Lidl bag.

- And this must have been difficult for you after your efforts to develop critical communities in Scotland?

- Yeh it was. I was now the temporary tutor that was excluded from all our activities in Scotland. But then everyone seemed to be in my position in Ireland. Tutors who were there for several years were all on temporary contracts – would be on the dole over the summer. I couldn't understand how people survived in teaching. There was a lot of passion and commitment. And maybe some didn't need the money as much – a lot came through a volunteering route. But most tutors that I started to get to know seemed to need the work – some would get quite anxious about the likelihood of work after the summer.

- And how did you feel about the work?

- Well, the work itself was great. I was doing a mix of unaccredited and accredited teaching. The unaccredited was interesting as all the work that I had done in Scotland was SQA accredited. And I came into adult education in Ireland at a time of such change as well. Just as I was getting my feet in the work, the ground was shifting in so many ways: 33 VECs were reforming and, in many cases, merging to form 16 ETBs; the further education qualification body, FETAC, was on the cusp of merging with its HE counterpart and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to form a new qualification authority: QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland); a new legislative framework for adult and further education (Government of Ireland, 2013) was being enacted which would shape policy, discourse and structure of the sector and give birth to a new national organisation (SOLAS) charged with overseeing so much of the management of this change.

- That's a lot of change. Why all this change?

- Why indeed. I suppose the short answer is a response to the dire economic state of post-boom Ireland and that a human capital concept of education grounded in well-rooted Irish neoliberalism provided the neat solution that we'd train ourselves out of trouble (Murray, et al., 2014; Fitzsimons, 2015; Connolly & Hussey, 2013).

And along with that came a shift to professionalizing adult educators through new Teaching Council regulations for the FE sector (The Teaching Council, 2009) and the subsequent emergence of Teaching Council-accredited FE teacher training courses in eight HEIs.

- Ok. So you were saying earlier that the word ‘professional’ was not uncontested earlier in adult education ....
- No. Adult education is such a heterogeneous sector in Ireland – operating in so many different spaces, with so many different purposes. And with that educators are heterogeneous too - with different identities – including a sense of professionalism.
- So you were entering into an occupational space that was in many ways redefining itself?
- Maybe ‘redefining’ ... for many though it was about struggling to hold on to something with a social value and purpose against such a dominant discourse which argued for a more vocationalized adult education (Connolly & Hussey, 2013; Murray, et al., 2014; Fitzsimons, 2015).

But then I really felt like an observer ... so marginal to all this, barely part of it. My position within the institution of the VEC was so very precarious ... my payslip reminded me each month of my status and worth within the organisation with the words ‘Unqualified, temporary tutor’ imprinted at the top.

- Why ‘unqualified’?
- Well, yes. I wrote to them a number of times to tell them I was in fact qualified and that they probably meant ‘unregistered’ with the Teaching Council.
- And what did they say?
- There was no response from them. There never was really.

We paused.

- But then there was so much rich work going on in the classes I taught. I loved the work that I was doing with some groups. I ended up working quite a lot with middle-aged and older men with low levels of literacy. But we used narrative quite a bit in different ways.
- For example?
- Well, I often started a group with a 'Piece of me' project. You put me on to that in Edinburgh. Remember?
- No. I think you're mixing me up again.
- Maybe - basically I'd ask them to bring in a small object that had personal significance for them that they could talk to us about for a few minutes. I'd model it first of course. But these modest seeds would often grow into really moving and thoughtful autobiographical vignettes. ... I felt, maybe more than I ever did in Scotland, that I was working in adult education spaces ...
- In what ways?
- Oh ... in lots of ways ... that we were working together in terms of the co-creation of knowledge through dialogue and the drawing on, reflecting and validating of experience (Freire, 1996) (Greene, 1994a) (Dewey, 1997) (Brookfield, 1998) and hopefully, for some, transformative (Mezirow, 1991).
- So the work was meaningful? But?
- I don't know really ... and maybe this sounds selfish ... but the nature of precarious work – that sense of such an uncertain future made me very anxious about my own occupational position – my own identity. ... I hate to say it ... in fact I really struggle to say it, but maybe all my work, the domestic, the care work, the adult education work ... maybe it just felt so ... invisible ... to me, to others ...
- Why do you find that hard to say?
- Because there is a real clash there in what I think I believe (the value and worth of care work) and what I feel (that it wasn't enough). But also that I was feeling the gaze of others close to me who felt that it was a temporary occupational setback – would they feel the same way if it was Eilidh and my position was reversed?

I felt, and still do, feel, that both of us work really hard in our various domains, we never stop ... but that there is no acknowledgement of that ... maybe I wasn't, maybe I'm not robust enough yet to ignore the perceptions of others ... maybe I am a bit hungry for validation ...

- Validation of what?
- Validation .. of the work that I do ... my occupation?
- I notice that you use the word 'occupation' a lot ... rather than 'profession'.
- Yeh ... remember in Belfast when we talked about signs, semiotics and all that?
- Vaguely ...
- And I talked about the what occupation's etymology and how it translates into Irish a *slí beathie* – literally the way of life ...
- Right ... it's coming back to me now ... and this concept of occupation as something you do or the path you follow fits with you more comfortably than all that is implied by 'profession'?
- Yeh ... and all that is contested by 'profession'.

PhD – a clearing?

- So is that then what brought you to the PhD?

We had reached Saughton Park. The vast bulk of Murrayfield Stadium was slowly edging its way into our vision. Our walk east towards town would bring us close to Murrayfield and Tynecastle. I'd been to Murrayfield so many times, but never to Tynecastle. It was only now at this distance that this seemed strange to me.

But I was avoiding your question.

You looked across at me. Possibly unsure whether or not I heard you the first time, you asked again,

- So was it a sense of doing something that had validation exterior to your invisible occupational activities that brought you to the PhD?

- I don't know ... it seems that must be part of it doesn't it?

- You're not sure?

- Well, it's not the way I would have framed it to myself or anyone who asked at the time – but, now that you ask, it seems that it has to be part of it.

- And is that a problem?

- Well ... it doesn't sound like a very worthy reason to be engaging on a doctoral study, does it?

- I'm not saying it was only that. There were other motivations I'm sure.

- There were. There were. ...

- Like?

- Well, when we met first I was thinking of doing a PhD ... but felt I was probably getting a bit long in the tooth!

- And look at you now.

- Yeh. Look at me now. But I suppose all the interest that I had been pursuing in both my own development and my colleagues through the Teacher Fellow role was leading to something else ... I was never going to just leave that there. And then you did encourage me to consider it.

- I did.

- Why?

- I knew that you were always keen to study more ... and maybe I felt that you needed it too.

- Yeh. ... And it did become that clearing that I was looking for ... that space to develop my knowledge further. I never expected it to go the way that it did though. ... I'm not where I thought I'd be ...

We retreated to silence. I wondered had our conversation run its course for now. And despite my intent to keep you away from the intoxicating beauty of Edinburgh, we ended up emerging onto Lothian Road and heading towards Castle Gardens. Closer now to being real tourists rather than 'mythical tourists' (Buzard, 1993).

It was clear to me now that you were no longer interested in talking. Your energy was focused on walking and absorbing the serious beauty of it all.

The castle loomed precipitously above us to the right. Ascending the steep steps which brought us to The Mound, we crossed the road and came to a natural pause - resting on a bench beside the National Gallery.

Your gaze was restless and hungry as it skirted from the castle, to the gardens and now, or so it seemed, to the Scott Monument.

But my eyes had settled elsewhere. A giant reproduction of Duncan's *St. Bride* (1913) hung from the outside of the national gallery. I smiled an acknowledgement at you and your burden of the young saint as you floated effortlessly over the sea. Past Iona. Past the Hebrides. Heading home.

Found fragments from an anthology of tutor narratives #4

Tutor growth





However, it was through this  
new work with the VEC that I started to come across  
learners with

significant literacy issues.

This was not something  
I had experienced before in my  
commercial and private tuition.

What's more,

I wasn't qualified  
to deal with these issues  
effectively.

I was worried  
that I would do the wrong thing  
or  
somehow damage a learner's confidence.

I could see that people really needed the help  
that I didn't have  
the expertise  
to help them.

To help me develop some

knowledge, skills and confidence

around adult literacy issues,

I enrolled on a university diploma course in

adult education.

As the course progressed I felt that I wanted

to put some of the

knowledge into practice.

So, I enrolled for the

volunteer tutor training course with the VEC.

For a long time I worried

about

whether I was being

too relaxed

at the first or second meeting.

I remember a conversation I had with a group

about discussions.

I felt that they had been having

a lot of discussions and I  
was getting a little worried  
about what the learners were getting out of them.

I brought this concern up explicitly and  
asked them  
how they valued the discussions.

The learners were  
delighted with discussions  
as they felt that it meant that  
a lot of issues could be addressed.

The group pointed out that the  
discussions helped to  
contextualise their learning about  
language and literacy.

The learners valued the space  
to query things and  
ask why things were a certain way.

I was really pleased with this  
but

I suppose I was still nagged

by a more

general, lingering doubt

that it is hard to feel that work had been done if it is

just a discussion –

it's like I needed

something more tangible

to show that learning has happened.

Once I started my degree in

adult education, I started to realise

the importance and value of discussions in learning.

I feel that that a lot of

this doubt

had to do with

the need for physical evidence of learning.

I think that this pressure,

in a way, comes from

the demands of accreditation

and FETAC

and that sense of

a requirement to document learning

... a sense that

learning doesn't exist without the physical evidence

to prove that it happened.

More recently I have commenced a degree in adult education.

This has been a wonderful experience –

I love it.

I love

the opportunity, the luxury, it gives me to have

deeply enriching and reflective conversations

about important things.

In some ways it provides

validation

and

puts a theory on things

that I have been doing for years.

I think that studying adult education  
has given me the confidence  
to be less directive with my learners:

I am more willingly  
to let go

and let the learning be shaped by the learners.

As my time developed with Youthreach I realised that

I found the work enjoyable

and that I didn't find it too hard. However,

I wanted to know more and

learn how to do it better. So,

I enrolled on a H.Dip in adult education and

absolutely loved it.

I got so much from the H.Dip in

so many ways. Before that, I suppose

I worked with groups in an intuitive way

I did what felt right and

it seemed to work for me. But the H. Dip added

a new depth to that experience –

it gave me

a theory,  
a language

for talking about my work  
which I really valued.

And it was a completely  
different experience  
for me as a learner too.

From the very first day the H. Dip  
practised that theory – and this theory and practice was  
something very different  
to what I'd experienced before.

I loved it.

Some of the professional development modules  
which have been promoted by one  
Higher Education Institute  
are not really accessible  
as  
they take  
place

when  
tutors are  
working.

Many would gladly do them, but can't because  
they would have to  
give up  
teaching hours and  
income to do them.

*The value of volunteering as apprenticeship*

The shift from  
volunteer tutor  
to  
paid tutor

was a very gradual process.

I worked as a

volunteer tutor for about

five or six years

before I started working with groups.

That transition from



volunteer to group tutoring

was managed differently than it is now.

Back then, the organiser would

support volunteer tutors in their development,

keeping an eye on them

making the judgement when they felt the tutor was ready,

if at all

to start working with groups.

When they felt the time was right they would approach a tutor to see if they'd like to take on a group. There was

a real value in this long internship:

tutors emerged from this process with

a rich experience, awareness and deep commitment

to their work -

this route into tutoring is something that is,

and will become,

less of an option in the future, which is a shame.

When I started at the Centre as a literacy tutor  
one of the things I had to face  
was my own preconceptions about learners.

I remember, in particular, Mary,  
who really made me challenge my ideas about adult learners.

After just a short while working with Mary,  
I felt that she was better read than herself.

For Mary, coming to the Centre  
wasn't about literacy at all  
- what she really lacked was  
confidence.

Because she didn't complete her schooling

Mary viewed herself  
as less than complete.

This sense of herself  
had stopped her  
forming and developing social relationships.

I was starting to see the  
deep emotional  
social work  
of the tutor.

And yet for me  
it always felt like such  
a privilege  
working with students like Mary on the one-to-one programme  
at the Adult Learning Centre.

So, for me,  
the difference in this form of education  
which I was now involved in at the Centre  
was a lot to do with

the effort that  
I needed to work on as a tutor  
to try to  
leave those preconceptions outside the door.

I needed to

give everyone a blank canvass,  
to allow everyone  
to share stories  
and  
to start working together as equals.

I needed to ditch my sense that I was going to help them  
in some specific, pre-determined way.

You can't just walk into a class with a student and  
start teaching geometry or trigonometry.

You really just have to find out where they are at.

And  
when I worked it like that  
when I worked it like a conversation  
then it just grew  
from there.

I'd go away with that information  
and make my lesson plans from that.

I just took it  
slowly at the beginning  
and built it from there –  
but always going back.

The experience with my first student, Aoife,  
was so important in developing  
my confidence as a tutor.

And it also made it clear to me how much we need  
to adapt  
as tutors  
all the time –  
if someone doesn't understand us,  
then we need to try change our approach.

This is, of course, is easier with one-to-ones  
but becomes a bit trickier in a group situation.

*From trainer to tutor*

When I started working as a trainer

initially

I wasn't really thinking about the people

– my main concern then

was making sure that I covered all the points on the training course.

But my work within the adult literacy context

has allowed me

to develop an awareness that it is much more

about the specific people in the classroom

and

the possibilities for exploring things together.

I began to realise that

their experiences,

what they bring into the classroom

was a resource

something to learn from.

This concept was

foreign to the training environment

I feel that  
my experience  
in the commercial world,  
which I would regard as a much tougher environment,  
has enabled me to deal with most situations.

I've always been very resourceful and  
never been in a teaching environment which I felt that I couldn't handle.

Commercial training contexts can be tense environments  
as the trainer steps into pre-existing issues and animosities.  
I've had to deal with a range of challenging situations and individuals.

Consequently,  
I have never felt that much need  
for support  
in terms of the content or methodology of my teaching.

I don't feel a significant need  
for professional development or support.

*A sense of growth*

And it also taught me that  
I needed to have  
the humility  
to recognise that

I could only bring the group so far  
and that someone else needed to give them that last insight.

I think I've developed a lot as a tutor  
over the six years or so that I've been working.

For example, one way that I've changed is that, now,

I rarely answer questions:



I try to let learners respond  
work things out themselves as much as possible.

I also encourage  
a lot more group work -  
active work –  
which I didn't at the start.

My class,  
these days,  
would be a place where

there are lots of learners talking to each other.

In other words

I'm not the teacher.

In fact “teacher” is not a word that I'd use about myself.

I don't even see it as a bad word  
but I think when people think of the word “teacher”,

they think of someone standing up at the front of the class  
telling people what they think they should know.

And

I really don't see my role as that.

I did a H. Dip in adult education recently  
and, as part of that, we were asked to come up with

a word or a metaphor to describe what we do.

I found that really difficult.

I don't have a metaphor

I'm not a guide,

I'm not a leader ....

I'm kind of just there

for when I'm needed

in whatever capacity that may be.

But I don't teach.

I think I probably started off more as teacher

but then I found my way,  
through experience,  
of working with learners.

My own method just happened –  
evolved over time.

And I suppose  
I'm very transient  
in terms of my methods –  
I'm always tinkering  
with the way that I do things.  
I'm never happy  
with what I've done.

And if you do something one way,  
it would be boring to keep doing it the same way  
again  
and again.

Another aspect of my growth  
over the years, I feel,

is my shift in the expectations I set for learners.

Although I have high standards for what I produce,

I have learned to be more sensitive when it comes to the work that students produce.

So, for example, when it comes to

student portfolios for accredited programmes,

I feel that

it shouldn't be about how they look

but about

the experience

and

growth in confidence

that lies behind the portfolio.

I believe that, as much as possible, students should

have as much

control

and

expression

over what they produce within the FETAC structure.

*Not-knowing as a resource*

Letting go

of this notion of the expert  
was important for my own development.

I feel that one of the things which really  
helped me develop was  
the gradual  
growth in confidence once  
I became relaxed enough

to know that I didn't have to know all the answers.

For me, it was an important step to be able to realise that  
it's not about knowing everything  
but helping people to gain the confidence  
to allow them to find the information themselves.

I felt that part of my development was being able  
to let go

of the notion of power  
the need to be in control.

It was important for me to be able to say

"I've no idea, but let's see how we can work it out".

I think I was

far more rigid about the curriculum

when I started with groups first –

that it was

more my own agenda which drove the learning.

Over the years I think

I have learned

to let go more.

But, in a way,

I drew on

my experience

in college as a mature student.

I realised back then

fairly quickly that

if I wanted to learn, I had to be vocal.

I remember a lecturer coming into one session in college.

He asked was anyone struggling  
with differentiation and integration.

It was important for him to know this for the rest of the course –  
it was the foundation for the rest of the learning.

I was the only who put up my hand

and

we spent the next few weeks doing some valuable revision.

When I was going out the door people were saying thing like

“Thank God, you put up your hand because I haven’t a clue”.

So,

I knew that

it’s important to feel that you’re in a class where  
you can say “Look, I don’t understand what you’re doing there”.

That was a real lesson for me

because it made me think about

not taking fundamental things for granted –

there is no point in me doing algebra

if everyone is struggling with fractions.

So, as I started  
to get a sense of the group I was teaching  
I asked,  
in a gentle way,  
if they'd like me to go over fractions –  
and sure enough they did.

I think being fresh out of college  
helped me understand the difficulty  
that teachers can have working out what their class is like  
and where they're at.

*Tutor experience as resource*

The first couple of classes were very disruptive

lots of shouting

bad language and

abuse

was being directed at me.

To be honest, because of my age, it didn't really bother me

age gives you a thicker skin.

If I was twenty two and just starting off in teaching,

I would've probably



run out the door the first day and  
never come back.

I could easily have reacted to any one of the things they said to me.

But I didn't.

I think it was on the second day that

someone threw an empty water bottle at me.

Instead of reacting and picking on  
the guy who threw it

I started a conversation around respect ...

'Can we just respect each other?

I know you don't want to be here.

I know you're forced to be here.

I am being paid to teach maths.

If you really don't want to be here,  
you can walk out the door.

I'm not your jailer.'

‘What’ll happen if we don’t turn up?’ a few asked.

‘I’ll need to mark you absent.’

‘But then we’ll lose our money’

‘You will. But it’s your decision.’

So,

we talked around all of this –

about

decisions and responsibilities

and I said if they decided to stay

then they’d need to show respect.

I talked about

me being prepared to show respect if they did.

I talked about

it not being school.

I talked about

it not being a school-teacher and pupil relationship.

I kept coming back to  
them being adults and  
the idea of mutual respect.

Eventually, at the next class,  
the guy who threw the bottle came to me and apologised.

Surprisingly enough, as time moved on,  
some of the tough guys, when they got a bit of confidence  
in the tasks I gave them,  
became very competitive in terms of completing tasks.

As I got to know them,  
and they got to know me,  
things started to get better.

Involving them in the actual teaching  
turned out to really work.

I started to involve them in coming up to the board and  
letting them explain to the others how to do a task.

They started to feel that

they were coming to my level

or

I was coming to their level.

We started to

work more as one.

A lot of it came down to

just

seeing the

students as people

with complex and

often difficult lives

I think that

my laid back nature, age and life context

was part of being able to deal with it.

I think

hearing my story

helped make the group work well.

I felt that I needed to do  
something different  
something to keep myself sharp.

Part of my reason for getting more experience  
with younger adults is that  
I think that the profile of our learners  
is changing and I felt that  
I need to stay on top of it as well.

You can get very comfortable  
teaching older learners  
how to use computers for years on end.

It's  
a whole different mindset  
to the teaching I've been doing up to now with adults in terms of  
preparation and classroom management.

It can be very demanding in the classroom.

They're young, they're fast,  
and they know everything.

It can be hard to slow them down

to get them to learn.

It was

stressful

starting off with this group last year

but it also made me think about

how much we need to challenge ourselves.

If we're too comfortable,

then there must be something wrong.

I'm not sure

what kept me going initially

because I did find it stressful

– maybe I stuck at it

because I saw the value in it.

But I needed to shift too.

I had to

shift my expectations in terms of

working with young adults.

When I had them first I think part of me felt  
that they'd welcome the opportunity to be entering an adult education environment

and that they'd be ready to learn –

but they weren't.

Maybe that was more about me –

it would have suited my planning for the sessions.

But now I see that

a lot of making it work is about

building the

right kind of relationships

with them –

and maybe working on that

right kind of relationship

is even more important than it is with older learners.

Young adult learners

need to feel valued –

they need so much

encouragement and affirmation.

I would love to see

more opportunities

for tutors coming together

and exchanging experiences

and resources.

But already

tutors put in a lot of development time

outside of their class contact hours.

Last year, for example,

I was teaching 15 hours a week

but there were weeks when

I was in the VEC for 30 hours.

So, although I feel that tutors' willingness

to be available outside of their contracted teaching

has been abused a little bit,



I strongly believe that tutors would come in for something peer-led and mutually supportive.

One thing that I feel could support tutor development further would be more opportunities to share experiences and practice.

Tutors are creating lots of resources individually and in isolation.

It would be great to get together more with others to discuss what worked and what didn't.

I think as a group we could support each other a bit more.

I feel that there isn't a lot of that happening at the moment.

However, my sense is that tutors are doing lots of other things – so organising the time to get together is very difficult.

I know that there are

lots of tutors who have been working for years  
and feel that  
they have their way of doing things.

They're comfortable in the routines  
they've developed and  
believe it works for them.

But I think it's  
a little bit dangerous  
to cut yourself off  
from what's going on out there.

We have to get  
out there  
and engage with the world and  
the community of tutors and learners  
out there.

For example, there's about four of us who have Junior Cert classes  
and we feel that it would be a great idea for us  
to come together to chat about  
what we're covering  
and how fast – all the stuff that we care about.

So that's another thing that's going to happen soon.

But you can see it pay off –

you see the benefit of it with your groups.

If I was in my twenties and just out of teacher training college

it could be very different.

But I've years of experience in business –

places where I had to meet customers and

deal with people all the time.

So, I suppose,

I know the power

and benefit of networking.

I really believe in

the value of tutors

learning from each other.

In fact, in the past I had

conversations with my boss in which I said that

I'd love

to have some kind of

informal discussion forum for tutors.

I feel it would be

really valuable

and I hope that it will be taken on board and happen.

I think that discussions

with other tutors

open up new possibilities.

I think it's

hugely valuable for tutors

to be talking to each other.

There can be

great conversations going on

in the ETB.

But

I don't think tutor conversations

about these kinds of things happen enough.

I don't think that meetings that are called for that purpose

actually work

because it's always

a bit too formal.

Whereas a meeting for a

coffee  
and a chat  
would be better –  
even for fifteen or twenty minutes may be enough.

... meeting face-to-face  
is much more desirable.

There is  
a value and richness  
of meeting up with each other over a  
coffee and  
just chatting –  
where tutors can pick up all  
the experiences of people and  
learn about, and share,  
the stuff that works  
with learners.

Generally, I feel that there is  
a lack of opportunity for professional development.

*Challenges for developing tutor communities*

Tutors try to be in the moment

when they're there and

then they're gone.

What's more,

tutors probably need to take control

in creating these opportunities themselves.

Despite the lack of practice-sharing opportunities,

I still feel that, at some level, there is

a sense of commonality across the tutor body

as everyone is coming from

the same mindset of facilitation

and trying to create

the right spaces for adults to learn.

But there is

very little space for tutors

to sit down and

share that practice themselves.

So, despite knowing tutors for years and

working there for years, I feel that there  
isn't a sense of tutors all working together.

It's not that tutors are unwilling to  
share practice

and

experience.

The difficulties

may be partly contractual

as I, like all tutors,

am not on a full-time contract

but a per-hour one.

Despite being there for a long time,

this does make me

feel less permanent and

in some way more isolated.

I really feel that there is

a missed opportunity for tutors to support each other

and learn from each other.

I'm not quite sure what the solution might be.

It may be that there needs to be a mandatory monthly meeting of tutors for which they  
get paid.

Tutors would gladly  
come in without pay  
for things like an informal  
tutor peer group.

We did try to get a small discussion group going  
at one stage but

it just seemed to  
fizzle out after a bit –  
I'm not even sure why.

*Finding the spaces for peer conversations*

When I started first

I didn't know anyone down at the VEC –  
but as I've been doing more work

I've started to get to know more tutors  
by hanging around and  
chatting during breaks and  
doing photocopying.

So I starting going to the ETB to do my preparation for sessions.



And as I'm in there I just chat to different tutors –

not just about my subject –

about

what I'm doing and

what they're doing.

Just by

using the VEC space

to do that work, you start to meet other people.

But I think that important  
practice-sharing conversations

do take place between tutors

over photocopiers

and at break-times.

These conversations are

informal and irregular

but can be

highly beneficial.

And it really starts to open up if

you start talking to other tutors

about what you're doing –

they then start talking  
about what they're doing.

Talking about basic stuff –

stuff that works.

I've also made connections from the post-grad  
that I did recently and myself and another tutor are  
going to meet up with other tutors  
who are starting their post-grad somewhere else.

But our initiatives to get together ourselves  
may never have happened  
if our ALO didn't facilitate  
that kind of culture.

So much of the  
work has to be done  
at home because  
there is no space for us  
to do that

there really isn't that facility.

Another problem comes down to

time and timing.

People aren't generally free

at the same time

for these conversations to happen.

And if you are taking time out to do that,

then it's time you are not getting paid.

I would do

most of my preparation work

at home.

It would be nice to have

a space

to go and have a chat about things

in a bit of privacy

or somewhere where you're

not bothering others.

*Key people in supporting growth*

A lot of that

sense of our community and

value as tutors

comes from our ALO.

She is fabulous.

She's there if you need her

but she trusts us as well.

So, we're brought together as tutors quite often to

work on something that helps with our teaching.

But the deeper benefit in that

is bringing us together as a group.

I have been working with the same CEF with the ETB

for the last seven or eight years and

she has being fantastic

in working to develop a timetable

that works for me. She is really

well-respected

by students and tutors alike. She is

particularly

supportive of tutors.

I think that the

relationship

between the CEF and the tutor is really important –

Another source of support for me in the ETB space where I work

is the porter,

Frank.

I don't see much in terms of other tutors,

but Frank is there every time I come to work

and always cheers me up

with some words of

moral support.

He's a bit like my dad in a way.

But generally,

in terms of the work that I do with the ETB,

I work pretty much alone.

*Cultures for growth*

... our centre has run a couple of

learner conferences

and

learner/tutor conferences

in hotels in town and

these conferences are great

in just

bringing everyone together

to discuss what works and what doesn't.

I don't think enough places

facilitate spaces for tutors to come together

and to just let the conversations happen

- to do that is invaluable.

There is a strong sense of

community of tutors in our centre.

I have talked to people in other centres and

it seems to be non-existent

which shows me

just how good it is in our place.

It would be nice to have a space

but we get by.

If we need a room or a space,

we can usually work that out –

we still manage to collaborate as tutors  
when we need to.

Generally, I would talk to  
a core group of tutors that I felt comfortable with  
about stuff that came up.

So what we,  
the part-time tutors, learned over time,  
was to just to  
keep our conversations to ourselves.

There was  
certainly no institutional system or process  
to support tutors.

But  
having a space  
where tutors could meet  
informally and  
just chat through things  
that they are doing and coming up against  
would be really useful.  
I would link in with the tutors  
in the centre

a bit when I'm there.

But this is usually

moments grabbed

between classes

or on breaks

and, again, there can be

the problem of

getting a space

to talk about things.

It's unrealistic

for the FE sector to think that they can have

high quality and professional courses

without investing in the teaching staff

to develop and run these programmes.

If, instead, they are employing people on

precarious and short-term contracts,

well then, that will be

reflected in the quality



of the programmes they offer.

Each learning centre or college has its own culture.

Some cultures,

when it comes to part-time tutors,

are very much

'them and us'.

But it differs

between various centres and colleges.

One of the centres where I work

has a very inclusive culture

where everyone chats to one another.

In other places it can

even be difficult getting into the staff room.

In one place in particular

I remember a real sense of being

just one of the blow-in tutors.

This pervading sense of

unfriendliness

had nothing to do with the learners.

In fact, the learners often commented  
upon the culture themselves.

I witnessed this

hostile and cold culture

there across all staff from

the porter up to the principal.

In fact, so strong was that feeling that

I wouldn't be arsed going back

to that centre again.

Although this was an extreme case,

I have had experiences of degrees in between.

Tutors

though can often be made to feel,

intentionally or not,

somehow excluded

from the broad life or

community of an institution.

I know there has been

a lot of change going on recently  
at the institutional level with VECs becoming ETBs  
but things are really horrendous.

The communication with tutors is very poor.

I know there is a lot going on now with  
change  
but that's no excuse –  
we were around for a long time before any  
change.

A big organisation should be able to look after all their staff  
and that attitude towards  
tutors and adult education  
can be changed from the top.



Part Three

A clearing



Wandering through the Devil's Glen, Wicklow ...  
a slow move towards methodological congruence.





**I**t was a couple of months before we finally got out for the walk we had promised each other for so long. The walk which brought us to now. The walk in which we hoped that we could bring all our knowledge, experience, interest and passion together to see a way forward for all this.

I picked you up early outside Tesco. With that imperceptible nod of yours, you slid into the front seat – your forehead already furrowed with deep thought.

- You ok?

- Grand. Just thinking.

- Oh.

I left it there. And as you settled beside me, you were already shifting to what lay ahead of us.

- The Devil's Glen then?

- The Devil's Glen.

- Why there?

- Well, I think we need higher ground for a bit. A bit of space, some perspective to think this through. And there're loads of trails crossing each other, so hopefully we'll get lost a bit.

- Hopefully.

- Yeh, you'll like it – the landscape is dotted with poetry.

- Oh.

- I'm not speaking metaphorically for once. There is a Seamus Heaney walk that loops through the hills – every now and then there's a bench with a Heaney couplet on it. ... He lived in Glanmore ... on the edges of the wood.

- The Glanmore sonnets?
- The very same.
- 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' ...
- That's right .... 'filling the stillness with life' (Heaney, 2006).

And so we let stillness fill us for a bit as we edged out of Wicklow towards Rathnew.  
After a few minutes a question settled upon you.

- So today then. What do we need to ...

But the sudden intrusion of the too-familiar beep and accompanying amber fuel light  
on the dashboard killed your question before it could even form.

- What's that?
- I'm low on petrol. .... It's grand. ... I'll get another forty miles at least.
- Should we ...?
- No, no. We'll be grand. Anyway, I can't fill it up 'til Thursday.
- Thursday?
- Yeh, Eilidh gets paid then.
- Right.

So, we left your question hang between us un-formed for now and drove the few miles  
to the woods in silence. Out of Wicklow and Rathnew, over the N11 and through the  
lush environs of Ashford. Leaving the village, ascending slowly at first, and then more

dramatically, we moved from the coast and into the first contours of what becomes the mountains of Wicklow.

Instead of driving in the mile or so to the car park, we parked at the entrance.

It was late Spring, and the woods sparkled a memory of recent rain.

We joined a track that rose quickly through a steep and soft carpet of needles amongst the pine – passing commissioned landscape art that fought a bit, or maybe surrendered itself willingly, to philistine natural growth.

We must have walked for about twenty minutes before we started up again ... our bodies and minds now relaxed and finding a rhythm within themselves - amongst the smells, sights and sounds of the woods.

Forgetting, for a time, discordant amber fuel warning signs. Forgetting things which caused foreheads to crease so early in the morning. Forgetting everything before, and after, this perambulatory moment (Hall, 2009; Gros, 2014).

- So, where now?

- Well, I think you were starting to ask me in the car about what we needed to talk through today.

- Yeh.

- Isn't it obvious?

Taking stock

- Maybe. .... let's see ... in Belfast we walked through a kind of theoretical development. A sense of where you are coming from with all this.

- Right. And what did you get out of that?

- Well, we talked and walked a fair bit and I suppose at the heart of all of it was this notion of troubling the subject. How your thoughts developed about the writing

subject, the reading subject, the colonial subject, the national subject, the gendered subject. And the role of language in constructing these subjects. And how, after the linguistic turn, that unproblematic representations of lived realities can have troubling significance (Saussure, 1960; Joyce, 1968; Davies, 2007).

