CONSULTING THE EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE OF PRACTITIONERS AND LEARNERS THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AN ONLINE HISTORY PROJECT WITH OLDER ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Individual difference and diversity among older people alludes to the importance of creating flexible programmes facilitated in welcoming, person-centred, learning environments. In response, I present my ideas for developing a future online local history project involving older adults' memories of childhood. Through my qualitative fieldwork interviews, I consult practitioners and learners who have experience using Information and Communication Technologies with, and as, older adults in education and training contexts. I invite these participants to describe the possibilities for, and challenges to, realising my ideas for the future project. Through documentary analyses, and my use of a recurring circle metaphor, I compare and contrast the participants' expressed ideas with those I garner from among the literature. My intentions are to direct my project designs in response to the educational needs of older adults.

I note EU and national policy responses to demographical trends as seeking to provide educational opportunities for older people based on their needs, motivations and interests. Despite tendencies to view these needs and motivations as homogenous, purported benefits to engaging older adults in education emphasise improvements to their personal and social well-being. I see policy regarding the provision of ICT skills training for older adults as suggesting two broad agendas: (a) social inclusion, and (b) economic need. Acknowledging further heterogeneity among older adults in respect of their varying degrees of interest in, and familiarity with, ICT, I argue that the acquisition and development of ICT skills may be incidental to their participation in the future project. I contend that more meaningful participation in the future project may be fostered through the adoption of an oral history dimension that recognises the value of contributors' lived-experiences. Capturing the stories may present health benefits to these contributors, and offer a way of connecting to marginalised voices.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Conjoining circles

For me, my thesis invokes a visual image in which I see myself seated in a welcoming adult education setting. I also invite you, the reader, to visualise yourself sitting alongside me in our imagined room. Our chairs are but two among the many I have purposefully arranged to form a circle, a seating configuration familiar to me through my engagement with adult education. At various junctures throughout my thesis I introduce others to our circle. I invite these participants to engage in discussion about my ideas for developing a future online history project involving older adults' recollections of childhood. With the help of those whose presence shifts in and out of our discussion circle, I hope to establish some of the possibilities for, and challenges to, realising my ideas for the future project.

I see four dimensions or spheres pertaining to my enquiry: my personal or 'axiological' sphere (Creswell, 2007, p. 18), older adults, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and oral history. In keeping with our circle, and drawing from my experience of another familiar practice used in adult education where participants introduce themselves by telling their stories, I first define my 'personal sphere'. This involves describing how my ideas for the future project seemed earlier in my research journey. Returning 'full circle' to revisit these ideas later, I critically examine how they are impacted by my research journey. I explore the three remaining spheres that form my framework of enquiry in the next chapter.

Before setting out my ideas for the future project, it is worth noting how I have tried to avoid using dualistic language to describe my research journey. For me, polarising terms, such as start/ finish or beginning/ end, bear the assumption that I might accurately locate fixed points-of-origin from which the learning I encountered throughout the course of my research emerged. Instead, I see my thesis as set in motion and as moving beyond the restrictions and limitations I have imposed upon it by confining it to the static format I present to you here. So, once again it seems, to me, that my circle metaphor is quite befitting. These wider motions of my thesis envelop circles of collaborators: you, participants, authors, researchers, scholars, practitioners, peers, lecturers, friends and families, among others. These shifting circles extend to encompass our shared ideas, knowledge, life experiences, practices, actions, politics and memories; they span our legacies, our histories, our present and our futures.

How I organise the rest of this chapter

In recognition of these characteristically human movements, connections, complexities, limitations and my place among them, I find it appropriate to describe how I think I arrived at my ideas for the future project, my concept of my personal sphere. I then outline my principles and values that inform my research. I expect that doing so will provide you with sufficient context to my thesis. After which, I briefly define for you the scope of my research. Having done so, I elucidate my 'initial ideas' for the future project, despite how dubious my attempts to temporally locate them may be. Finally, I conclude this chapter by explaining how I structure the rest of my thesis.

Arriving at my ideas

My parents, at times, move though our circle. For me, this invokes reflection on my past, my interests, skills, competencies, previous learning, as well as my present and how all of these might, in turn, support me in my ambitions for the future. I can recall how throughout my early teenage years and into my adult life, as a result of illness, my father's health worsened progressively. Despite this, I owe much of my capacity for systematic and analytical thinking, my interests in folk music, folklore, local history and culture to him. I find roots of my creativity in music and design in my mother's talent for creative writing and in her boundless imagination. The older I get, and especially since my late father's death, the more I find myself looking to my past. The more I look back, the more deeply I regret not taking greater opportunity to speak with my father about his life experiences.

My move to study education and training, at undergraduate level, helped me to develop an understanding of the core values and principles underpinning student-centred, participatory, egalitarian, democratic, emancipatory and critical approaches to teaching, learning and education. I owe much of this understanding to my engagement with the humanist/ progressive work of John Dewey (1938) and his explorations of the role of experience in education, Malcolm Knowles' (2005) ideas about adult education and their roots in the work of humanist psychologists like Carl Rogers (2014; 1969). In addition, my understandings are informed by contributions from such influential theorists and thinkers as Stephen Brookfield (1986), Peter Jarvis (2004), Paulo Freire (1970), Michel Foucault (1980; 2000) and Elizabeth Adams St Pierre (2014).

My previous postgraduate scholarship in the field of digital humanities and culture brought me to consider the possibilities for using digital tools and technologies for supporting the teaching and learning of history. I listed some of the online resources I developed in Appendix A. As part of my previous, unpublished, research I advocated for developing online educational historical resources in ways that recognise how 'disparity' among the needs of potential 'users' of these resources can impact their 'usability' (Kavanagh, 2014, p. 5). I suggested that consulting and engaging potential users, particularly learners, in the development of these kinds of resources may improve their impact and educational value. Heeding my own advice, as a potential developer of the future online local historical resource I describe further in this thesis, I feel it is necessary for my designs to take account of the educational needs and motivations of those older adults who will ultimately contribute to the future project.

Furthermore, my current studies, and participation in the Master in Adult and Community Education (MEd) programme at Maynooth University, encouraged me to reflect, more deeply, on my identity as an aspiring adult educator and researcher. These reflections helped me to draw out some of the basic principles, which I elucidate further in chapter three, that inform my teaching, learning and research practice. These basic principles complement my person-centred approach to programme design.

In short, some of these principles concern how, as an aspiring adult educator, I endeavour to prioritise, engage, respect, care about, value and respond to the needs, interests, lived experiences, knowledge and ambitions of learners. I intend to extend these principles to my programme designs for the future history project and I am hopeful that this becomes clear to you as you read my thesis.

By developing my knowledge of, and my principles for, my teaching, learning, research and programme design practices, and through being encouraged to consider more creative and progressive approaches to educational research by some among the faculty at Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education, I have also come to recognise something of my own place and voice in my writing. In response, I am hopeful that by using metaphor, writing in the first person and adopting a dialogical/ conversational writing style, I acknowledge something of your place within my thesis, as well as my own. Applying these kinds of personal, semiautobiographical and creative approaches to my writing forms part of my burgeoning attempts to depart from the stiffness that I find characterises my previous work, which I associate with my

adherence to more traditional academic conventions. By writing in this way, I am actively exploring different ways to construct, represent and communicate knowledge.

Scope of my research

Returning again to the idea of motion, and circles, I position my current research within the early stages of a larger action research cycle; I describe action research in greater detail in chapter three. I posit my research somewhere around the fact-finding/ defining-the-problem stages. 'The problem', in this case, essentially refers to my inquiry into the possibilities for, and challenges to, realising the future history project.

Bringing my educational principles to my research and programme design practice, I hope to take account of the educational needs and motivations of potential contributors to the future project. I gain insights into their needs and motivations through reviewing the relevant literature and by speaking with practitioners and students who have first-hand experience of teaching and learning with, and as, older adults in relatable educational contexts.

I could have focused my research on conducting feasibility studies, needs analyses, and the collection of more quantitative-oriented data. However, I feel that adopting a quantitative approach would somehow overlook the essence of the principles and values I described previously. For me, my interviews provide qualitatively rich accounts of the participants' descriptions of their experiences in ways that quantitative surveying or questionnaires might not.

Moreover, I do not intend to create a mere list of things I should be mindful of in developing the future project. So, I also see my research as occasionally moving beyond the reconnaissance phases of the action research cycle and into the critical reflection stages. In this mode I critically reflect upon the literature and the experiential knowledge of the practitioners and learners, who participated in my fieldwork interviews, and examine their implications for the development of the future project in chapter six. Ultimately, my goal is to progress to the next stage in the action research cycle: to develop a plan of action for realising the future project. Part of my aim for this study then is to facilitate moving closer to enacting the project in the future.

On another level, for me, conducting my research also represents an attempt to reconnect with my past, moving back, to try to make up for missing out on what my father might have told me about his life. I deeply regret being ignorant to so much of

what my father told me about his past. Perhaps part of my research is concerned with my careful attempts to preclude others from feeling the same sense of regret that I do. By helping them, you and me, in some modest way, to value older adults in our present, by recognising the richness of their lived-experience, perhaps we might carry something of them with us into the future.

My initial ideas

I explore the implications for applying generalisations and the power of defining terminology in chapter two. In addition, I discuss the limitations of metaphor in chapter three. Nonetheless, it is my view that playing street-games was a relatively common cultural practice in Ireland among some children during, and before, the nineteen-sixties. I wish to centre the future project on exploring, sharing and publishing the recollections of childhood memories of playing street-games expressed among a group of five or six adult contributors aged sixty-five years and over. Being mindful of generalisations, I refer to this cohort throughout my thesis using the terms 'contributors', 'older adults', 'older people', 'older persons' and 'older learners' interchangeably.

I envisage that this group of contributors, and I, will meet regularly to work together to create a project website/ online exhibition. To help develop the website, as part of the future project, potential contributors may require a prerequisite level of computer literacy, experience and technical competence. As facilitator, I will invite contributors to work collaboratively to devise sets of textual instructions, written or typed, for playing various street-games and to record their memories of playing them. I will ask the contributors to publish their instructions and memories on the project website. I also hope contributors will create their own multimedia content, e.g. images, photos, diagrams, audio, video, etc. and add these media to the future website to contextualise their instructions and memories. I imagine, in my role as facilitator, I will try to respond to the contributors' emergent educational and training needs throughout the duration of the project by providing workshops, tutorials and training, etc. as required.