- Right. And that, in textual representation, this breaking down of the all-knowing writer re-presenting the world for a passive reader is really interrogated by the likes of Barthes (1968), Cixous (1976), Kristeva (1986a), Irigaray (1985) and Moi (1985). Their criticism really creates this sense of a troubled subject. And it's through work like this that we see the intersection of language, power and identity ... a sense of feminist and postcolonial voices, voices from the margins, dislocating the authority of the writing subject ...

- But at the same time as being troubled, you seem to have found ways through all of this via some of these critics.

- Yes ... so the notion of phallogocentrism – this patriarchal allegiance to the monolithic and unproblematically-representational word, the logos, is really taken apart and questioned by, for example, *l'écriture féminine* (Irigaray, 1985; Cixous, 1976; Kristeva, 1986a; Moi, 1985).

- Which is, as Kristeva, suggests (1986b), and Smyth performs (1989), a more revolutionary poetics – a pre-Oedipal mode of representation which embraces non-linearity, attendance to somatic epistemologies, difference, contradiction and playfulness – something which really shatters that sense of the all-knowing, authoritative subject. And combining some of this with Bakhtin (1981) too that there seems to be some hope for a textual notion of subjecthood which embraces dialogic forms of meaning-making ... dialogic-texts and intertextuality. That meaning is played out through language ... it is never fully present but suggested in the play of texts. Our subjecthood is, in fact, intertextual – we are intertextual subjects.

- Right ... but ... haven't we talked though this before.

- Of course. But bear with me ... don't forget, I am, just about, an educator and part of the purpose of this whole thing is trying hard to embody educators' ways of knowing.

- I don't see the point.

- So ... that how we know is really tightly interwoven with our practice. So that this is as much a learning text as a text about knowledge.

- And?

- And that means that, as a learning text, it will re-trace itself constantly – learning is, or should be, recursive and reflective – we edge forward very slowly by re-tracing the things we think we know already. So, I know that all this may seem repetitive to you, that things are never fully dealt with ... but to me that's what learning, adult learning looks like ... we go forward, we go back over things, and inch forward again ... always moving but never quite arriving.

- Jaysus ... don't say that?


- What?

- Never arriving. After all this feckin' walking we better arrive somewhere. ... But I suppose your point is that we may have talked about this before, but we are still learning it ...

- Yes ... and still getting to know it – still walking our knowledge. And you and me will re-trace much of these paths long after this walking tour come to an end.

- Jaysus.

- Yeh.



... as a learning text, this will re-trace itself constantly – learning is, or should be, recursive and reflective – we edge forward very slowly by re-tracing the things we think we know already. ... but to me that's what learning, adult learning looks like ... we go forward, we go back over things, and inch forward again ... always moving but never quite arriving.

We had been taking turns in the track without much thought as we went. But we paused at an intersection which offered three ways. I glanced over and saw you looking down a track which suggested the promise of some native deciduous trees amongst the planted coniferous. We continue, without words passing, in the direction of your gaze.

- So that was Belfast. And then we had Edinburgh?
- Yes. What did you get out of that walk?
- Well, I saw that Edinburgh is a beautiful city. And I'm still not sure if I forgive you by tantalizing me with such views from the top of that hill and then dragging me out to that banal industrial estate.
- But that was where I worked and lived. That was the landscape that we needed to walk. And anyway, we ended up where you wanted to be in the end.
- I suppose.
- And what Edinburgh revealed, or started to reveal was my values, my knowledge as an educator. This wasn't so apparent to me when I started first when I started working in education - I didn't see the connections between the cultural knowledge of my Belfast walk and my practice as an educator. And I think I've only started to see it through this but what I can see now, in my practice, was this draw to activities and cultures which decentred oppressive authorities ... the destabilisation of the teacher as the omniscient author and learners as passive readers of that process ... starting to see connections in my values and practice with critical educators in particular (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Kincheloe, 2008; Giroux, 2010)
- In fact, I think Freire frames the teacher-student relationship in those terms .. as authors and audience ... doesn't he?
- He does. He refers to the 'narrative character' of education and posits, in traditional and oppressive forms of education, 'a relationship [which] involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)' (Freire, 1996, p. 52). But I didn't frame it in those terms at first. Again, it's only through this careful retracing can I see the intersections of my practice and theory – if they are even separate as both my practice and theory aspires to being critical reflective – they exist in the same place. As does this. And this question of the subject in education is something that other critical educators come back to again and again (hooks, 1994; Ryan, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008; Connolly, 2013). But, then as I keep saying, I think it's only through all this walking that I start to really see myself as, or aspire to being, a critical educator.

- Your slow becoming (Horton & Freire, 1990; Jephcote, et al., 2008; O'Neill, M. et al., 2014)?
- Something like that ... or maybe unbecoming (Colley, et al., 2007).
- Ok ... try to be positive ... Another thing that interested me is the way you talked about educational meaning being created dialogically ... to me it sounded very like the way you saw meaning being created in culture – art, literature – the dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) .. would that be right?
- Maybe ... I suppose what draws me to some of these critical educators that I have just mentioned is the connections that they make between the social, personal and cultural .....
- And political?
- Yeh ... that's right, I am very conscious of power and strive to democratise as much as I can the various learning spaces I inhabit as an educator. And underlying this effort for more dialogic spaces and practice is that sense that meaning, knowledge is never created, held in any one person, but across and between the spaces of learners and teachers ...
- So to me that has resonances of this intertextual way of knowing, or being, that you keep going on about ... a kind of heteroglossaic and polyphonic of learning ... an intertextuality of experiences (Bakhtin, 1981; Kristeva, 1986a).

But I might be getting ahead of myself here. My point, for now, is that in letting stories mix we are trying to validate the knowledge that people have. And make the point, without a sense of condescension, that the experiences learners bring is knowledge and we need to embrace something like epistemic humility or the potential of negative capability (Freire, 1996; Warnock, 2011; McCormack, 2013) to really allow that to happen – to go beyond tokenism. And with that comes passion, feeling, care, love is important in knowledge ... education (Freire, 1996; Irigaray, 1985; Noddings, 1996). All of that is in the mix.

- That's a lot ... You talked earlier, in Belfast I think, about the play of language, power and identity – almost as a kind of theoretical frame. Has that evolved?

- I think so ... I might add knowledge to that mix now ... this interplay between all four: knowledge, language, power, identity. I think from early on that I saw my inquiry taking place in that space ... remember the graphic I put together which tried to capture that (Figure 2)?

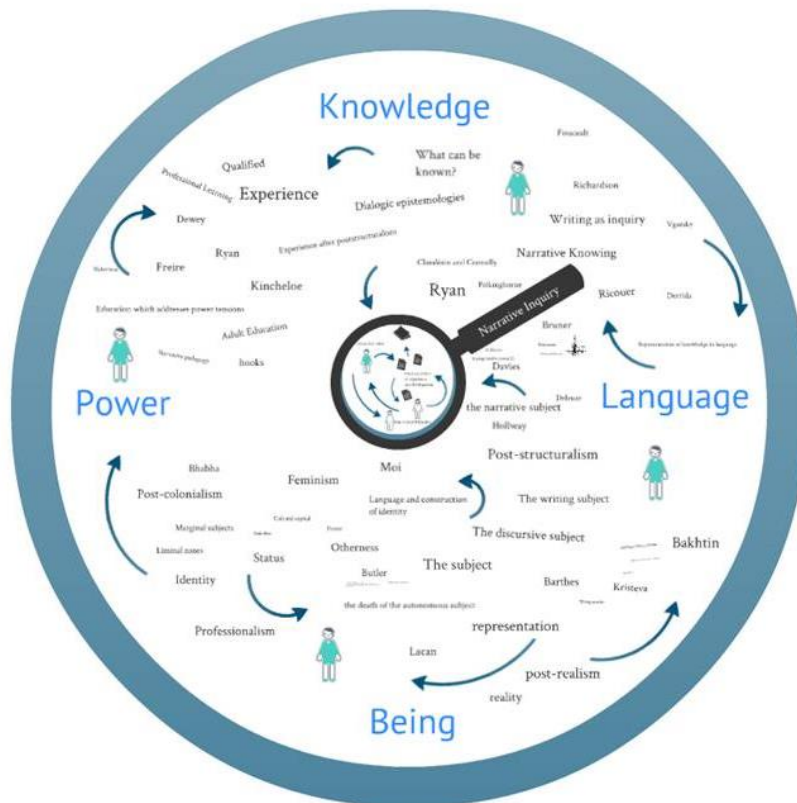


FIGURE 3

... But then I think, as I moved forward through this, that I replaced ‘identity’ with the ‘subject’ ... or, no ...that’s not it ... maybe that’s what we become when we enter that space ... it’s the interplay which creates the subject ... maybe our subjecthood, our sense of self comes from this interplay of the three elements of knowledge, language and power ...

*The play of the personal*



- So, then can we say then that your knowledge as an adult educator is somewhere in the place between the theoretical and practice?

- I think that's too simplistic. For one remember that there are not as separated as you think and that theory is, as Eagleton put it, merely 'practice bending back on itself' (1996). Or maybe as McNiff and Whitehead see educator theory as something different to sociological or psychological theories – it draws on the them but shouldn't assume an intellectually inferior status (Whitehead, 1989; McNiff, 2007; McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). McNiff rages against an epistemological apartheid that delineates the 'high-value' knowledge of research and the low-status value of practitioner knowledge:

to set up a regime whereby knowledge itself is used as a marker of symbolic power is one of the most flagrant violations of the concepts of social justice.

(McNiff, 2007, p.317)

And Whitehead, going back further, resists the dominance, but doesn't reject, the 'propositional' framing of educational theory and instead argues for 'a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer' which is based on practitioner desire to improve as educators – to develop a situated theory based on the question 'How do I improve my practice' (Whitehead, 1989, p.42)? A question, that has always been at the heart of my own work and development as an educator ... a question that led me to you ... to here.

- So, our theory of educators is largely drawn on our practice. Is that not unlike Freirean notions of *praxis* - reflection combined with action (Freire, 1996, p. 68)?

- There is a similarity but with Freire, and critical education in general, there is the extra dimension ... that we engage in reflection on our lives, our practice in order to transform it ... that there is some teeth, a sense of social purpose in our reflections ... something that take us out of our heads ... and again that's what attracts me to both critical pedagogy and feminist criticism ... it balances the personal with the social, the political ... contextualises our stories within a larger social narrative. And again I really

don't see a huge distinction between the knowledge, theory and practice for this – this whole inquiry, this journey is, the way I see it, as much a learning act as a research act ... it is a practitioner inquiry ... its knowledge and theory is that of a developing educator rather than 'an early-career researcher' ...

- So your knowledge, the knowledge that holds this together-

- tentatively ..


- However, tentatively ... the knowledge that holds this tighter is more than this blend of theory and practice ... .. but I'm also wondering a bit about the personal ... is there a space for the personal?

- Yes and I suppose that's pretty obvious to you now but it wasn't very clear to me until I started work on this ... but working and playing away, behind, below and beneath this reflection and engagement with practice and theory, the personal is always there ... the invisible stuff that we barely ever name. And this self-censorship, this silencing only started to reveal itself through this perambulatory archaeology ... again working on two plains .... forward and back ... but in the making of a way, a track, the uncovering of the earth beneath ..

- And what was revealed then?

- Well ... the sedimentary layers of personal experience, knowledge ... All the stuff that I spend my time telling students has value, the stuff of their lives that is knowledge ... and I find I am, or was anyway, as guilty myself of edging out, demoting the personal ... the invisible work, which we talked about before, still can be invisible to me ... it troubles me ... it serves to remind me how strong the bind of patriarchal and neoliberal notions of masculinity and occupation are (Daniels, 1987).

But I had glimpses early on that the personal would play out, somehow, in all this:



... this silencing only started to reveal itself through this perambulatory archaeology ... again working on two plains .... forward and back ... but in the making of a way, a track, the uncovering of the earth beneath ..

17/12/12

*And another thing about the research ... I think that it's becoming clear to me that part of the whole significance of the PhD is coming up with some form of authentic mode of research which is, not unique, but peculiar to my own ontology and epistemology.*

*(O'Neill, 2010-2015)*

So, slowly, very slowly, it is starting to become more clear to me that my knowledge then, comes in the interplay of these three domains, the stories that I am enacting in these three worlds ... the personal, the work that I try to do as an educator, and what I read, what I write – the scholarly stuff ... I move in and out of those constantly ... they are not delineated ... there is flux between them ... each one textured by the other.

#### The emergence of a triskelion epistemology

I stopped for a drink. Sitting on a felled tree and rummaging through the mess of my rucksack, I wondered vaguely why I carried so much crap that I didn't need with me. Why did I have half-written chapters of this and dozens, or so it seemed, notes from the boys' school in my bag? Why can't I be the kind of person who has clearly-delineated spaces for various bits of their lives? Surely things would be a lot easier.

But I only lingered on such questions for a moment. Once I'd found the water, I came back to you and, still musing about these three interrelated epistemological domains, I found myself tracing shapes on the soft peaty earth with my finger.

You came over.

- What are you doing now?

- I love the feel, the smell of peat ... the stain it leaves on your hand ...

You crouched down beside me to watch. I continued to doodle on the earth with my finger as we talked ...

- And, you see, I'm always thinking of ways to represent complex ideas differently .. simply, artistically ...

You looked at the interlocking loops I was tracing out with my index finger on the soft earth.

- What's that?
- So I was thinking of ways to represent this kind of knowledge ... my epistemology ... which was based on flow and equity between the personal, the theoretical and practice.
- And ...
- And for a while I had thought of symbols that stood outside the positivist heritage of the enlightenment ... I thought about triadic structures and designs.

The Venn Diagram (Figure 3) seemed too rooted in the sciences and classical systems of thought ... too Euclidean maybe ... aligning too closely with dominant forms of knowledge.

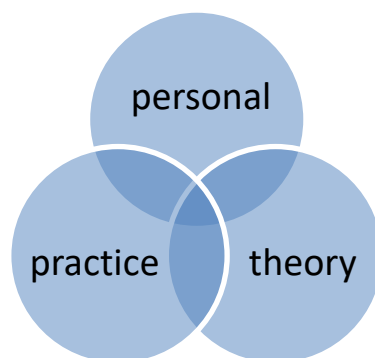


FIGURE 4

- So you want to reject classical traditions?
- No ... but to include other ways of thinking ... other ways of naming the world. Remember what we liked so much in Irigaray and Cixous all those years ago ... the possibilities we saw?

- Remind me ... I'm getting old and forgetting the important stuff ...
- That the whole project of 'writing the body' was, or could be seen, as rejecting 'either-or' epistemologies and, instead, embracing 'both-and' ways of knowing (Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1985; O'Neill, 1999).
- Oh ... I'd forgotten all that ... but it's coming back to me.
- So if we are to have the definite lines of Euclid, then we also should have the fragments of Sappho. And there is something in this notion of fragments that attracts me ... that I think offers possibilities ... but, even drawing on Sappho, we locate our thoughts within one tradition, one culture .... one line ...

I drew a single line with my finger in the peat beside the messier flow I had been working through.

- So then I started thinking that the Celtic Knot symbol (Figure 4) might represent an epistemology that stood a bit outside the neat narrative trajectories of hegemonic European knowledge. It had a triadic structure with an intersecting space between them which seemed to resonate with the overlapping of the personal, theoretical and community of practice.

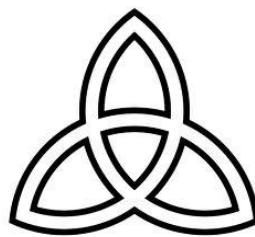


FIGURE 5 CELTIC KNOT

But then I scratched the origins of this a bit and found that, despite its Celtic design, it seems to have first appeared as a doodle in the manuscripts of Irish monks – possibly as

a way of naturalising the core belief of divine trinity in the relatively newly arrived Christianity.

- The invention of tradition goes back a bit further than I thought (Hobsbawm, 1983) ... and aren't you revealing your patriarchal modes of thinking by this constant search for origins ...

- Yeh ... I know, I know ... and I suppose this is where the likes of Foucault might come in again with assertions to resist this assumption of origins in hegemonic epistemologies and, how, instead, his genealogical method 'opposes itself to the search for "origins"' (Foucault, 1984) . And I do like that resistance to teleology – this problematising of straight lines of development ...

But then, this interrogation of words, their meanings, their origins is a type of cultural inquiry that poststructuralism enacts and, in so doing, often reveals the power at play in language which has become so invisible, so naturalised to us ...

- And I think what's interesting in what you're saying is that you seem to be circling in this Foucauldian genealogy, as Scheurich and McKenzie frame it, the body and the play of systems of rules, power in epistemological formations (2005, p. 852).

- Yeh ... and I suppose, in the end, the play of all of this put me off this notion of both of these symbols for a while ... . I did lean on a dolmen so to speak (Figure 5) – remember where we ended up in Belfast?

- The Giant's Ring? ... That's right. There was a dolmen there.

- Yeh. And dolmens were definitely something which existed on the pre-Christian Irish landscape and again it had that triadic structure which I liked ... but there is something of the logocentric static weight of the tablet of the top stone that made me wary of embracing it ... something not unlike a monolith ...

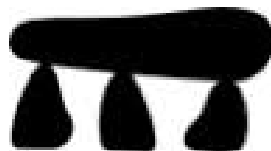


FIGURE 6

- Yeh .. but a usurped monolith ... held up, or carried away, by the many ...
- .. Maybe you're right ... I like that ... but anyway, I seem to be settling on something else ...
- What?
- The triple spiral or the triskelion (Figure 6): it has the sense of flow and interconnectivity that I was looking for. It also suggests an indigenous epistemology, or at least a counter-hegemonic one, that I felt was important as a counter balance to enlightenment knowledge (Four Arrows, 2008).



FIGURE 7 - TRISKELION

And the triskelion spiral can be found in Newgrange ... but also in many other countries. So I like its transnational aspect – that our authentic Irish culture is, in fact, a shared one – not as unique as some would like to believe. Of course, it also pre-exists the national anyway. And maybe what I like most is the lack of knowledge, the ambiguity about and around its original meaning ... again it seems to play with that the thirst for origins in meaning which seems, now, just one way of seeing knowledge – and a way wedded to patriarchal ways of knowing (Moi, 1985). Why do we, why do I, still struggle to accept the possibility of shared and indistinct origins and multiple meanings?

- Because the alternative is messy?

- Maybe you're right.
- I've heard somewhere that the spirals represent legs moving ... possibly running?
- Or maybe walking for us?
- Yeh .. but ...
- What?
- Is there no something closed about it the flows ... is there no way in and out?
- No ... there are entry points in as well that allow for entry and exit ...

I stooped down and took your hand to trace the lines on the soft earth leading out and away from the spiral.

- Ok ... I think I see them ... but ...but why bother at all with this?
- Why spend time on symbols?
- Yeh ...
- Well ... why ... I think at first it helps in the conceptualization of the whole project in lots of ways ... to tattoo or inscribe this symbol on these texts is partially to acknowledge something wider and more ancient than the euro-centric project of the university and enlightenment .. is deeper and older (Four Arrows, 2008)... And there are traces too in old Irish history of triadic ways of envisioning learning and development for scholar-poets (Corkery, 1967; Cork Gamelan Ensemble, 2015). And again this cultural diversifying of knowing gives us that sense of humility when it comes to knowledge that I mentioned before (Freire, 1996, p. 71) ... we are not working teleologically and evolutionary towards greater knowledge (Foucault, 1984; Done, et al., 2011) ... but backwards and forwards at the same time ... and down through the surface, through the sediment (Massey, 2002) ... but our knowledge, acknowledges older knowledge ... and with that wisdom ... that adds an ethics and a sense of sustainability to that knowledge ... a connection to the earth ... it displaces the



knowledge from our heads, spreads it through our bodies as Cixous (1976), Kristeva (1986a) and Ryan (2001) would surely improve, and locates it ....

- ... in our feet? You mentioned 'walk our knowledge' earlier.

- Yeh. In our feet. But throughout our bodies and beyond ...

- Beyond?

- Yeh ... again, we need to get away from this isolated and individualised notion of knowledge. That it happens in our heads – heads locked up in our offices or rooms. Why not, instead, imagine knowledge flowing in us and the ground we walk on ... and through?

We rose at these words and started walking again – but maybe both of us now more aware of the significance of our walking and its relationship to the lines that flowed out of our inquiry.

- And so, from early on I tattooed (Power, 2014) these pages with a triskelion header to help me write through anxieties about times when you might question me whether all this, my performing knowledge was 'theoretical enough' ... it serves to remind me to remind you that my knowledge, for what it is, walks, runs and stumbles between the three ...

- The personal, theoretical and practice? So is that what inhabits the three domains of the spiral?

- Yeh - sometimes. A symbol I suppose of the fluid and non-unitary character of my epistemology ... it reminds me to declare this *isb* my knowledge (Cairns & Richards, 1995) - how could my knowledge be anything else? So like Shakespeare's Macmorris, my language is both familiar and strange at the same time.

- Macmorris?

- Yeh ... a rare Irish voice in a Shakespeare play who feels troubled enough about his connection to a collective identity to ask 'What ish my nation?'

- Oh ... I get you – *what ish my nation-what ish my knowledge*: both contested ... both liminal?

- Yeh, something like that. My point is that I haven't worked in the academy for the last twenty years – I came to the academy after years of teaching. And even then, I came to university as a student and to teaching as a mature student ... So any knowledge I have has been in constant motion between my roles, my experiences as a son, a friend, a student, a lover, a father, a grandson, a husband ... a failed sound-engineer, a wannabe musician, a low-paid clerk, a union organiser, an immigrant, an emigrant, a legal alien, a further education teacher in Scotland and a precarious education worker in Ireland ...

- and a researcher?

– ... a researcher? Maybe, although it's not a title that fits comfortably with me yet. I think a critical educator is a researcher ... always inquiring into practice and its contexts. And sure what else is this except one prolonged act of critical and creative reflection? So I think to say 'adult educator' assumes an inquiring subjectivity as well ... I like how Freire in one of his last interviews refers to himself as an 'epistemologist' (Freire, 1996) ... that's how he sees himself as he looks back on his life and work. And an epistemologist seems to cover both educator and researcher. But I prefer the word 'inquiry' to 'research' anyway.

... but anyway, you're dragging me away again ... all those relationships, all those identities – my knowledge, the knowledge, all these personal and occupational narratives that underpin all that is claimed here is intertextual and at play in these spaces ... anything that gets done here is working through that spiral ... through that prism ...

- Or the 'cracked looking-glass' (Joyce, 1968)?

- Ah, very good, you are listening after all ... but again tempting me away from my point - stay focused.

- So ... if your knowledge exists in this play of the personal, communal, theoretical .... and you're only seeing it, this play and interplay, now so far into it the inquiry ... so I suppose one of the outcomes of the inquiry is, already, a sense of clarity of what your knowledge, what adult educator knowledge looks like ....

- And this, if you want to frame it like that, is a finding ... this sense of naming my knowledge .. remember, what is our knowledge? But seeing this, really seeing it and accepting it, took deep and long narrative and autobiographic reflection ... there is no quick way to get to this point.
- There is something in taking it slow.
- There is ... and there may be just the hint of a movement to advocate for slowness in universities (O'Neill, M., et al., 2014; Mountz, et al., 2015) ... to acknowledge the role that it plays in the evolution of knowledge:

slowing down represents both a commitment to good scholarship *and* a feminist politics of resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university  
(Mountz, et al., 2015).

So that slowing down is not just beneficial to the self and to the emergence of knowledge but that it is also, in the context of neoliberalising forces in education, a political act. As Maggie O'Neill, et al. (2014) suggest, slowness need to be viewed, and explored critically, as a possible way to disrupt the project of the neoliberal university to affect radical change (p. 3).

- So, all this is living, walking advocacy for slowness ?
- Yeh. Maybe.
- But just to come back for a second ... you said, just now, 'our' knowledge when I was talking about yours ...
- But that's the point ... don't you see that? This is important. My point is that my knowledge is really something insignificant ... it only becomes something with substance, with energy and possibilities when it becomes 'our' knowledge ... a dialogic knowledge. I'm sure I've talked before about only really feeling close to something called knowledge in spaces where critically reflective dialogue is enacted ... when the knowledge exists between those present, those engaged... tutors, learners, researchers, participants, mothers, fathers, children ... whoever ...

- So you don't see your knowledge as something located exclusively in you ... so to speak ... it seems to contradict the things you say about embodied knowledge?
- I do think knowledge is embodied in you and me but I also feel that it comes to life, is invoked, in our exchange, in our intersections, our dialogue ...
- And if I wasn't here?
- If you weren't here it would be hollow words ... it would be me talking to myself ... thousands and thousands of words of just me talking to myself ... writing for myself ... although I would be conscious of you (sorry not you, but *you*) looking over my back ... I

... knowledge is embodied in you and me but I also feel that it comes to life, is invoked, in our exchange, in our intersections, our dialogue ...

would be engaged in the very forms of phallogocentric discourse that was revealed to me as a site of oppressive assertion of power ... and isn't that a kind of madness?

- What?

- Talking or writing to and for yourself for so, so long?

- It's traditionally the way these things run.
- Yeh. Traditionally. ... And many women were locked up and deemed mad for their attempts at breaking through to new forms of expression ... for resisting tradition (Gilman, 1913; Gilbert & Gubar, 1980)... breaking the laws of the father (Lacan & Fink, 2006) ...

We walked in silence for a bit around the back of the hill through the Coillte forest tracks and past a patch that had recently been felled by something which, by the tracks and scars on trees and exposed rock, suggested the presence of significant mechanical violence. It was, after all, a commercial wood and there was money to be made in it all.

The trees had become sparse around the track and a view westward towards Roundwood and the gentle mountains beyond opened up.

- Why is this place called the Devil's Glen?
- Well ... I think that, before the reservoir went in up near Roundwood and tamed the Vartry a bit, that the sheer unfettered force of the river plunging down the gorge below us created some kind of unearthly roar that, some said, sounded like the scream a devil might make. .... I think. But I may be misremembering that.

The loudest noise now was our own footsteps echoing on the gravel track through the woods.

#### In search of a method to match

- So I think I get now that the epistemological base, if I can use that term –
- ‘Base’ seems a bit fixed, a bit too stable ... a bit militaristic too now that I think of it.
- Ok then the epistemological ... eh ... space? ... where all this comes from is a fluid place where knowledge exists in flow between subjects and between the personal, the social ... is that right?
- Yeh ... I said practice or community but you can say social if you like ... it would be hypocritical of me to tie you down too fast to any one signifier ... but yeh ... it has that social element ... the subject engaged dialogically in practice, as a community ... yeh ... remember the spiral routes of the triskelion allow things in and out as well as circulating around internally ... there are two routes ...
- Ok .. stop talking for a second I'm trying to tie this down a bit ...
- Interesting choice of words ...
- Jesus will you just shut up! Just let me get this clear ... .. so you are working off this epistemological triple spiral which allows flow of meaning and knowledge between the personal, social and theoretical ...?
- That'll do for now ... But ... I think it's important for me to make the point that I didn't see this in the beginning ... I may see it more clearly now ... but I came to the

PhD without that sense of the worth of any of the personal knowledge really ... or if I did not the worth for it in a scholarly inquiry ... I came believing that I needed to become a social scientist ... And maybe to an extent I tried to be that person ... take on that identity ... I felt I had to learn I had to become a social scientist.

- Why was that?

- Well a big part is that education is firmly situated in the social sciences and, as such, comes under that academic sphere – that gaze.

- So I started off in that position, writing and reading social scientifically (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bernstein, 1996; O'Neill, 2011).

- And what was the problem with that?

- I suppose that, to be honest, that at the heart of it, in more ways than one, was that the stuff that I read and wrote left me cold ... I knew I could write in that way. I had adopted that kind of voice before in the humanities (O'Neill, 2001). But I didn't know if I had the heart for it now – not after everything we've been through.

But, again, I'm not even sure I was aware of that even then ... I just kept going. Kept exploring the standard texts on social science research (Mason, 2002; Creswell, 2003; Silverman, 2011). Kept looking for a way that resonated with me.

And don't forget that this working out and through a methodology that was consistent with my ontology, epistemology, my values and practice was stimulated by the pedagogic space that I entered on the doctoral programme – a critical and feminist learning space (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996; Connolly, et al., 2007) that practiced its theory by encouraging us to unearth the knowledge and the positions we brought with us into the programme.

And, in this slow unearthing, I did come across things which suggested the possibility of a way forward ... so for example, Kincheloe, et al. (2011) positions the critical educator within qualitative research as someone who imagines an inquiry informed by 'critical bricolage' – a call to keep the critical gaze open to multiple approaches ... and to draw on the full range of experiences and knowledge that are available. And this notion of the researcher as a 'bricoleur' is reasserted by Denzin and Lincoln when they stress that interpretive practice is an emerging practice in which

The interpretive bricoleur understands the research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 6)

And there were resonances of this sense of the uncertainty in Schostak who drew on cartographic metaphors to explain the early stages of inquiry:

For any researcher, then, no matter how experienced, the starting point is in a sense a process of making maps without at first knowing what the project is to be a map of: the appropriate format of a map; and whether or not a map constrains, biases, leads one astray or opens up possibilities where none had previously been seen

(Schostak, 2002, p. 3).

- I'd say you were delighted to stumble across that metaphor given your penchant for maps, landscapes and power (Daniels, 1998; O'Neill, 2001)?

- I was, I was ... and in the end I couldn't avoid landscapes and mapping could I?

But at the beginning of this I held on close to the possibilities in these readings .. that sense of embracing not-knowing ... an explorative inquiry. And I also listened to voices like Mason who stressed the importance of going right back to fundamental things like values, purposes. Although acknowledging the interpretivist dimension of qualitative research, she encourages us not to get paralysed by postmodern reflexivity (2002, p. 6).

- And how do we avoid that? Or should we?

- Well, I'm not convinced we should, but she comes up with simple and basic prompts to help focus the beginning qualitative inquirer ... questions which help us, helped me, to focus on things like 'why am I doing this?' and 'what is the nature of the thing under

investigation?' But she also acknowledged the play of power and encourages us to engage in the 'politics of qualitative research' (p. 20).

And Mertens too encourages reflection on fundamental questions in starting out:

Before you start worrying about the research question, you think 'who am I and what do I value?

(Mertens, 2009)

- So, in these, it seems that researcher subject is forefronted in all this? Is made very visible?
- Yeh ... but I'm a very slow learner and I understood that to a point but hadn't yet, embodied that in the work I was trying to do ... not completely anyway.

#### Narrative as method

- Ok ... let's go back a bit ... so you were interested in the experience of adult educators working in VECs or ETBS or whatever they are now ... and you wanted to explore these tutors' experiences of growth ... or development. Right?
- Yeh.
- But you were left cold by more traditional social scientific modes of inquiry ...
- I suppose you could say that ... or felt that I stood at some distance from them.
- Yeh.
- But you did move forward?
- I did. I had to. I didn't have indefinite amount of time to get this done. I had a modest scholarship and small stipend for four years. I didn't have the luxury to ruminate on ontological, epistemological and methodological tensions forever.



- So?
- So. I suppose in many ways it was you who sent me off on a path that led, eventually, to all this?
- Me?
- Yeah. You probably don't remember, but during all my early dialogic wandering in the seminar space you must have recognised something in my methodological discomfort and my leaning on the epistemologies of the arts.
- I don't remember. Why do you say that?
- Because, you suggested that I explore narrative inquiry as a method.
- Ok. Still don't remember. But this was useful?
- It was. Because it was that glimpse of something familiar in a methodically foreign space for me.
- Ok so then ... tell me about narrative then ... what do you mean by narrative and, I suppose, why narrative ... isn't it one of those marginal methods?
- ... Where to start ... it should, at this stage, be no major surprise to you that narrative is a mode of inquiry that I was drawn to ... after all we've talked through ...
- No ... but I'm still interested in what you have to say ..
- Well, I know I said we should resist the quest for origin, but I'm also a mass of contradictions and I think it's not insignificant that an etymological glance at the word 'narrative' brings us back, through the French word 'narratif,' and Latin verb 'narrare', to the Latin word for knowing ... 'gnarrus' ...
- So knowing and narrative, semantically at least, were once very close ...
- Yeh but somewhere along the way they got separated ...