My thesis structure

Staying in our imagined adult education classroom, at times, some of the chairs in our discussion circle come to be filled by various authors, scholars and researchers of 'the

literature' which I review in chapter two. Their work helps me to establish some of the possibilities for, and challenges to, realising my future programme ideas.

Some of the remaining chairs in our circle come to be occupied by the people with whom I conducted my qualitative fieldwork interviews. I view these participants as having acquired valuable experiential knowledge and experience, as students and practitioners, which I hope we can draw from as part of our discussion.

In chapter three I describe how and why I engaged these participants, my research approach, the methods I used to conduct my research, the values and ethical principles I apply to my research, their limitations, and I provide some justification for my choices.

I outline my findings from my conversations with the interview participants in chapter four.

I subsequently analyse my findings to invoke a discussion, in chapter five, by comparing and contrasting the participants' expressed ideas, regarding my plans for the future project, with the possibilities and challenges I identify from among the literature.

In chapter six, we return 'full circle' and revisit my initial ideas for the future project. I explore the implications for what I am learning from my engagement with the literature, my conversations with participants, my discussion and analyses of my research findings. In this chapter I critically reflect upon how my research impacts my intensions, ambitions and designs for developing the future history project. I conclude the chapter with some brief reflections.

Concluding comments

In this chapter I invited you to join our discussion circle. I provided some context to my research, outlined my ideas for a future online history project and described my thesis structure. However, clever uses of metaphor, my personal history and programme design intentions relate to one of the four spheres comprising my conceptual framework: the personal. Accordingly, in the next chapter, I proceed by examining the other spheres: older adults, ICT and history.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the first chapter I largely focused on elucidating the personal sphere: how my research relates to my practice as an aspiring adult educator, researcher and programme designer. In this chapter I introduce key and relevant authors to our discussion circle, via my review of their literature, to define and examine the three outstanding spheres: older adults, ICT and oral history. I conducted a minor review of the literature prior to engaging my fieldwork to explore the landscape of international and national thinking on educational provision for older adults. Adopting a degree of reflexivity, for reasons I describe in chapter three, I subsequently revisited this literature in accordance with the themes that emerged throughout the course of my research and in response to my findings, which I present in chapter four.

Older adults

Policy context and terminology

In parts of our world a view is expounded that some contemporary societies can be characterised by their rapid growth and development (Weber, 2003). Within this view emerging demographic trends are linked to improvements to people's working conditions, lifestyles, health and well-being, and predicated upon advancements in medicine and technology. These demographic trends are frequently cited as indicating that populations of older adults are growing both internationally (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2011; Czaja & Sharit, 2013; Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Huber & Watson, 2014; Krašovec & Kump, 2014; Merriam & Kee, 2014; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Ordonez, et al., 2011; Sánchez, et al., 2007; Wagner, et al., 2010) and nationally (AONTAS, 2008; Bailey & Sheehan, 2009; Bunyan, 2004; Caples, 2010; Corrigan, 2012; Corrigan, et al., 2013; Doyle, et al., 2013; Fagan, et al., 2014; NCAOP, 2005; O'Reilly, 2010). Responding to the perceived 'challenge' these growing populations present (NCAOP, 2005, p. 20) are various policies and milestones, which plot the course of 'thinking' about aging and older people at an international level (The European Commission, 1999; 2010; 2012; United Nations, 2002; 1991; 1983; World Health Organisation, 2002) and at a national level (Robins, 1988; Department of Health, 2014).

Yet, however well-meaning policies might be, as Murray (2014, p. 102) tells us, essentially all attempts at 'defining terms is an expression of power'. So, who are 'older adults', whom are they older than, and what does my use of the term imply?

For the purposes of my research, I set the minimum the age requirement for participation in the future project at sixty-five years. As I shall explain later, I subsequently lowered this age to fifty-five. Despite this invariable tendency towards applying 'sweeping generalisations' (Roberts, 2010, p. 6), the implications for which I examine later in this chapter, I feel my decision is somewhat justifiable given that (a) I concern the future programme with exploring the childhood experiences of a particular generation of adults who are (b) ostensibly older than me. In any case, what does the literature tell us about how education providers are to respond to this population trend?

Educational needs and motivations

Echoing my previous research, educational programmes which purposefully take account of the needs and motivations of those they are aimed at, and consult them, during the process of development are 'likely to provide settings for meaningful learning' (Brookfield, 1986, pp. 258-259). As older adults, what possible educational needs and motivations might potential contributors to the future project have?

Jarvis (2004, p. 93) writes, 'as time becomes shorter', the learning needs of older adults tend to become focused 'upon the problems of the immediate present and previous experience becomes increasingly important'. So, if we bring with us the knowledge we garner from our 'experience in the world' (Connolly, 2008, p. 16) to whatever educational setting we find ourselves, it seems reasonable to assert that some older adults may bring a 'rich accumulated experience' to their learning (ibid.). Perhaps, for some, accumulated lived-experiences may become more extensive and varied with age.

However, age is not a precursory guarantee of 'better, or more diverse, experiences' (Brookfield, 1998, p. 127). As Thalhammer (2014, pp. 48-49) notes, the age at which someone is deemed 'older' is contested. Moreover, 'old age' refers to a range of life 'phases during which a person's needs and prospects change'. It makes little sense then to consider the educational needs and interests of older adults as homogenous, fixed and determinable (AONTAS, 2008, p. 17; Kenny & Barrett, 2011). Rather, older adults should help determine the landscape of their educational provision 'on the basis of their motivation, learning experience, health status, and interests' (Thalhammer, 2014, p. 49).

An older person, then, is as likely as anyone else to 'participate in educational programs to pursue personal interests' (Czaja & Sharit, 2013, p. 3). Consequently, courses, teaching and learning materials, methods and resources for older adults should try to respond to their needs, interests, experience, characteristics, preferences (Blanchard-Fields & Kalinauskas, 2009; The Equality Authority, 2002) and 'future aspirations' (Findsen & Formosa, 2011, p. 116). Moreover, McKenna (2007, p. 4) recommends these programmes should also include 'practical and functional' dimensions. But how might participating in such purposefully developed programmes benefit older adults?

Educational benefits

Ageism and discrimination can contribute to the reproduction of poor self-image and low levels of self-esteem among older adults (McKenna, 2007; 2012). Research with, and about, older people suggests these negative self-perceptions may be alleviated through (re)engaging with 'educational, cultural and social activities' that benefit the 'economic, social, physical and mental well-being' (pp. 3-9) of older adults. Some of these benefits purportedly include: the promotion of greater independence via an improved capacity for self-fulfilment (O'Reilly, 2010) and 'self-actualisation' (McKenna, 2007, p. 5), increased self-confidence and self-esteem, personal health benefits (Bailey, et al., 2010; McKenna, 2012; O'Morain & Leahy, 2007), opportunities to up-skill and engaging mental stimulation conducive to keeping an 'active mind' (Corrigan, 2012, p. 162; Thalhammer, 2014). Furthermore, engaging physical and mental activity may 'reduce stress and increase longevity' among older people (AONTAS, 2009; 2008, p. 31; McKenna, 2012; O'Reilly, 2010; O'Morain & Leahy, 2007).

Previous research also indicates that some older people attribute great importance to the opportunity for 'social interaction' that their participation in education may offer (AONTAS, 2008, p. 16; Bunyan, 2004; Carragher & Golding, 2015). Social interaction through education 'with others, whether peers, tutors or younger people' may prove helpful to reducing feelings of social isolation and loneliness among older adults (AONTAS, 2009; 2008; Bailey, et al., 2010; Treacy, et al., 2005).

However, while these benefits are likely to impact positively on the lives of some older adults, I wonder if focusing on the 'self' takes sufficient account of the kinds of broader social, cultural and political factors that may contribute to creating and sustaining ageist and discriminatory attitudes towards older people.

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An intergenerational learning perspective

One response involves fostering 'intergenerational solidarity' (Edmond, 2012, p. 49) to promote intergenerational care and understanding (Doyle, et al., 2013), and strengthen communities, through education. This approach, in some ways, echoes Erik Erikson's (1950) concept of 'Generativity', the penultimate stage in his influential eight stage theoretical framework for human psychosocial development, which concerns the development of 'care and concern for the next generation' (Bradley & Marcia, 1998; Lawford, 2005, p. 261). Some authors link diminishing opportunities for intergenerational care to the busyness of modern living. To them, the 'geographic separation' of families means some spend increasingly less time together (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p. 31) which erodes familial communication structures and reduces possibilities for intergenerational contact (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Traditionally, the networks of care and support within families, and communities, encouraged older people to feel respected and valued, and helped keep them informed of social and technological developments (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Less intergenerational contact may, thus, potentially contribute to furthering the marginalisation of older adults (Corrigan, 2012).

This possibility, for some, highlights a growing need to provide 'extra-familial' opportunities to foster intergenerational exchanges through education (Kaplan, et al., 1998; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p. 31). Proponents of this intergenerational learning perspective argue that purposeful intergenerational interaction through education can grow both the personal and social capita of both older and younger learners (Corrigan, 2012; Corrigan, et al., 2013; Granville, 2002; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Putnam, 1995; Putnam, et al., 1994). These purported reciprocal benefits typically concern the 'upward and downward' (Corrigan, 2012, p. 154) transfer of knowledge and skills and opportunities for social interaction, among peers and between generations of learners (Corrigan, 2012; Corrigan, et al., 2013; Surlis, 2012). Furthermore, placing value on the lived-experience of older adults can provide them with reassurance, improve their confidence and foster positive attitudes toward learning among them (ibid.). Taken collectively, intergenerational relationships may help foster a sense of 'communal belonging' (Corrigan, 2012, p. 157) by creating opportunities for people to play a 'significant role' in the lives of others (Surlis, 2012, p. 37). This may also invariably raise awareness of, and place greater value upon, the needs of older adults in our communities (Corrigan, et al., 2013).

Fear of technology and schooling

Purported benefits to engaging older adults in education abound, what might some of the possible challenges to their engagement in education be?