And you might remember how I talked in Edinburgh how I seemed, even before I was aware of it, to draw on what might be called narrative pedagogy or narrative learning (Dominice, 2000; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Moon, 2010)... and even earlier, way back, in

Belfast I hinted, albeit briefly, that we are the stories we tell about ourselves (Randall, 2014).

- You did?
- I did. Remember I talked about having a narrative sensibility and my identity being created in the space between various, and very different, family histories, family stories?
- That rings a bell. Go on ..
- So Polkinghorne argues that 'narrative meaning is created by noting that something is 'part' of a whole and that something is a 'cause' of something else' (Polkinghorne, 1988).
- This sense of everything being connected that you keep coming back to ...
- Yeh, that's one way of interpreting that ... And Fleming claims that 'narrative ... offers a way of making sense of our experiences by ordering them temporally according to a theme' (Fleming, 2003, p. 1).
- Ok, so I can see then that it might start to have an attraction ... go on ....

But how does that get us to here ... to using narrative as a way of inquiry ... I mean, I'm not even sure what it means in the context of research ... it seems a bit faddish ...

- Well, maybe ... maybe ... and in fact some would see that narrative as a way of inquiry is very much a 'field in the making' (Creswell, 2007) or as Sikes and Gale put it

Narrative is a contested, complex, transitional and developing field

(Sikes & Gale, 2006)

And as Chase's useful overview contends more recently, it is 'still a field in the making' (2011, p. 221).

- So it *is* a marginal method ... is there any validity in it at all?

- Well, I'm not quite sure it's so marginal. It is, possibly, something marginal in the domain of social sciences. But I'd argue that narrative ways of knowing and inquiry into experience have been around a lot longer than the social sciences. Possibly as long as humans have been able to communicate.

- That's some claim.

- Maybe ... but think about oral, epic poetry, or even cave paintings ... ways of representing some aspect of human experience ... Think back to what Barthes said:

...narrative starts with the very history of mankind [sic] ... there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative ...

(Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237)

- So, what you are saying is that narrativity and humanity are deeply interwoven?

- Yes ... we are *homo narrans* as Niles (2010) would put it ... Scribes, oral poets told and re-told stories of collective identity for centuries ... and it was the way people came to understand their lifeworld. Through official or unofficial stories.

But I think Bruner is on to something when he sees the Enlightenment as that moment when narrative maybe lost some of its currency as a legitimate, or serious, way of knowing, understanding the world (Bruner, 1991). Or maybe it's more accurate to say, that with print, and literacy, the growth of the mechanisms of the state and religion, official stories become dominant, hegemonic. Just as the evolution of imagined communities through printing technology and literacy provides the conditions for, what became, dominant, if sometimes revolutionary, narratives of nationhood (Anderson, 1991), the same process will have created a kind of narrative apartheid - official stories, stories with power which gain currency and become naturalised as authoritative and, on the other hand, a whole heterogeneity of personal stories, folk stories, stories of the marginal – the kind of stories that the likes of Zinn (1995), Lomax (The American Folklife Center, 2004) and The Beehive Design Collective (Beehive Design Collective, 2013) seek to uncover ...

- Back to folk music again ... So you're talking about the kind of stories that folk music and collaborative narrative projects try to sustain?

- Exactly ... you are listening.

- I am. Go on ...

- So Bruner discusses how, since the Enlightenment, empiricists and rationalists have been concerned with how we can know the world – how different approaches are taken but, in this tradition, there is an assumption of a 'stable world' with a sense of knowledge, erroneously, as 'point-of-viewless' (Bruner, 1991, p. 2) . And how

... most of our knowledge about human knowledge-getting and reality-construction is drawn from the natural or physical world rather than the human or symbolic world.

(p. 4)

- And all this, of course coincides, with the Cartesian thinking subject –

- Yes ... and remember we are interested in all this in interrogating this thinking subjecthood a bit .... that who we are, our sense of self is located in the head ...

- Yes, but Bruner, and narrative scholars, question this way of knowing the world ...

- But so did the whole project of Romanticism didn't it?

- It did ... and I suppose Romanticism posited, to put it bluntly, the feeling subject in opposition to the Enlightenment's thinking subject.

- And Romantic literature and art is hardly forgotten ...

- No, but I wonder is it even considered knowledge ... I mean I think that is one aftershock of the Enlightenment ... this sense of rupturing knowledge apart .. into scientific inquiry and aesthetic craft. Richardson makes this point too about splits into creative and scientific writing (Richardson, 1994) ... and it wasn't, as Bruner sees it, until

the 1980s the social sciences, and psychology, see in narrative the possibility that narrative constructed reality as much as represented it (p. 4)

- The 1980s? But sure, hadn't modernist writers being exploring that very possibility for a hundred years (Joyce, Wolff, Elliot)? I mean you've already talked about Joyce's work creating an identity as much as representing it. And your historiographers talked about 'inventing the nation' and national identities ... creating the national subject through language, through stories of the nation (Foster, 1998)? Not to mention everything we've touched on about poststructuralism and writing the body. I mean this doesn't sound like it should be new to you.

### Narrative in education research

- Yeh, I know, I know you're right ... but again, it's a bit about scale ... or maybe positioning. If we look broadly at narrative, we can see that writers, creative inquirers, have been exploring the possibilities of that, possibly as long as there has been artists. And historiographers and cultural critics more recently. But if we look narrowly at research in education, which is where we are now, then, yes, it's all a bit more recent in terms of activity. The methods of educational research have been, traditionally, very aligned to the methods of social science not the methods of art or cultural criticism (Clandinin, 2007). We may bring our methods with us into education but we are stepping into a different epistemological and methodological world.

- Ok, so?

- So, I mentioned Clandinin and Connelly before .. how I came to them early on in my wandering in search of a method. -

- Yeh ... Clandinin and Connelly's *Narrative Inquiry* (2000)?

- That's it. In fact it's full title is *Narrative Inquiry: experience and story in qualitative research*. And what I liked about that was how they told the story of their own methodological evolution and the tensions they experienced in a collaborative project investigating Bloom's Taxonomy ... how their own thoughts on narrative as a way of

inquiry came out of the tensions and their reflections on that project (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 24-32).

- And what were the tensions?
- Well, they saw a methodological tension between the 'grand narratives' and 'narrative thinking' ... so that

In the grand narrative, the *universal case* is of prime interest. In narrative thinking *the person* in context is of prime interest

(p. 32)<sup>2</sup>

And these tensions, which they felt at first, but started to see through their reflections started to come into focus around some themes: *temporality; people; action; certainty; context.*

So, they argue that temporality is core to narrative thinking ... a sensibility that an event, a phenomena, I might add to that a subject, happens through time ... grand narrative thinking, they argue, ignores temporality.

- Ok. And people?
- Well, it seems an obvious point, but they point out that people, in process, are at the centre of educational activity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Grand narratives can de-people education until it becomes about objectives.
- Right ... objectives ... so this is the behaviourist tension in the Bloom's Taxonomy project?
- Yeh ... their concern was that people were getting lost somehow in it all.
- And a way back is to focus on their experiences ... their stories.
- Yeh ... that's it.
- So *temporality, people* ... what was it *action*?

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<sup>2</sup> Italics in original.

- Yeh ... so they argue that grand narratives reduce action (and in their context they were thinking about performances in tests) to simple-enough equations between action and cognitive level. But narrative thinking sees action as part of a much more complex, more messy terrain of people's narrative history.

And then there was *certainty*. Narrative thinking, they felt, always have multiple interpretations, whereas grand narratives are more definitive in unitary explanations and interpretations.

- And *context*?

- Well this was their fundamental issue in that project I think ... this tension around the significance, or the invisibility of context ... temporal, spatial, cultural, biographic ...

- People's experience?

- Yeh ... so experience then is the phenomenon which narrative inquirers are really interested in?

- Well, put it this way, if you are interested in exploring people's experience, how else would you do it if you weren't going to do so through their stories?

- Eh ... leave that with me ... I'm sure you could ...

- Well maybe you could ... and this focus on experience drew Clandinin and Connelly back to Dewey whom they claim is at the heart of all their educational research. In fact, the tension they encountered as researchers they see as a tension in education and education research in America that has persisted since the epistemological tensions between Dewey and his positivist and behaviourist contemporary, Edward L. Thorndike. And they saw in Dewey's continuum of experience the significance of temporality ... an experience always based on past-present-future.

And in fact the lines between narrative and experience become quite blurred for them

Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of experience. Therefore educational experience should be studied narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19).

- That reminds me of a line from *Charlotte Gray* (Faulks, 1999)...
- Really?
- Yeh ... 'she viewed life as narrative, because that was how she experienced it' (p. 18).
- Right. And it chimes with what we talked about earlier about storying our lives (Randall, 2014).
- Yeh ... but ...

- But what?

- Well, I can see this deep interconnection between experience and narrative ... but ...

- But what?

- But what happens to experience when narrative, when language gets less assured, less certain of itself, of its capacities to simply 'portray experience' ... all that stuff you talked about earlier about poststructuralists troubling representations and subjects ...

And so there are the remains, the fragments of a post-positivist narrative inquiry throughout this work. But it is disrupted and ruptured by another methodological narrative that came out of this reflection on things that sat uneasily with me

- Yeh ... you're spot on ... and, for me anyway, this is where it gets interesting-remember this was one of the three things that puzzled me from the beginning ... this question of inquiring into and representing this thing called 'experience'

- Ok ...

- I mean you're right – and this was a tension for me as I started circling narrative ways of inquiry. In one way stumbling on narrative was a relief because it brought me back to familiar epistemologies of humanities. But then, I'd left down my book-learning pen years ago with a confident sense that representing experience in story, in art, was a messy political struggle for subjecthood in which the writer and the audience, as much as the subject, were all implicated.

- So narrative was a false methodological hope for you?



- Not at all. It got me moving in the direction I wanted to go. And I did start to work with the tutor participants with a sense that I was engaged in something I was uncritically calling 'narrative inquiry'. I spent a lot of time designing and working through that. But what *narrative* actually meant or became to me shifted the further I travelled with this inquiry – the deeper I went in my own critical reflections.

And so there is the remains, the fragments of a post-positivist narrative inquiry throughout this work. But it is disrupted and ruptured by another methodological narrative that came out of this reflection on things that sat uneasily with me – even when I felt that narrative might be methodological home for me.

- So what was wrong with narrative?

- Well, there is nothing wrong with narrative. But maybe there are things about the way it was positioned within, albeit marginal to, a post-positivist epistemology that still bothered me. That narrative was used very much, by Clandinin and Connelly and others, as a method.

- And what is wrong with that? Isn't that what you were looking for?

- It was. But I was always interested in it as more than a method. More than a way of doing research. And this comes back to my original interests and positioning as learner and teacher. I was, I am, as much interested in narrative as a cultural thing - the narrative artefact. The material narrative that emerges from the process – the narrative process; the learning process; the research process. And maybe a lack of visibility of the researcher subject – their authorial position of power in the narrative project of their research.

- So thing and process? Noun and verb? ... and more visibility of the writing aspect of the research ...

- Yeh ... the dancer and the dance ... maybe.

- And you didn't see the possibility of this in your readings of narrative inquiry methods?

- Well, what I am beginning to see more clearly is how broad a church this thing called narrative inquiry is. Chase, again, refers to this too in her survey of narrative inquiry as she sees its methods diversifying into 'complexities and multiplicities' (2011, p. 431).

In fact, I'm not quite sure how useful a methodological term it is. I've attended all three of the Narrative Inquiry conferences held here in Ireland since their inception and, what strikes me, as I move between papers and workshops and keynotes is the wide variety of what people are doing and associating with narrative. So that, a very recognisable post-positivist approach, such as BNIM, sits in a conference side-by-side with the performance of aestheticized fragments of participant narratives or analyses of oral histories or discussions of narrative journalism all sit side by side.

- And that bothers you? I thought such inclusivity and heterogeneity would be your thing.

- It is. And it doesn't bother me at all. I love the diversity of subject and topics. It just makes me question the notion of some methodological taxonomical precision in something called 'narrative inquiry'. What the people attending the Narrative Inquiry conferences have in common, fundamentally, is an interest in stories and their use in developing knowledge about their subjects. And Chase again sees this common foundation in narrative methods – for her it is the shared interest in the biographic aspects of life to come to greater understanding of society and history that distinguishes it as a distinct methodological space (2011, p. 221).

- So what's the problem?

- It's not a problem. I'm just raising the question of how useful the term is - a lot of the work which unproblematically aligns itself with narrative as method, to me, seemed framed within a fairly traditional looking social scientific narrative text and project and, post-positivist epistemological position. In fact, it was often when I came to look at graduate research that used narrative inquiry as a methodological position that I came away scratching my head –

- Why?

- I think that a lot came down to how such research read and their form. To me the promise of methodological difference in the texts I read about narrative inquiry seemed missing in the research that supposedly signed up to these principles. And I was trying to see another way of doing that.

- So you had commenced an inquiry with a sense of being a narrative researcher but you were plagued by some troubling methodological thoughts ... some doubts?

-

## Troubling things

- Yeh. In fact, I was struggling with three interrelated issues ...
- And they were?
- Well, they were issues which were probably provoked by the advice that I just talked to go back to first principles (Mason,2002) to think about why I was doing all this, and to acknowledge my own biography.
- And what did that throw up?

### *Fat books on dusty shelves – a question of audience*

- I don't think I framed it as a problem as such but I suppose from the very beginning I felt I was moving in a different space than those more comfortably located within a post-positivist tradition. And, by the way, I suppose I should be clear that when I talk about post-positivism, I am using it in the way that Creswell (2009) uses it to describe research 'worldviews' and what others like Lincoln and Guba (2000) or Mertens (1998) might call 'paradigms'. So that post-positivism as a methodological and associated epistemological position aligned to the natural sciences and reflects the assumptions and methods of the study of the natural world: hypotheses; research questions; a knowable reality that can be, to an extent, objectively studied.
- And you felt that you weren't moving in this space?
- No ... so that certain things seemed to bother me ... or I seemed to fixate on them.
- Like?
- Like, I suppose the textual dimensions of a PhD – its very form ... that it was in the end a project to create a big fat text of knowledge that would sit on a shelf somewhere. And I was troubled about all the energy, all the work that would go into writing all of this for ... who?

- The field.
- Arse. How many people do you think read PhDs outside of the writer, supervisors and examiners?
- Haven't a clue.
- Neither do I. Someone told me once that the average readership was two, but I'm not sure about that. Either way I'd say it isn't many.
- Oh ... so you were worried about not getting read ... seems a bit self-important ...
- No .. I don't think it was that ... I was thinking of audience ... who am I writing for?
- And?
- Well, again this is where the triskelion guides me .. I was writing, I am writing for, at least, three audiences that I am aware of: myself (the personal); the academy (theoretical); and adult educators (practice). Although I'm hoping all three follows the flow through the different domains.
- So?
- So.... from the very start ... the form, the style of this was something that I was trying to work through. You must remember that from the seminars. I felt that I kept coming back to this again and again. Having worked as an educator, all that time away from the academy - I wanted it to be something that I wouldn't mind reading myself as an adult educator – felt strongly that my allegiance was to practitioners. And we talked about that before I even started the PhD – that sense of audience. Remember our attempts in Scotland to try to connect practitioners to research and policy?
- Yeh ... through dialogic spaces. You even experimented with a fiction dialogue ... but I think you only ever showed that to me, is that right?
- Yeh ... I was still working through that. But the conversational emails were important I think – catching people in moments in their busy days. That's all practitioners have time for – just cracks in the day.
- So who, in reality, no matter how well it is written, how engaging it is, is going to read over 100,000 words of a PhD?

- Yeh, you're right ... the form of the traditional PhD seemed to resist that. And maybe it's only ever a space to work through our own knowledge anyway. But still part of me wanted that work to be around form ... to experiment with ways of connecting through experimentation with different ways of writing ... and reading.
- Reading?
- Yeh, you said yourself that it's unlikely that anyone would read something so long. So, why expect that. Why not, instead, write something which allows the reader more freedom to read in non-linear ways ... to dip in and out ... to flick through and let a phrase, an image pull them in if it catches them ... and to follow that line, that movement for a bit?
- So back to this reader-as-creator of meaning that you see in Barthes (1992)?
- Yeh ... maybe. And maybe also the work and spirit of *l'écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1985; Moi, 1985; Kristeva, 1986a; Smyth, 1989).
- So the form here is more, or just as, important than meaning?
- Not quite - remember we've suggested that form isn't to be considered on its own separate from meaning. We've talked before about how form, style and meaning interact in meaning systems (Van Boheemen, 1987; Moi, 1985).
- We have?
- We have. In Belfast. And so, you see, this issue reveals that lingering epistemological after-life of Belfast.
- Ok ... and?
- And what? You said there were three troubling things ...

*The data of experience*

- Yeh ... so another issue, another thing which bothered me from the beginning was the notion of representing adult educator's reality ... their experiences.

Remember what this thing was supposed to be about ... exploring the experiences of adult educators working in VEC/ETBs.

- You might forgive a soul for losing track of that?

- Yeh. You're probably right ... But when I started to think through this focus on experience I realised that maybe my previous studies in the humanities were casting a long shadow over this.

From the start I was always interested in exploring the experiences of educators. And a positivist social scientific paradigm seemed to frame experience unproblematically as something that could be studied and analysed relatively objectively.

But then, thinking, if you like, as a social scientist, I wondered, well what is the data of experience? How can experience be measured at all. And although narrative methods seemed to offer a way of inquiring into experience – I felt that there were presumptions about experience in narrative research that didn't fit right with me. That there was in a lot of narrative research a sense that people come with stories.

- And you don't buy that?

- Well, I do in one sense. But I think the stories that emerge from experience are as much located in contexts of the present re-telling of them. I mean, how after all I'd learned about the projects of modernist and postmodernist artists and writers – writers who spent their lives struggling with authentic ways of representing human experience – how could I approach the representation of experience so uncritically, so clinically?

- Ok. So, the nature of experience as a phenomenon was becoming a problem for you –

- Again, not a problem ... a puzzle maybe ... something to work through ... and, ultimately, a central part of the inquiry.

- Fine. ... And the third *problem*?

*Locating the researcher-subject*

- Well, this is quite linked with the other two. Especially the issues around representation. In particular I wondered about ways of representing, not just my voice, but, and again this feeds back into the epistemological threads, my subject position in the research. And although the presence of the researcher-writer is acknowledged in narrative research, there still seems to be a power-imbalance in terms of the representation and epistemological currency between the researcher voice, even in narrative, and participants. Participants' experience, their stories, exist in a textual structure and academic discourse that allows researchers to tell us what they mean – the researcher-writer has, so to speak, the final word.

And this was a question that was, is, deeply ethical. To write in that patriarchal way with the presumed authority of the knowing subject seemed to go against my belief in the fallibility and deauthorised author as posited by Barthes (1968), Bakhtin (1981), Kristeva (1986a), and the rest (Joyce, 1968; Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1985; Gilman, 1993; Davies & Davies, 2007). And after realising the value of the concept of the subject in deconstructing notions of hegemonic discourse, how could I believe all that and turn around and write the ultimate phallogocentric text?

And, what's more, it is also discordant with my adult educator belief and practice. Writing a text like this seemed like the ultimate in didacticism ... you just sit there silently and I'm going to talk to you for hundreds of page about all my knowledge.

- So how to both represent and position your subjectivity as an adult educator engaged in an inquiry in an authentic and ethical way in all this?

- Couldn't have said it better myself. Good man

- Woman actually.

- Sorry.

- Not to worry ... I do shift a bit.

You paused for a moment – gazing into the mid-distance in that way you do when something doesn't quite sit rightly with you.

- What's the problem?
- Nothing ... just ...
- Just what?
- Well ... I suppose I find it hard to locate where you are coming from ...
- Ok ...
- And ... it was just that ...
- Go on, I'll not be offended ... don't be so careful ... I need you to be critical ...
- Ok ... you talked just now about an inquiry that was 'authentic and ethical'.
- Yeh ...
- And I suppose what I'm thinking about is this sense of contradiction between what I see as a constructivism that you lean towards and authentic which seems to suggest something more essentialist in its nature.
- Ok ... I suppose there is a contradiction there ...

We walked on again in silence for a bit. I was thinking through this sense of a contradiction ...

- Well, I suppose – and this brings me back to my earlier intellectual life as an undergraduate – I don't see authenticity and reality as one and the same thing. I see authenticity as a cultural construct – as a discursive act really. In particular I'm thinking now of Hobsbawm's ideas about the invention of tradition a form of cultural and political constructivism in response to modernity (Hobsbawm, 1983) and nationalism could be seen as social and cultural construction of notions and narratives of an authentic Ireland or Scotland or Italy or wherever which were, at one time, quite new ...
- Ok.



- And Graham, who locates authenticity in the colonial and postcolonial power struggles of naming and search for origins, sees ‘the history of authenticity in Ireland as being inseparable from the history of the reproduction and circulation of the objects and materials of “Ireland” ...’ (134).

- Again this notion of origins arise ...

- Yeh ... and, if you remember, earlier we discussed Foucault’s caution against the hegemony of teleological thinking (Foucault, 1984). So, I suppose, again, I see authenticity as a power-move more than a static essentialist attribute ... and maybe, as Graham posits,

authenticity is thus constantly a cultural, textual phenomenon, defining recreating and projecting. Authenticity may resist definition, but its materiality in textuality is undeniable (Graham, 2001, p. 137).

- Ok ... so, again, more a discursive move than anything else ... a verb more than a noun ...

- Maybe ... maybe.

We were walking now as one and I slowed, as you did, as your gaze, and attention, was drawn to something, which seemed out of place, propped up against a tree.

*Moving on*

- What’s that?

We came off the track, across a tangled mess of stumps and the discarded smaller branches of a recent felling. Closer now, the object seemed to be the remains of an ancient shovel.

- Ah ... it's an old sleán.

The wood of its shaft had long-since returned to the earth – all that remained was the very old blade of the sleán itself.

- There must have been bogs up here one time.
- Yeh ... hard to imagine with all the trees now. ... I wonder what the story is behind this ... how did it come to be left here? Did some young fella get a clip around the ear two centuries ago for leaving the sleán up on the bog?
- Or maybe he left it here the last day of cutting. Maybe he knew what was coming for this landscape and that the tool had had its day.

For a moment, we considered a few plot-lines for the boy, long-dead, and maybe never alive, that once held, and possibly mislaid, this nearly-extinct tool.

We regained the track and soon fell into our walking-talking rhythm again.

- Ok - so a triskelion of puzzles - how did you work your way through this?
- A few ways ...
- Like?
- Well, the ways I feel we learn best ... through dialogue, through reflective writing and, embodied ways of meaning making – and for me that was walking. Lots of walking.
- Dialogue with who?

- Mainly supervision and the dialogic space of the seminar ... and, really, any dialogic space were all this grew a bit. In fact, we developed a closed group on Facebook for those of us doing the PhD as a way of keeping conversations going, supporting each other, sharing personal stuff that leaked into the themes we were interested in (Adult Ed Research Forum, 2011-2015).

And all these spaces were central to moving forward, very slowly ... the gentle but critical pieces of advice that people would say .... so, as I said earlier, it was dialogue, the space opened up by the adult education culture of the doctoral programme, that got me started with narrative as a possible approach.

- But it was also the critical pedagogic space that was the catalyst for all this deep methodological reflection in the first place, wasn't it – I mean, in a sense, it was the deep reflection that got you stuck?

- Yeh – you're right the adult education space both complicated my inquiring task and offered ways out. And when I got stuck in that I was introduced, through our conversations, to Ryan's *Feminist Ways of Knowing* (2001) which, again, was important ... was one of those texts in which you see so many of your own thoughts, puzzles being worked through. And Ryan really helped me work through some of my troubles with narrative - helped me develop some clarity around identifying and making visible my own epistemological formations ... in particular she brought together poststructuralism, feminism and adult education in a way that rehearsed, in a very different way, some of the ideas that I was struggling with.

Ryan was really useful in lots of ways (Ryan, 2001). Her book opened a connecting door for me between deconstructed notions of subjectivity, experience and adult education practice and research.

And she highlights weaknesses in unquestioning positioning of universalist dualisms and the assumption of the unitary human subject (Ryan, 2001, pp. 66-69). And there was this moment of excitement for me as I came across names like Moi, Cixous, Kristeva and Hollway in the same pages as Mezirow, hooks and Freire. Names I had encountered many years ago with Jessica in Belfast were resurfacing in studies in adult education.

- And how was Ryan using all these ideas?

- Well, in different ways, but, in terms of Cixous and Kristeva anyway, it was their attempts to deconstruct unitary notions of feminine identity – particularly in that sense of occupying the powerless pole in patriarchal binaries (pp. 36-40; Ryan, 2001). But she sees problems with them as well in terms of a liberatory politics, as Cixous, it could be argued, retreats to an essentialism of sorts and Kristeva denies a specific identity politics of the feminine which makes action and change difficult.

- So they are of little use?

- No. I don't think so, they really have a worth at the discursive level ... they allow us to really interrogate the relationships between power and language. And anyway, I think Cixous, at least can't be reduced so easily to an essentialist. I know she says, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that she 'writes as a woman, toward women' and that there can be a sense that what she writes draws heavily on an epistemology of difference of female sexuality and body. But also, there is so much play and contradiction in the likes of Cixous, that I think we need to be hesitant of such closed readings.

- What do you mean?

- Well, in the very next line she qualifies what she means by 'woman':

When I say "woman," I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring to women their senses and to their meaning in history

(Cixous, 1976, pp. 875-876)

- So?

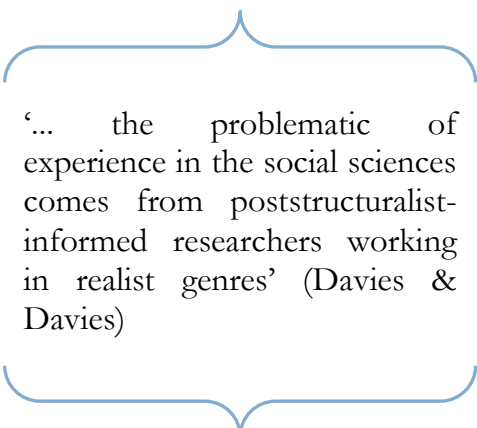
- Well, to me this qualification of 'woman' doesn't sound very essentialist – but rather posits 'woman' more as a subject position in patriarchy.

- And why the defence of Cixous?

- Well, I think that maybe that my struggle and my inquiry may also be happening at a discursive level – so to draw on her is not a retreat to essentialism.

- But Ryan helped you too with this question, this tension around experience and narrative?

- Yeh ... what Ryan does is deconstruct the human, in particular, the female subject in context of the patriarchal discursive practices in academia and sees, instead, that an attendance to the stories that people tell has a political and radical import. Again, it's that sense of narratives operating against the grand narratives. But with her acute awareness of the play and power of language and its play in discourse, she offers that complication of narrative that I felt myself. And how in the end she resolves this to an extent by focusing on accounts rather than individuals (Ryan, 2001; p. 77). This was a significant moment for me in my methodological thinking – I think from then on I have



‘... the problematic of experience in the social sciences comes from poststructuralist-informed researchers working in realist genres’ (Davies & Davies)

focused and talked about educators’ narratives, their accounts, rather than them as individuals. And once I reframed it like this – as narratives – all kinds of creative possibilities opened up for me – although I wasn’t even aware of that at the time.

And yet again too it seems to be feminist scholars who are really engaging with these

issues. So, for example, Davies and Davies also address this by claiming that there is a real lack of interrogation of the concept of experience for many researchers who claim to be working ‘after the linguistic turn’ (Davies & Davies, 2007, pp. 1139-40). They claim that the problematic of experience in the social sciences comes from poststructuralist-informed researchers working in realist genres (p. 1140).

- Ah ... but wasn’t that you at the very start?

- Exactly, I was that researcher at the start ... well I wasn’t, but I hadn’t uncovered that yet. It would be more correct that I felt I had to be that researcher at the start. But because something didn’t feel right I kept circling, kept trying to work out ... and lines like this were, became, life-lines ...

Once having abandoned realist paradigms, we can no longer take experience to be something we can straightforwardly *have* and then make a transparent account of.

(p. 1142)

- Why 'life-lines'?

- Because it started to make visible these troubling feelings I had about what I was doing. But, crucially, started to make a way out more visible ...

So, as they say, after the linguistic turn, the researcher needs to stop thinking in terms of going off to capture the experiences which participants 'have' but instead, and despite best intentions, that it is they, the researchers themselves, who are 'being had' by the storylines of research. It is researchers who are 'made captive to the story line, the expression, the images, the metaphors, the emotions that rise up in the telling, in the writing, and in the listening' (p. 1141).

- So the researchers become, in a sense, the unwitting subjects of their own research?

- Only if they take the time to reflect and start to see it like that ... otherwise there is a danger that they will just remain the objects of their own research. And that's really how it felt for me ... despite my best intentions ... despite my reluctance to have 'me' in here, my ways of thinking about things made this shift almost inevitable. And maybe it was part of what Ryan was saying about only being able to 'research another's subjectivity, identity and knowledge, only if we have done similar research on ourselves' (2001, p. 77). Maybe Ryan was convincing me of the need to drag my own subjectivity into the inquiry.

And, back to Davies and Davies for a moment, what they claim then is that the research process, the 'telling', the 'account making' creates a new event, a new experience. They caution us that the individuals, the subjects, the experience of research can't be fully said to pre-exist the 'occasion on which the account was made of them ... the autonomous subject of research disappears in the turn to discourse' (p. 1141).

- But surely this threw things right up in the air for you?

- I think it did. But I'm not even sure that I was that aware of the consequence of all that then. I'm still not sure. Again, I think I felt that this was important but kept going anyway.
- Always keep moving?
- Yeh and it made me become very reflective on my own position in the process, in the inquiry and influenced the way in which I was going to work with participants.
- In what ways?
- Well, I started to deconstruct the research subject, the research voice ...
- You'll need to explain that.
- Ok ... so my plan was to talk to adult educators about their experiences, to gather their stories ... and early on I knew that to do this would require a recursive research encounter ... so I started dwelling more on the recursive relationship with participants – the going back to them to verify that the transcript of their experience was accurate?
- So, member-checking?
- Yeh ... originally, I think I had this fairly standard view of the function of reciprocity.
- But ... ?
- But as I started to engage with the implications that I was trying to operate as a kind of poststructural narrative inquirer, this recursive encounter took on more significance.
- In what ways?
- Well, I was still interested in the stories of adult educators experience but I wasn't trying to 'capture' them anymore but 'co-create' them with adult educators. So that our second meeting was an opportunity for both of us to look at their experience, as a narrative, and edit and change it in ways which would remain true to their experience – their portrayal of their adult educator subjecthood. So our first conversation was about me listening to their experiences – guided by a series of conversational milestones. And then, eventually, the way I worked it was that I storied (or re-storied) those experiences as narratives, something they would, could read – not transcripts (McCormack, C. 2004). And after I gave them some time to read the narratives, I

would meet again, for the second meeting, to discuss the quality and truth of that narrative.

I was, in effect, textualising experience through a process, partially informed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and partially by (and complicated by) Barthes (1968) on telling and re-telling. The object of our conversation in the second meeting was not their experience – but the textual (re)production of that experience: that methodological shift in focus to the accounts rather than the individuals which Ryan talked about (2001). The participants had become, in some sense, exterior to that in the re-telling. It was my way, I suppose, of addressing this issue, this problem of representing experience. And more than that – it was approaching something of the polyphonic text (Bakhtin, 1984)– something which sidelined the author subject and allowed the participant characters to speak for themselves – interpret their own stories through this collaborative act. They became interpretive-participants: analysts, in a way, of their own texts.

- Ok so I feel that we've slipped here into the mechanics of your method without me even knowing it
- Lovely.
- Can we go into that?
- What?
- Well, the bits that we should I suppose ...