Interestingly, AONTAS (2008, p. 38) note that feelings of 'inadequacy' can discourage 'some older people from engaging in intergenerational learning'. Those who may have not participated in formal education for significant periods of time, or at all, may be intimidated to (re)engage with learning, particularly where younger learners are present (ibid.). Furthermore, a person's negative experiences of schooling can discourage her/ him from (re)engaging with formal education (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Rogers (2007, p. 7) writes that a certain degree of anxiety is to be expected among any group of learners entering an unfamiliar environment. However, as Rogers also notes, this anxiety is likely to exacerbated where a person's 'experience of school education has been disappointing' or troubling (2007, p. 8). Consequently, it is important not to 'underestimate the power' of negative memories of schooling (ibid). Similarly, Bunyan (2004, p. 7) notes a fear of failing due to a 'lack of confidence stemming from former school-days', which may be heightened by a fear of using unfamiliar technologies, is possible among older adults.

Coordination, scheduling and timetabling

A further challenge, cited among the literature, is the limited availability of suitable transport options (AONTAS, 2008; Fagan, et al., 2014; McKenna, 2012). Those who depend on public transport, who have safety concerns about travelling when it is dark, or who drive, tend to prefer part-time courses that are appropriately scheduled to avoid peak traffic times (The Equality Authority, 2002). Furthermore, Jarvis (2004, p. 93) states that some older people 'may have many more commitments than younger people' and so often tend to prefer to study part-time. However, while it may be likely for a retired adult to have more free time than a person who is in full-time employment, caring duties and responsibilities, 'e.g. grandchildren/partners or full social lives mean this isn't always the case' (AONTAS, 2008, p. 30).

Facilitating a welcoming environment

That our individual 'uniqueness' is something that may become 'more apparent' as we age (Jarvis, 2004, p. 83), and the real possibility for difference and diversity among prior educational experiences and levels of confidence, suggests a crucial requirement

for educators to be able to put older learners at their ease, and for encouraging them to feel relaxed and valued (Corder, 2002, p. 8). Addressing these needs is predicated upon creating and sustaining a welcoming environment, conducive to learning, and involves fostering mutual respect among all those present. Understanding 'There are no right/wrong answers', and that there are 'few subjects where it is legitimate to insist on one opinion' (Rogers, 2007, p. 108), can also prove useful to adult educators who are committed to eliciting meaningful collaboration from among adults (Brookfield, 1986; Rogers, 2007). Participation should be understood to be voluntary (ibid), and being physically present in a classroom often demonstrates huge commitment from learners.

Part of the adult educator's role is to help the learner to sustain and develop her/ his enthusiasm for education (Corder, 2002). Learners should also be encouraged to engage critical reflection in order to challenge and develop their beliefs, assumptions and opinions, as well as engage those of others through purposeful dialogue (Brookfield, 1986; Nesbit, et al., 2004). Furthermore, an unpublished report on the Educational Needs of the Elderly in West Cork (2007, p. 7) notes how incorporating 'time for tea and biscuits' can be useful to providing older people with an important 'opportunity to converse with their peers and such social intercourse' is deemed beneficial to their engagement with education (AONTAS, 2008, p. 16).

Having looked at some of the educational needs, motivations, and interests of older adults, as well as possible benefits and challenges to their engagement, I wonder how ICT might relate to these considerations.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Technological advancement

The Internet and the World Wide Web [Web] have become almost ubiquitous in supporting many people in various aspects of daily life. So much so, there are some who assert 'They don't call it technology; they call it life' (Theimer, 2013). But, these kinds of assertions belie powerful assumptions regarding the relationship between ICT and human well-being. That the presence of things, like ICT, pervades modern life should not be taken as an expression their worth. Exploitation, poverty, disease, inequality and violence are, among others, just as prevalent in today's world, if not more truly global. Suffice to say, none of these things could be described as desirable.

Nonetheless, change is inevitable, and a social inclusion argument contends that ICT will continue to permeate further aspects of modern living, and develop at increasingly faster rates. Consequently, those in society who are not given sufficient opportunity to develop their ICT skills, which are deemed increasingly necessary to their participation, face the possibility of exclusion and marginalisation.

It is hardly surprising then that, since the middle of the 1990s, ICT have been a focus of various 'programmes and initiatives of the "Lisbon agenda" of the European Commission' (Thalhammer, 2014, p. 47). Similar national polices and investment incentives, such as the *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life* (Department of Education and Science, 2000), have sought to encourage the provision of educational opportunities to develop ICT skills among those, including older people, with seemingly 'low levels of educational attainment' and 'digital skills' (Casey, 2009, pp. 15-16).

Critically, however, it is possible to note an economic dimension to the ICT skills/ social inclusion agenda. This argument posits the promulgation of subsequent ICT-related policy as guided, in part, by the rationale that ICT skills are among those deemed necessary to sustaining a competitive workforce within knowledge-, as opposed to manufacturing, driven economies (Casey, 2009). Some provide further critical analyses of, what may be purported as, the encroachment of education's ambitions for personal, social and community development through the enactment of successive EU and national educational policies, which seek to prioritise the needs of a free-market driven economy in higher education (Walsh, 2014; 2012) and in adult and community education (Murray, 2014).

ICT skills among older adults

Older adults, so the argument goes, fall within the socially and economically 'at risk' categories. The contention being that a person who entered retirement before computer technologies become common in the workplace (Bailey & Sheehan, 2009; McDaid, 2012) is likely to be less experienced and familiar with newer technologies (Caprani, et al., 2012; Holland, et al., 2014; Lalor, et al., 2009, p. 38). However, despite some successful inroads in terms of ICT related educational provision for older people, the realisation of these ambitions in adult and community education is purportedly hampered by a lack of Government funding (AONTAS, 2008; 2009; McKenna, 2007).

Huber and Watson (2014, p. 16) write that, even for a person who is strongly enthusiastic about learning about new technologies, her 'age, education, technical knowledge, and technological anxiety' can adversely impact her willingness to pursue these interests. Casey's (2009, p. 19) research identifies a 'general fear of technology among older people' who are unfamiliar with ICT which, according to The Equality Authority (2002, p. 64) relates to their apparent 'lack of awareness and skills'.

Interestingly, Craddock contends that a 'major obstacle' to adopting ICT for use among older adults concerns how older people are typically and 'erroneously perceived as a homogeneous group' (2012, p. 12). Roberts (2010, pp. 5-6) highlights how 'Our tendency to think in cohorts' can often encourage us to apply 'sweeping generalisations' that overlook differences in age, perception, experience (ibid.), gender, race, education, income, geographic location, motivation, computer literacy and IT skills, employment background, and personal interests (Koutsouris, 2010).

Furthermore, it is important also to note the prevailing common misconception that older adults have no interest in ICT (Demiris, et al., 2004). To the contrary, as part of its submission to the National Aging Strategy (Department of Health, 2014), AONTAS declare that 'Computer literacy is an essential skill for participation and engagement in society' and that, as such, 'The recurring emphasis placed on ICT by older learners [themselves] highlights the need for greater supports for older people interested in learning about new technologies' (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 5).

As with anyone in society then, regardless of age, some older people face the challenge of participating in societies in which the use of ICT pervades 'almost all social areas' (Thalhammer, 2014, p. 48).

It makes little sense then for me to attempt to justify that incorporating an ICT skills dimension to the future project may be beneficial the inclusion of contributors on the basis of their age. Rather, recognising individual difference and diversity among older adults and the richness among their varied previous experience, educational needs, interests and motivations, one possible reason why an older person may decide to contribute to the project could be that she *self-identifies* as wishing to develop and apply her ICT skills. In other words, the development of her ICT skills may be incidental to, rather than a requirement of, her participation.

How might the future project account for additional needs and motivations, particularly for those older adults who more or less interested in engaging new technologies and developing their ICT skills? I contend that one approach, which leads me to the fourth sphere of my enquiry, may be to provide those among them who played street-games as children with opportunity to explore their childhood memories. Assumptions about the childhood experiences of older people abound, how realistic is this idea?

History

Street-games

Marsh (2012, p. 508) identifies a 'long history' and a 'rich tradition of "western" children's folklore'. Among the various published collections of children's games cited by Marsh is a book entitled *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Gomme, 1964). Published in two volumes in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the book contains 'various versions of over 800 games' (op cit). A similar endeavour to record Dublin children's street-games was made in the nineteen-seventies by Eilís Brady (1984), who published details of almost 200 street-games, rhymes and songs. Children's games can provide us with useful cultural and historical insight as they pass 'from generation to generation' and, despite variations in rules, player configurations, actions, or determining outcomes, slight differences rarely in play rarely render a particular game unrecognisable (Whittaker, 2012, p. 270).

So it seems possible that street-games might inhabit the living-memories of some older adults who played them. But, what might be involved in accessing their memories of their games and their recollections of playing them?

Human memory and storytelling

The future project is partly concerned with the potential contributors' capacity to engage their autobiographical memory. Findsen and Formosa's (2011, pp. 71-72) somewhat clinical description defines this as 'the personal representation of general or specific events and personal facts that one experiences during his/ her lifetime'. Berman and Furst (2011, p. 143) write, 'Although not universally the case', a person's capacity to utilise the 'cogitative resources' required to purposefully recall from her memory may reduce with age. However, there is no single identifiable cause for this reduction because human memory exists in a complex system involving the 'entire cognitive process' (Findsen & Formosa, 2011, pp. 71-72). This complexity is what distinguishes

human memory's uniquely deep, 'rich', 'mysterious' and 'fragile' 'character' (Carr, 2010, p. 191). Our memories are rooted in our past; at the same time we mediate them through our physiological presence, thereby connecting our memories to the present. Yet, much like my circle metaphor, memories can also allow us to transcend our past and present by laying foundations for our future aspirations (Perks & Thomson, 1998).

Memory can have generative properties: recalling past experiences can help us consolidate neural connections we formed as these experiences occurred to us. Subsequently revisiting these memories can forge new neural connections in our present and, like my circle, the cycle continues (op cit.). That we may harvest our memories to create and tell stories enables us to 'build connections with prior knowledge and improve memory' (Lowenthal, 2009, p. 252; Schank, 1990). Some link storytelling, memory recall and reminiscence to wellbeing (Chiang, et al., 2010; O'Shea, et al., 2011; Stinson & Kirk, 2006; Stinson, et al., 2010; Wu, 2011) to contend that engaging memory poses such mental health benefits as 'promoting self-understanding, transcending physical limitations, increasing self-worth, alleviating depression, and helping people deal with crises, loss, and life transitions' (Zusman, 2010, p. 26).