### An emerging method

- Maybe ... let me just tell you the story of how my method emerged from all the thinking, reading, dialogue and walking ...
- Sounds good ... although have we not been doing that?
- We have ... but there's more to tell. It was, is, all a bit messy-
- I'm gathering that alright ...



- But what remained in focus was this interest, this concern in adult educator growth –
- But that got complicated a bit when you started to deconstruct the adult educator – that, here, in this textual landscape the lines between you and your participants as adult educators got blurred –
- Yeh, but again, a lot of that is more clear in retrospect than it was at the time – there was more a sense of a methodological dissonance ... but anyway, let me tell the story – stop dragging me off –
- Sorry
- No worries ... it's hard to stay on track.

So, I started off with this notion of talking to adult educators about their experiences of becoming and developing as tutors ...

- You wanted to hear their stories?
- Yes ... but in the very early stages, I was still reading and engaging with narrative and didn't quite frame it like that.

In those early stages I was just anxious, as a recently returned emigrant at the margins of the field, about finding anyone to talk to. But then I just started talking to the people I knew and let it grow from there – a kind of snowballing or networking sampling technique. And this provided mixed results ...

- In what ways?
- Well, I suppose that I found I was getting into really rich occupational and personal life stories with fellow tutors.
- Which was great – yeh?
- Oh yeh ... and I think, as well as the rich stories for me, the conversations with tutors, my peers, was giving them a space to engage in deep acts of reflection of their occupation as tutors ... a space that they rarely got access to:

*15 April 2014*

*Just typing up \_\_\_\_\_'s narrative and at about 16'05" she starts to talk about her first experience of a group. At first she says, almost automatically, "the groups were grand". And then she catches herself and says, "No. I tell a lie. It wasn't grand. Jesus I'd forgotten this ..."*

*So, this keeps coming up – this sense that people are seeing things themselves that they'd forgotten or passed over. The act of telling helps them to bring into focus something that had been significant but they'd lost in the linear rush of their lives. So narrative offers an opportunity to reflect a bit more deeply on our past experiences. Whatever about what I am getting out of it, the participants experiences are being layered with some reflective thought – possibly enabling them to make something useful or enlightening out of that forgotten moment.*

*Another few lines from \_\_\_\_\_ where she reveals the reflective potential of these research encounters: "I'd never thought about this until now I'm sitting here thinking about it" and again, "Even things I've said this evening I've thought "I must remember that. I didn't know I thought that".*

(O'Neill, 2010-2015)

- So the research encounters with tutors were doing something else ... serving another purpose?
- They were ... and this is part of the ethical practice of adult educational research ... there needs to be a beneficence to participants (Holman Jones, et al., 2013) ... that it can be an opportunity for learning for them. And that, for adult educators, research must also have some form of transformative impact (Ryan, 2001; McCormack, 2013).
- But I also met with a couple of other adult educators who had been tutors at one stage but had long moved on and whose occupational identity had shifted ... they worked in more management and organising capacities. They were a bit more integrated, and I suppose invested, into the structures of the educational bodies that tutors were at the margins of.
- And?
- And ... for one reason or another, these didn't work out so well.

- Why not?
- Well I wasn't sure at the time, but I think that part of it was that I wanted to have conversations with tutors – to have the subjecthood of tutors present in those encounters. But maybe the tutors became a third party in these – slightly Othered or marginalised – and it wasn't what I wanted and I probably wasn't quite so sure of what I wanted from those. But that took some reflection.
- You said 'one reason or another'. So it wasn't just this sense of tutors being Othered by the process?
- No. I did have a very rich conversation with another adult educator who worked in a managerial capacity. And there was rich stuff in his interview – some of it quite critical. In fact, maybe too critical. When he read the transcript, I think he got a fright when he encountered the bluntness of some his comments ... and worried a bit about how his position might be exposed by that.

I sensed that. He was still happy enough to be involved but that wasn't enough for me. We talked it through a bit and I said that if I didn't hear back from him in a week, that I would delete his audio recording and transcript and not include any of what he said in the research.

- So you made it easier for him to withdraw?
- Well, I set it up that he would need to do something to stay in the research.
- That was a pity ... ethical I suppose, but still a pity.
- Well ... maybe ... but ethics isn't something we just contain to a form we submit to get the research moving ... we need to embody it at every level and every stage of the inquiry (BERA, 2011).
- Yeh ... I was wondering when we'd get to ethics ... but you're suggesting that ... what? We've got to it already?
- But look at the way you talk about ethics. You frame ethics as 'it' – a thing, a substance that we must put into all this to validate it. But that's not how I see it.
- How do you see it then?

- I see ethics more as a verb – as a practice. I mean I've done all the things that I needed to do for this research – I submitted my proposal to the Ethics Committee and was granted approval (Appendix Two). But what I mean by ethics as a practice is that we act ethically throughout the various dimensions of this. And maybe that comes more naturally to adult educators who are deeply grounded by a sense of ethical practice. There is no big shift for us into this slightly different type of epistemological activity. The way we are with participants is the way we are with learners. But there is an ethics in creativity as well – that sense of some level of verisimilitude – a social or emotional verisimilitude. To work hard on the style, form, structure of all this to create an 'authentic' sense of what adult educator experience is really like.

And making that work, aesthetically, is a deeply moral act.

So I'm with Denzin when he collapses the distinctions between ethics, knowledge and creative practice:

The boundaries that have traditionally separated ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology are erased. We write moral texts, works that bring the world into play.

(Denzin, 2000, p. 261)

- So the ethics bit is in every bit?

- That's about it really. But, coming back to these research conversations that I deleted ... I learned from these ...

- Like what ...

- Well, firstly, and this was starting to coalesce with my reading in narrative, that I really was just interested in listening to tutors only ... to hearing, or rather working on, their stories. There was something more equitable in the research encounters with tutors – something that overlapped in our hyphenated identities – me as tutor-inquirer and them as tutor-participants – that made the conversations richer somehow –

- You keep calling them 'conversations'

- Well I do ... because that was what they were ... conversations ... I really struggled from the beginning to call them 'interviews' – and what was implied by that-

- What was implied by that?

- Well ... an interview for me seems to be part of the discursive baggage of positivist research whereas a 'research conversation', as I, after the likes of Holstein and Gubrium (2004; 2011), started calling them, reflected the kind of encounter that I wanted – that sharing of experiences, that lack of rigidity in the conversation, that deconstruction of the *researcher as expert* drawing *data* from a *participant*.

And the encounter with the educator who got a start from reading the transcript was an important moment for me too ... it was a rupture in the practice of this inquiry of the troubling feeling I had regarding representation ...

- What do you mean?

- I mean ... I started to think about what kind of textual or epistemological artefact did I want to emerge from my encounter with participants. And, as I was engaging more with narrative ways of knowing but also narrative in research, I started to realise that what I wanted, what I was looking for, was stories.

- Seems obvious.

- Maybe. But not to me at the time. I came to that moment that what I wanted from the encounter was to create, co-create, a narrative of that educator.

- So that stories are being shared and meaning or learning opportunities are been created between tellers and listeners. There is a sense in this, then, that you are creating rather than uncovering or drawing out narrative as data. Would that be right?

- Yeh. It comes back to this notion again of stories been created out of experiences – but it is the creative, or inquiring, or pedagogic act which transforms those experiences into stories. For me this is central to the whole process – an ontological and epistemological point that imagines stories not pre-existing the research encounter. It's a point made too by Holstein and Gubrium (2004)

Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge - treasuries of information awaiting excavation - as they are constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers (p. 141).

And Davies and Davies make the point that the interview, the social space in which researchers and interviewees meet to explore 'experience' is an act of 'data-generation' (2007, p. 1140). And, in relation to Narrative Inquiry, I was moving away from the post-positivist framing and, to use Chase's terms, more of a focus on 'narrative practice and narrative environments' and 'the researcher and the story' (2011, p.422). A shift, then, to more creative and ethnographic notions of narrative which are sensitive to cultural contexts, their constructivist nature and the narrative of the researcher.

So this also addressed my problem, after the poststructuralist turn, of representing experience.

- You'll need to unravel that a bit.

- Well, it started to become clear that my goal was to produce, along with the participants, narratives which reflected an authentic account of their experiences as adult educators – and again, think of 'authentic' here as something that seems real and helps to negotiate a discursive position for marginal voices. But I've talked before about this two-stage process. But what I didn't get into was the sense of the second stage – this reworking the narrative with the tutors helped in a couple of ways ... it decentred the author-researcher into a more shared sense of a writing subject. But it also helped shift the phenomenon of the inquiry from tutors' *experience* to *textual constructs* of tutor experience ...

- So, let me get this right, in the second encounter, the focus of the inquiry had shifted from the participants' experience to the ... well what? ... the (re)production of a text or narrative of that experience ...?

- Exactly ... so my way around the problem of representation after the linguistic turn, as they say, was to embrace the textuality of that experience ... that what comes out of the inquiry are not broad statements about the general experience of adult educators in

Ireland ... but a series of narratives of specific educators. I was less and less interested in performing a clever and deep analysis of fragmented sections from narratives locked in a drawer.

- And, just to go back then ... so you started off doing the traditional transcriptions ...?

- Yeh ... remember that what is also emerging from all this is my own competence as an inquirer ... so I started off doing transcripts because that's what you are supposed to do in social science research.

But my encounter with the adult educator and my readings, conversations and reflections around the interviewing process and outcomes, really started getting me to question what the point of the transcripts would be if I was interested in something much more creative. And I came to the point of realising that the narratives were the objective – the artefact which would come from the research. That what I was moving towards doing – my goal was an interpretive act of co-creation of tutor narratives. I started to think of them more an anthology and my role more as a curator (Luttrell, 2013; Lawson, 2015).

- So how were you going to approach analysis then? You mentioned something a while back about the tutors as being analysts of their own stories – what did you call them ... 'interpretive participants'?

- Yeh. Well, and that's just the thing – the encounters with participants were interpretive moments. We were creating knowledge, new meaning together in these moments. I had moved right away from the notion of participants as 'vessels for answers' as Holstein and Gubrium (2004) say, but rather a moment of narrative co-creation.

But if interview responses are seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed, nor ever pure. ... Because interviewing is unavoidably collaborative, it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be construed as contaminants. Participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in meaning making. They are involved in meaning *construction*, not contamination.

(Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 155)

- And your role was what ... a facilitator ... a curator, is that what you said, ...
- Yeh ... that's how I felt it should be and if I am serious about the play of power, language and knowledge then I need to just be as true to the kind of critical adult educator that I aspire to be ...
- What do you mean?
- To just create the space and facilitate the narratives ... let them emerge. And, not meta-narrate them once they're told – I think this is crucial, really important. It seems deeply hypocritical to facilitate the emergence of narratives and then take ownership of them or re-author them by telling you what they really mean.

- So what, just let them stand as they are?

These were the moments we created, narrated, the adult educator subject together.

- I think so ... more or less. Again, the work, the critical work, goes into their production.

- So the creation of the narratives is an interpretive act? What was that like ... that sitting down for that second iteration with the

tutors with their narratives ... did you just show it to them then ...?

- No, no. I explained what I was trying to do ... and sent them the draft narrative at least a week before we met. To give them time to read, to reflect. And so they usually came with a hard copy of that with their own notes on it.

And we'd sit over a coffee somewhere, never in an ETB space, and, literally, our gaze had shifted to the text between us which was in formation. These were the moments we created, narrated the adult educator subject together.

- And how did they feel reading these narratives?

- Well, most were very modest and they wondered who would be interested in this. But what was really interesting was the opportunity for reflection it gave them on their working lives and identities ...



26 Feb 2014

*I had my first second round conversation with [REDACTED] a few days ago. We met for a coffee and spent at least a couple of hours talking – we didn't just talk about the text – but if we weren't talking about and/or editing it, we were talking around it. It was a really interesting experience. I loved the way that the notion of the autonomous or authoritative unitary voice has now got dislocated in this process. What started as a conversation, which was dialogic to begin with, evolved into a text, shaped by me, but with [REDACTED]'s words, into another conversation over a text and coffee, which was scribed by us both, ending up then with another post-second-conversation text which needs now to be reedited. What was also interesting was how the process can act as a reflective moment for [REDACTED] as she is forced to stand back and look at her own occupational reality. A couple of things seemed to crystallise for her in the re-reading of her narrative: for one, she was, in this second conversation more clear about the differences of her training and adult education work. She referred, this time, to “two different cultures” and her “change in mindshift”. She was more explicit, or maybe it was more clear to her through the narrative process, of her preference for the type of teaching and learning found in adult education.*

10 April 2014

*Evening: RC2 [second research conversation] with [REDACTED]. It went really well she talked about how different it felt to read something like this instead of a traditional transcript. I really got a sense with her that my method was doing what I wanted it to do. She said that it was an engaging read and would be interested in reading other tutor narratives. She talked about how it was really interesting reading this [sic] things had changed and she'd almost forgotten how big a thing it was for her to go back to work and how insecure she was back then before having a contract of indefinite duration. So the act of reading a narrative at a temporal distance allowed her to perceive change in her own life that had become invisible to her.*

02 July 2014

*The conversation with [REDACTED] this evening was really good. She said that she got a real glow when she read it [the draft narrative] and that it invigorated her with a renewed passion for what she does. She was also clear that it sounded like her – it felt like she was reading her story.*

11 July 2014

*I had my second round conversation with [REDACTED] tonight about her narrative. It was a really interesting chat. She talked about how pleased she was to read how much her narrative confirmed and validated some of the more theoretical ideas she has been exploring elsewhere in some academic writing. She said that she was relieved when she read the narrative as it gave credence to what she was exploring elsewhere. This is another, unexpected, but very positive outcome of the approach I'm using here. In a sense her narrative, then becomes this place where her theory and practice come together ... or is it? But it's definitely some sort of mirror which allows her to see more than her practice – but the values and passion behind that practice too.*

(O'Neill, 2010-2015)

- So, if you see, their narratives ... I hope ... had started to take on a value and purpose for them in their own development as much as mine through this project. And if nothing else, I'm happy with that outcome.
- And what was the plan then with the narratives?
- So, the plan was to produce an anthology of tutor narratives separate to this text ... this narrative.
- And did you do that?
- I did ... eventually ... after some more textual shifting ... but they're in fragments now.
- Fragments? Shifting?

- Fragments for number of reasons ... in the end, I interwove them with my story – it seemed too much like two separate texts otherwise ... I needed to integrate them more. And it's more consistent with the intertextual subject position that I buy into anyway.

- And, of course, the fragmented nature of the narrative reflects, in its form, fragmented careers?

- Yeh, I like that.

- And you talked about shifting narratives above – what do you mean by that?

- ... well another issue which came out of the narratives for one tutor was, like the non-teaching adult educator earlier, was a slight sense of concern about being identifiable through her narrative.

I gave her the opportunity to withdraw but she wanted the narrative to remain. But I told her I'd mask it more. And this got me thinking more about the narratives – the anthology I produced.

I wanted it to be more polyphonic – to lose the individual and create a collective narrative voice.

Producing an anthology of tutor narratives as a separate text was something that was sparked by reading about the work of Eila Estola in Elbaz-Luwisch's survey of the ways in which narrative has been used to explore teachers' lives (2007). Estola et al. (2003) collected over a hundred narratives of teaching lives through a public competition.

And so I felt that the tutor narratives that were being co-produced here should exist in their own right as a separate text ... not as an appendices or a reference.

- And didn't we talk ... way back ... about how you felt that you were more a holder of stories, an anthologist rather than a teller?

- We did, we did ... and we talked just a while back of my sense of being more a curator of stories.

And so I worked hard in bringing them together. And that took a lot of time – months. But in the end I didn't like the way they read ... one educator story after another. It seemed repetitive. I wasn't sure whether I would want to read it. And also the focus then was on the specific educator rather than the experience. Which

wasn't what I wanted either. I wanted it to be more polyphonic – to lose the individual and create a collective narrative voice.

So I started to re-cut the anthology and instead it becomes organised by theme ... and that took a long time too. But all that was creative and interpretive work. So now it starts with the ways into education and brings the narratives of those experiences together. Then moves on to stories of volunteering in literacy services that many of them shared. And so on. The themes trace a generic occupational and narrative arc from past, present and future ...

And this shift to a thematic anthology helped me address concerns of the adult educator who felt she might be identified as her story didn't appear in its entirety any more ... but became fragmented and interwoven with the stories of the other tutors. So when you read it now, you are never really sure whose story you are reading as it shifts back and forth between various tutors – again the individuality gets lost. The only thing that tells you that we have shifted to a different story is the positioning of the text on the page ...

- Explain that ...

- So I still wasn't happy with the narratives in thematic form ... felt, to be honest, they were too dense, hard work reading through them ... If they were to be something that people would read then they needed more aesthetic work – and I didn't want to collapse them, edit them, any further. I felt that would dishonour the co-creative act with the tutors. So I started exploring ways of representing them more creatively on the page drawing on found poetry which others have used in academic contexts (Walsh, 2004; Clandinin, 2015).

Using the white space of the page ... which, again, resonates with antiphalllogocentric ways of writing ...

rupturing

the traditional lines

of writing and script.

Each fragment from a tutor occupies a different space on the page ... so a fragment from

one tutor might start,

for example, hugging the left margin,

but a shift to

a narrative fragment on

the right margin (right-justified – like this)

signals a shift to another voice.

- Oh ... I see ... But don't we lose that sense of who said what?
- We do.
- And that's not a problem for you.
- Not at all. In fact, it's a solution to a problem for me.

We talked before about the problem of representation and authorship ... my way out was, is, letting go of the unitary author or tutor who unproblematically inscribes their experience.

- And instead?
- And instead, after Bakhtin's intertextuality and polyphonies, poststructural feminism antiphallologocentrism, Barthes's death of the author, Freire and hooks's dialogic epistemologies, we have the intertextual, dialogic adult educator subject ... whose individual identity outside of the text is, in a sense, of no importance, but whose experiences as an intertextual collective is a moment of significance for all adult educators.
- I'm not sure about that ...
- What?
- Are you not eradicating the individual tutor – these very real tutors you talked to - in all this – this creation of a de-individualised textual subject?
- No more than a painting or song eradicates their subjects through strokes on a canvass or the melody of a song ...

- So maybe I should see this more as an act of reverse-transubstantiation ... changing something from body and blood to the material – the text.
- Jesus ... don't be so sacrilicious ... but it is an act of transubstantiation in some ways ... as I said, the textualisation of experience ... which is another way, I suppose, of saying creating narratives of experience.

### The accidental autoethnographer

- But what about you?
- What about me?
- Do you stand outside all of this? Are you some benevolent deity who just facilitates the coming together of all these narratives ... why doesn't your voice, your subjectivity get dragged into their narratives. ... Why ...

But your voice trailed off and your last 'why' just hung on the cold air with nowhere to go.

- But, of course .... you did get dragged in ... that's what this is all about. This is the point of me being here ... talking, walking through all this. Jesus. You could have just told me.
- Well it is a big part of it ... but you're right I did get sucked into it. Maybe that was always inevitable. Once I started down the road of deconstructing the adult educator subject and acknowledging the play of the personal in the production of knowledge, I was always going to get dragged into this.
- By yourself ...
- Maybe ... but all this, this narrative, has its own pull, and it demanded my presence here in these leaves ...

- So the adult educator subject then that you have been inquiring into all along has been you?
- Well, not me exclusively, but me and all the participants ... and the participants that speak through you.
- Through me?
- Yes. Through you. You have so many uses you know. You were also part of the solution to the three troubling things.
- Glad to help.
- And through significant moments in reading ...
- Such as?
- Well, a really significant text for me was stumbling across St. Pierre's 'Nomadic inquiry in the smooth places of the field: a preface' (1997b). It was a text that revitalized me. It gave me energy when I needed it and suggested a kind of a way forward ... not a prescriptive path but more a sense of validation of the issues and doubts I was having about the inquiry – how we can have these, even use these, to move forward in the dark.

And she starts this piece by acknowledging that what she was writing was born out of a sense of failure of her field work with older women in her home county in Virginia. She writes about not being happy with the final dissertation that was 'a dutiful text' and struggled with the 'burden of authorship ... speaking for others'. And how it was so different to the 'playful and rhizomatic' book 'in her head' (1997, p. 368).

- So her starting point then is a sense of ... what? ... failure, dissatisfaction?
- Well ... failure on her own terms ... her dissertation fulfilled the obligations of academic work ... but it was her sense of the inadequacies of a work that had not ended. And it hadn't ... she was, as she says 'stalled in an ethnography' (365) ...

And she looks around for ways out of that ... and one way is by drawing on Richardson's concept as writing as a method inquiry which we talked about before (Richardson, 1994) ... as a way of discovering truths and making meaning.

- Which is what we are doing ... yeh?
- It is certainly part of it ... that's why I always struggle to give a quick response to people who ask things like 'so you're finished the research now and just writing-up?'
- Because this is the research ...
- Yes ... this is our inquiry ... or part of it ... and it doesn't end, or pause for judgement more like, until I let this iteration, this weave go ...
- You mean submit?
- Indeed, submit ... what a word. Maybe it's the right one.
- So St. Pierre and Richardson opened up writing as a mode of inquiry ...
- Yeh ... but there was more going on with St. Pierre.
- Such as?
- Well ... for one she returns as an ethnographer to her home place ... and reflects on different notions of place in her inquiry, her work ... not just the physical space, but also the spaces of theory, spaces of text, internal spaces .. and how they intersect (p. 365).
- But doesn't she interrogate the physical space of home as well?
- She does and this has significance for me as I am returning through all this to the spaces of home after a similarly long absence as her –
- Which was ... what ... fifteen, twenty years?
- Well ... yeh ... about that ... not that either of us were absent from home all that time ... I certainly was absent from Ireland for many years and was a visitor but there is a sort of homecoming happening through our inquiries that are significant too.

And it's not that home becomes a safe or uncritical space ... rather the opposite as St. Pierre sees it – home is 'not a refuge' but instead 'a busy site of leaving and transformation which happens in space of revisited homes. And, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, it is the capacity of home to deterritorialize space - to shift it, to render the familiar strange that suggests promise in going back to go forward (366).



- Which is why we are walking through your spaces? You talked earlier about Hall (2009), Ingold (2010), and O'Neill, M. & Hubbard (2010) – work that explores and performs perambulatory inquiry and knowledge.
- Yeh, walking is certainly part of the mix alright ... St. Pierre argues that 'one must be placed for a time to remap one's cartography' (367). So, we are, I'm afraid a bit like the military cartographers who named, and claimed, the imperial landscape as a paper landscape (Andrews, 1975).
- But doesn't St. Pierre see herself, her work, as nomadic inquiry ... rejecting, or ignoring the borders and ordered lines of Deleuze and Guattari's striated space and embrace the smooth spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) instead ... spaces as she says, 'like the desert and the sea that tend to gnaw and grow in all directions (369)'?
- Yes ... she does. And I like that sense of the nomadic inquiry, or nomadic epistemology in one sense as it sits well with my narrative but also the kind of portable and transient knowledge of adult educators – never quite experts in a field or subject – but more generalist knowledge.
- Knowledge we take and find as we go?
- Yeh – just enough knowledge to fill a Lidl bag ... but then ...
- What ...?
- Well there is something that bothers me about calling it 'nomadic' knowledge and I think it's the postcolonial hairs on my arm that are raised ... this othering of nomadic people, cultures – bothers me ... (Said, 1995).
- And there is always that problem in the ways hegemonic cultures name people on the move ... think of the ways Travellers have been named through the years within Ireland ... within our own family ...
- Yeh – and think of the discursive positions that are being taken up at the moment as European culture and society struggles to name the people ... dying crossing the Mediterranean ... 'migrants', 'refugees' ...

So it might better for me to resist the use of such terms as 'nomadic' and call it something more quotidian like 'precarious' or 'transient' methodology ... something

anyway which reflect the uncertainty of the subject positions such inquirers inhabit – something a lot less exotic, because it certainly isn't that.

But I suppose, it comes down again to this notion of not-knowing that we talked about before ... not being sure but moving ahead with an inquiring and creative impulse all the same.

- And so she addresses her dissatisfaction with her previous work ... through what, writing and a return to home and ...
- Well ... I think, and this is all relevant to us, in not ignoring her own presence, her own subjecthood in the inquiring narrative ... she talks about the need for the ethnographer to excavate their own biography before proceeding – or rather excavating and proceeding at the same time (p. 370).
- Which sounds like what you talked about before when you talked about us moving in different planes at the same time ... back and forth through these trails and our clumsy archaeology, through that movement, of the paths themselves ...
- Yeh – they are not dissimilar – and St. Pierre talks too, partially drawing on Butler, about sedimented subjectivities (365, 370, 381).

But that's not all ... she also advocates 'letting go' in our inquiries, in our pursuit of knowledge and meaning. She reflects on times she has written without knowing what she means but that meaning comes through conversations with friends, walking, gardening ... social and physical activities. Processes that hegemonic epistemologies don't associate with knowledge creation. She refers to it as the 'physicality of theorizing' (p. 372).

- Which is a bit what we having been doing, right?
- Right.
- So, St. Pierre was helpful in moving you forward ...
- Yeh ... and she resisted attempts to write the polished academic piece ... she starts at the beginning with reflections on being stuck, and moves into reflections on her disappointment with her dissertation and those reflections on space and the body in theory ... but then writes a number of 'asides', one of which is a poem made up of

quotations, which performs a text which resists the neat trajectories of an academic piece ... and she is almost apologetic for that

I can't even write that helpful paragraph that you expect in an essay and may have been impatient to read, the one that points the way through the text that is to come by explaining that I will discuss this and then that and then the other. I have no idea where I am going, except that I am moving toward the outside.

(St. Pierre, 1997b, p. 370)

- And, you being messy you, love that I bet?

- Well I am and amn't. I like texts I write to work and work well ... but that doesn't mean mechanically ... probably more aesthetically ... and pedagogically.

Anyway, I suppose my point is that I got energy from what St. Pierre wrote but also how she wrote it ... the text as a site of radical thought or inquiry.

- And why not ... if you believe all you say about embracing other ways of knowing, then surely this needs to enact it?

- I think so.

- So you saw, then, coming back to the start of this, ways in which the personal, your subjecthood could become part of the inquiry?

- Yeh ... and, as with a lot of this, it was a very slow reveal ... that kind of rhizomatic inquiry that St. Pierre talks about where you follow lines of thought and writers from one text to another ... and I did that after a while it seemed that I was reading a lot around creativity, embodied research, poststructuralist inquiry and how that came together in forms of autoethnography ...

But in fact that knowledge came quite late – I was writing and performing this in that kind of 'nomadic' line that St. Pierre was embracing without realising what it might even be called.

But instead, and maybe going right back to the words of Kincheloe, et al. right at the start, I was, I am a bricoleur (2011), who draws on different things, different knowledges as I went – personal narratives, creative impulses and sensitivities, feminist poststructuralisms and postcolonial concepts, emerging and developing practices of pedagogy ... all of that stuff to create this ... something which reflected and was authentic to dialogic and embodied ways of knowing; something which destabilised and deconstructed the researcher-author and the power relationships between the researcher and participants; something that was playful, creative and critical and could locate the personal within a broader landscape of inquiry.

### From journaling as learning to writing as inquiry

- Can we linger a moment on this notion of writing as inquiry?
- Absolutely. Engaging and immersing myself in dialogue was just one way. But that alone wasn't enough. Remember in Edinburgh I talked about educator learning needing to be both dialogic and reflective – having that communal and personal aspect?
- Kind of ...
- Well I did. ... And what class of hypocrite would I be if I wasn't doing that myself? ... So, I also worked my way forward through journaling.

In fact, I'd been keeping a journal before I even started the PhD ... (O'Neill, 2010-2015) ... as a way of working through ideas that might lead to something. I merely continued with this when I started the PhD ... using the journal as a space to help me work through a lot of this ... I've talked about this before ...but the journal was crucial ... a filter ... I suppose you could see it as another form of dialogue with myself ... things I could be brutally honest with ... but also ... a kind of quality mechanism ... a place to work through the possibilities of what this might be ... the journal was one way out of that ... .

- And journals, as we've talked about, become such important places for reflection and learning (Carlile & Jordan, 2007; Moon, 2004; McCormack, 2013)?

- Yes ... and, in fact, another source for all this is the journals I wrote as part of my learning about feminist writing and epistemology with Jessica in Queen's (O'Neill, 2000) – we talked about these in Belfast.

Those pages have been a rich space for me to go back and see my struggles and insights with language, power, knowledge and the subject. And as I reference that here, I start to see that (O'Neill, 2000) is just part of my intertextual subjectivity ... a bracketed, temporally-located textual nod to another subjecthood ...

- Yes ... I've noticed these traces of various forms of previous textual selves ..

- But that's dragging me away from my point –

- Why worry about tangents now?

- Ok ... hold the sarcasm for now ... remember it was you who told me that 'humour isn't always appropriate'.

- That wasn't me.

- Ha ... you don't have a choice. ... Anyway, coming back to my journal for the PhD, the more I wrote, the more significant it seemed to become ... in different ways ...

- Like?

- Well ... as I say it became a place to work through things - a place for dialogue with myself. And this, I found really useful, important ... it was, it is a text, that creates an intrasubjective relationship that comes close to supervision. And, of course, McCormack writes about that role of writing in that sense and as a practice of 'self-care' in the 'border-country' of the 'disturbing and disorientating spaces' of doctoral research (2014, p. 172).

- But it's more than just 'self-care' isn't it?

- Yeh ... and he makes that point too ... that journaling, and this became slowly apparent to me, becomes, or can, an epistemological act – a place where new knowledge, meaning can emerge (p. 173).

And as well as that self-care, epistemological dimension, it becomes, a crucial part of the ethical practice of the type of inquiry that I was doing ... a space to really question my

interactions, my relationship, my duty to participants and, indeed, the integrity of the project itself.

- That's what you mean about ethics?
- I think so. It helped as well deal with that issue of the researcher-subject – a place to acknowledge our presence in the research ... again this reflexivity is core to ethical inquiry (Etherington, 2009).
- I sense another triadic structure coming .... this three-fold function of the journal as self-care, learning and ethical practice ....
- Ah, if only the world was so obedient to our frameworks ... but I think that out of the journal came another function ... another possibility.
- Ah that's a shame ... what was that?
- Well, and it is linked to pedagogical and epistemological .... this sense of writing itself being methodological ... a way of inquiry. But again, this import of the journal, of all the writing I was doing wasn't clear to me at the beginning ... it slowly emerged over time (Richardson, 1994; Speedy, 2005; Gale & Wyatt, 2006; McCormack, 2013).