I find that this link between memory and storytelling adds an intriguing possibility to the future project. Particularly were, in addition to the apparent health benefits, Ricoeur (2004, p. 89) tells us that 'The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace of past events'. Memory, Ricoeur explains, also concerns responding to our 'obligation' to carry with us something of those 'who have gone before us' to whom we owe 'part of what we are' (ibid.). Expressed more troublingly, perhaps, 'All it takes is one generation. If the history is not preserved, it's as if it never happened' (Zusman, 2010, p. 118).

Contested nature of oral and life histories

But, we are told, to posit working with human memories as a mere perfunctory exercise in capturing testimony to previous life events is to be guilty of a gross oversight of its complexity. Nowhere have I found the 'fallibility of memory and the subjectivity of first-person accounts' (ibid.) more contested than in the field of oral history research.

On one hand, oral history can challenge 'the historical enterprise' and its 'orthodoxies about historical sources, methods and aims'. Capturing oral history can provide an alternative 'historical record' that includes the experiences and perspectives of those

who might otherwise be 'hidden from history' (ibid.), by providing an outlet for the 'silenced voices' (Plummer, 2001, p. 41) and 'secret stories' of the marginalised (Steedman, 1987, pp. 5-9). Atkinson (2005) notes our stories contain 'instances of personal resilience and struggle against acts of discrimination and exclusion'; by reminding us of how we responded to these challenges, our stories encourage us to develop a 'more profound sense of self and identity' (Hamilton, 2009, pp. 315-317).

On the other hand, fierce debate abounds 'about the reliability of memory and the nature of the interview relationship, or more generally about the relationships between memory and history, past and present' (Perks & Thomson, 1998, pp. xi-x). Lambert (2013, p. 49) notes a significant growth in interest, particularly though digital media projects, in capturing older peoples' living memories.

Yet, surely universities and academic institutions have played some role in legitimising what constitutes the 'official' version of the past through their propagation of 'knowledges [*sic*] of erudition' (Foucault, 1980, p. 83). Where do I stand then if I advocate for resisting official narratives and, at the same time, I am implicated in reproducing the authority of those institutions that contribute to creating and sustaining an official historical record given my association with, and proximity to, 'the university'?

Lambert argues that by over focusing on research methodology and the 'rigour' of the 'interview experience', the 'academic trend of oral history' places 'much less emphasis on the publication issues for the interviews'. He goes on to describe a 'broader view of the process' that seeks to use 'new media' to provide immediate public access to raw 'oral recordings', 'source documents' and 'excerpted stories' (Lambert, 2013, p. 49). So, what I find particularly appealing about Lambert's broader *Digital Storytelling* approach is how it provides opportunity for resistance by placing value in the telling of the story, rather than its material accuracy.

Faciltating storywork

Butler (1980-81, p. 37) tells us that older 'People get much out of the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings to someone willing to listen'. Going forward, I will invariably need to consider how I might encourage contributors to work collaboratively, explore and share their memories, and establish their 'narrative paths' (Miller, 2004, p. 58). Simondson (2009) states, a challenge for facilitators is 'to create an environment

for participants that evokes memory and engages the senses, intellect, spirit, and heart and at the same time sparks curiosity and imagination' (2009, p. 123).

Schweitzer (2007, p. 213) describes a number of 'essential' skills and qualities for engaging memory and reminiscence with older adults which, I find, align well with the adult educators approach to facilitation. Schweitzer explains that, displaying real 'curiosity' and a willingness to learn from an older person, can encourage reminiscence; conversely, feigning interest can be discouraging. Being 'sensitive' to the feelings, as well as the content, a person expresses through telling their story is important. Any discomforting or painful memories that emerge should not be probed further (ibid.).

As Hamilton (2009, p. 321) cautions, working with people to explore their past may invariably 'mean listening to accounts of very traumatic memories'. As such, this presents important ethical considerations regarding the possibility for causing unintentional harm to both speakers and listeners alike. Furthermore, what a particular person deems 'sensitive' depends upon the context in which she/ he hears or tells a story and upon her/ his 'cultural norms and values'. Consequently, adequate provisions for care, as well as 'opportunities to reflect on and make sense of these accounts', must be made for engaging in this kind of work.

Schweitzer (2007, p. 213) writes that listeners should try to expound an 'attitude of acceptance' that demonstrates understanding and respect for the speaker's point of view. Having a 'reasonable memory', to remember, recall and refer back to aspects of a person's story, can indicate that you value what you are told. Furthermore, a good 'sense of humour' can prove useful to creating a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to story sharing. A degree of 'adaptability' may also be required so that the speaker's emergent needs and interests inform the course of a story sharing session. In addition to talking, which is not everyone's preferred mode of communication, other 'imaginative' ways might be used to express a story 'such as drawing, singing, dancing, showing, etc.' (ibid.)

Concluding comments

In this chapter various authors, researchers, theorists, policy makers, thinkers, etc., passed through our discussion circle and presented us with their main ideas, via my review of their literature. I hope you now have a greater sense of the four spheres I describe as pertaining to my enquiry. It would be interesting for us to learn how these

views compare and contrast with those of practitioners, and learners, with direct experience of using ICT for, and as, older adults in education. To attempt such an exploration, which I do in chapters four and five, I feel I should first describe how I collected, analysed, interpreted and presented these participants' views, and my reasons for doing so. These various elements comprise my research methodology, and I present them in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this I chapter outline my research methodology. This involves describing my philosophical and theoretical positioning, the data collection tools and methods I used to construct my thesis, the principles, values and ethical considerations that underpin them, their limitations and my reasons for my choices. I present these to you in (loose) accordance with the 'components' advanced by Lincoln and Guba (2013, p. 85).

Theoretical paradigm

Emphasising the practical implications, in respect of developing my educational, research and design practices, for the participants' experiential knowledge attests to a distinctly pragmatic character of my research. I situate pragmatism, as a philosophy, between the 'poles of realism and relativism' (Finlay, 2012; 2006, p. 20; Mason, 2002), and I understand it as a theoretical position that 'privileges practice and method' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. vxii).

Reflecting my applied-research orientation, and my concerns with improving my practice, I pragmatically sidestepped the polemics of 'paradigm wars' and 'Methodological purism' by specifically focusing on defining my research as exploring possible solutions to practice-based problems (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2009, p. 461; Fraenkel, et al., 2012; Patton, 2001; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Despite accusations that pragmatism tends to focus on ends above means, and recognising the constraints imposed upon my study, in terms of scale and time, I (again pragmatically) adopted research methods that work, without committing myself to using 'these methods in their full versions' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2007, p. 119; Irwin, 2013; Lovat, 2013; Newby, 2014; Preissle & Grant, 2004; Reid, et al., 2014; Yin, 2011). I could have focused my research on conducting feasibility studies, needs analyses, and the collection of more quantitative-oriented data. However, I feel that doing so would not capture the qualitatively rich insights I am interested in exploring.

Participant and site selection

Excluding me, the cohort of research participants comprises two programme co-ordinators, one facilitator, three current self-identified 'older' students, and a local historian. I purposefully selected participants who identified themselves as having experience using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) with, or as, learners in relatable educational contexts.

Complementing the applied, practitioner-based, nature of my study, I conducted my fieldwork in ostensibly naturalistic settings; these were the participants' familiar work, teaching and learning environments. By choosing to operate in these settings I hoped to gain meaningful insights into the participants' world (Creswell, 2007).

Research strategy

Applying my 'research to practice' (Adams, et al., 2012, p. 6; Wellington, 2015), I locate my current study at the initial 'reconnaissance', 'fact-finding' (Dunne, et al., 2005, p. 25; Lewin, 1948), or 'observation' (O'Leary, 2004, p. 114), stages of an action research cycle (Coles & McGrath, 2010) within a larger, future, study (see Figure 1 Action Research Cycle   I invited participants to critically reflect (Lowe, 2007; Wellington, 2015) on my programme design ideas for the future history project, and asked them to suggest changes and improvements to my ideas (Bell, 2010).

> As a practitioner-based research approach, action research combines action and research in attempting to change and improve situations. It is guided by principles such as participation, collaboration, self-criticism, praxis, and uses the methodological mechanism of a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Rule & Modipa, 2013, p. 60).
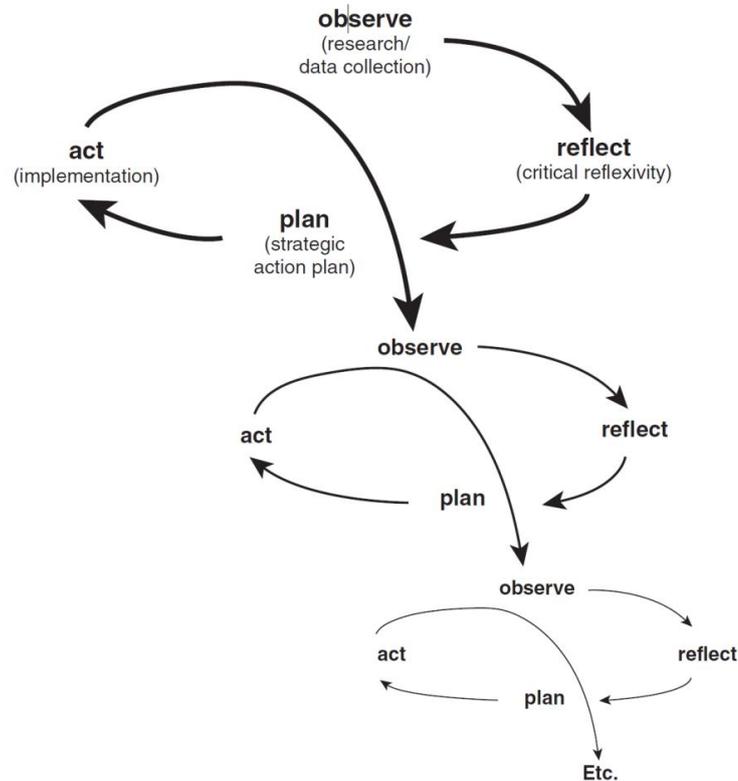

Figure 1 Action Research Cycle (O'Leary, 2004, p. 141)

Working in 'collaborative mode' (Yin, 2011, p. 214), with participants, to take 'stock of what is happening' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, p. 157), enhances the potential for our respective teaching, learning, research and/ or design 'practice to become praxis, or "practical philosophy"' (Adams, et al., 2012, p. 143; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Rather than prioritising seemingly erudite knowledge (Foucault, 1980), which emanates 'down from on high' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 34) from an 'ivory tower', I see my approach as according power to the participants by valuing their experiential knowledge and ensuring their input drives the programme design recommendations and decisions I derive from my research findings (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted one-to-one, semi-structured, interviews with each participant to gain insight into the context of their professional, teaching, and learning experiences, behaviours and actions (Seidman, 2004). During which I described, to the participants, my intentions for the future history project. I used open-ended questions to encourage each participant to draw from her/ his experiential knowledge and expertise to suggest possibilities for, and challenges to, realising the project. At each stage, I reflected on the participants' comments, revisited the literature, and I revised my questions accordingly, during and between successive interviews, in ways that tried to take account of the participants' expressed ideas. Furthermore, as I mentioned in chapter one, I feel that the epistemological stance I have adopted by opting to conduct fieldwork interviews provides my research with qualitatively rich insights into participants' descriptions of their experiences in ways that quantitative surveying or questionnaires might not.