*17 Nov 2014 – Wicklow*

*Sitting in the café waiting on a phone call about the car. The problems with the car recently have really been a distraction – it's like [REDACTED] says, when you have no money, you pay twice for things: once to get it cheap, and twice to fix it. And then there's the time that it takes away from the work that I want to get done. This work.*

*It seems like an age since I wrote in this ... in one sense I feel that all my writing now needs to go into the PhD text – I feel that's where all my creative and critical energy is gathering – waiting for me.*

*But maybe it's important to come back to this space too as the other text is more performative, more outward-facing – although I am trying to make it as honest as I can too. This text is a less complicated space for writing through all the greyness, the confusion, the anxiety.*

*It's funny that I've been harping on and on since I started the PhD about how difficult it is to do it right when things are so tight – and I've been trying to keep them separate. Yet, as a*

*final text starts slowly to emerge from it all, I can see that this material difficulty and trouble will be part of the story. The form of my knowledge – the text that I produce – is not formed out of a vacuum. I thought back on that essay I did in university years ago on Joyce and how his experimentations in form were not a result but a part of his struggle for forging an artistic identity. I'm no Joyce, but I think that my text, its form, is part of my own struggle to forge an occupational identity – or to hold on to one.*

*And what has emerged from that struggle is something really quite creative in form - something that has moved away from a traditional PhD text. In many ways I think it's the only way I can write it now – the only way that seems authentic. If I was in a more secure or homogeneous occupational space then I think the form emerging from any inquiry that I made, and the mode of inquiry, would be a lot closer to conventional forms – the form would somehow mirror that stability. So, if I was doing the PhD in the position I was in Scotland six years ago when, it would be something that I would be writing from a relatively comfortable position within FE and, as such, would speak the tongue and forms of FE research – even if it was very critical.*

*But researching and writing from a precarious position generates something else and what that is I think is something ... different, awkward, a bit of a nuisance – it's very form resists traditional expectations.*

*It reminds me a bit of the discourse around protests at the moment. I suspect that there are lots of people who are not hurting in the recession – not really hurting – who have a sense that there are acceptable forms of protest which usually revolve around some notion of something peaceful and controlled. But I can understand people who are really feeling the pain how frustrating that can be and how that form of protest doesn't seem enough. If traditional forms of protest haven't changed anything – then things, the very form of protest, will evolve into something more violent, more challenging. I'm not making sense but I think the connection I'm making is that there is something similar for me doing this thing from the margins of adult education – something that I feel I'm just about hanging on to by the threads of the PhD itself. And I wonder what's the point of reproducing something clever and conventional? I'm aware enough of my own limitations to know that better-informed people than me have done and are doing that. That's not where my strengths lie – where do my strengths lie – well people keep saying that my work is nuanced. I'm not quite sure what they mean by that. Possibly that I am an as-yet-undiscovered charlatan. But what I think my strength is a type of critical creativity that fluctuates between practice and theory. So that what I am trying to do is speak,*

*write, perform an adult educator way of knowing that merges the personal, the theoretical, the communal in our practice and work ... and not just happy to describe what that means, but as I say, perform it in the text. And that my knowledge is something which comes from every dialogue I've ever had with a text, a student, a colleague ... myself. And if that is my knowledge, then I should write it like that ... and in a way that really develops the metaphors of knowing that I keep coming back to and these metaphors become the vehicle for any knowledge that emerges from this.*

- Can we just linger on that for a moment?
- Sure ...
- Just this notion of writing as inquiry ... can we unravel it a bit?
- Yeh, so I suppose what is meant by that, what I mean, drawing on these scholars is using writing as not just as a pedagogic resource or reflective space, but also as an epistemological one ... as a way of inquiry and as a way of meaning-making. Richardson is pivotal here when she argues for creative modes of writing as a way of knowing

Writing as a method of inquiry, then, provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science. Writing as a method does not take writing for granted, but offers multiple ways to learn to do it, and to nurture the writer.

(Richardson, 1994, p. 924)

- So, I suppose it makes sense that if we live in a reality constructed through language, that language becomes a mode of inquiry?
- Yeh ... but I think it's more than that. Not just inquiry but representation of inquiry – and collapsing the space between them. What I love about this Richardson piece is that she is so honest about struggling to read worthy sociological work that becomes so



hard, so boring, to read because they ‘suffer from acute and chronic passivity: passive-voiced authors, passive “subjects”’ (p. 925).

- Ok ... so this is why we are so active then is it?

- Well, it’s certainly a big part of it. And she traces the historical splits into literary and scientific writing. But then sees in what she calls CAP (Creative Analytic Practice) ethnographies which are both ‘creative and analytic’ (p. 930) and uses a lens borrowed from science and creativity to evaluate the worth of such work which doesn’t try to separate the telling from the tale (p. 937).

- So what’s her criteria?

- Well, I’ll get to that in a bit but, for now maybe I’ll just mention her five criteria which are: substantive contribution; aesthetic merit; reflexivity; impact; expression of a reality. But as I say, we’ll get to evaluation in a bit. The point for now is that, in this piece, we can see writing taking on a new purpose, a new import for us.

- Ok ... I suspect we will need to come back to this ... we were talking about journal writing which, in my head, I was thinking was a space for reflexivity – not the site of inquiry itself.

- Well ... it started as the former and, through its enactment, started to suggest the possibilities of the latter. And that happened a lot with this inquiry – the learning acts (dialogue, journals, walking) from early on got dragged in, as we moved forward, as methodological acts. And I suppose that’s what I am really interested in ... not just reproducing all the reasons why a creative approach to writing might have a place in inquiry (for more worthy scholars than me have done that and are doing that) – what I really want to do, what I am trying to do here, is perform these possibilities. To experiment with form, style and content to see, to show, what that might look like.

- And it looks like this?

- It does I suppose.

- So you moved slowly forward in your inquiry through dialogue and journaling?

- That’s right. .... But also through movement.

- Ah ha! I knew it .... dialogue; journaling; walking - I knew you were building up to some triadic thing that would flow through your tri-skeleton thing or whatever you call it!

- Triskelion.

*Walking as inquiry*

- And walking would have to come into the meaning-making wouldn't it? I should have guessed after all our walking. So go on, tell me about that.

- Well ... walking has always been part of the narrative of our family life. We were always a family that went for walks. And it's something that I've continued with the small family, has become part of the fabric and rhythms of our life... we don't fetishize it, don't have the fancy walking gear or all that ... we just go for walks. And when I think back on our times, and we've said this so many times, some of our happiest times together as a family have been walking ... in Belfast, Scotland, here ... and we've walked and talked through so many troubling things over those years.

- We have. And we've walked until hope emerged – don't forget that.

- I won't and you're right to remind me.

- Walking and playing the guitar seem to be the things which are good for you – ground you a bit.

- Maybe ... although I think the guitar is a different activity for me ... it's more akin to that notion of flow that you used to talk to me about (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) – a space where I am lost, immersed in that act of playing that I don't think about anything else ... or not consciously ... but walking, for me anyway, is a very reflective activity, is a place where I think a lot through other things ... make sense and meaning of all the troubling bits. Make connections. And it was quite well on into the PhD until I realised its significance ...

*04 June 2014*

*I had some thoughts as I walked the other day that I wanted to journal ... what were they? Something fairly fundamental about the methodology of the PhD. So much comes and connects as I walk – I think I need to write about this in my PhD. I should probably get that Philosophy of Walking book.*

(O'Neill, 2010-2015)

- And did you get that book ... *The Philosophy of Walking* (Gros, 2014)?

- I did. And I started reading around walking a bit more - started to realise how significant it was in the emergence of all this.

- And?

- And I suppose I saw parallels between walking and writing. So, for example, Coverly and Gros, in their texts, explore, and collapse, the connections between writer as walker; writing and walking (Coverley, 2012; Gros, 2014). They explore the possibilities and role of walking in both philosophy and culture. And again, it reiterates the point about the links between a moving body and knowledge.

And in research or inquiry I think this gets pushed a bit further – where walking gets prioritised in acts of inquiry and meaning making (O'Neill, M. & Hubbard, 2010). Hall (2009) contemplates the significance of walking and place - moving through local, known, spaces in research. He, tentatively, suggests fluid connections, with inquiry practices.

To move, I have argued, is not always to move on, or away, from the place in which one already resides. Places themselves, as much as they are constituted by flows in and out, are also made up of continued traversing around. Tracking such movements – capturing them, joining them, sharing them, representing them - presents particular challenges ... but in directing attention to local motion my aim here has not been to advance any specific technique as mobile method .. , rather to suggest a more general orientation. And this is an orientation which ought really to come easy to the qualitative researcher,

predisposed as he or she is, surely, to patience and consideration for the repetitive –plodding – messiness of quotidian activity.

(Hall, 2009, p. 583)

And the like of Colyar (2013) and Ingold (2010), I think, push this even further again ...they start to really stress the ways in which writing is an embodied act. So that Colyar reflects how the first draft of her papers get ‘written’ as she goes on a daily run around Toronto. And this is how I see my writing process too. The first stage of writing something for me is some form of embodied thinking that is as far away from the passivity of sitting in front of a keyboard as I can get – usually, for me, walking. And Ingold is very interested in this creative interplay between writing, inquiry and place. And in his exploration of the connections between walking, writing, reading, painting and listening collapses ontological distinctions between the real and representations of the real and sees in Australian Aboriginal notions of the Dreaming a synthesis between walking, imagination and creation (Ingold, 2010). Remember, it was you, after all, who told me on the stairs that day to go walkabout with this.

- Did I?

- You did. But he doesn’t just collapse the distinctions between writing, creation, place and walking – you have a role too.

- Me?

- Well, the reader anyway. In discussing medieval monks’ writing on animals and the fragility of ontological distinctions between a ‘real’ beast, the image and the word, he asks,

How, then, does reading differ from walking in the landscape? Not at all. To walk is to journey in the mind as much as on the land: it is a deeply meditative practice. And to read is to journey on the page as much as in the mind. Far from being rigidly partitioned, there is constant traffic between these terrains, respectively mental and material, through the gateways of the senses.

(p. 18).

- So, what are you saying? Are you saying that this walk, this landscape we are moving through is more than just an extended metaphor – because I suppose that was the way I was thinking of it? I mean it's not real ... This isn't real ... Is it? ... Is this real? ... Jesus, you're playing with my head again.

- Well ... this walking that we do together is so much more than a metaphor. I suppose I presumed that you knew that. These are not just random places we are walking. These are real places which have been, and continue here, to be the site of deep, embodied, perambulatory meaning-making. Any knowledge I have has been walked through, literally, in these spaces ... We may come to Nan Shepherd (2011) later, but it was Macfarlane, writing about her work, that declared 'I walk, therefore I am' (2008). My point is that walking, writing, place, meaning-making and our sense of subjecthood are all interwoven in this. And this sense of walking locating us in a space is, I think, important for critical research as it contextualises knowledge and also suggests, more obviously, opportunities for cultural and social critiques.

We had lost sense of time and place at this stage. And you, it seemed, had become, not surprisingly, very conscious, for a moment at least, of our walking.

We were back amongst a trail leading through mostly-planted pine. Every now and then a crack in the commercialised forestry allowed the possibility of a moment of indigenous growth ... the slower growth of a deciduous tree.

We paused in such a clearing which offered the respite of a bench under the sprawl of an old oak. The slight crack in the trees below us revealed, just about, the distant sea. We had walked, it seemed, a long loop which had started westward and now, at last, had left us facing east again. As we settled into the bench, I pointed to Heaney's words inscribed into the wood ...

Walker, pause now, and sit. Be quiet here.

Inhale the breath of life in a breath of air.

(Heaney, n.d.)

You looked at me with a degree of incredulity.

- Ah come on now, you planned that. This is more than a coincidence.
- Not really. It just emerged. Really.

Not for the first time, you looked unconvinced, but thought best to leave it.

## Creative methods

We respectfully obeyed Heaney's command and paused and were quite for some time. We allowed our own voices and thoughts to fade for a bit and let the sounds of the woods slowly establish their presence within us.

It was you who got us back on track again.

And I suppose that's what I am really interested in ... not just reproducing all the reasons why a creative approach to writing might have a place in inquiry ... what I really want to do, what I am trying to do here, is perform these possibilities. To experiment with form, style and content to see, to show, what that might look like.

- So you were, as I said once, in search of the right vessel – a textual space to locate all this creative and critical play and inquiry.

- Yes ... you did say that didn't you ... and you saw it, knew it, possibly, before I did myself.

- Ah yeh but you were too close to it all ...

- Maybe, maybe .... and the last piece of the puzzle, if you want to put it that way, was

embracing creativity in research ... in fact, regardless of what happens, it was this embracing of creativity which gave me the energy, the passion to see this through ...

- Was that in doubt?

- Possibly, there were moments of deep doubt in all this ... but I always had a sense, throughout, the creativity would play out in this somehow. I always seemed to be dragging in the creative one way or another ...

*30 Aug 2013*

*Well, we found out about two deaths today: Kitty and Seamus Heaney.*

*Kitty will be missed much by our little family - she was a source of joy and affection for us all, especially, I'd have to say, [REDACTED]. She slept with him every night and they had a close connection.*

*I was moved and saddened, maybe more than I would have thought, by Seamus Heaney's death. Maybe because I consider him young. He just seemed slightly immortal.*

*Reflecting on his death and poetry and reading the various articles online and in the newspapers made me ponder the significance of his passing. Rather solipsistically and probably very insensitively, but not altogether unpredictably, I thought about the relationship of poetry to my own project. I considered, and I must write this is [sic], that my project has a poetic function as much as an epistemological and methodological one. If poetry is seen as the representation of our lives, our reality through an aesthetic use of language, then, yes, my project can be said to have a poetic function because I am very conscious of how language is used, on so many levels, in my research. And I want what I produce to have an aesthetic value. Not that I would compare it to poetry as it is generally regarded, but rather, as I say, it has, in part a poetic function.*

*This train of thought got me thinking about how longevity in text is usually ensured by style rather than content (although I know I am again falling into the dualistic mode which I always try to avoid). Shakespeare's sonnets on the immortality of verse calls to mind the temporal which is central to Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry mode. Who will, in all honesty, read, in five hundred years our PhDs for what they have to say? Surely, they will be more interested, in our style, our assumptions, our blind spots and our methods.*

*Anyway, I need to ensure the research maintains its aesthetic integrity ...*

(O'Neill, 2010-2015)

- And that there was something too in my thinking that was trying to forge a link between creativity and that sense of epistemological humility that we talked about before (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994)....

*22 June 2014 - Ballynerrin*

*Listening to Stephen Rea and Enda Walsh on the radio this morning. Stephen Rea talked about working with Beckett who advised him not to focus on what a play was about but on its rhythms. For some reason this struck a chord with me. He (or was it Cillian Murphy who was on the day before?) also talked about how they say in the film/theatre world that they story finds you. This is a bit what this feels like ...*

(O'Neill, 2010-2015)

- So you were circling the creative throughout? To what end ... as a way of inquiry ... writing about the work ... dissemination ... ?
  - I suppose all that ... there's something about the concept of dissemination that troubled me too ... this notion of it being the after-life of the research ... what if the after-life was drawn a bit more into the life of the inquiry?
- But also I was drawing on the notion that creative acts can also be subversive acts or counter-hegemonic acts ... think back to what we were saying about folk music, ballads ... all the sometimes explicit, often, implicit critiques of power in anonymous ballads ...
- But isn't that the great power of art ... it doesn't have to tell you, it is enough, even better, to show ...
  - Yeh ... and there is, of course, a long history of the defence of poetry in terms of its social value (Sidney, 1595 (1995); Shelley, 1840 (2002)) ... and certainly I have been



drawn to writers from various ages who have provided some critique of society in their work ... Dickens, Gilman, Joyce, O'Brien, Greene, Carver, Duffy, Meehan, Higgins ...

- But this is a different thing altogether.
- It is and it isn't. It is trying to perform a type of knowledge, adult educator knowledge, or a triskelion flow of knowledges, in a creative way ...
- And is there validity in that?
- I think so.
- Does anyone else?
- Well again – not those whose power is invested in the technologies of hegemonic epistemologies .... but, if we look to the margins, again, we see that feminist writers and thinkers advocate creativity in knowledge creation and education. So there is, I think, a common call to tap into the radical potential of creative practices across a wide range of thinkers and writers ... from a feminist poststructuralist position ...

Cixous (1976) argues for a revolutionary potential of writing in ways that disrupt patriarchal modes and forms.

She [woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated ... To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon (Cixous, 1976, p. 880)

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist ... It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate (Cixous, 1976, p. 883).

But, coming back to slowness again, this way of working can't be rushed - Done, et al. (2011) make this point

The theoretical praxis found in the writing of both Cixous (2007) and Richardson (1997), which is an inter-weaving of the personal, political and theoretical, is a way of engaging with theory that also takes time to develop (p. 395).

Both Irigaray and Cixous caution us to be wary of the authority of the signified and the need to 'listen with another ear' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 29).

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. (p.76)

What is being argued for is a radical mode of expression that draws on women's autoerotic and non-unitary sexuality which fuses, in some senses, a *jouissance* of language and of body to produce texts.

And Davies et al. (2006) in advocating a feminist poststructuralist approach in collective biographical methods note that

In doing so we constitute, through the mode of telling, another subject cut adrift from its liberal humanist moorings and able to be seen in one particular moment, being constituted through multiple discourses, a subject who is in process, a verb rather than a noun, a subject with boundaries permeated by others, by discourse, a subject identical with the text through which it is being constituted (p. 93).

- And this subject identical with the text is close to where we are- isn't it?
- I think so ... yeh ... but don't think that blunts our teeth ... or that the page will hold our bite. That the focus on the subject is not the same as the focus on the individual. But that, as Ryan (2001), reveals, feminist poststructuralist methods, in pedagogy and research, may offer one method of attending to the personal and political simultaneously (p. 136). And that in this process the subject takes on a different character to what we are used to in more humanist approaches and, drawing on Hollway and Jefferson, claims that the

Human subjects of research might be represented with the complexity we currently associate with literature and works of art more generally.

(Ryan, 2001, cited Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.138)

And Maxine Greene has long drawn that attention of the nexus between art and education practice (Greene, 1994; Greene, 1994). And in fact, she draws attention to something that is very pertinent to us right now ..

- What's that?
- Well, after Barthes, she points to the creativity in reading and how, through reading, we make meaning by weaving the world of the text with our world (Greene, 1994b, p. 221) ... so that the boundaries between the textual and extra-textual become, for us, anyway a bit blurred ... to what extent are we textual subjects?
- That sounds a bit reminiscent of Derrida's infamous statement (Derrida, 1976). But, you're pulling us away again ... the point you were making is about creativity's role in what ... education or research?
- Both ... remember this is a learning text as much as anything else. But, to answer your question, I think we are moving, in some ways, from sociological inquiry, in embracing creativity, towards something closer to a cultural inquiry or critically-infused creative acts ... we are still interested in the same themes of education, power, equality

and social justice but we are also interested in how, by bringing language into the mix, how that can be explored and presented creatively.

So, it's great to see teacher education and education inquiry been explored and facilitated through art (Walsh, 2004; Hickman, 2007) and creative, dialogic methods (Sava & Nuutinen, 2003; Speedy, 2005; Gale & Wyatt, 2006; Gale, et al., 2010).

- And within adult education contexts in Ireland it's exciting to see that call for the transformative potential of creative practice been advocated and performed through the likes of Connolly (2013) and McCormack (2013).
- Yeh and, there is a connection also to walking and creative acts –

We must recognise in the power of the imagination the creative impulse of life itself in continually bringing forth the forms we encounter, whether in art, through reading, writing or painting, or in nature, through walking in the landscape.

(Ingold, 2010, p.23)

Which reminds me of the work by the likes of the Beehive Design Collective (2013) – which moves even further towards creative, critical work and really blurs the lines between research and creativity. These artist-researchers literally walked the landscape of Mesoamerica.

- Who are they now?
- Well ... they have a number of projects ... but they are a collective of artists who have come together to explore important social issues and represent those challenges in creative ways. In ways where the individual artistic voice, the 'I', is lost, or merges into a collective critical, artistic act.
- So they kill the author (Barthes, 1968)?
- No, no ... the re-imagine, re-constitute the author, the researcher as a dialogic (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996) and polyphonic subject (Bakhtin, 1981) - a community of

artistic-inquirers who seem to embody a revolutionary poetics (Kristeva, 1986b). That's how I see them anyway.

So, for example with their *Mesoamérica Resiste* project, a number of researcher-artists spent over nine years gathering stories – through walking the local - from activists and local communities in mesoamerican regions who were resisting a massive infrastructural development plan which would have devastating impact on local communities. And out of all these narratives the artists came together to re-tell the story from the ground through artwork which can be read from imperial and indigenous perspectives. It draws on cartographic and natural metaphors to tell the big and little story of oppression and political and commercial imperialism in the region (Figures 6 & 7).



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9

- That's powerful stuff alright.

- It is and what I think I saw in work like the Beehive Design Collective a sense of validation for creativity and critical thought ... that our knowledge forms could, maybe

I think I'm trying to *show* as much as tell ... this is why this is so messy, such a wandering text.

should for a bit, be played with ... to get us, out of the kind of states of stuckness that St. Pierre (1997b, pp. 365, 370) and McCormack (2013, pp. 55, 71, 91) write about that happens in the process of thinking and writing something ... producing something of worth.

- And where does such playfulness bring us ...?

- Well, it brings me to a place where I want to do all of this ... I want to be critical, I want there to be intellectual depth, I want voices to merge, blend ... the subject to dissolve, I want the text to become a canvass, a space for creative-critical acts which try to represent and enact the play of the personal, a community of educator subjects and the theoretical ... I want it all I suppose ..

And I found myself after years of working, walking and writing through this, I found that I had been drawn to textual voices that validated, lent support to what I was trying to do or maybe accurately I was drawn to those who were stuck with the same

questions, the same puzzles ... people who explored the personal in research and how it can creatively connect to something broader than the writing-researching subject (Dominice, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2009; Etherington, 2009; McCormack, 2009; Bochner, 2012; Denzin, 2014). People who I didn't expect popped up with their own forays into autoethnography (Brookfield, 2011) and posited a published autobiography, a creative re-telling of a life story, as a site for authentic critical reflection (Brookfield, 2008); and even people who wrote autoethnography about learning about autoethnography (Wall, 2006).

- Is that last one not a bit like what this is ...?

- Well a bit ... Wall (2006) tells the story of her learning. I think I'm trying to *show* as much as tell ... this is why this is so messy, such a wandering text ... And what I found in much of this was also a way of seeking validation for the whole process ... remember you did ask that question a while ago ...

But just allow me to make this point ... so, through all the wandering off the paths – never just an aimless wandering, but a considered divergence from a well-trodden path – I have met, and continue to meet, others, in clearings here and there – others who are on similar journeys ...

- Such as?

- Well ... people like Chawla (2013) who realised that walking was becoming a way of not just revealing the intersections between her research and theories, but also a way of collapsing and embodying narrative subjectivities:

Could my dissertation have been written had I not walked? Of course. Only the stories would not be a part of me as they are even now.

(pp. 168-169)

- This is interesting. Were you familiar with this at the start?

- No. And maybe that's part of the point I'm trying to make. If someone had given me this Chawla piece at the start I would probably have taken a glance and thrown it amongst the pile of other pieces that people give you.

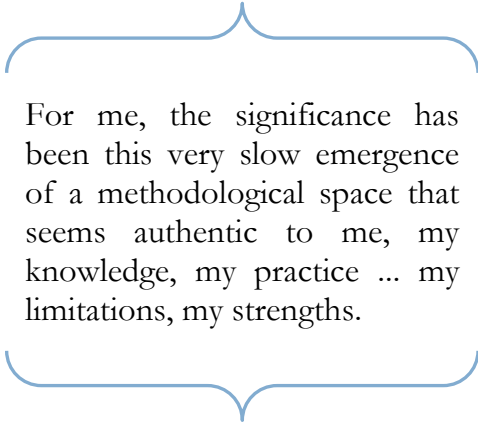
- So, it would have meant nothing to you then?

- No. And how could it? For me, the significance has been this very slow emergence of a methodological space that seems authentic to me, my knowledge, my practice ... my limitations, my strengths.

- But ...

- Go on ... say what's on your mind.

- But ... would it not have been easier to just pick a method and go with that ... I'm just saying ...



For me, the significance has been this very slow emergence of a methodological space that seems authentic to me, my knowledge, my practice ... my limitations, my strengths.

- Not for me. All this is more, so much more, than a method (Holman Jones, et al., 2013). It's a way of being in, and with, the world – a way of interpreting, living in and, if we are lucky, transforming it. So, no, it would not have been easier to *just pick a method and go with it* ... Jesus ... sometimes, I wonder ...

- Ok, ok ... calm down.

We walked on a bit. Walked off some of the tension that had suddenly erupted.

- So? This isn't new.

- Well, it isn't really so new at all when you place it in the context of the work that so many others are doing - others whose work seems to operate from a sense of dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional performances and expectations of qualitative inquiry.



- Like who?
- Well Richardson (1994) who developed ideas of writing as inquiry from a starting point where she felt unmoved by traditional, canonical social science writing. St. Pierre (1997a, 1997b) who developed a method and whose dissatisfaction extended to what she felt compelled to produce for the academy in her doctoral research. Bochner (2000) who is interested in ethnographies that ‘produce interesting, innovative, evocative texts, works that seek to nurture not kill the imagination’ (p. 268). Spry talks about poetics and emotion as being ‘scholarly treason’ but she argues that it is ‘heresy put to good use’ (p. 709). Holman Jones, et al. (2013) and Speedy and Wyatt (2014) who, in their introductions, and collection of creative research (Gannon, 2013; Poulous, 2013; Chawla, 2013), make a plea for aesthetic research which is so much more than a method.
- Jesus, that’s quite a list.
- And it’s not the half of it ... and as we come towards the end I seem to be stumbling across more and more work that is doing this kind of thing. Some of it going back quite a while.
- Like ... ?
- Well, Clough’s piece from 1996 – nearly twenty years ago now – is very resonant with this inquiry.
- In what ways?
- Well, he writes a short story, a fiction, which ‘self-consciously’ mixes up the stories of participant with researcher subjectivities based on ‘an epistemology which will never ultimately separate art and (social) science’ (Clough, 1996, p. 80).
- Ok ... I see. So, this is certainly not new.
- No ... although Clough did make the point that there are ‘few examples of the form used to convey the experience of *both* the subject *and* the researcher’ (p. 72).
- Right ... but as you say that was nearly twenty years ago.
- It was ..

- And how different would all this have been if all this work was revealed to you right at the start ... if you were given all of these references and told 'There you are. These folk are doing stuff that might interest you. Off you go.'

- I have thought about that ...

- And?

- Well I suppose, then this would have been a very different story indeed ... but what makes what we've done interesting, possibly, is that it is the story, partially, of our search for a community of creative and critical inquirers without even knowing that anyone was out there at all ... the story of a very green researcher going off the beaten path because of a feeling that there had to be another way.

- Hence the need for a clearing?

- Yeh, and in a methodological clearing, some of these others might just see in this text shades of the kind of work that they are trying to do. Work that tries to articulate the place of creative and writing acts in the development of knowledge and practice. Work that tries to uncover the play and place of the subject in acts of inquiry. Work that acknowledged the somatic, and, especially, the moving, perambulating body in the process of meaning-making. Work that endeavours to sing to broader audiences than the academy.

And this, then, is the broad community of methodological practice that, as I come to the end, I find myself been drawn towards. This is the community that awaits in this clearing.

- And how would you name that? I know you don't like labels and badges, but how would you, as Flynn compels us at the beginning of all this, to name it, this, your, methodology (Flynn, 2004)?

- Well, you're right. I don't like labels and badges, but maybe there is something in tentative naming – at least it allows the possibility for like-minded inquiring souls to find each other and get some strength from that.

- So?

- So ... I suppose I'm still not sure but it certainly feels and looks, as it draws to a pause, the kind of work that is done by the broad range of inquiry sometimes named as 'interpretive autoethnography' or 'poststructuralist autoethnography' (Denzin, 2014).
- So is that what we'll stick with?
- Maybe. You are in a big rush to brand this with a methodological name, aren't you. Slow it down a bit ... Maybe it's got something of the nomadic inquiry about it (St. Pierre, 1997b; Gale, et al., 2010).
- Or ... maybe ... when I describe what I have tried to do here to people who are, even vaguely, interested, it's interesting how they hear what I am describing as something creative rather than academic. The response I get, along with a hint of raised eyebrows, comes out as 'Oh ... so it's like a book?'. So maybe it's close to that kind process.
- What?
- Creative writing. But creative writing with a critical and educational edge. I don't know what you'd call that. Sometimes I find myself calling it a 'creative inquiry' which may just bring us back to the likes of Clough (1996), Bochner & Ellis (2003), Speedy & Wyatt (2014) and all the rest ...

### A post-qualitative clearing

- Ok ...
- And ... or maybe it is just part of what Lather and St. Pierre call 'post-qualitative' research (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014) – inquiry that has all that is good of qualitative inquiry pulsing in its DNA but pushes the boundaries of what is considered scholarly knowledge.
- Ok. But where does that leave us?
- Well ... with a few options, I suppose, in terms of methodological naming which should do ... I think you have half a point ...
- About what?

- About naming. Maybe there is a value in the naming. Even if we struggle, or resist to locate it, tie it down to one thing – maybe it’s useful to know what we are not, rather than be bound by definitions of what we are.
- You know that people usually sort this out at the beginning ... not now, as we come to an end.
- I know, I know. ... But it’s like I say, a large part of this inquiry has been a search for a way ... so our methodology is something that is, slowly, emerging from this. Not something that we *just pick and go with it* ... I can’t believe you said that.
- Ok, ok ... drop that, will you ... I’m sorry for offending your methodological sensitivities.
- Ok ... sorry.

## Evaluation criteria

We’d been walking for a very long time at this stage, taking turns in the path as they came without too much thought. I’d been up here many times and knew that as long as we kept half an eye on the sun, we’d make our way back when the time was right. The hill was criss-crossed with forest tracks – we’d been taking paths and turns to make the walk the length it needed to be.

- How does anyone judge all this ... how can we say that, yeh, this works, this is ok as a piece of scholarly work?
- Well, I’m not sure at all I can say that ... and it’s not really up to me to make that judgement. I feel that it has worth ... and I do get some help in coming to that judgement ...

So, if you think about a traditional piece of social science research, it is evaluated by the well-established, or deeply-sedimented, criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability (Loh, 2013)

- Which works for traditional pieces of research I imagine but ... this, I take it, is not ... so?
- So, as many writers interested in narrative, creative and interpretive methods have pointed out, if we are to engage with notion of criteria at all, and some, like Bochner (2000) and Polkinghorne (2007) recoil, just a bit, from the very associations of words like 'criteria' and 'validity' ... so, to engage with that language, those concepts-
- I'm sorry to interrupt, but why would anyone not engage with these terms?
- Well, I suppose it depends on what you are evaluating ... and what you think this is ... is it a creative process, a research act ... a learning event?
- ... all three possibly?
- Yeh probably ... which makes it messy – it would be a lot simpler to consider notions of a evaluation if it was a traditional piece of social scientific research ...
- But it's not.
- No.
- So ... I'm guessing that modes of evaluation are messy too?
- I'm guessing that too.

The sun was low in the sky now - it's presence fractured by the trees around us.

And with that the temperature had dropped a bit. There was a chill that I hadn't noticed until a lapse in our conversation.

- C'mon we should start winding our way back ...
- Ok ... lead the way.

- It doesn't matter really – all of these cracks lead to the way back ... eventually.
- Cracks?
- Sorry ... I meant tracks ... I must be getting tired.
- It's fine. Cracks works too.

And so we took a track that opened up to our left and seemed to follow the contour of the hill, as much as we could make out in the fading light, down and around the hill. Down and around.

It was you who took it up again.

- So ... say you have a poem or a story ... or a song ... whatever?
- Yeh.
- How do you evaluate that?
- On aesthetic grounds ... does it work as a poem or a song or whatever ...
- And how do you evaluate a learning event as you call it?
- Well, in very blunt terms, on how much it has moved me on, changed me, transformed me ... and transformed the world around me.
- So, whatever, about the criteria for traditional research ... these criteria need to be in the mix too .. this aesthetic and transformative dimension.
- Yeh ... and also it's like what I said about the poem, what we need to be asking when this is all over is 'does this work as a piece of narrative inquiry?'
- So, as Bochner said, a 'criteria against ourselves' (Bochner, 2000)?
- Yeh ... and I like how he writes about what he calls 'alternative ethnographies', which I suppose we could call this ... it was like I was adrift for a long time, but was slowly

pulled into an orbit around this thing called autoethnography – I was writing about it years ago ... it erupted into my Masters thesis at one stage ... then disappeared again for over a decade ... but anyway, back to Bochner and evaluation ...

He reflects that in his long career he is baffled by the fixation on things like ‘rigor’ and ‘criteria’ and says that ‘we get preoccupied by rigor, but are neglectful of imagination’ (p. 267). But he gets into it a bit ... maybe it’s a lesson that we should start our inquiries from spaces we resist ... and instead of a list of criteria in a neat table (which I think I tried to create for comparative purposes a good while back), he simply tells us what works for him, what draws him into alternative ethnographies ...

- What does then? What works for him?

- Well ... he says he is drawn to work that represents the details of everyday life, including, the affective details ... feelings ... not just the facts.

And he is also attracted to work that is structurally complex in its narrative form – that resists simplified narrative trajectories and, instead, reflects the messiness of memory and the curve of time (p. 270).

- Have we done that?

- Well, its messy anyway ... but again, I don’t think it’s quite for us to say.