Documentary analyses

I conducted documentary analysis to formulate discussion, within my thesis, by comparing and contrasting the possibilities and challenges purported by participants with those I identify among the literature. The literature comprises a range of primary and secondary sources, including relevant resources and publications from academic, scholarly and research institutions, as well as those from voluntary, community, and advocacy, groups and organisations working on behalf of older adult learners. I also paid particular attention to national and EU policy pertaining to educational provision, and ICT skills training for older adults, oral history and memory.

Reflective journal

I kept a reflective journal to record my personal research journey, with a view to improving my research practice (Preissle & Grant, 2004). Together with my fieldwork, findings, primary and secondary research, the musing and perceptions contained in my journal, explicitly and implicitly, informed the decisions, choices and findings I made along the way. Although I have not explicitly distinguished this journal content within my thesis, I have woven the learning I derived from it throughout.

Applied thematic analysis

I applied thematic analysis to identify, codify and analyse patterns among my interview data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Guest, et al., 2012; Saldaña, 2009) and findings. These patterns, or themes, are the 'implicit and explicit ideas' I found occurring within one interview or across a number of interviews (Guest, et al., 2012, p. 10; Symon, 2004). Rather than beginning with 'predefined categories', I placed coded themes into the categories that I found emerging from the data itself. I organised themes and categories in accordance with a coding taxonomy I developed from my analyses (King, 2004; Saldaña, 2009, p. 140). My intensions for the outputs of my coding and analyses are not the construction of a 'theoretical model' but, rather, 'recommendations' that directed my reading towards the creations of new questions for successive interviews, for informing the design of the future history project, and also for identifying areas for further research within and without my thesis (Guest, et al., 2013, p. 13).

Truthfulness

Elucidating further my values and principles I mentioned in chapter one: underpinning my occasional work as an adult educator are five major moral precepts of non-malfeasance, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity, and justice (Kitchener, 1984). These moral precepts inform the basic principles that guide my teaching and learning practice. By applying these principles to my practice I extend my concept of education beyond the domain and notions of formal schooling to encompass a broader range of 'incidental and intentional' (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 55) occurrences of teaching and learning that contribute to human growth, development and flourishing. My broader, person-centred, view of education is one through which I prioritise, respect, and value the 'needs, interests, experiences and desires' (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 57; Murray, 2014) of learners. My view of education compels me to emphasise the importance of my

duty-to-care through a redefining of the teacher-student relationship (Elias & Merriam, 1995). This re-conceptualisation affronts traditional understandings of these roles by enabling me to challenge conventional notions of teaching, learning, education, and legitimated knowledge (Murray, 2014). By recognising how adult education can promote engagement through meaningful dialogic encounters between, and among, teachers and learners, and how this can foster commitment to continual self-review and critical reflection, I conceive of adult education as a powerful, transformative, force for encouraging purposeful individual, collective, and social change (Brookfield, 1986; Elias & Merriam, 1995; Murray, 2014).

Extending these principles to apply to my research, and in accordance with the *British Educational Research Association's* (BERA) ethical guidelines, I make the assertion that 'educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research, and academic freedom' (BERA, 2011, p. 4). As such, I deem my ethical considerations for research as coalescing well with my moral precepts and basic principles for adult educational practice.

In light of these considerations, I am obliged to confront the power and authority that my role as a researcher is potentially imbued with. I see this power as invariably manifesting on account of my relationship with the university, its academic, cultural and historical legacies, and how these rest upon the commonly held perception of the university as the exclusive authority over knowledge and truth (Foucault, 2000). I consider this power to be further evident where I am privileged with choosing my own research topic, with devising my questions, setting agendas and schedules, defining the parameters for conducting my fieldwork, and in my selection of research methods, tools, participants and settings. I also see power where I am charged with a responsibility to interpret the participants' recollections of their experiences, and where I have control over how these experiences come to be represented in my thesis through my analyses, findings, recommendations, and conclusions (Freeman, et al., 2007).

In response, I am attempting openly position myself, and you, the reader, within my research. I am hopeful that by writing in a semiautobiographical style, and in the first person, that I am as being as honest and open with you about my own values and assumptions as possible, and defining what Creswell (2007, p. 18) terms as the 'axiological' dimension. I am hopeful that by writing in the first-person I am

conscientiously making sufficient attempts to address the possible impact that such imbalances of power may have on my research. By making myself, and my choices, as visible and as transparent as possible within my thesis, opting to write in this way permits me to acknowledge my position within my own research (Adams, et al., 2012; Friesen, 2012) and diminishes *some* of the perceived 'authority' I wield as an author (Foley, 1998, p. 130). Furthermore, I contend that 'there is no neutral knowledge' and I make no attempts to declare my findings as wholly unbiased or as absolute truth (Ryan, 2006, p. 16; Freeman, et al., 2007). Expounding values of mutual respect and reciprocal trust, my research instead prizes the experiential knowledge, practical wisdom, and lived-experiences that the participants themselves have chosen to share with me. For me, my fieldwork merely marks the beginning of an on-going process of 'reflexive dialogue' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 31), between me and the participants, which continues through to the publication of my thesis (and perhaps beyond).

Despite committing my research to using ethically sound moral precepts and principles, and to adopting reflexive approaches that seek to address imbalances of power, it nonetheless remains necessary for me to recognise that there are still possibilities for my research to cause unintentional harm (Bell, 2010). I have therefore made additional provisions which attempt to ensure, as best as possible, that my research conforms to relevant institutional, and legal, requirements, obligations (Coles & McGrath, 2010), rules and regulations.

In accordance with standard institutional ethical practice, policy, and guidelines, I deem my research to be of low-risk, on account of both the non-sensitive nature of my core research questions and how the participants are representative of non-vulnerable populations. My research proposal has also passed an initial ethical proofing process conducted by my MEd programme co-ordinators at Maynooth University. Further ethical concerns arising throughout my research process are highlighted, discussed, and resolved through consultation with my course co-ordinators, research supervisor, lecturers, and peers.

All invitations to participate in my research are accompanied by a statement, in plain language. This statement clearly describes my motivations for conducting my research. It also details the requirements for, and terms of, participation in my study. The plain language statement declares that all participation in my study is voluntary, and that withdrawal from my research at any stage will not incur penalty (Giacon & Hay, 2014).

Participants are given amble opportunity and encouragement to discuss my research with me in person. All participants are required to indicate to me that they have read and understood the plain language statement, and that they consent to the terms of participation in my research, by signing a printed declaration of informed consent. Additional expressed written consent is also sought from participants where I opt to use their specific comments, ideas, or where I quote directly from my interviews with them, in my thesis.

In accordance with the *Data Protection Acts* (Government of Ireland, 1988; Government of Ireland, 2003), it is also necessary for me to clarify how any data collected during my research is handled. This is achieved through regular monthly meetings where I must demonstrate, to the satisfaction of my course coordinators, research supervisor, lectures, and peers how I am taking due care to make adequate provisions for maintaining the confidentiality of data, and for protecting the participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality (Lowe, 2007).

Prioritising the ethical integrity of my study places ethical concerns 'at the forefront' of my research (Giacon & Hay, 2014; Wellington, 2015, p. 4). In doing so, I bring these ethical commitments to bear on all stages of my research (Wellington, 2015). I am hopeful that by choosing reflexive, ethically sensitive, approaches I have revised the trajectory of my enquiry, and moved it in directions cognisant of, and responsive to, the participants' accounts of their experiential knowledge. Engaging their accounts, in this way, invariably invoked constant critical examination of my 'taken-for-granted assumptions' (Giacon & Hay, 2014, p. 31); this created exciting opportunities for learning to emerge throughout the process of conducting my research, which I describe in chapter six. Similarly, by conforming to Maynooth University's guidelines for ethical research practice, and to legal requirements relating to confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, I made provisions to help protect the participants, the university I represent, and myself. Taken together, I believe that these measures provide for a suitably robust ethical framework that supports my intensions to conduct authentic and 'truthful' research (Coles & McGrath, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Limitations

Uses of metaphors abound for capturing various aspects of education (Elias & Merriam, 1995). My discussion-circle-in-a-room seems particularly apt because, as Brookfield (1998, p. 139) tells us, 'No practice is more beloved of adult educators than that of

having students sit in a circle'. It is possible to 'image a circle when we think about adults learning with adults, and when we think of collaboration' (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, p. 75). My use of metaphor allows me to posit my thesis as something born out of collaboration with those moving through our circles, and as something which 'cannot fully exist in the lives of individual collaborators' (ibid.).

Yet, despite how well my circle analogy appears to work, metaphors fail to fully explain the complex realities they represent. Discussion circles, in practice, can be imposing and invasive; their uses can make some people feel uneasy, under surveillance or coerced into participating (Brookfield, 1998). Moreover, what might we say about the excluded, withheld or silenced voices belonging to those outside our circle (Brookfield, 2001). Such are the limitations of metaphors, the complexities of human experience, and the invariable constraints they impose upon my thesis. While I may claim my thesis to be a product of collaboration, it comprises my personal interpretation of a fixed set of collected experiences that are largely shaped by my own worldview. As such, I cannot contend that my thesis represents any attempt at some generalised universal 'truth'.

Time is often represented as cyclical in motion, like circles on a clock face, and despite my ambitions for my thesis it is important for me to acknowledge that my research was invariably bound to time's unrelenting passing.