And linked to a messy or complex narrative structure, Bochner also looks for an authorial voice that authentically reveals vulnerability, limitations and honesty ... and ‘contradictory states’. And, in addition, but again linked to that, is his hope to see a ‘tale of two selves’ (p. 271) – a sense of the self in transformation.

And with all that a really careful attendance to the stories and well-being of any participants involved in the research ... to take care in the representation of their stories.

His final comment on what draws him to a piece is a simple one, but certainly a hard one to force ...

- What’s that?

- He wants a story that moves him ... in his heart, belly and head (p. 271).

- Is that enough?

- I think so ... but I also think that as well as moving us, it needs to be coherent as a piece on to itself first and foremost and to an audience wider than the narrow readership required for examination purposes.
- So what do you mean 'coherent on to itself'?
- Well ... I suppose that it comes back to this sense of it work in terms of its own values its own paradigms ... consistent with its own practice ... (McNiff, 2007; McCormack, 2013).
- You mean our values, our paradigms, our practice?
- I suppose I do.
- But it also needs to work as a text that cuts across genres ... it needs to work aesthetically but also epistemologically ...
- So not just a good, or engaging read?
- No .. it needs to be more than that for our purposes. It needs to open our way of seeing the world a bit more ... in our case, seeing adult educator experience in a new light ... and hopefully in a way that might transform that reality ... even just by the slightest bit to have the possibility of a 'catalytic impact' as McCormack (2013), after Lather, puts it.
- But even this sense of possibility suggests something else ... something less tangible maybe than measuring an impact?
- Yeh ... it might be closer to the hope that Denzin looks for in this kind of work (Denzin, 2000).
- And what Avis and Bathmaker look for in practice (2004)? A sense of hope.
- Yeh ... which, of course, draws us back into critical pedagogy through this yearning for hope (Horton & Freire, 1990; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996) You see, everything is connected ... it's very hard to separate the methodological from the pedagogical here.
- Why bother?
- Yeh, you're right.



- So we are looking for work that demonstrates, as they say, ...
- Sounds good so far ...
- ... work that works aesthetically ... is engaging as a text ... works on all parts of the body, but also shows growth on part of the author and the possibility for transformation in terms of theory, method and practice ...
- Sounds good.
- Will we go with that then? Will that be our measure of the worth of this?
- Ok.

#### A found anthology

When we came to the next bend, we took the track which would lead us around the top of the Glen and down, eventually, to the car.

Weary with walk and talk, we slumped into the car, throwing our jackets on the back seat. You paused and focused on something half-hidden amongst the detritus.

- What's that?
- What?
- This book or ..

You stooped in and picked it up – engrossed in its elaborate front design which suggested the contours of a map or maybe an elaborate wallpaper design.

- This is it?

I nodded confirmation.

- *Voices in a clearing: tutor stories of working in adult education.* Catchy.

- Thanks

- Why didn't you tell me it was complete? After all that walking, you never even let on all the time that it was here in the back of your car.

- I forgot ..

- You forgot?

- Or I didn't know it yet.

You looked at me with a mixture of care and frustration – possibly worried that I was, after all, losing it.

- Right.

You were being careful with your responses.

- ... I suppose it doesn't matter though now ... can I borrow it?

- Of course – take it. When we meet up next we'll talk about it ... see what you think. But can I give you some advice on reading it?

- Sure.

- Well, I don't think you should read it linearly. Remember all of this, all of what we have been doing really resists straight lines – and that includes reading.

- Back to Barthes?

- A bit yeh ... and also *l'écriture féminine* too – so I don't think it works reading it the way we read prose. Maybe it should be read a bit more like a poem –

- So?

- Well ... when I read it, I flick through it, turning the pages glancing at the meanings created by the play of white and black spaces. And maybe a word, a phrase catches my eye and I follow that for a bit ... and then step away and flick again ... back and forth and down and slow when it takes me that way.

- Ok ... I'll give that a go.

We drove the way home, as we came, in silence – but a different silence to the one which brought us to the woods today. I was happy to see you flicking through the pages of the book as we drove – dipping in here and there. Sometimes half-smiling, sometimes full-frowning.

You had found, in the act of clearing the detritus in the back of my car, this text of adult educator voices, their dialogic stories of living through and working in adult education.



## Part Four

Paths travelled; paths ahead



Found fragments from an anthology of tutor narratives #5

A sense of a future





I enjoy what I do now  
and, at the moment,  
it works well with having young children.

I suppose if

I was to be honest,  
if in ten years' time I was still  
just a tutor,  
then that would probably  
piss me off a bit.

I really would like to see myself  
continuing into the future  
as a teacher with adults.

My name is down  
for three courses in one centre  
but I'm hanging on  
as I don't think the funding  
for them has been sanctioned.

I would be interested in doing  
a teaching qualification.

One of the reasons is that  
I wouldn't like to be excluded  
from work if the ETB is moving towards that.

But maybe more importantly is that  
doing a teacher qualification,  
I think, might help me  
become a better teacher.

I feel I have much more to learn as a teacher.

Maybe it would give me  
more confidence  
going into a class  
if I had that qualification.

I feel that everything that I've been given so far  
that I've made a go of it.

There have been  
some challenges  
and I think I overcame them.

I really love what I do

and

would like to keep developing

and

growing.

The degree may help me

secure a future

for me as a tutor.

For a long time,

I was unsure about

joining the Teaching Council.

But ensuring that I have

a reliable

and

sustainable income

as a tutor

has become increasingly important

and I will look at registering with the Teaching Council

when I am eligible to do so.

I've also applied for

union membership

recently to help

secure that future.

I am aware that there is

a trend towards

registration with the Teaching Council.

I feel that there might be

a risk in the future

that

opportunities for work will be limited

if tutors are not registered

but I'm not too concerned at the moment.

I am not a member of the Teaching Council and

would not be eligible because

I don't have a Level 8 qualification.

I haven't given any

serious consideration

to committing to any of the

qualifications offered in institutions.

I would like to see myself

continuing with some hours with the ETB

in the future although

I know that

not being registered with the Teaching Council

may have some effect down the line.

But again, at the moment, I am not overly concerned with that.

I sense that it will mainly impact  
on day-time programmes,  
but would have  
less of an impact on  
evening courses and  
more vocationally-tailored programmes.

As a general rule there is  
more commercial work available,  
although there can be  
problems in getting paid for the work you do as a trainer.

Although the  
income that I get from tutoring now is  
not enough,

I'd still like to do more of it.

Training, in some form or other,  
has been a constant thread  
across my career and  
reflects my desire to work,

face-to-face with people.

So, I imagine that I will continue to have some  
tutor or training role with the  
ETB or maybe some other organisations.

Teaching and developing courses are things that  
I both enjoy and am good at.

I am not too worried about the future as  
Opportunities  
seem to evolve organically  
from one context to the next.

I am passionate about the work that I do.

I need to work,

but

I also need to believe in the work that I do.

As long as adult education

is about more than qualifications,

I want to be a part of it.

I'm really not that sure  
where I am going  
with the work that I do as a tutor.

And yet, maybe,  
down the line,  
I see myself in some kind of  
coordinator role.

I wouldn't like  
to let go of the teaching  
completely.

I think that  
if you want to be of any worth  
in terms of management or coordination  
that you have to have  
your toe in the water  
in terms of tutoring or  
you are in danger of losing the reality.

So, I'd like to see myself

go on somewhere

but I don't know where

right now.

I like the idea of

getting a few more years experience

and taking it from there.

I'd love to be

involved in teaching or supporting people

who are teaching in adult education.

I also really like working with parents

and the whole area of family learning,

so that might be part of my future too.

But I often wonder

what the gain is for us as tutors

for all the work

and professional development

that we put in over the years.

There are, of course,

deep personal gains



in terms of our own development and

this is really important for me –

I've learned so much being a tutor.

But

a sense of security,

benefits

or

a potential career path

all these things are important too

just to continue existing as a tutor:

the things that are

taken for granted

in other jobs.

You get to a certain stage where

a sense of security

and

a regular income

becomes important.

So, I am

always keeping my eyes open

for opportunities.

There's loads of things that I'd love to do.

In two years time

I may do something complete different.

It's hard to say.

Outbound trajectories

I worked in the centre for about six years.

There are a number of reasons why I left.

It didn't happen quickly

and for a while, at the beginning,

I thought that I'd be able

to make a career out of working there.

But various issues that  
had been building up for a long time  
gradually came together and  
made it difficult for me to stay.

At one stage,  
I was working  
up to about twenty hours  
but nothing was permanent.

... that was probably  
the primary reason that I left –  
I eventually knew that  
they'd never be able to offer me anything full-time.

I was getting fed up with this bitty-ness.

I was away from Ireland for so long  
that I didn't know how the system worked.

I assumed when I started that I'd start off  
getting some hours and  
build that up to a position where I'd eventually  
get a full-time or permanent post.

I assumed that it would happen.

I don't think that they thought that I'd ever leave.

I was there for so long.

But I needed to have a career.

I couldn't see the work with the VEC as a career

because no matter what I committed to it,  
what they offered me was  
always dependent on what hours were available  
for that particular term.

It was a big decision to leave.

But when I left to take up a full-time job it was  
such a relief  
to just be in one place and  
not scurrying between different places and  
left with the feeling that your  
head was in different places. It was  
very hard  
working between  
two stressful jobs in care and a tutor – it was really hard to manage.

When I think about the future, I just see myself

more or less

doing what I'm doing.

I don't feel the need to look for  
anything higher in terms of position.

I just need to

keep myself

sharp and challenged.

So, I'm happy

being a tutor as long as I can push myself somehow.

I would be

slightly worried about the future of

those of us

who aren't registered with the Teaching Council.

I have tried to get registration with the Teaching Council.

I did so many courses over the years-

but they sent it back: they wouldn't accept them.

In hindsight, it may have been better

if I'd gone back and done my degree.

It may have made things easier for me now.

But if I went back to do something now which was going to take a few years,

I would do something that interested me

I wouldn't do it just to get accreditation.

If it ever came down to me being

forced into a corner

where we were being told

we needed to do certain courses

to get registered with the Teaching Council or

we'd lose our jobs, I think

I'd just walk away

and look for something else.

I think there

might be a shift

to the more academic and qualification-based tutors.

But I think if there is

there is a danger

that they'll lose a wealth of experience with that.

I'd be worried about seeing lots of secondary school-trained teachers

coming into adult education.

It's just

such a whole different approach.

A secondary school teacher is trained to deliver a subject for

a certain amount of time

for the benefit of

the students, the school

and their own career.

And then

I think about

the ways that tutors work

as they start a programme with a group

by sitting down and having a discussion

about what they want to learn.

I don't worry so much for myself in terms of my future

but I'd worry

about how the whole adult education

landscape is shifting.

And this teacher-trained dimension

is just part of it.

I think the profile of our learners is changing.

I think we are going to see  
a lot more people in front of us because  
they need to be  
to get their Social Welfare payments.

As a result I think a lot of our  
older learners will  
get squeezed out  
– people who missed out on education  
earlier in life  
for so many reasons and  
have got so much in coming back.

We really run the risk of losing these learners if  
there is a pressure on us to  
get people off  
the Live Register.

We can see  
the move towards  
that in the last couple of budgets –  
this stress on getting people  
off the dole and into training.

That has to put a pressure on what we can provide.



And  
the casualties  
of that will be  
the older people who are coming and  
will probably never go back into the work force.

In general I'd have a concern about how  
the core work of ETBs  
is being  
disturbed and distorted  
by budgetary concerns.

I think there is a danger that  
economic and financial issues,  
at an institutional level,  
are increasingly having  
too much of an input into  
what the provision of adult education within the ETB.

That really worries me.

And in all that  
I wonder who is involved in making these decisions.

As a tutor this process seems very

distant and unclear.

Where and how do we voice our concerns?

Back, up and over to Gleann na gCapall



**A**nd so it was that we were reaching the end of our time together for now. We had walked and talked such a long way about so many things that troubled and intrigued us - had covered so much ground and, in the walking, left something of our mark, our lines on the way itself.

I don't know how long it was until I allowed myself to think about this, the final walk. I'm not sure that I'm great with endings. But maybe, like St. Pierre, I shouldn't see that as a problem (1997a). Maybe they're easier to handle if I can start to see the cracks in them – ways into something else: maybe the moment of rupture into another line of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; St. Pierre, 2013) ... or a way into the bending back on what we do, what we have done, which Eagleton sees as the beginning of theory (1996) ... or, when we infuse that reflection with an urgency for change and action it becomes closer to the critical education notion of *praxis* (Freire, 1996, p. 68).

But when I did start to think about a kind of an ending for us, it also started to become clear that I had somehow, somewhere along the way, decided that this should be a solitary walk.

Just me.

That I would leave you behind, just this once, so I could, in solitude and silence, think through the significance of all we had talked and walked through together.

I've been at pains throughout all this to make it clear that I am trying to perform, to show, more than tell, adult educator development and knowledge. To make it clear that *this* whole messy text, is what my, our knowledge looks like - a dialogic knowledge that flows between the personal, our experiences as educators and the theoretical.

And up to now, we have engaged in dialogue, as we would do in any adult education environment, to try to create some kind of artefact which reflects that learning.

If we are truly engaged in dialogic practice, we also need to acknowledge that we are letting go a bit. And your words came back to me again ...

Letting go

of this notion of the expert  
was important  
for my own development.

I feel that one of the things which really  
helped me develop was  
the gradual  
growth  
in confidence once  
I became relaxed enough  
to know that  
I didn't have to know  
all the answers.

And you were right. We do need to let go.

We need to welcome the possibility that our talking and listening will carry us to places we never imagined at the start, that the dialogue we enter will change things: change our plans, our ideas ... change us.

And, as I hope I have made clear, our knowledge, our learning doesn't just come from dialogue – it also comes from critical reflection (Brookfield, 2008; Boud, 2010; Fook, 2010). We talked through this in Edinburgh when we talked about professional learning.

Maybe, then, there is a time, as adult educators, to engage in dialogue, but there is also a time, to retreat, a bit, into the first person, to stand back, away and alone from others to consider the significance of the ground we have covered.

I had intended that this inquiry would be dialogic, more or less, throughout. And I suppose it is – even now. You are still with me. Just a bit more removed. Maybe it's one of the many contradictions of this text that I have, in the end, pushed you to the margins.

...

And when I started to think of where I should walk (although I have abandoned you for now, I still can't abandon perambulatory knowledge), where this thing should end, my mind wandered west again.

As I thought through the end I found that I had, unsurprisingly, wandered back to the start of things.

Back to the places where I had always had the freedom to roam alone from an early age – up the rugged slopes of the hill around my mother's birthplace in Connemara. Back to the place I explored in my MA studies in Belfast (O'Neill, 2001). Back to my home from home.

The first trace of a descendent in my mother's family who arrived in this valley was a defeated and fleeing soldier from the Jacobite Wars by the name of Eamonn an Saighdiur (Eamonn the soldier). His descendent, Thomás na gCapall, gained his more peaceful occupational name generations later as he was known to have reared horses (capall).

The place that I found myself drawn to for this final walk bears traces of Thomás' occupation. It won't be found on any map – it was never captured by imperial acts of cartographic signification; instead it is a place instead known locally, very locally, as Gleann na gCapall – in English, 'the glen of the horses'.

Maybe it was named after the same horses that Thomás tended to, and later sold, to the army. The big market for horses was, of course, the British army. So, in that sense, the imperial had a hand in its naming. Maybe in the end, it's hard for any of us to not get entwined in the messy networks of power that work for us and suppress us (Foucault & Deleuze, 1979).

And, in thinking of this place as a location for our final walk, I felt that there was something too, in stretching the metaphoric overlapping of all things equestrian, in acknowledging the stories embedded in the Irish of Gleann na *gCapall* and the Latin of the *hippocampus* – another landscape of memory work (Hazel, 2006).

But linguistic play wasn't the reason for me walking up and through this place. It was something more fundamental – something to do with a return to autobiographical beginnings.

...

Gleann na gCapall is a small and subtle valley that lies above a hill to the back of my mother's family home in Connemara – a traditionally Irish-speaking region to the west of Galway. It was somewhere I always retreated, as soon as I was old enough, to find a stillness of the kind that Heaney found in Glanmore (2006).

A stillness that has always nourished me.

I have mixed-up memories from various stages of childhood and adolescent of lying, face-to-the-sky amongst the bog heather of Gleann na gCapall. Time just melting away as the distinction between my body and the earth below and around me blurred with each moment. It was, I suppose, a hint of the kind of connection with the natural world that indigenous epistemologists and poets know more deeply, more honestly (Four Arrows, 2008). In fact I think that this may have been the first space where the Romantic poetry that I was encountering in my final years of school began to reveal itself to me at last. The silent landscape here taught me this poetry in ways which my English teacher never could.



And I suppose there are many other places where all this could end. But this place, this unnamed-named, modest valley hidden away, above and between much larger hills and mountains of the west, seemed like as good a place as any to finish - for now.

But ... I can hear you even now, interjecting from the resonances of our previous conversations ... interrupting from the margins ...

And yes, in our very first walk in Belfast, we talked of my early encounters as a mature student with colonising and de-colonising knowledge and the discourse of tourism of the west (O'Neill, 2001).

And yes, I am aware that I am in danger of slipping into something which may seem hypocritical – that sublimation of the west into the Other space of writing. That in the creation of a 'sublime' and 'wild' landscape in text, the danger was that I, like so many 'occidental tourists', aestheticize, sublimate the west for my own needs, my own desires (Arata, 1990).

But I am, at least, aware of that. And, in being aware, I tread carefully.

In working through this contradiction, I came across a few pieces, as has happened before on this long walk, that offered me some support in this cautious turn to beginnings.

We talked before about the troubling times St. Pierre experienced as she circled her own text and research in her return to the familiar-strange territories of home (St. Pierre, 1997a). And how, a method, a way, emerged for her from confronting the things which troubled her about the texts she produced and the texts she didn't, but wanted to.

Another text which supported my turn to the west was bell hooks' reflections and writing on her own return to autobiographical beginnings in Kentucky (hooks, 2009; hooks & Brosi, 2012). hooks almost seems to have surprised herself by returning to Kentucky – the place of her birth and a place, she explains to the bemusement of many acquaintances, that she is happy to see out her days (2012, p. 109).

But what draws hooks home was to be with her parents as they age - and in particular to be with and near her mother who had Alzheimer's.

As I read, that late summer day not so long ago, hooks write with so much care and love about her mother who was ‘slipping slowly into eternity’ (hooks, 2009, p. 4), I thought of you and your mother. And wept.

And yet, while the everyday might slip, the old memories, the established stories, seem to be more stubborn – or have left deeper tracks. Maybe there is a hope that narrative, a turn to our old stories, can, if not halt, at least ease that final drift (Cunningham Breede, 2013). And we have worked on these old memories over the years – crafting textual narrative traces that will outlive us both.

And you.

You who has borne the burden of others for so long on your shoulders, should now, at least, be relieved of some of the responsibility of all the tedious horse-work – indulge yourself in the nourishing memories and let us deal, as much as we can, with the rest.

Another piece which I came across in my slow turn westwards was from Anne Enright who was, in her own way, struggling with the same thing as myself – the pull of the Irish west in her creative endeavours.

She writes about resisting what she calls the ‘landscape solution’ in Irish prose ‘whereby the writer puts the word “Atlantic” or “bog” into the story and some essential yearning in her character is fixed’ (Enright, 2015).

As I started to read her piece I felt, initially, that I wouldn’t find much support in her words for my return to the west. But then, as she traced the play of the west in Irish literature through Lawless and Synge, she comes to acknowledge her own transformation – her own readiness, or need, to write of, and from, the west.

And, just as I acknowledged the necessity for me, at our end, to be alone, so too does she as she explores the gendered, creative and epistemological significance in her turn to the west:

I am a writer. It is my job to be alone. ... It [the Burren] might be my father’s part of the world, but landscape, for me, is always maternal. That is why it always feels so good to be between those hills. That is why a new vista seems like something remembered from another time, and walking out feels like a

return. To walk a place every day is to arrive, slowly, at knowledge of that place that precedes words, and precedes the stories that attach to this mountain peak or that bend in the road ...

They say you can never go back, you can never go home. Up on the green road, these questions were made beautiful – if there is such a thing as a beautiful question – because there is no better place to come home to than the west coast of Ireland. And when I sat back at the desk, sufficiently windblown, with a little wildness still running in my blood, I started to write a book about love and abandonment, exile and return, all those impossibilities.

(Enright, 2015)

It feels, then, that there is no better place for me to return as I walk this text to a close – to walk it to my home-not-home - to this small slice of the west of Ireland of my mother's people, a landscape-text richly inscribed with personal, familial and historical narratives.

...

And so, not long after our walk in The Devil's Glen, I found myself driving alone along the changed, but still familiar, route to Galway.

As a child our slow passage through bottle-necked towns would break the monotony of the journey westward from suburban Dublin. I came to know the likes of Maynooth, Moate, Athlone, Ballinasloe, Athenry through the moving frame of the car window. These places now have, literally, been reduced to signs – their presence deferred for the need for speed.

These days I need only slow down for the two toll stations that I meet on my way - stopping to pay the combined, one-way fee of four euros and eighty cents for the privilege, the luxury and the monotony of bypassing the local through privatised motorways.

And sure enough, within two hours I had reached Galway and was on my way along the Clifden road – a road, which, in contrast to the Dublin-Galway road, has changed little over my lifetime. But maybe not for long, even as I travelled that day I listened to a report on the radio of a 500 million euro plan to bypass Galway.

And out past Galway city again and through the familiar terrain and townlands of Roscahill, Moycullen, Ougtherard, Maam Cross, Recess and onward. And, after a bit, off the track again, through the pass that reminds me of Stoker's in his little-known turn to the west (1990). And, finally, slowing right down, as the terrain and way demand, for those last couple of miles.

I arrived late.

Usually you are there when we arrive to greet us. No matter what time of the day or night we'd arrive, you'd be there waiting for us with a fire burning and a table set with tea and homemade scones.

But, for once, I arrived to a still house – dark and cold. And although I shivered a bit with your absence, I didn't bother with heating, tea or scones. Instead, already tired of thinking through the next day's walk, I headed straight for the big double bed in the middle room and collapsed onto it – just for a moment ... to catch my breath ... to summon the energy to unpack ... .. the few things I brought and ... .. get ready for bed ... ..

...

The deep silence woke me with a start early the next morning – stretched sideways on top of the covers in my clothes.

But I was nourished from a deep sleep and ready for the walk and day ahead.

I rushed a shower and breakfast from the few things I had packed – I was keen to get moving.

I had thought that a cloudless blue sky would set just the right tone for the day – but, of course, it was another grey day with a light wetness in the air that could, I suppose, be nearly called rain.

After gathering a few things for the walk, I left the house behind and started the ascent up the hill.

When we started a walk together, you always looked around in earnest for the best route – always with an eye for the way. I felt if you were with me that day, you would surely have nodded a suggestion to the spectacular ridge trailing off to the north west. Its topographic drama would draw you to it.

But maybe that's another reason why I came alone. I never doubted the route I would take. It was the route that I had taken innumerable times in my life. And it would, in all possibility, in this dramatic landscape have seemed a wasted opportunity to you.

But this was a route that thought more like Nan Shepherd (2011) than Edmund Hillary. I wasn't here to conquer a mountain, but instead like Shepherd or Robinson (2006) to try to know this landscape and myself a bit better by walking through its contours. Listening to it. Feeling with it. Walking with, and through, the landscape to collapse the lines between us.

And as I read Macfarlane's introduction to Shepherd's great, invisible work, he reminds us that a turn to the local, the parochial, is, through the eyes of poet-critics like Kavanagh and Shepherd, not a turn away from the world, but a study of the universal in the local, in the familiar:

To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width.

(Paddy Kavanagh quoted in Macfarlane's introduction to Shepherd

(2011, p. xv))

And it's with this swirl of creative and critical encounters with the familiar and the abstract that I reached the first gate just above the house.

I struggled to open, as I always do, this ill-fitting gate. We put this up about twenty years ago with the bits we found around the place. Its awkward utilitarianism testament to my underdeveloped DIY skills. It wasn't, it isn't, pretty, but it works – just about.

It's when I pass this gate and shut it behind me that I start to feel that welcome solitude – the deep, familiar stillness.

The way I was taking up the hill was one I knew very well – possibly the one I know most well in my life.

A track made by the comings and goings of my mother, aunts, uncle, their parents and family, their community over decades, over centuries. A track I've walked since I was a child. A track I've walked with my own children. A track they'll walk long after I've moved on.

Although the track itself can split in parts lower down – the ways meet again further up. At times, particularly in the lush growth of rushes and ferns of mid-summer, the way can disappear in fields which form mini-plateaus that create moments of pause in the ascending lines of the hill. But, even when invisible, the track is there - the way is written into our memories, our bodies.

I paused, as I always do, at the crochán – a lump of a cliff which marks the first stretch of the ascent up the hill. A pause to take in the lake and the small island which hosts the ruins of Grace O'Malley's castle – the local pirate queen who, or so it is alleged, had to revert to Latin to find a common language to communicate with Elizabeth I in their one meeting.

...

I sat there for a long time - struggling to find some coherence about the significance of all of this, our grand tour, for me, for inquiry, for adult educators. This was, after all, the purpose of this last walk. To consider the 'so what?' of this inquiry.

I kept going back and forth between all that this has stirred ...

landscapeswalkingknowinglearningwritingreadingcarelovecommunityworkingprecaritim  
arginalitystoriestemporalitypoweridentityhumilityintertextualitypolyphonytriskelionflows  
lownessplayfulness ...

But, everything seemed so connected, so interrelated that I couldn't focus on one thing without darting off sideways into another. I sat alone with all these restless thoughts. Before I could hold on to one thought, another rushed in to take its place. But only for a millisecond as its presence was displaced by another ... and on and on it flowed.

I don't know how long I'd been sitting there on when I decided that my stuckness wasn't going to be resolved by sitting (St. Pierre, 1997b; McCormack, 2013).

I needed to move. I needed to walk the stuckness out of me.

And so I did – I walked on. Up the hill, past the old house, up the track, past the old well, and up again until I reached the stone wall at the top.

I paused again here. I had walked the whole way up and nothing had settled. Maybe, I felt, I was forcing it too much. I had a few days here. I didn't need to rush this.

And so, after some time, I descended again to the house. As I retraced my steps I tried to rationalise the vague sense of disappointment which had crept up on me.

For the rest of the day I busied myself, purposefully, with stuff that needed doing around the house and land. I would start afresh tomorrow. Again, I told myself that we can't rush knowledge – and smirked to myself when I felt that, if nothing else, surely I should know that by now (O'Neill, M. et al., 2014).

I woke early the next day, keen - possibly too keen - to try afresh. And again, after a quick breakfast and shower, I was soon on the hill again. More than ready to walk this thing home.

But again, everything seemed to hit me at once and in fragments. Nothing would settle long enough for me to hold one coherent thought for more than a moment – and a moment of coherence was all I craved to start a weave.

By now, the stuckness was starting to make me a bit anxious. It is so rare that I'd get a few days out on my own, to have this temporal luxury to spend on indulgent things like this. The time I had needed to be productive.

And again, I walked the hill – ready, waiting, for coherence, for the stillness, for something.

But again, nothing came. And, as nothing continued to come in buckets, I returned to the house again – more than a little despondent now. Maybe this wasn't the place to come after all. Maybe there are too many memories here for me – maybe there is no space left here for me to create new ones.

And I slowed as the day progressed as this thought grew - that the coherence I was looking for may not come here after all. I had one day left – I needed to be back in Wicklow by the following evening. I knew that the pressure and the small busyness that comes with clearing things up to go, getting the house in order, would leave little head space for the kind of things I wanted to get into.

So resigned to silence, I rose, on the third day, with less urgency – took my time over breakfast, over the shower. And more through habit than epistemological hope, headed casually up the hill. Through the gate.

And, again, like the first day, I paused at the crochán, to catch my breath and look upon the familiar landscape – a landscape that I never remember seeing for a first time. ... And I lost myself in something you said about this recently ... lost myself trying to remember what you said ... what was it you said? ... something about not having a memory of seeing this place for the first time ... it was you who said that.



But I was disturbed, very slowly, by a sense of another presence. Something that was missing from the days before. Something that was both part of, yet emerging from the land around me.

I paused for a moment. Closed my eyes and listened, using my first occupational sense, to see if I could locate the change through sound. But all I heard was the dissonance of a disturbed blackbird – down by the house, I thought.

I looked around slowly.

And, of course, there you were.

Sitting comfortably on the crumbling wall just behind me. You. With that big, crooked smile of yours.

I paused for a moment. I should, I suppose, have been shocked – alarmed even – to see you there after so purposefully leaving you behind. But, for some reason, I wasn't. It was as if, without even knowing it myself, I was expecting you.

You broke the silence.

- How's it going?
- How's it going yourself?
- Grand ... thought you might need a bit of company for this last stretch.
- Did you now?
- I did.
- And what made you think that?
- I'm learning from you. ... I knew that if you really meant everything you said, if our knowledge is truly dialogic that sooner or later you would get stuck ... that you'd need me.
- Stuck. How did you ... so you have been just sitting there waiting for me to turn to you?

- Something like that. Yeh.
- For how long?
- Not sure. Seems like forever.
- Jaysus.
- Yeh. Jaysus.

And that was it. That was all we said about your sudden apparition on, or emergence from, the side of a hill in the west of Ireland - so far from where I'd left you.

And you were right, of course - I did need you. I had tried to walk this last bit alone. To retreat into the I. But I couldn't. It's obvious that I still have so much to learn, and re-learn, about adult education.

And with you here, with me, I somehow felt I was an adult educator again. Maybe I can only ever feel that when you are present. Maybe there is no such thing as a unitary adult educator subject.

But you weren't interested in dwelling on my failings - my vanities that I could go it alone. Instead, as always, your interest was in a way forward.

- So, where to? Are you heading up as far as the wall?
- And now that you're here, we may take a stretch beyond it - up and around to Gleann na gCapall.
- Alright then – you always liked that place – not sure why. But fair enough. Have you not been up there yet this time?
- No, I haven't ... now that you mention it.
- Why not?
- I'm not sure ... something was holding me back.
- Ok ... sure, let's get going then now.

And we were off again. Walking in silence for a bit while our bodies found their own, now-familiar, dialogic rhythm.

- So how has it been going for you so far?

I glanced sideways at you. Your crooked smile lingered – although you tried to suppress it for my sake.

- Fantastic.

- Yeh, right.

## Methodological reflections

- So, what do you want to talk about?

- Well, I suppose I have three things knocking about my head at the moment. Three ways in which I'd like us to contemplate the significance of all this.

- Three things? Why am I not surprised. And what are they?

- Well, first up, I'd like to talk through our methodological learning. What have we learned about ways of inquiry into adult education. Then I'd like to talk through the significance of all this for me, personally – where does it leave me – in what ways have I grown through all this as an adult educator.

- And the third thing?

- Well, it comes back to what this thing was supposed to be about in the beginning – so, 'what is the significance of all this for adult educators? What have we learned about adult educator growth?'

- Back to your original question?
- Did I have one?
- Well you said you did anyway. Remember, on our very first walk in Belfast: ‘What are the possibilities of narrative for adult educator growth?’
- Oh that ... well that was just something to get you off my back. You were very keen to have a research question. It was the thing that seemed to disturb you in Bonn (O'Neill, 2013). ... But yeh, you could put it like that, if you like.

But really, although I was always clear that this was about adult educators, I always struggled to pear it down to one finite question –

- Your resistance to the dictatorship of the monolithic logos again (Moi, 1985)?
- Maybe. And those we have bumped into along the way have certainly encouraged us to explode the unitary, clearly-bordered statement –
- Or unitary, clearly-bordered question.
- Yeh ... or question ...

But, of course, part of the purpose of this walking tour, although I didn't quite know this at the start, was, as part of the title, ‘ar lorg na slí’, suggests, a search for a way – a search for a method.