Adopting a critical view of my methodological approach, a further use of my circle metaphor might be to use it to describe my research methodology as a lens. My enquiry, then, is confined to looking through my methodological lens at issues that I deem relevant. I need to be mindful of how what I see, when I look through my lens, consists of what I have drawn into my periphery: through my selection of topic, literature, snippets of insights garnered from among participants, whom I chose, and through the tools and methods I deploy to analyse my findings. These limitations reveal how my thesis can only ever provide a restricted view of the issues I explore.

Concluding comments

So far I elucidated the four spheres of my enquiry, via my semi-autobiographical disclosure of my axiological or personal sphere and my ideas for the future project, in chapter one, and by reviewing the literature to establish the other three spheres, in chapter two. In this chapter I described my research methodology, my philosophy that I see informing my thesis, the research and data collection tools and methods I used, as

well as my values and rationale for applying them. Everything is now place to bring these considerations and the research participants into our discussion circle. In the next chapter I invite these participants to draw from their lived-experiences so that they might use them to evaluate my ideas for the future project.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the previous chapters I defined the four spheres of my enquiry, reviewed the literature and outlined my research methodology. In this chapter I present what I found expressed among the views of those who participated in my fieldwork interviews. As I explained in chapter three, I conducted my fieldwork interviews, one-to-one, in a variety of locations and on different days over a number of weeks. However, for the purposes of presenting my research findings to you, I feel it is useful to return to our discussion circle in our imagined adult education classroom. Again, I hope you can visualise yourself sitting with me among the participants as we discuss how our experiences, as practitioners, teachers and learners relate to my ideas for the future history project. Imagining a collective discussion circle, in this way, allows me to frame my findings by presenting them in the form of a dialogue or conversation. Although my interviews were not actually conducted in this collective manner, this framing permits me to construct broader imagined questions to capture a wider range of the participants' thoughts, ideas and responses. I feel that this, in some ways, also acknowledges part of the messiness of qualitative interviewing which, in turn, reflects the richness, depth and diversity among the lived-experiences of the participants I interviewed. I present these broader questions in *italicised* text throughout the chapter.

Participant introductions

As we sat in our circle, I introduced myself and explained we had assembled to discuss my plans for the future project. I said that, with the help of those present, I hoped to establish what some of the benefits for, and challenges to, realising my ideas for this future project might be. I described my plans for developing the future project in much the same way as I did in chapter one.

I asked the participants present in our discussion circle to draw upon their experiences of teaching and learning. Reflecting on these experiences, I asked the participants to share their thoughts about my ideas for the future project. Before we moved to answering my specific questions, I requested that each participant provide some brief details about themselves. What follows is a summary of the participants' self-descriptions. I refer to each participant using their respective pseudonyms, which they approved, except for Martin who requested that I use his real name.

Pamela explained that she coordinates computer skills training programmes targeted at older adults in community settings, and that she advocates for the inclusion of older adults in society. Tracy said she coordinates, and has published research on, a range of educational programmes that foster intergenerational exchanges between, and among, generations of students. I was previously involved with one of these programmes, a genealogy course, as a learning support assistant. Jim introduced himself as a facilitator of ICT skills training who tutors and supports older adults as part of targeted educational programmes. George put himself 'in the same bracket' as older learners. George said he participated in an extensive variety of courses for older adults, and currently a student. I previously met George through my involvement with one of the courses he took. Christine said how, having retired from her previous employment, she returned to education primarily to keep herself 'up-to-date' with 'computer and Smart Phone' technologies. Over the years Christine completed a range of courses designed for older adults. Paul described how he also took part in different courses for older adults. Paul said he currently participates in one such targeted programme as a student. Martin has written a number of published books, developed websites, and created photographic exhibitions, around his oral and local history research.

Our discussion

I thanked everyone for their introductions and asked those present to reflect on their experience and involvement with older adult learners. I explained my intentions were to recognise the value of their experiential knowledge and their awareness of the educational needs of older adults. I said I hoped we could incorporate what they had to say into my designs for the future project. Our discussion began with my first question:

I asked *'Will older people be interested in contributing to the future project?'*

Pamela remarked how the courses she has been involved with, 'around history, genealogy, memoirs, and reminiscence', have 'always been hugely popular' among older people. Pamela explained she felt this was because 'as some people get older they become very interested in who they are, and where they've come from. They want to leave a legacy behind, a trail, for their families'. Similarly, Martin said he found many 'people love talking about growing up', and Christine added how she knows 'few people that don't like talking about their childhood'. Cautioning against over generalising, Tracy said she viewed the future project as presenting a 'real attraction' for older people interested in recalling and remembering 'childhood games and their

past'. Jim agreed and said 'people like telling stories about the past, they like to look back and describe how things were then they were young'.

I asked *'Will contributors enjoy sharing their memories?'*

Christine said providing opportunity for a person to recall their memories can be 'great for the person telling' the story. Tracy explained that the future project's emphasis on memory recall could potentially provide some contributors with mental health benefits my encouraging them to reconnect with positive memories. Tracy declared this kind of recall and memory work to be 'a great way of using and engaging the brain and of keeping our minds active'. Christine added that she could see how bringing a group of contributors together could invoke a veritable 'explosion of memory' as people share their experiences.

Pamela said she has found that engaging older adults in education presents 'all sorts of positives for their mental and physical health'. Christine agreed and said she feels healthier and is more active since her return to education. Christine said this has given her 'focus', 'challenged' her, 'stimulated her mind' and ultimately 'enriched' her life. Christine added 'I would definitely say that, health-wise, I feel I have benefited'. Paul asserted that 'nobody who comes on a course will tell you they're no good, everybody enjoys them. Everyone will say returning to education was a great benefit'.

Jim said being committed to a scheduled programme to provide tutoring and support for others benefits him personally, as a facilitator, because 'no matter what kind of humour' he finds himself in will always 'get out there'. George said contributors would be 'happy to see the project grow from a germ of an idea to being fulfilled. They'd benefit greatly from seeing you, others, and themselves developing and maturing' as the project progressed.

I said *'Are ICT skills beneficial to older adults?'*

Pamela said computer technologies pervade many aspects of modern life and that

> Computer skills are becoming a necessity. Many older people, who had previously been very competent in managing their own affairs, suddenly find it difficult if they can't use computers. They say they feel left behind and that they *have* to learn. Learning computer skills can help those people feel more independent, and can improve their confidence because they feel part of the modern world

Jim remarked that has 'seen that happening' and said 'you show them how to do something they'd no idea about before, they think it's marvellous. When they're able to

do it themselves, it gives them great confidence and independence'. Paul said he retired from a career spanning over forty years with the civil service just as computers 'start coming in'. Paul commented that he now uses computers 'all the time', and claimed that 'unless you're able to use the computer now, you're lost'. Martin mentioned people who told him that their involvement with his local history projects 'filled them with a great sense of pride, ownership, and personal achievement to see how their contribution means something to the whole community'.

I replied *'Is there a social aspect to education?'*

Pamela said, in her experience, she has seen learners becoming 'more engaged with other older people' through their participation in educational programmes. Pamela asserted that, by offering ways for older people 'to get out of the house' these programmes can be effective in 'reducing social isolation and loneliness among older people'. Pamela added, for some, 'the social aspect can outweigh learning a new skill'.

Jim shared his views about the social dimension and said

> I think it's a social thing with older people, especially. Some people retire and don't have that social opportunity to talk to work colleagues or chat to people during the day. You kind of lose that when you retire because you don't have to go out anywhere. So, it's something else to get them involved in, it gets them out of the house. Some people want to get knowledge and learn something specific. But, other people like to go every week just to meet people and, it's interesting for them, they learn something as well

Tracy agreed and said 'social engagement from older to older person is very important'. Christine declared that 'seventy-five per cent of what we get out of attending a course is coming, actually, physically, coming outside'. Christine told me she visited a local women's group she had 'pin-pointed' to join in her retirement but said

> They were doing crochet, knitting, bolls, sewing, sequence dancing, and a whole pile of stuff. They were great women, but I felt I was too young and wasn't ready for that just yet

Christine said, through her participation in one programme, she went from 'from not knowing anybody outside, I ended up with pals, whom I still meet. It really opened up a whole new world, in retirement, of fun and learning'.

Paul gave a similarly rich insight into how he benefited socially from his return to education when he said

There're people my age who stay at home, they wouldn't go outside the door to buy a newspaper. They get sort of cocooned and wouldn't know what was happening. They might watch television, or listen to music, but what's outside their front door doesn't really interest them. But, if you do a couple of courses you meet an awful lot of people. I met people my own age. They were a lovely crowd. Different things were happening; you'd go to different places, which was great. It gets you out and meeting other people with different ideas on life. Everyone has their own story. They're from different backgrounds and there's a great social life

George also explained how 'There're very limited opportunities after you retire, especially if you're separated, divorced, or widowed. There're only so many times you can dig the garden'. George described some of the people whom he met through his participation in targeted educational programmes as 'lonely', 'widowed' or living alone. George spoke about the 'social involvements' that emerged for him through his return to education as 'better than sitting at home' and meeting new people as a 'positive'. George said that the 'initial contact' established in the classroom provided him, and his classmates, with 'great social opportunities' through which they formed friendships with older and younger students, and with members of the local community, that extended beyond the classroom context.

I asked *'Are there benefits to creating a website as part of the future project?'*

Tracy said 'capturing stories' on a website presents opportunity to create a digital 'artefact or repository' of childhood games, and provides a 'medium that makes sure they're stored and not lost'. Tracy explained how the games children play often form part of their socialisation and, as such, their childhood memories may contain 'cultural stories' and codes that offer insights into the socio-economic conditions prevalent at the time of their upbringing. Jim added that we often 'hear about big events, the wars, politics, and various things, but what people actually did on a day-to-day basis, how they enjoyed themselves and socialised, tends to be lost'. Christine said the future project website may prove a 'very useful tool to have down the line', especially for teachers, because it provides space for people to record their personal histories. Martin added that history is important in this regard because it can help future generations 'understand and know how we talked, how we lived, and how we worked'.

Next I asked *'Will the future website only be useful to teachers and historians?'*

Pamela saw the project as potentially bringing 'people together within a community', if it was localised to a specific area and involved some intergenerational element. Pamela added that the 'whole dynamic between Grandparent and Grandchild is very

harmonious and, when it comes to teaching, it works very well'. Tracy mentioned that there are 'all sorts of socio-economic reasons' why it is 'sometimes it's not always easy for younger children to be with, for example, grandparents'. Tracy said the project's potential to foster intergenerational exchanges may provide a 'real rich experience' and a possibility for 'deep learning between older and younger people'. Paul spoke of this, from his own experience, and said that he enjoyed the intergenerational 'interactivity' he got from 'talking with younger students about 'today's life and life in my time'.

Tracy likened the project 'to the work of Erik Erikson and the whole area of Generativity' and described the future project as representing a 'possible relationship tool between older and younger people' that not only values 'older people and their experiences but also values the technical competence and skills of younger people'. Again Tracy cautioned about over-generalising but said, 'depending on your cohort of older people' involved, the future project may offer community building potential as a way of 'marrying together' different kinds of experiences across generations.

I asked *'What challenges can you foresee to creating the website for the future project?'*

George identified 'limitations with the subject' of the future project. George said there are a finite number of street-games to document, and a significantly smaller number that *all* of the contributors would have experienced playing. George explained this could limit a potential contributor's capacity to add street-games to a repository. George said a game played in 'Kerry may not be the same as one up in Donegal' and may vary further depending on whether girls or boys played it. George suggested I consider how these variations might impact the project.

Christine said coming from a 'rural farming background', and growing up outside of Dublin, gave her a 'different kind of upbringing' and experience of childhood. Christine felt people 'brought up and reared' in inner city Dublin would have interesting childhood memories because their culture 'nurtures' storytelling, and values the sharing of 'local knowledge' and history. Christine recommended going 'around different areas' to capture a variety of experiences of growing up.

Next I asked *'How will contributors to the future project feel about publishing their stories and memories?'*

Martin spoke of the importance of being clear with contributors to the future project regarding my intentions for using their stories, 'because that's their story and they own

it', and how people are entitled to be accredited appropriately for their contributions. Martin said some contributors 'won't mind *you* hearing or publishing their stories' but may feel uncomfortable recounting them with others present.

Martin explained the necessity of getting a contributor's 'seal of approval' before committing their materials to publication. Martin described handling personal artefacts as 'a fragile business' that needs to be appropriately adapted according to each contributor's sensitivities; some stories may require collaborative 'editing' while others may not. Martin cautioned that upholding a contributor's right to withdraw material from publication, even 'three months down the road', may entail additional work, but expounded the importance of respecting contributors' 'wishes'.

I posed the question *'Will contributors to the future project have the IT skills required to build a website for themselves?'*

Pamela recognised a need to clarify whether or not participation in the future project would strictly require contributors' to have a prerequisite level of technical competence. Pamela said many older people 'feel they've lived their lives very successfully up until now' without computer technologies and warned there could be 'people who will want to take part in the project' but neither have nor want computer skills training. Pamela added that catering for disparity among skills levels may require 'extra resources', or additional training on specific technologies required by the project.

Martin said some contributors may be 'geared up to tell you their stories, and if you mention a computer they'll freeze'. Martin described how 'the majority of older people are usually quite willing' to try new technologies, but felt 'five or six lessons are not going' provide everyone with sufficient training to create a website.

Tracy mentioned how perhaps even potential contributors with basic to intermediate computer skills may be 'put off' by the 'wording' or 'frightened about not having the capabilities and skills to "build a website"'. Christine added this could seem like 'a chore' to those less familiar with computer technologies and discourage them from getting involved. Christine said my intensions for contributors to be self-directed in their uses of technologies should take account of the collective capabilities of the group of future contributors: some may 'write it out quicker' but could require 'spoon-feeding', others may 'type away while they'll be chatting to you' and could help 'set up the website'. Jim explained 'you've no idea' what an older person's previous

experience may be, some could be accomplished 'typists' while others type 'with one finger'.

Martin said, if the core focus of the future project is capturing stories, and I am committed to respecting a person's right to contribute, a willing contributor cannot be put 'out of the picture' over IT skills level because this will 'shrink' my 'pool' of potential contributors.

Tracy suggested I emphasise how contributors' narratives will be 'valued and used for the website' to generate wider participation in the future project. Christine cautioned against excluding people on the basis of technical competence because I would miss out on capturing so many 'great stories'. Christine recommended 'putting a microphone in front of people' willing to share, and Martin added 'that's where your tape recorder comes in'.

Then I asked *'Why do you think contributors to the future project might be anxious?'*

Pamela said 'A common barrier or challenge for people is fear. They think they're going to press the wrong button, wipe the computer clean, break the Internet, do some sort of damage'. Pamela described how many people tell her 'they've been awake all night worrying about coming to their first classes'. Christine said 'Because you're afraid you say "God if I press that button, I'm going to delete all that and I'm never going to get it back"'. Christine remarked that it was hugely important for her to 'get over that fear of new technology'. Martin told me some people 'used a pencil and a copybook in school' and for them taking a 'giant leap' to using computer technologies 'can be very scary'. Paul said he 'wasn't brought up with computers' and said that initially he was 'afraid and didn't really understand computers'. Jim described how, beginners especially, can be 'nervous', 'half afraid', or 'weary' because they may 'never actually had anything to do with computers before'. George retold of how he was supported in overcoming his fears when he returned to education as an older learner and remarked

> They took a lot of the fear of learning out of it, from day one we were told not to worry. 'Give the computer a belt! Press the button! Look at the screen! What's the worst that can happen?' We were encouraged give to the computer a thump and start again

Pamela said this 'genuine' fear of technology can be linked to 'bad experiences of school and the idea of learning or education can have negative connotations' for some

people. Tracy commented that 'depending on their age group' some people may have been schooled to believe that 'making a mistake is to be stupid'. Tracy explained that this may be 'imbued in a person's learning and stays with them' through their adult life.

I asked *'How can I get contributors involved in the future project?'*

Martin explained that any advertising for the future programme should be suitably targeted at potential contributors, and 'put the onus' on them 'to take responsibility' for getting involved. Pamela remarked this may involve confining the scope of the project to a particular catchment area, rather than keeping participation 'open to people from anywhere'. Pamela explained this could focus the project on exploring experiences of growing up in a specific locality. Pamela added that, in this way, reducing the number of possible contributors could make the future project more manageable and avoid oversubscription or discouragingly long waiting-lists of potential contributors.

I asked *'How should I set the agenda for the future project?'*

Pamela said common initial concerns potential contributors have include: 'Where's the venue, what time is it on, how often will it happen, how long does the programme run for, is there a fee, who's running it', to which Martin added 'Will I be stuck behind a computer every day?' Martin asserted that being available to answer these initial questions can allay potential contributors' 'fears'. In response, Tracy recommended hosting an information meeting, prior to the first session, to introduce potential contributors to the programme and address their concerns.

Tracy said make it 'very clear, from day one, what the project is about; your expectations and goals for the people involved, at every stage of the process, should be explained'. George spoke of defining and adhering to set 'parameters' and said contributors need to 'know what they're getting involved' so there are 'no surprises'.

Martin described how setting an agenda, with weekly goals, from the outset can help contributors understand their involvement in the project. Martin said contributors should feel they achieved something by the end, and a structured schedule can drive a programme towards these ends. Martin added that any plan should accommodate enough flexibility to respond to contributors' emergent needs.

Pamela suggested some ongoing 'admin' work, reminding people to attend, responding to 'no shows', etc., may be necessary to keep the future project active. Pamela added

that some older people are willing to travel reasonable distances to attend a programme, supported by free travel provided by the State. Pamela said public libraries may be 'open' to hosting free community-based projects and have useful resources and staff who are willing to help.

I asked *'What about timetabling?'*

Pamela described how older people can be '*very* busy individuals'. George agreed and felt, while people may be 'happy' to contribute, they may be concerned about committing their time to the project. Pamela noted this could impact scheduling and said she found 'best practice, in terms of timetabling, is typically the morning, for older people'. Tracy added that the 'evening time' is generally unsuitable, which Christine explained may be because some 'older people mind their Grandchildren' and organise their activities around school-hours.

Pamela said she runs her classes for two hours with 'break in the middle'. Christine recommended planning for a break of at least thirty minutes because 'you're not going to take a ten minute break with fifty or sixty year olds'. George noted how adequate break-times can provide opportunity for social interaction.

I asked *'How do you think the future project should be facilitated?'*

Martin said learners should 'dictate' the pace of sessions but facilitated in ways that ensure the project 'heading in the right direction'. Pamela recommended scheduling 'plenty of time' for learners to recount their childhood experiences.

Pamela commented that some students may feel 'discouraged' if the facilitator/ student ratio is large, and that one-to-one IT skills training can 'work really well' particularly if learners are paired with the same tutor for every session. Jim agreed that 'one-to-one is best' for ensuring that learners control the pace and content of sessions. Martin said one-to-one facilitation can prevent individual stories from becoming lost among group interactions.

I asked *'What about group or classroom management?'*

Pamela described how facilitating fair and equal participation from among all contributors may reduce the risk of some contributors becoming 'impatient and frustrated'. Christine remarked that, unlike school children, older people are often eager to 'impart their knowledge' and tend to be willing to engage more readily. Christine

explained that, while this can add 'fun' to the learning experience, it should not distract from the 'formal stuff' of building the project website. Martin recommended a system for facilitating group-work involving the sharing of a designated 'talking stick'. Only the contributor holding the stick may speak at any given time. Martin explained how, 'instead of interrupting, the others write their comments down' which they then subsequently bring up for discussion when 'it's their turn to speak'. Martin said this system can make group-work more engaging, enjoyable and fair.

I asked *'Do you think peer-to-peer facilitation might be possible?'*

Pamela mentioned that 'peer-to-peer' advocacy can prove a 'powerful' way to elicit the participation of older people who may be reluctant to engage. Pamela expressed her difficulty in finding willing older adult tutors. Pamela said even those who have completed a training programme may 'lack confidence' or 'feel uncomfortable' about tutoring. Pamela suggested that reducing the minimum age for potential contributors to fifty-five could include people who are 'early retired'. Both Pamela and Christine described this cohort as being more likely to have the IT skills necessary to 'train the others in the group'.

I asked '*What qualities should a facilitator bring to the future project?'*

Tracy told me to bring 'dedication, commitment and a passion' to the future project. Martin viewed a willingness to dedicate sufficient time to completing the project, as a way of 'giving something back' to the contributors in return for their participation. Martin sensed I was 'a bit shy' and said this would be 'a challenge' for me to 'overcome' if I am to facilitate the future project in a fun and engaging way.