- Go on ...
- Well as I say, a search for a way of inquiry into adult educator realities that could, or would try to, do justice to the complexity and specificity of experiences and knowledge – a way of inquiry that wouldn't sterilize these realities through the application of power-laden subjectivities of more mainstream social science methodologies and modes of communication.
- And did you find that? Did you find a way of doing this?
- Well, I'm not sure there is a destination. But what has emerged, so far-
- So far? How much further do we need to go?

- There is no end. That's just it. The knowledge, the method comes from always moving, always engaged in embodied dialogic reflection. This won't be the last times we walk these hills.

- So?

- So ... what has emerged then, from all the tortured reflections on representation and communication is a textual something – part-scholarly; part-pedagogic; part personal. A textual something which is very conscious of its own presence, its own performance. But a textual something which is the process and product of deep, slow and prolonged acts of embodied reflection.

- Is there not a danger that ... I dunno ... it all sounds a bit off the wall. I mean, does this count as research at all?

- Maybe not as research in the way you're thinking. But I think it does count as a form of inquiry.

- A narrative inquiry?

- Well that is the big question really. It is an inquiry that plays with narrative but its relationship with narrative, as we discussed in *The Devil's Glen*, has shifted, moved with us along the way.

Epistemologically this inquiry, as you are probably very bored of hearing now, takes place in a constructivist and critical pedagogic space. Creswell identifies four world views in qualitative research: postpositivism; pragmatic; social constructivist; and advocacy/participatory (Creswell, 2009). And it is somewhere between the latter two that I think this inquiry is located.

And this has implications for the way in which we position ourselves to and with the diverse range of narrative inquiries.

- Inquiries?

- Yeh ... inquiries. I think its misleading to speak of Narrative Inquiry as a homogenous methodology. Instead, as Chase (2009, p. 421) points out, it is probably more useful to think of it as a type of qualitative research with multiple approaches and corresponding ontological and epistemological assumptions. Some take place in that

space around postpositivism – see stories as social scientific data. In fact, even to use the word ‘data’ when talking about stories and lives reflects a shadow of postpositivism for narrative researchers, such as Clandinin or Holstein and Gubrium who might normally, as Chase regards them, as pragmatic or constructivists respectively (2011, p. 422).

In fact, Chase in revealing the diversity of the field makes an important point when she peers it right back to say that, at its core, all narrative inquiry research has at its core an interest in biography. How we approach biographies and what we do with them is dependent on our epistemological positions, our world views as Creswell (2009) would put it, and our values and ethics as researchers.

- And how would you position yourself?

- Well, for me this was an inquiry that took a creative, participatory, critical and constructivist approach to adult educator occupational biographies. It moved away from the more traditional social scientific tradition of analysing and meta-speaking other people’s stories but, instead, made an attempt, and I stress an attempt because this is very much an experimental act, towards a more democratic research space where the interpretive act was in the telling and re-telling, in the storying, in the reading. So that maybe, in the end, all this could be tentatively located in world views sympathetic to Creswell’s advocacy/participatory and social constructivist position (2009) and methodologically as narrative in spaces sympathetic to Chase’s narrative inquiry positions constructivist/ethnographic ‘narrative practice/environments’ and interpretivist/autoethnographic ‘the researcher and the story’ (2011). And, of course, such positions lead us to creative modes of inquiry such as Richardson’s Creative Analytic Practice (1994) and all that followed.

- Sounds kind of innovative ...

- I’m not sure about that. What has been revealed to me, what our walking has allowed itself to reveal, is that what we are doing is not, in fact, something new – not something as off-the-wall, or rather off the map, that at times we felt it was.

- No?

- No. I really don’t think so. And I think it’s a bit of vanity to call yourself ‘innovative’ – maybe worse than that even. Maybe such language performs a kind of

career-positioning activity. It's a word that has a lot of currency in the market of the academy (Wiles, et al., 2011).

- Yeh, but there needs to be substance behind something called 'innovation' – otherwise you'll be exposed as a charlatan, surely?
- Yeh, maybe ... maybe. And I might be exposed yet.

But does it work?

We had been making our way around the meadow which forms a small plateau before the path gets steep again. Although talking with some passion, we'd been walking without much haste. But all the same it appeared that we were slowly gravitating towards the ruins of the old house in the corner of the field.

- So if it is a creative act, even partially, then, and coming back to the criteria we talked about before, does it work ... I mean does it work? Does it work as both critical and creative inquiry?
- Does it work? I'm not sure yet ... can I even judge that?
- You have an idea, I'm sure ... what was it that James asked you recently?
- 'Do *you* think it's any good, daddy?' And he gave me three options to tick: a sad face; a neutral face; and a happy face.
- That's right and what did you say to him? What did you tick?
- Do you know I can't remember ... I didn't tick anything - or did I? I might have ticked the space between the neutral face and happy face. And I probably said something non-committal like 'bits of it' or something like that ...
- Wouldn't be like you to be so guarded .... Anyway, we also talked right back of ways in which work like this can, should, be judged. Remember? I think it was up in the Devil's Glen. We came up with a few things ...

- Remind me ...
- Well we said that if we were judging something like this that it needs to be doing a few things ... that it should work aesthetically (Richardson, 1994; Denzin, 2000)... be engaging as a text ... works on all parts of the body – the mind and the heart (Bochner, 2000). And be consistent and coherent with itself and our practice. But that it should also show growth on part of the author and the possibility for transformation in terms of theory, method and the field ... (McNiff, 2007; McCormack, 2013)
- No small ask then.
- No ... but I don't think you're too far off the mark on these.
- In what ways?
- Well take this sense of producing an engaging text?

One of your purposes was to write in ways about serious issues for educators that would engage them as much as, more even, than the academic community. And whatever about this big text, you have, already received some acknowledgment from your community of practitioners about this.

- How's that then?
- Well, the prologue to this work was, as you mentioned earlier, a slightly re-worked version of a contribution to a book on theory, policy and practice in further education in Ireland (Murray, et al., 2014). And have you not received some unsolicited feedback from educators in the field who said they enjoyed, but more importantly, were moved by that? This is important. Clough (1996), whom we met before, believes that this is important – why we try to write this way.
- Well ... a few did get back to me – I haven't exactly been flooded, but a few people said some nice things that's true. Yeh ... I suppose. I wrote that piece as a way of experimenting with form and style ... but also rehearsing themes in this. So, maybe I do have some acknowledgement, already, that at least part of this text works in an aesthetic way.
- And you also got feedback on the tutor narratives from the participants ...



- Yeh, that's true – I'm a bit more sure about that impact. These conversations that I had with participants who were moved and learned something about themselves, in different ways, in reading their own narratives. Some spoke of being involved before in research but never reading, or worse, hating to read the more traditional transcripts. But reading back, and contributing to an evolving narrative felt very different – it gave some hope and others a sense of validation.

- So that, in itself, surely is one of the possibilities of narrative in inquiry – this capacity to reveal to educators the worth and value of their own experience – their own stories? When you see this inquiry working in that way, doesn't that demonstrate, or even perform, an impact on practice ... or, at least, offer some hope that it might from the bits and pieces and feedback you've got from the inquiry?

- Yeh. I suppose it is.

- ...and the various workshops and bits you've done connected to it?

- What do you mean?

- Well, your workshop at the Further Education conference in Maynooth last year ... wasn't that based on this ...? (O'Neill, 2014)

- Well, I made an effort to do something that was honest to this process.

- Tell me a bit about that.

- Well, I called it something like re-visioning CPD or something like that ... and I suppose I was trying to replicate, to an extent, what I did with tutors as part of this inquiry, with tutors as a professional development process.

- How did you do that?

- Well, I only had about forty minutes so it was partially demonstrating it and partially discussing how it might work in VEC/ETBs. I started by asking people to develop a occupational biographic timeline using a handout that I gave them (Figure 9)

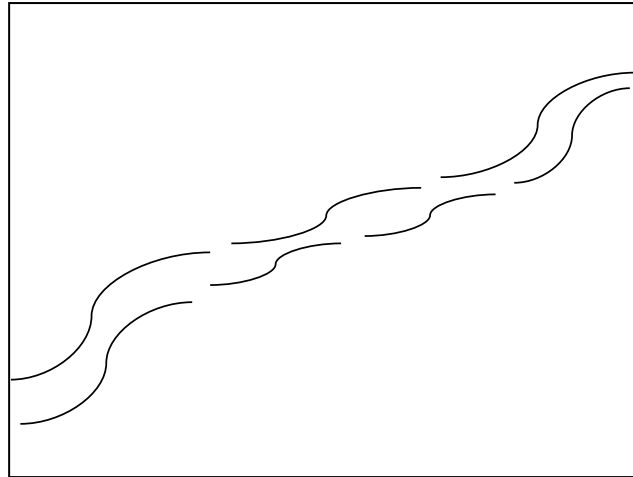


FIGURE 10

- It looks a bit like a crooked path.
- Yeh ... I was thinking of the crooked paths of the tutors and myself – and the breaks in the path which might represent entry or exit points in their tutor lives.

Anyway, I modelled it myself (Figure 10). We didn't have a lot of time. And got them to have a go – making sure that they left space on the path for a future.

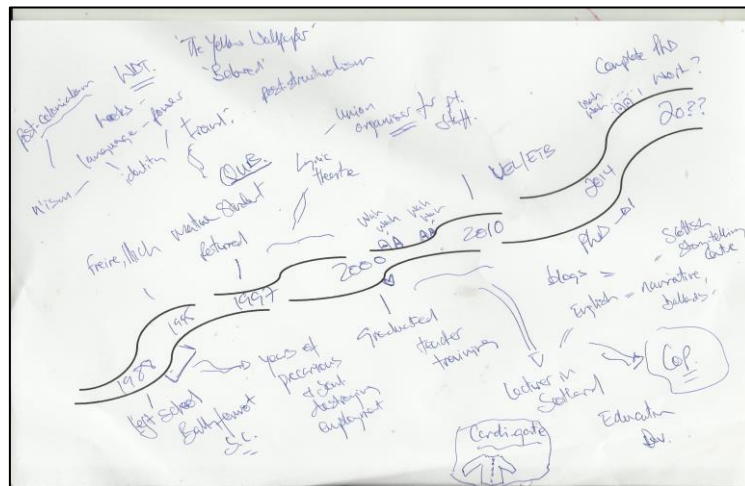


FIGURE 11

- And then?
- Then got them to talk to each other, with the path as a conversational prompt, about their occupational stories.

And then, finally, we brought them all together and tried to connect them to something holistic, organic ... it ended up like a tree but it could be anything (Figure 11). We ran out of time but we talked about how, once the stories are brought together, we can start identifying sources of strength and toxic aspects to our growth ... and also how this entity stands in a larger landscape.

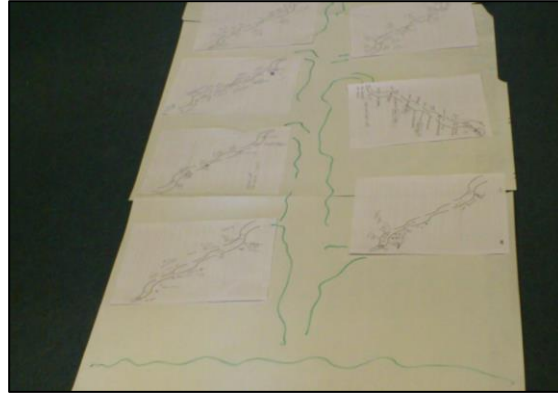


FIGURE 12

- So the idea was to move from the individualised narratives to a community of contextualised ones?
- Yeh ... something like that.
- So that is impact – isn't it? So we see this work rippling out into practice contexts ... having an impact outside of the academy.
- Maybe.

And we walked on and up in silence for a bit more.

- But what about the whole thing then. This big text. How do you feel about it now?
- As with many things which we write or create, when we look back on them at some temporal distance, we see the inadequacies of our work. And I certainly see them in this - even without the temporal distance. But again, like this text, I console myself by framing it as a textual moment of a longer and ongoing transformation in my ways of knowing. Just as I look back on this already and see it as a movement towards

something rather than an epistemological or methodological terminus. It's just a draft of a way of knowing. Something that needs written and re-written.

- Right – and what version are we on now?
- Seventeen ... I think.
- So this is what version-seventeen knowledge looks like?
- Yeh, I suppose. So, does, it work? Maybe it's too early to say. Maybe we need to get to the final draft.
- And when will get that?
- Too late to matter I suspect.
- Right ... you're losing me again ... I want to go back to what you said about inadequacies just now ... like what? What are you thinking about?
- Well, I'm calling them inadequacies. But again, it could also come down a lot to reading practices.
- What do you mean?
- Well. This is a long text – non-linear in the method and the writing. I feel it may be difficult to follow at times.
- But isn't that what you wanted to create? Something that would require readers to do some of the work. To create a writerly text (Barthes, 1992; Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2014)?
- It is, yeh – you're right.
- And as Barnacle & Dall'Alba point out

[the doctoral] thesis becomes an opportunity for the candidate not only to *share* their discovery but also to let readers *share in* discovery. ... It also shifts the notion of authoritative writing from that of being in control to being in dialogue (2014, p. 1148)

Surely that's what you've been trying to do. It comes back to that whole thing about all of this being true to adult education practice ... so that getting the reader involved in co-creation is exactly the kind of pedagogic practice that we strive for in our adult learning spaces. Creating spaces where meaning needs to be worked on ... not just given. So if the reader feels uncomfortable then part of that is because that is what learning feels like.

- Maybe ... or maybe that's just an excuse for literary and methodological weakness ...
- Well, yeh that could be part of it. But I don't think that's the case with this. I think you have worked hard at creating an open text – a writerly text. You have written all kinds of ambiguities into it.
- Maybe. As much as it is the product of a non-linear process, I hope that readers approach it that way in their reading too. In fact, I think if you would have very different experiences if you read it linearly or non-linearly.
- But sure, who would read something like this in a linear way? It would kill you. You can't tell people how to read at the same time. Not everyone is as messy as you in their writing and reading practice.
- No. No. But, neither should people feel compelled to read line-for-line from front-to-end the narrative fragments or our walking chapters.
- I think you need to just let go of that now: you've done your bit, let the reader do their bit. Listen to your own advice.
- What do you mean?
- Well, you're always going on about the anxiety that can occur in letting go of control in pedagogic spaces as we move towards more participative methodologies.
- That's true.
- And if this is a textual space that in some ways rehearses adult education practice, you're going to have to let go too. Let us work on the meaning too.

- I know. And I want you to ... I want an open space, an open text ... why do you think I've left so much white space in this? There may be more between the lines in this than there is in the lines.

Our talking had brought us away from the meadow as we followed the path of a small stream which cut a diagonal line across the land. We paused for a moment beside it – absent-mindedly throwing pebbles in.

- I was just thinking ...

- Yeh?

- Well ... you know that you have talked a bit, and we've read tutor stories, of the kind of cultures that create conditions for development, growth?

- Yeh.

- Well, I was just wondering if you had anything to say about the conditions, the cultures which allow something like this to grow? I mean I'd imagine that many university departments would be wary of something as ...

- ... epistemologically liminal?

- Ha! ... that'll do ... I can't imagine many departments allowing you off to do something so ... epistemologically liminal.

- No, you're right. And I haven't really talked about that, have I?

Much of this has been worked out, as I have talked about before through walking and journals. But I am in no doubt that I was both lucky and privileged to have ended up in Maynooth's Adult and Community Education department to do this work. I find it hard to imagine another higher education space in the country that would have provided the conditions for something such as this – for what it's worth - to emerge.

- And what is so special about that space?

- Well ... they work hard at creating a critical and feminist pedagogic and supervisory culture based on authentic adult education values of trust, creativity, care, critical reflection and epistemological democracy.
- So what does that mean? For you?
- Well, what I mean is that as well as having plenty of space for dialogue, I was trusted to make my own way. For better or worse, that pedagogic freedom allows something different to emerge. And I suppose that's the point of a doctoral thesis anyway ... it needs to come from us: we need to be able to point at it and say 'this is what my knowledge looks like' and be happy with that.
- But you're not alone?
- No ... not at all. The opposite I would say having listened to doctoral stories. No, the department, our supervisors, our peers are all present – a kind of ethical guide. Maybe in finding our way we also have that sense of, as Done, et al. put it, developing our own 'ethical compass' (2011, p. 394). But its developed in dialogic spaces. And this is where the regular opportunities for group and supervisory dialogue is so important – keeping us on track. I may have completed something else a bit safer and a bit tidier in another space, but I know that it wouldn't have had such a profound impact on my ways of thinking and being as this had (Carawan, et al., 2011; Kincheloe, et al., 2011).
- And what's that? What kind of impact has it had upon you?

## Personal reflections

But I paused before answering. I was thinking of what you said about growth and development. There was something about these words ... both of them now, which troubled me a bit. But I couldn't quite see what – yet. Growth and development. They were unsettled by something lurking, creeping – something just outside my vision. And I shuddered when I thought how your creeping thing drove you mad (Gilman, 1993).

But free too, I suppose.

- Again the things I can't see. Things that are invisible.
- Sorry?
- Sorry I was caught in a moment with invisibility.
- Invisibility?
- Yeh. Invisibility seems to pop into this story quite a lot ... Invisible work, invisible tutors, invisible knowledge.
- Oh ... ok.

You paused and laid your hand on the stone wall that bordered the field.

- There is amazing resilience in these walls – built so long ago by hand and hanging off the side of a hill in some of the most battered landscapes in these islands.
- Yeh. Still standing. You built them well.
- I had help.
- You did of course. And, when I was up here yesterday on my own I was thinking about you.
- Were you now?
- I was.
- What were you thinking?
- I was thinking about the day you left here for good - the day you emigrated over, what, a hundred years ago?
- About that. What had you thinking of that?



- I was thinking how you got up early, very early, that morning to slip away unseen, to make your departure invisible to the family – not, I suppose, to avoid heartache – I’m sure you knew there’d be heartache - but to avoid witnessing the heartache of those you loved who knew they’d never seen you again. To avoid going but, instead, to be just gone.
- And is that wrong? To want to avoid all that?
- No. I suppose not. I’ve done it myself.
- How do you know all this anyway? As you say, I thought I slipped away invisibly.
- Invisible stories.
- Invisible stories?
- Well invisible to you anyway – until now. And just a small story really. Barely a story at all. Crafted by a boy who was witness to your invisible departure. You probably never knew this, but unknown, invisible, to you a young boy, your neighbour, was up early too.
- Who?
- Micheál.
- Ah, Micheál ...
- Yeh. He was the only witness that day to the playing out of a too-familiar trope in the ordinary, repeating tragedies of Irish occupational arcs. He watched you pause for a moment to look up at your home, your sleeping family, the land, before getting up on your bike for the long cycle which would lead you eventually and forever to America.
- Yeh ... my long cycle to America.
- What did you do with the bike, by the way? I always wondered about the bike. Did it, at least, return?
- I don’t remember now ... it was a long time ago.
- Well Micheál did. He lived to near a hundred, and didn’t stray from his home, always told that story of that moment of pause before you hopped on your bike – a

moment to commit to memory the people and the place that was your world – all you knew - before leaving it.

I've always wondered how hard that cycle was for you. But more, the dawning devastation of your mother, the family, as they awoke and realised that you were gone. They probably knew that you were on the cusp of going. Maybe the conversations and fussing about leaving had dried up – maybe a bleak resignation had set in and was something you couldn't bear any more. Maybe you needed to be just gone. But still, for them, to awake to an ordinary day to find you so suddenly absent ... without even the ritual of a funeral or a wake for comfort.

- You're not making it any easier. I didn't have a choice.

- No, no. Of course not. I was an emigrant myself once and made similar journeys, similar departures – slipping away to avoid the going. But I was, of course, from a more privileged generation when emigration was not synonymous with death – there was, there is still maybe, more well-founded hope that sons and daughters will return home ... some day. Although that hope ebbs and flows with the socio-economic realities of the now - I wonder what state that hope could be in these days? ...

But you asked me just then, how this has impacted on me?

- I did. I thought you were avoiding the question.

- No, no. It just brought me somewhere else for a moment. When I started this, I was a recently-returned emigrant who felt almost guilty for having returned to Ireland in such a state.

- Ah, I see ... that's what got you thinking of my leaving. Your returning.

- Maybe.

My reasons for returning to Ireland were not driven by aspirations of career enhancement – in fact, I returned with motivations not unlike hooks' for returning to Kentucky (hooks, 2009).

- So?

- So are you going to answer my question?

- Sorry. Yeh. So what's the impact of this been on me?

Well I wasn't a static subject at the start. Certainly not in the space I came back into in Ireland. Everything was shifting. And that shifting is written into these pages.

- What was shifting?

- Everything. Or so it felt. Even our little family unit that had been stable for so long – there were four of us at the start, and now, as we come to a pause we have a beautiful, smiling baby girl in the mix.

And with this expanding family comes another layer of the work of care and love that we embrace wholeheartedly but struggle to synchronise with the demands of our other commitments ... for a while to come I might be drawn through triskelion flows, away from the labour of educational practice, into the personal with the care work which comes with a baby as you return to your hard, good work with a modest, but stable income. Our hope though is that in keeping moving through that we will find a way.

- So you have hope? Sometimes it sounds as if you don't.

- Maybe some days I don't. And it would be dishonest - and if nothing else the worth of all this, as much as Duffy's love poem (Duffy, 1994) and Shakespeare's sonnet 130 (Shakespeare, 1996) which we talked about way back, is trying to be honest – it would be dishonest not to acknowledge the hard times of this journey. And much of that is implied in its telling – in the showing rather. In the cards declined, in the flashing fuel lights. But you can read it too, if you like, in my journal ...

*29 Aug 2013*

*August was a tough time. Every day I woke up with that literally physical feeling of stress over debt and just surviving. But also the sense of stress as well with being in my 40s and wondering about identity and occupation. All this is deeply entwined with my research as well. When it comes to my research, I can consider it objectively - living it is tougher! Another aspect of this is a narrative lens helps me understand or make sense of some of the issues for me. I find it hard, when thinking about it narratively, to think or make clear what they [sic] next chapter the future for me will be. The present is tough and the future unclear. The state of things in Ireland and the stark lack of choices doesn't help. Funnily enough my*

*conversation with [REDACTED] over choices and the possibility of looking to Northern Ireland for work made me feel slightly better. It comes back to that sense of if your story has no hope in it, then it makes the present so much more difficult. Maybe we need to invent hope in order to make the present easier.*

*(O'Neill, 2010-2015)*

- That's pretty bleak.
- Well, I suppose it is. And it makes uncomfortable reading for me. But I suppose that's the reality of my occupational life these days. And it's interesting to note my delusion in this entry that I could, in some way, separate the personal from the research - to find a position to look upon the impact of precarity 'objectively'. But then, that was, is, one of the functions of the journal ... working through, making visible my own contradictions.
- So the journal became a place to make the invisible visible?
- Maybe. And bringing it back to your question about my learning in all this – that is part of it. This growing appreciation of the importance, for me anyway, of writing in working through difficult times. There were more than a few entries in my journal like this – textual spaces to articulate the difficulties of just getting by while at the same time trying to work through conceptual and intellectual ideas which seemed far removed from the everyday worries about petrol in the car, the mortgage, dinners, work, time to catch a breath.

And my thoughts often strayed to Woolf who made the connections between writing and creative thought and the specificity of the socio-economic conditions which allowed it to grow – a modest resource of space and money (Woolf, 1977).

- You seem caught up on this notion of safe spaces ... clearings (Craig, 1995). Places for slowness ... somewhere to catch your breath?
- I know. It's something that's been bothering me a bit on this final walk.
- Why?

- I'm not sure. Maybe because they don't exist. ... Or we haven't found them. I look back on that prologue now and I wonder ... I feel a bit more distant from it.

- Well, we are nearly as far as you can get from the prologue, but I don't think that's what you mean. In what ways do you feel distant from it?

- Ah, maybe it's too assured, too neat in its form and textual play. And it holds on to this notion of safe places and clearings for educator development . But four years later and we are still looking for them

- But haven't we made them ourselves ... isn't that what this is right here?

- Maybe. And you're right ... spaces like this have saved me at times.

Like the journal just about saved me at times of despair - it became a space to work things out and through – writing didn't put petrol in the car, but it allowed me to deal with the anxiety of that. It became more than just self-supervision and research – but self-care (McCormack, 2010; Thompson, 2011).

- But didn't it do more than that? That extract you quoted from the journal just there – it reveals something in that shift from anxiety about money at the beginning to those final thoughts about narrative.

- Possibly ... it did allow me to connect the personal to broader issues and concepts. I wouldn't, of course, advocate that the journal becomes a place to act as an opiate to dull the ache of the realities of socio-economic inequalities ...

- No but maybe it, and places like it, become something more like a critical space, that uses the personal to make connections to wider networks of injustice (Mezirow, 1998) (Brookfield, 1998).

- So a critically reflective space then?

- Yeh.

- And when you talked earlier about not being a static subject when this started?

- Yeh.

- How does what has opened up here, this narratively inflected critically reflective space ... what impact has that had, if any, on you?

- Well, when I returned to Ireland, as we discussed previously, I was very much on the margins of work – invisible to the adult education field in Ireland – a precarious worker on a temporary part-time contract with a VEC/ETB – we’ve talked about this. And there is no occupational subject who embodies much more instability than a precarious worker (Standing, 2011).

Nothing stays the same for long it seems. In the relatively short time since I’ve returned, VECs no longer exist and, in the same long, tortured moment of their re-structuring, re-naming, I half-jumped and was half-pushed from that work – possibly a trope in my own occupational narrative. See ... I was writing through it a year ago ...

*14 Sep 2014*

*In some ways there has been a significant turning point in the evolution of my own occupational narrative – I feel that my days are done with the VEC/ETB. The whole mess with the [REDACTED] ETB over interviews and the [REDACTED] ETB over CID has really made me realise how there is no future with them – not in any sense of being able to create something in terms of a liveable income. The [REDACTED] was trying to entice me back with the lure of the possibility of two hours CID next year - possibly. It just isn’t sustainable – and when I commit to a class, I think that I suspend any serious attempts to look for other work because of the sense of a commitment to the group.*

*I think, coming back to my own PhD, that the final chapter (or near the end anyway) will be an epilogue in terms of my own educational and occupational narrative. This would frame it nicely: starting with my story and ending with the next stage – I thought of one of the participant’s narrative as the ‘Long Goodbye’ – but maybe that’s my story. And maybe narrative allows me to imagine, through writing it, another possible occupational identity other than the one I’ve been locked into for so long.*

- So, it’d been a tough time obviously in term of work?

- Yeh ... but, as I have been at pains to make clear, there is a certain intertextuality at play in my adult educator subjecthood, this entry is a significant moment of shift from one occupational chapter to the next.

- ‘The long goodbye’ ... again that sounds bleak.
- Maybe ... but . all this, this walking and talking opened up other ways. So, again, all this narrative practice and method that has engaged me for the last four years has provided me with some glimmers of occupational hope.
- How’s that?
- Well, as I felt increasingly marginalised, or invisible, within the context of the VEC/ETB, the work of the PhD started to open occupational spaces for me within the university. And I have become involved in some of the work in the department’s Higher Diploma for Further Education (HDFE) – an educator training programme for the adult and further education sector; the Masters in Education; and some research around access and progression to and from HE for non-traditional students.
- Well that sounds promising?
- Yeh ... still precarious enough work ... short-term contracts and all that, but it’s good work .. work that matters.
- Can you flesh that out a bit more?
- Well the HDFE programme has provided me with the opportunity to observe and support student educators in their practice placements. This has been an invaluable learning experience for me. It is rare to get that moment of contemplation in an educational space – to be somewhat at the margins and reflect upon what adult education can, or should, look like in practice.

When I look back upon the artefacts of learning which were created between myself and the students, I see so much of all this, this deep reflection on narrative possibilities, flowing into and around the knowledge we were developing together. I see myself, in the feedback on visits, talking about a kind of narrative pedagogy that works on a number of levels. I see myself urge students to bear witness to the stories that they and their students bring to the class. And that our job as adult educators, specifically, is to create a sense of cohesion and interconnectivity between our stories, student stories and the curricular and hegemonic narratives which can so easily dominate – to think almost in that sense in the epistemological triskelion flux between student-tutor-curriculum knowledge.

- And power ... we've talked a lot about power in this?
- Yeh ..you're right. So, we also need, as critical educators, to expose, at least, the power dynamics laden in these stories – to move towards breaking down the epistemological hierarchies in the class. It's not good enough, as hooks reminds us, to just create spaces for uncritical sharing of stories (hooks, 1994).
- Can you think of ways how all these ideas were, are, bleeding out into practice, to your work?
- Well, I remember, for example, sitting in a room with a student educator wishing, as she talked about the grand narratives of sociology and structural inequality, that she really listened to the student who responding with her story - instead of seeing this as an illustrative example to support the knowledge – that the stories that students kept offering was knowledge that needed to be recognised as valid as the knowledge glowing from the PowerPoint.

22 May 2014 – Ballynerrin

*Just a few thoughts on my visit today in [REDACTED]. I really liked the sense of the place there and [REDACTED], the cooperating teacher, seemed lovely. I need to write up and post all these reports tomorrow. I did very well – possibly a bit tentative but she will, in time, develop her confidence and assurance as an educator.*

*The thing that has been going through my head a bit with some of these visits overlaps with my thinking on narrative – moving a bit towards narrative pedagogy. As I watch and reflect on really respectful developing educators I see these moments were [sic] different layers or spheres of knowledge operate in the room. At one level, there is the academy knowledge, usually transmitted through PowerPoint and mediated by the knowledge and complemented by the stories of experience from the educator. Again and again I see learners in the room endeavouring to articulate their knowledge through stories – they see connections and say things like “Yeh, that's like my sister who ...” or “I know what you're saying, my ma ...”. To me these are crucial pedagogic moments that we all, as educators, need to listen to and incorporate*



*and put side-by-side with the other forms of established knowledge in the room. These stories need validation and for learners to accept and get the knowledge brought to them, we need to accept and somehow validate their stories which is how their knowledge is being transmitted. I don't think it's enough to just let these important moments were [sic] learners work to create connections narratively as ephemeral moments in a class discussion: the PowerPoint and our notes/handouts have a greater currency as they are anchored in textual form which transcends the particular temporal context of the class. Our role, as educators who say that we attend to co-creation of knowledge, is to elevate the learner stories to that less transient state. But these need to be practical and clear. So for example, recording (in some way) what has been said or developed by learners in class and re-integrating that into the narrative of our learning resources which is then represented back to learners at the next session or later. So that they see that their work, their thoughts have been afforded the same textual status as our ideas and ideas of dead white men outside the room. And this, then, is a more useful way of using PowerPoint – as an evolving resource which captures the narrative of the class throughout the time we spend with them but which blends their ideas and stories with the things we bring to them. Not sure if this is making sense but I just need to get that down before I head to bed.*

*(O'Neill, 2010-2015)*

- Did you get into a conversation with her about this?
- I did. And I took my time over the written feedback to make that point to her.
- Ok. It sounds very much like you are bringing all this back into that space with the HDFE students.
- Yeh ... but remember it flows ... so this space is informed, grows from that work, that learning too ... the things I see there, the things I learn from placement visits. And the conversations that flow between me, students, the local contexts and fellow supervisors.
- So, as much as seeing this inquiry as a cultural act, you start to see teaching as a cultural act? All this focus on artefacts, stories, language – you even spoke of the semiotics of the staffroom on our walk in Edinburgh.
- Yeh. I think it's the way I've always seen it. And doesn't Freire say that teachers are cultural workers anyway (Freire, 2005). This working on language and its material

forms in the classroom is something that I think I've always done. But all this starts to make what I know and what I do a bit clearer.

So, there is a sense, in thinking about the cultural dynamics of teaching, the artefacts of learning, that helps us move towards a more democratic space – that if we think about teaching as a narrative act, the telling of an educational story, then we are the anthologists or editors or curators who bring the voices together. And maybe it's not enough to just create the space to allow students tell their stories if they become invisible outside of that moment. So that the learning artefacts created become part of that group's educational multi-authored narrative which reflect epistemological flux between student and tutor narratives and the meta-narratives of theory and curriculum documents which stand confidently at the centre of a curriculum.

- Ok. And this wasn't the way you were thinking at the start, before all this?

- Well, I think I probably was thinking a bit like this ... very faint foreshadow thoughts ... but the way I spoke about my thinking became more assured. And again, just allowing me to see the connections between things ... I keep coming back to that.

- Like what?

- Well, what also interested me, in reflecting on visits, was that the knowledge being transmitted from a PowerPoint could also be read from the local landscape. I remember standing with a student after a very good lesson on social inequalities in a garret of a classroom in a beautiful nineteenth-century building in Dublin city centre.

As we reflected on the class we stood at a small window overlooking the skyline of the inner-city. It occurred to me in that moment that so much of the content of the lesson was inscribed in the narrative of the cityscape. I suggested to the student to look for interconnections between local stories and the curricular content. These narratives can be found in abundance in the stories which students offered. But they can also be found in reading the local landscape. And from this vantage point high up in the building much could be read by gazing out the window onto the once-high spires of churches which puncture the sky here; spires that are now looked down on by corporate and office buildings ... and to read the relative spread of spires against the concentration of the corporate buildings within certain areas. There was so much to

read about the story of power and inequalities over the last couple of hundred years in Dublin by just looking out a window from a high place.

- And surely it was because you were working through the significance of your own landscapes and thinking about the connections of place and knowledge that this was spilling out here.

- Yeh ... but spaces, landscapes and knowledge were mixing themselves up in lots of beautiful ways ... so Andrews' (1975) notion of the paper landscape created by imperial acts of cartography and the critical-creative counter to that the in the artistic activist work of the Beehive Design Collective (2013) and Craig's (1995) call for safe places in teacher landscapes mingled with the resonances of the poetry of place and land in Heaney (1998) and walking the landscape ethnographies of Ingold (2010) and poetic-philosophical feminist musings of walking and mountains of Shepherd (2011) and Enright's (2015) reflective caution on the tendency, as she sees it, to lean too much on the western landscape as a place to fix the psychic things in Irish literature.

... but everything spills into each other ... I really don't see that there is a hierarchy of knowledges at play here ... look around ... that's why I've tattooed the triskelion on our skin ...

- To remind us of that knowledge flows through our contexts ...

- Yeh ... through the personal, through the scholarly, through practice and around and back again ... never stopping until we stop.

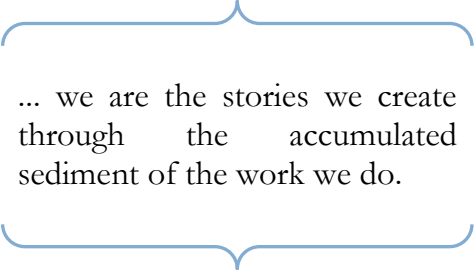
- Ok ... so you had this real sense of what ... knowledge flowing back and forth ...?

- It felt that my knowledge of educator practice was being created in a flux between my encounters with students in their placements, my own occupational narrative as an educator and the theoretical ideas that I was navigating for the PhD. I can't imagine having that kind of conversation before all of this.

- Ok ... and you said you were doing other work too .. some supervision work on an MEd course?

- Yeh ... I've also been doing some work with students on the Masters of Adult Education programme (MEd). And again, I feel that much of this has been flowing back and forth between their work and mine – that there is no 'my knowledge' but 'our

knowledge' – knowledge created in the space between us. I see and admire the work done by students who embrace, tentatively, creative approaches to their research in different ways – who try to balance the theoretical, the personal and the communal narratives in one textual performance. This is not easy – there is no template to pick off a shelf – instead we go in search of metaphors and meaning hidden in our own biographies. Like myself, these students, these educators, are at the beginning of a journey of imagining the performance of knowledge in different ways.



... we are the stories we create through the accumulated sediment of the work we do.

And we sustain each other through communities of care, passion, creativity and criticality.

- So where does that leave you then?
- Well this whole thing leaves me, us, with the knowledge that our occupations are our narratives – we are the stories we create through the accumulated sediment of the work we do. And maybe my occupational narrative is the career narrative of a mythic tourist (Buzard, 1993) – someone who walks the trail for a while but sees a glimmer of something hopeful in the trees and heads that way – someone who tries to write/live an ethical occupational narrative – an interesting narrative. And as I get older, the desire for the simplicity of good work - work that matters with some sense of a steady income is as much the goal rather than something called a 'career' that bursts with cultural capital ....
- But in Ireland, right now, that's tricky ... as simple as that sounds ... to get a steady income *and* meaningful work, good work ..
- I know, I know ...
- So?
- So, we keep walking. We keep doing this. Come on.

## Reflections on adult educator growth

We moved away from the stream – across the field which partially obscured, amongst the overgrowth in its far corner, the ruins of stone buildings.

We made our way to them, across boggy ground covered in rushes. The field to the side of the old dwellings followed the contours of the hill as it stretched out into another climb.

Your gaze lingered for a moment on the lines marked out on the contoured land.

- What are they?

- Potato drills. Or, more accurately, the faded lines of old potato drills – still marking the land a hundred years or more after their last crop.

- Oh.

- In fact, if you drive around this part of the world at the right time of the year, autumn or winter, the mountains reveal, in the scars of ancient drills, a very different past – these mountains were, once, busy with the work of families and communities.

But at times of high-tourism, the summer months, the lines of a once-peopled landscape is hidden under deep and lush growth.

- We see so much more in the denuded landscape. Autumn was always my favourite time of year here. Although I spent my summer months here as a child, it was as an adult that I discovered the deeper silences and secrets of the hills in the months of natural decay. C'mon. I want to show you the house.

We entered the old house, a house which has now become a stone one-roomed ruin. A house built with rocks ripped from the barely-agricultural land by hand. Your hands - amongst the many.

A mountain ash had, somehow, muscled its way through the back wall and would, I suppose, one day, knock it. But the roots worked on it too – working unseen to rupture the house’s fragile foundations. And I thought that, at least here, the arboreal and rhizomatic worked as one to return the house to the earth.

And, of course, this was the house you were born in – and, now that I think of it, your brother, the one who slipped away visibly-invisibly on his bicycle to America.

- Every time I come down, I do the same walk, this walk. I do it today. I’ll do it again.

- Why?

- I don’t know. Habit. ... I want to. ... A connection to old stories maybe. I always pause for a moment here in my way up the hill - try to imagine it as a living house – smoky, damp, dark, the smells of cooking, turf fires, clay pipes, noises of the young and old, quiet serious talk, laughter, music, noises of work outside and inside, the animals close by ...

- Mind that now ... don’t be slipping into a John Hinde postcard ...

- No, you’re right. I’m glad you’re here to keep me right. I must always be careful of not slipping into that, the ease to paint the Other ... even now, after all this.

But with your reminder of the aestheticized and sanitised portraits of the west, I thought a bit more carefully about the reality of life in amongst these walls. You were thinking it too.

- Jesus but it would have been cramped in here - the closeness of living in this space ...

- Yeh ... three generations at least all here in this tight space ... everyone on top of each other – no space to think, to love, to grieve ... even the invisible grieving which visited us twice during all this, and which surely visited here regularly, would have been hard to hide here.

After some minutes of silence where we were held by the raw memory of unseen, unknown grief, we left the house and sat on the half-collapsed wall that runs alongside it.

It was, one time, a public track leading across the hill. It starts off very definitely, but, these days, soon seems to lose its way in some rough fields. I have long traced it with feet and, further up, with eyes but can never quite work out where it was going. Again the pull of teleological thinking – that fascination of origins and destinations of patriarchal and hegemonic thought that goes so deep in our ways of thinking and meaning-making (Foucault, 1984; Moi, 1985).

- What now? Where now?

- I suppose this is our final stretch. We usually head up to the wall there at the top.

I pointed to the line of stone wall towards the top of the hill that demarcated the land from the commonage above.

- Ok. So, you've talked a bit about the methodological and personal impact of all this. What's left to talk about?

- The thing that was supposed to be the main, the only, focus of this inquiry right at the start ... adult educator growth.

- Ah, that's right. I'd nearly forgotten.

I glanced at you quickly to see if you were being serious. But you were staring westward towards the more dramatic, dangerous looking peaks down the valley.

- Ok, so just talk to me .. tell me what you've learned about the growth of adult educators from all this.

- What have I learned? Well, one of the striking things that I've learned from all this – I probably knew it anyway, but it has become more visible to me as I've walked - is the depth and richness of experience of tutors coming into adult education. Our stories of journeys into working in adult education reveal such rich lives that seem somehow unacknowledged, by us as much as others.

- Yeh ... when I read that fragment the thing that kept going around my head was how much people were bringing into their adult educator work from their lives. It's not the traditional occupational narrative that you associate with teachers.



Many tutors talked about their work in terms of a moral or social purpose - work that mattered. And I see that in your story too – this sense of struggling to be a *good* educator.



- No, maybe not. But even teachers aren't a homogenous bunch – so we need to be a bit cautious about generalising. But there is definitely a lot of experience in the pre-teaching lives of tutors in these stories.

- And with that experience seems to be a real sense of ethics – a depth of care about the work that guides the adult educator subject in this text – care for our students, and a wider, deeper care that this work, the work we do, is somehow important work. Many tutors talked about their work in terms of a moral or social purpose - work that mattered. And I see that in your story too – this sense of struggling to be a *good* educator.

- Yeh ... and for lots of the tutors this ethical thread might be traced back to their way in as volunteers. I think the way you framed that as 'work that matters' is the thing I hold on to now. Especially in Ireland where I am struggling to see a clear career path as an educator.

- What? Even after all this?



- Especially after all this. ... One of the thing that all this has revealed is the interconnections between educational careers, precarity and narrative ...
- You'll have to unravel that a bit ..
- Well I think that one of the possibilities of narrative approach is that it allows us to make the connections, or should I say disconnections, between precarity in education work and any sense of a career.
- Go on ...
- So, let's imagine a career, as Reid (2014) and Del Corso and Rehfuss (2011) do, as an act of narrative construction – our careers become the stories we tell-live of our occupational lives. And of course, as we know by now I hope, narratives work on temporal plains – through the past, present and future simultaneously (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Tedder, 2009; hooks & Brosi, 2012).
- So our occupation stories or careers are working through the past, present and future?
- Yeh, exactly - but what happens to that narrative project of our development, what happens to our notions of this thing called a 'career' when all three of these dimensions are deeply problematised?
- Problematised?
- Well, take the present. The occupational present, for us, is, it seems, deeply uncertain – our very subjectivities, as suggested by our own anthology, are called into question:

I only

ever saw myself

as a

part-time

temporary person

- Yeh, that lingered with me too ... a ‘temporary *person*’!
- Yeh ... the present for so many educators, not just adult educators, is that sense of a *part-time, temporary* person ... a very incomplete subjectivity. What does it mean to be a ‘part-time’ person? Or a ‘temporary’ person? How can such a position ever be imagined to be an appropriate starting point for professional development – whatever that is?
- Well it’s this for one ... but go on ...
- Yeh you’re right ... *this* is professional development. But, my point is, the temporal dimensions of CPD can’t be ignored. CPD can’t be envisioned as a suite of desirable workshops that educators should attend or a form to be completed. Our CPDs are our occupational stories – and they exist across the temporal plains.
- Ok – so what about the future?
- The future isn’t much better for a zero-hour or temporary tutor: by definition they have no future - organisationally, I mean. And much of the anxiety of tutors and educators is based on uncertain occupational futures. As I look back through my journal, I see that even in the time between first and second meetings with participants, how occupational instability disrupts the construction of a neat, linear, developmental career narrative for adult educators ...

*30 July 2014 – Ballynerrin*

*Just home after a long but productive day. Two RC2s [second-round research conversations] tonight. I’ve written about ■ above. Just a few lines about ■ before I go to bed.*

*There was a real shift in just one aspect of her narrative – her sense of a future. She is still as passionate but feels a lot less sure about continuing as she is long term – the word “security” kept coming up – or rather lack of it. As she said, she’s invested a lot of time (seven years) and has done her H.Dip but it hasn’t improved her conditions – if anything she is in a worse state as the hourly rate for tutors has gone down.*

*(O’Neill, 2010-2015)*

- So, your point is, that in the end it is difficult to live and work a narrative, to have this thing called a career, in positions of deep precarity (Standing, 2011)?
- I'm beginning to think so.
- But what about the past. I get the bit about the a precarious present and future rupturing the possibilities of coherent of occupational narratives. But what about the past? It can't rupture our past?
- No .. or maybe yes if it was a precarious past too. Remember a lot of the tutors in the anthology worked for several years in this state of insecurity .... that has an impact (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Lopes & Dewan, 2015).
- In what ways?
- Well, in lots of ways ... for one, many tutors don't see the connections in their work with others ... there isn't a sense of connection, for many, to a broader community. Or worse, as some of the tutor narratives made clear and as James and Biesta (2007) note in their longitudinal study of nineteen FE learning sites:

The widespread use of fractional and temporary contracts has laid down some distinctions between core and peripheral staff (p. 128).

And such distinctions create insiders and outsiders in educator communities – internal tensions which are toxic for growth.

And so, then fractional, casualised, precarious – call it what you want – educational labour has no place to develop a common memory of practice. Standing makes this point about the weakened social memory of the precariat:

... occupational instability disrupts the construction of a neat, linear, developmental career narrative for adult educators ..

Besides labour insecurity and insecure social income, those in the precariat lack a work-based *identity*. When employed, they are career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity (Standing, 2011, p. 12).

And of course, without a common memory, without ‘a social memory’ how are the narratives of occupation written – individually or communally?

- So what about you?
- What about me?
- Do you have a career?
- I don't think so ... it doesn't feel like it most of the time.
- You're not sure?
- Well, I'm not sure I suppose because I don't think it's something I have much control over in Ireland ... Again, a career, if we think about it narratively, seems to suggest a certain degree of authorial control.
- So you have no control at all?
- No I have some. I can do things like this ... but not indefinitely. I can work on my side of the narrative – make it richer. But that gets me so far.
- So if you don't have a career, what do you have?
- I don't know if I have anything but, to put it simply, I do the bits and pieces that come my way that I think, when stuck together, don't make a very tidy occupational narrative, but more, at best, an interesting pastiche.
- This ‘bits and pieces’ has come up a lot.
- Yeh, and it reminds me of the distinction between a job and career that Sennett makes clear

‘Career’, for instance, in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labor meant a lifelong channel for one’s economic pursuits. Flexible capitalism has blocked the straight roadway of career, diverting employees suddenly from one kind of work to another. The word ‘job’ in English of the fourteenth century meant a lump or piece of something which could be carted around. Flexibility today brings back this arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of labor, pieces of work, over the course of a lifetime.

(Sennett, 1998, p. 9)

- So ‘job’ in this arcane sense is closer to your experience?

- Well, it has become that in Ireland.

- But surely you do have control ... or authorial control at least?

You fight best, if you don’t mind me saying, on the open white plains of text. So, your CPD then, should not just be textual, not just creative, but political too.

- In what way?

- Well, you can write a different type of career narrative ... you have done so. And writing it from a subject position of precarity, from marginality makes that narrative more uncomfortable, less conventional, messy ... all

the things it should be. I mean you just said that without a social memory, without a communal past you can’t, we can’t narrate, construct our careers. But you are doing that here ... right now ...

- Maybe ...

- Not maybe. That’s exactly what you are doing. And not just for you. You also gave the tutors a space to narrate their occupational lives. Your conversations with them, although very open, were very organised temporally – you talked together through pasts, presents and futures.

- So?

- So ... you can't say you don't have a career if you say that its narratively defined because you are performing it now through this.
- Maybe ... but it might be a fractured career that is in danger of taking me away from education ...
- So you fight for it then ... show the fractures ... the fragments ...
- How?
- Well this is a good place to start. You've done it already. You fight best, if you don't mind me saying, on the open white plains of text. So, your CPD then should not just be textual, not just creative, but political too (Done, et al., 2011). Becomes a creative text with critical teeth on it.

It was my turn to lapse into silence for a bit. You were keen, though, to keep the conversation going.

- Have you read Bleakley's piece on invisible ink (Bleakley, 2000)?
- I think so ... ages ago remind me ...
- Well on the one hand he advocates writing as professional development .. but he is suspicious of the worth of the dominant form of confessional-personal reflective writing that dominates such practices,

Such writing is not liberating or empowering, but rather offers a paradoxical discipline, as a technology of the self in which, as a practice of liberation, there are certain things that may be said and certain things that may not be said.

(2000, p. 13)

- So, he resists this retreat into the first-person?

- Well, an uncomplicated and humanistic notion of a stable, fully-knowable first-person anyway.

And he also goes on to problematise notions of 'growth' and 'development' – as if they are always purely positive things ... as he says, 'tumours grow, economies inflate ...' (13).

- Ok ... this is all sounding familiar ... didn't we touch on this before when we talked about CPD back in Edinburgh ...

- Yeh ... we touched on it.

- And, to add to all that, he questions this rhetoric for safe places and clearings that you keep banging on about.

- Oh ... in what ways? I don't think it's rhetoric ... I'm not sure if I buy that completely.

- Well ... ok ... maybe that's a clumsy interpretation but I think his point is that that really useful reflective practice resists notions of safety and instead, drawing on Foucault and Nietzsche, should embrace the possibility that 'valuable praxis must also be "dangerous"' (14).

- I suppose I see your point. But we talked ages ago about the value of dissonance in professional development dialogues. I think the notion of safe places, for me anyway, is finding the space where we feel we can articulate dangerous things. My worry is that the most occupationally-vulnerable, the precarious educator working the bits and pieces, worried about saying 'no', is never, or unlikely, to be in a position to engage in dangerous dialogue – they, we, have too much to lose - we, are too easy to replace. ...

- You may be ... but you're talking about it now.

- Yeh ... but I don't think this is too dangerous. Let's not kid ourselves. ... Anyway why are you telling me all this now – at the end?

- Well, I suppose, that Bleakley seems to make some of these connections for you ... instead of waiting around for safe places to gather educators to share stories of practice, use the spaces you are in now to perform narratives that reflect the precarity of your lives, your knowledge ... and I know what you are saying about vulnerable subject positions but I think that through communal narrative acts, for example, by

deindividualising the educator subject, then there the safe place becomes narrative itself  
– creative spaces ...

- So this move towards the value of non-unitary CPD subject?
- If you really must put it like that, yes ... but you might be hovering around what Bleakley is saying,

Can we have narrative writing as reflective practice without a totalising “subject” or authorial ownership? This would constitute an approach that appreciates the value especially of written language’s inherent indeterminacy, and thus, resists or subverts notions of closure, as explanation, in reflective practice.

(2000, p.16)

- But isn’t that what this is? Haven’t we worked really hard to resist a totalising subject and authorial ownership?
- We have. I’m not pointing out your failures – I’m drawing attention to your strengths. The strength of this. I’m pointing out the obvious.
- So what do we do then?
- You’re asking me?
- I am.

You paused for a moment. As we climbed slowly, the landscape below us opened up, our increasing angle to it, bringing more into view. You seemed to be looking over to the east ... toward the odd fertile circle of a field that we can only see when we get a bit higher.

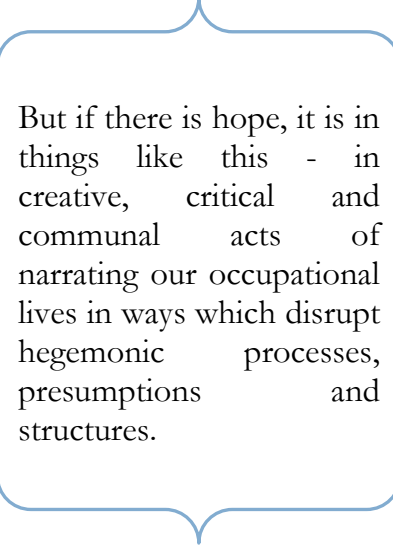
- What’s that?



- It's a Neolithic souterrain. You wouldn't see it if you were walking over that field. You only see it when the growth dies off in the autumn and winter. And with a bit of height.
- Oh. It's like a fertile island amongst that rough land.
- It is. See ... all that underground work makes the difference.

It was my turn to press you.

- So?
- So ... what?
- So ... what do we do then?
- What do we do?
- Yeh.
- Well, I think it's fairly obvious.
- Is it?
- Yeh. Look, you are such a mess of contradictions. You are looking for a neat ending here. There isn't going to be a clear narrative resolution to this. How could there be? You said yourself at the beginning of this walk that you weren't great at endings.
- You weren't there.
- Don't kid yourself. You know I was.
- Ok. Then, if we give up on neat endings, clear resolutions, then what?
- We keep on doing this ... if you want to be part of something that tries to save educators' souls from the terrors of performativity (Ball, 2003).
- I never said I was on a mission to save educators' souls.



But if there is hope, it is in things like this - in creative, critical and communal acts of narrating our occupational lives in ways which disrupt hegemonic processes, presumptions and structures.

- No you didn't ... I was playing with you. But we need to keep doing this: walking and talking our knowledge. Walking and talking in the direction and into the spaces that we know, we feel are right, are just. And being assertive that this, all of this, is what our knowledge looks like – a wandering, portable knowledge – just enough to fit into your Lidl bag – and a heterogeneous and broad knowledge that flows with creative and critical energy between the interconnected spaces of practice, the personal and theory.

- So this flow is infused, you're saying, with creativity and criticality?

- Yeh, absolutely, and in the end, I think that is where the hope is, if its anywhere – things are bleak, very bleak in Ireland for adult educators in terms of possibilities of nurturing something close to a career.

But if there is hope, it is in things like this - in creative, critical and communal acts of narrating our occupational lives in ways which disrupt hegemonic processes, presumptions and structures.

Our strength, in part, resides in our marginality - positions which offers a different perspective, a different subject position to speak as educators struggling to live and work an ethical life. We exist in the cracks, and so our occupational narratives are cracked –

- So what are you saying? Are you abandoning your quest for clearings – safe spaces, slow spaces?

- No ... but we may just need to create them where we can ... in the cracks.

Remember this whole things has been written in the cracks of a very precarious occupational reality.

- And this is what comes out of the cracks?

- This is one thing to come out of the cracks anyway. Maybe this is what professional development begins to look like for, what Hargreaves views as, the 'post-professional' educator (2001, p. 675).

By this time we were nearing the end of the serpentine track that led to the top of the hill. This was our traditional destination as children.

We'd race each other on arrival to be first to touch the wall. After a four-hour journey in a packed family car, we would run-slip with delight up the hill. To be first to touch the wall.

As we reached the stone wall that bounded the land I paused, resting against a large rock and looked below me at the familiar landscape. I thought again of all the work that these hills witnessed over the years – work almost rendered invisible now ... hanging on in fragmented stories faintly inscribed on the landscape and fading memories.

I thought of the work and love that went into all that was done here. I thought of you again – thought of your need to leave when the place could sustain you no longer. To take one last glance – a glance and nothing more – at the landscape you loved, all the stories that it held, and because there was nothing for you now, you take that one glance, get up on your bike and leave.

Maybe I have come to a moment not unlike your brief moment of contemplation. My pause to reflect on my occupational landscape, admittedly, has taken more than a moment. I'm not sure if I'm ready to make the choice you made. But then, what choice did you have at all?

But you.

You lived a different story. You stayed and crafted an occupational narrative constructed from a de-centred sense of a protagonist – the first-person did not dominate your story.

And it's been you, of course, who has been my ethical compass throughout it all (Done, et al., 2011).

...

We stood – getting ready to move again. My hand rested on the large rock that was, I noticed, part of the wall.

It was rare as children that we went beyond the wall on our own. We were constantly warned of the bottomless lakes and abandoned mines that lay beyond the wall. And, we generally heeded these warnings - our active imaginations generated vivid images of what seemed very real dangers in the unknowable terrains beyond.

But, pushing these stories borne of care aside, I had discovered the solitary pleasure of Gleann na gCapall as a teenager - delighted in the new and deeply silent spaces above the wall. And now, as an adult, I am always drawn there – the once-dangerous terrain has become a space of profound and nourishing stillness.

- Where to now?

- This way.

With one last glance at the land below, we squeezed through a gap – not even a gap, a crack really - in the wall. And pulled ourselves through by grabbing one of the posts which continue to emerge on this hill (St. Pierre, 2013, 2014). Pulled ourselves out onto the other side - out onto the commonage above.

Instead of taking the obvious line up to an ascending point, we made our way around the side of the hill, following a small stream for a bit, following the contours around and through, towards Gleann na gCapall.

Walking the contours.

Walking it home.

Epilogue – found dialogue in a shrinking kitchen



**T**he children  
three of them now  
had  
settled for the night.

And so,

we grabbed

a rare moment

alone together

over a cup of tea

in our

shrinking kitchen.

Just about alone –

our

dozing cat

shared the moment.

It was nearing the end

of October and

the wind had started

whistling its return

through

the cracks in our home.

Looking around at

the mess of a day's living,

you sighed,

- We're gonna need a bigger boat.

- Yeh. ... but it hasn't sunk us yet.

- Not quite.

- No. Not quite.

You looked across at

the manuscript that my tea was resting on.

An open book,

an anthology of poetry,

had, somehow, ended up

between the unbound pages

revealing fragments of a poem



'you run around the back to be in it again ...'

(Duffy, 1994)

While my gaze lingered on this line

and all I could see in it

from

'The Good Teachers'

your eyes, your thoughts

remained on the other, this

unfinished, open book ...

- So is that it then?

- Am I done?

- Yeh.

- Nearly.

- Nearly?

- Yeh. Nearly.

I poured you

another cup of tea.

- I shouldn't ... I'll be awake all night ...

but sure, what the hell ...

Still-sitting

you reached behind

to open the fridge.

- Shit.

- No milk?

- No milk.

You stood and took

a deep, deep look

into the fridge.

- We've nothing for the morning. ...

One of us will have to go down  
and get a few things ... there's nothing

for the lads' lunches.

- I'll go ... after this ...

do you have

any cash on you..

or is there money in the account?

- No.

- No to what?

- Both.

- Jaysus ... same old story ...

I'll take a couple of euros

from the lads' piggy bank

- Do ... but leave an IOU.

- I will ...

I always do.

You started to make

a list.

- Ah, no need. I'll remember

... it's just milk and a few things.

You made it anyway

and handed it to me:

*milk,*

*bread,*  
*lunch stuff,*  
*and something nice.*

- Something nice?

- Yeh.

- You mean chocolate?

- Yeh.

- I don't need a list.

- You do. You're

always telling me yourself

you need a list if you're going

to the shop for more than three things.

- Oh yeh ... I forgot.

We settled into

our black tea

again.

Allowing the stillness to fill our life

for a moment

or two.

- So what next?

- After this?

- Yeh.

- Well, that's the thing alright ... what next ...

- And?

- Well ... more work hopefully.

- More stable work anyway.

- Yeh .. and, after all this, maybe

holding on to some kind of

good work at least.

- Good work?

- Well, work that, at least, does no harm. Remember?

- Right ... that kind of good.

- Yeh, that kind of good ...

- It's hard to get both ..

- What?

- Good work *and* stable work.

- Yeh ...

...

- And was it worth it? ...

all the heartache,  
all the doubt,  
all the feckin' thinking  
that would drag you a million miles away, ...  
all that walking – Jesus, that walking.  
Was it worth it?  
- I hope so ... it's too early to say ...  
We'll see I suppose.  
And-

But,

of course,

the baby monitor

crackled into life,

muting my stumbling response,

as Maebh woke ...

hungry or teething.

Possibly both.

- Sure tell me again.

She'll be hungry at this stage I reckon. ...

And don't forget the milk.

And then

you were gone.

I finished my tea alone.

I felt that there should have been

a more profound ending

to all this.

Something deep,

creative,

thought-provoking

– a clever metaphor maybe –

something to

tie things up neatly –

something to

bring things to

a tidy conclusion.

But then, that was never

going to happen

I suppose.

Anyway, our story hadn't

ended.

Just a pause

to catch our breath.

And this

our slow, fractured fade

to white ...



I paused at the door

- the big

primary-coloured,

Lidl bag

in hand -

on my way out

- a glance of envy at our

sleeping cat

unmoved by all of this

and taking that moment to

steel myself

for the October night

which stood between us

and our

milk,

bread,

lunch stuff

and

something nice.

I was just closing the front door when

your distorted

voice

whisper-shouted

through the baby monitor,

- Oh yeh .. and can you get some apples?

Apples.

I smiled a slow,

crooked smile.

Whatever made me think

it was ever a simple choice between

avocados

and

aubergines?





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## Appendices





## Appendix One - Tutor profiles

Emma has been working as a tutor with the VEC/ETB for over ten years. She teaches a range of subjects including: literacy; personal development; nutrition; communications; maths; and IT. She is also involved in delivering and facilitating volunteer tutor training workshops. Over the years she has worked with a range of students: work-based; students with basic education or literacy needs; special needs students; and beginning volunteer tutors. Occasionally, however, she will do some work in her previous career to supplement her income.

Orla has worked as a part-time tutor for several years with the VEC/ETB. She has taught a range of subjects covering IT, Communications, Personal Effectiveness and Numeracy. Although, more recently her teaching has focussed exclusively on IT which draws her back to my own experience and background. Her work as a tutor is just part of her working life. Her other job also involves working in education too, but it is more in a project management capacity. Although there was a time when she contemplated working as a tutor exclusively, she now regards the project work as her main job.

Grainne started working as a tutor with the VEC/ETB over ten years ago. She moved on, relatively quickly, to a coordination role and has progressed, since then, through the organisation to other curricular and education management positions. Although she no longer works as a tutor, she maintains close contacts with the tutor body.

Kate has been working with the VEC/ETB for six years and has worked for FÁS in the past. At the moment she teaches mostly numeracy and Maths up to Junior Cert level. She works in a couple of centres across the VEC/ETB on a range of different programmes.

Maeve has been teaching Level 5 Childcare and Community Care with the VEC/ETB for several years. Her students are mainly women in their forties - there are very few men on Childcare courses. Most of the students are on Community Employment (CE) schemes and are allowed time to come to attend the course. There are a few students who are employed in private childcare contexts. A lot of the students on her Community Care course are caring in their own homes. There is some overlap between the two courses. At the moment she is teaching about twelve hours a week with the VEC/ETB.

Afterword: Things have changed for Maeve since her story was told first:

“ I now have a Contract of Indefinite Duration. I'd forgotten how insecure my contractual position had made me feel back then. Having this allows me, for the first time as a tutor to say 'no' to work with a degree of comfort.

I have also moved premises and now work in a small FE centre. The atmosphere is very different. I am no longer the autonomous tutor. There is much more sense of being part of an institution – and all the good and bad that goes with that.

My relationship with my CEF, possibly because of that move and their subsequent closer working relationship, has also changed subtly. I am more conscious now of her institutional duties and the procedural stuff that we can avoid when we're a bit more invisible.'

Paul works as a numeracy and maths tutor in a VEC/ETB across various locations. He returned to college as an adult learner to study a Maths degree after a long career in the commercial world. Since graduating, he has been teaching for a couple of years with the VEC/ETB.

Sinead has been working as a tutor with the VEC/ETB for the last ten years. She has worked with a range of groups and subject areas over the years: literacy, Communications, Numeracy, ESOL, IT skills and Personal Effectiveness. She has also been involved in the VEC/ETB's training programme for volunteer tutors.

Ted works for a couple of VEC/ETBs and, at the moment, mainly teaches on level 5 programmes. The funding for these particular programmes has recently ceased so they will be coming to an end soon. The students that he works with are, in the main, Health Care or Community Care workers. Ted has worked as a tutor for several colleges and centres across a number of VEC/ETBs over the last twenty years. Throughout this period he has also worked in commercial training contexts.

Molly has worked in adult education as a tutor for over ten years. For many years she worked with mature adult learners in the VEC/ETB's Learning Centre – in the last couple of years she has started to work more with younger adults and early-school leavers and also works in the compulsory education sector.

Siobhan works as a Health Care professional. Before her current post, she worked for several years as a VEC/ETB tutor on a number of Health and Social Care programmes. She has also worked as a tutor in her vocational area in other colleges in Ireland and abroad. In Siobhan's story, we learn about her experiences as an educator and the various issues that led her to, finally, leave the VEC/ETB and return, full-time, to Health Care.

## Appendix Two – Ethical Approval

Copy of ethical approval letter from MU Ethics Committee – March 2013.