George spoke of the value of being punctual and prepared for lessons. George said a dedicated and 'efficient' approach to facilitating a programme demonstrates 'commitment straight away' and may prevent contributors from feeling their participation is 'a waste of time'. Jim agreed and said being 'ready to go when you say, if everybody arrives on time and starts at the same time, that's ideal'.

Tracy warned not to 'presume an older person doesn't have a lot of knowledge' and said, people are often 'quite surprised' by an older person's 'wisdom and expertise'.

George asserted

> We want information delivered in a friendly manner and pitched to our level. Generally speaking, if someone shows us something once or twice we'll pick it up quicker than following an instruction booklet. The light bulb comes on and you have it. At the end of the day you've learned the steps off, the fear's gone, and it's more satisfying

Jim expounded the value of having 'the patience to sit down, go through the steps, and explain it. If learners write down the steps themselves, they can look back on their notes if they have to', and Jim cautioned against overloading learners with 'too much information all in one go, because they won't remember it'.

Martin said 'The idea, the finished product, is in your head, and you see it from start to finish. But, others can't', and Martin explained how providing clear instructions can help 'others see from your perspective, so they understand your point of view'.

Finally, I asked *'How do I create a welcoming environment?'*

Pamela spoke of the importance for facilitators, working with older people, to understand their fear of learning and of new technologies. Pamela expounded a 'learner centred' approach to putting contributors 'at their ease', so they feel 'comfortable', 'welcomed', and respected. Pamela added that their participation should be made 'enjoyable' and 'fun', and that the programme should progress 'at the learner's pace'. Pamela noted covering 'a couple of items that the learner's comfortable with' is preferable to overloading them with tasks, which may ultimately discourage them from participating further.

Tracy agreed that 'a relaxed environment is very important' and explained how some people may need reassurance that 'there's nothing silly, ridiculous or stupid'. Tracy said a 'key part' of this 'process' is 'valuing' contributors 'opinions' and 'reflections' from 'beginning to end'.

Pamela said 'A cup of tea is always encouraging' of social interaction, with Tracy adding that it is 'a great way of bringing people together and breaking down barriers'. George described many of his 'social involvements' through education as occurring 'over cups of coffee and tea'. Jim responded by saying 'People see a kettle, biscuits and cups and think 'Yeah, great, it's informal'.

Concluding comments

In this chapter the participants joined our discussion circle and shared their experiences. Keeping their comments within our circle, with the views from among the authors whose literature I explored in chapter two, as well as my ideas for the future history project I described in chapter one, in the next chapter I compare and contrast these perspectives.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the previous chapters, I described the four spheres of my enquiry, via my ideas for the future project, my review of the literature, my research methodology, and my findings derived from my fieldwork interviews. Bringing all of these together in our discussion circle, in this chapter I compare and contrast these perspectives to establish their implications for the future project. I have appropriately organised my discussion and analyses in accordance with headings that correspond to those in chapter two.

Older adults

Educational needs and motivations

I was relieved to hear the participants describe my ideas for the future project having potential to appeal to those older adults interested in leaving, what Pamela called, a personal 'legacy' behind. I was encouraged by Pamela's comments regarding the popularity of the history-oriented programmes she has been involved with. Pamela's remarks reflect Butler's (1980-81) assertion that exploring childhood memories presents, what Tracy termed, a 'real attraction' for some older people who, as Martin says, 'love talking about growing up'. I am hopeful that this supports my ambitions to develop the future project in ways that provide its older adult contributors with the kinds of suitably designed, 'meaningful' (McKenna, 2007, p. 4), 'relevant', educational activities and programmes called for in the literature (Blanchard-Fields & Kalinauskas, 2009, p. 26; Czaja & Sharit, 2013; The Equality Authority, 2002).

Educational benefits

I find real power in the idea that participation in the future project could encourage some contributors to develop a sense of 'pride' 'ownership' and 'personal achievement', similar to that which Martin described. I wonder how I might position the future project in ways that provide opportunities for contributors to derive these kinds of positive feelings for themselves. I had not been aware, until I spoke with Martin, of the ethical considerations concerning ownership of, and accreditation for, materials contributed to the future project for publication on the web. Martin's remarks, and also those about respecting contributors' rights to withdraw, I find, relate well to the kinds of ethical considerations I described as pertaining to teaching, learning, research and design practices.

Looking at how the participant's describe their (re)engagement with education as benefiting their mental and physical health, my findings echo some of the benefits to personal wellbeing that are purported among the literature (AONTAS, 2009; 2008; McKenna, 2012; O'Reilly, 2010; O'Morain & Leahy, 2007). For me, this is evident where, for example, through engaging physically and mentally stimulating educational activities, Christine described her return to education as 'enriching' her life. Similarly, I find that the participants' comments, about their positive social experiences of engaging with others through education, reflect the value of social interaction through education in ways similar to those that I noted previous researchers have highlighted (AONTAS, 2009; 2008; Bailey, et al., 2010; Bunyan, 2004; Carragher & Golding, 2015; Treacy, et al., 2005).

However, what I find striking in respect of my own findings in this regard, is how lived-experience imbues the participants' comments with a certain profundity. I did not encounter this depth and richness when I *read* about these potential benefits in the literature. I simply cannot express, with words, how moved I was to listen to Pamela, Jim, Christine, Paul and George describe the limited social opportunities some older adults have, even just to simply 'get out of the house'. No amount of literature could have given me such deep and meaningful insights into the potential social isolation and exclusion that a lack of meaningful and engaging opportunities might contribute to sustaining. Reflecting on these comments helped me to better understand the need for, what Tracy calls, 'social engagement' with older people in our communities. At the same time, I was moved to hear how (re)engaging with education provided these participants with new social experiences, which also led to their formation of new friendships among their peers, between people from different backgrounds and across generations.

An intergenerational learning perspective

The experiences of intergenerational educational exchanges shared with me by the participants certainly seem to support the idea that there are potential reciprocal personal and social benefits to bringing generations of learners together. Pamela and Tracy's comments that intergenerational exchanges in educational settings seem to compliment the kinds of intergenerational learning that can purportedly occur between, as Pamela herself says, 'grandparents and grandchildren'. Their comments, in turn, echo the views expressed in the literature by those who posit intergenerational learning

as possible response to changing family structures (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

That the future project may act as, what Tray calls, a 'relationship tool', which she likens to Erikson's generativity, was an interesting idea that I had not fully considered prior to conducting my fieldwork. I added this 'generativity' theme to my literature review post-fieldwork as a result of my analyses. I was initially somewhat reluctant to make any attempts to link the project to developmental psychology, about which I know very little. My reluctance partly concerns the difficultly I sometimes face when I try to reconcile how my lived experience is at odds with some aspects of developmental psychology. For example, Erikson (1950), although typical of common linguistic use of the era, developed his theory of the 'Eight ages of man' [*sic*] which, despite its apparent universality, presumably does not apply to women. But, I have to admit that, I am drawn to Erikson's idea that caring for the next generation should somehow play a part in human development; I am just not sure that I share his belief that human development progresses in linear fashion and in accordance with simple binary polarising choices.

I had not fully considered the possibility of wider community benefits to project's in terms of its potential to expand the social capita (Granville, 2002) of contributors through 'extra-familial' interaction (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p. 31). As Tracy notes, the project offers a possible way to 'marry' generations together because it places value in the contributors shared lived experiences, their skills and ideas (Corrigan, 2012), whatever their age, experience or level of expertise. I can see how, in this way, involvement in the project could potentially encourage some contributors to form intergenerational friendships which may, in turn, further intergenerational understanding (Doyle, et al., 2013), and create a sense of 'intergenerational solidarity' (Edmond, 2012, p. 49) through 'communal belonging' (Corrigan, 2012, p. 157).

For me, the assertion that some older adults may feel intimidated by the presence of younger learners, which may further discourage those who have fears and anxieties about (re)engaging with education (AONTAS, 2008, p. 38), is as slightly at odds with the positive experiences that the participants described to me. But, nonetheless, it is something that I feel I need to be mindful of.

However, it is also important for me to note how each of the learners I spoke with had participated in programmes that were primarily focused on intergenerational learning, and this is also central to Tracy's work. While there is no denying that the social, and

community, benefits to intergenerational learning described by these participants are important, it is also necessary for me to point out this particular cohort's position and experience of education. Yet, Pamela, whose work is not exclusively devoted to fostering intergenerational exchanges, also described the power of intergenerational learning.

Fear of technology and schooling

The anxiety, 'worry', 'nervousness' and 'fear' concerning technology and learning described by the participants reflect some of the common barriers I found described in the literature, which I subsequently engaged as a result of these findings (Bunyan, 2004; Carragher & Golding, 2015; Casey, 2009; Huber & Watson, 2014; Rogers, 2007; The Equality Authority, 2002). These kinds of feelings are understandable, especially for those who are unfamiliar or, as Paul said, who were 'not brought up', with computers. Recognising individual difference and diversity among older people's experience, while any fear or anxiety is to be taken seriously, I think that it is also important to be mindful that, while age may be a factor for some people, age is but one of many factors and not a determinant. As I noted in chapter two (Craddock, 2012; Koutsouris, 2010; Roberts, 2010), and as evident among the views expressed by participants, how an older adult perceives of school or technology cannot be predetermined simply on the basis of their physiological age.

Coordination, scheduling and timetabling

I found Martin and Pamela's comments about how reducing the scope of the project to focus on a particular locality useful. These remarks made sense to me in terms of how having a clearly defined focus would ensure that, what Martin terms, any 'targeted advertising' for the future programme would appeal to intended group of potential contributors. Similarly, as Pamela mentioned, focusing on a particular 'catchment area' would help me confine the scope of the future project but also provide opportunity for me to expand the central theme beyond street-games to perhaps encompass memories of growing up more generally.

Much of the participants' comments about the importance of setting an agenda, with clearly defined goals, expectations and parameters make sense to me on a practical level. What I found particularly useful in this regard were Pamela and Martin's list of 'common concerns' that I should anticipate potential contributors to the future project as

having. Addressing these kinds of practical concerns is something that I will need to consider as part of my design process. Tracy's idea that I should host an information session prior to the first meeting with potential contributors is one, I feel, I could have only learned from an experienced programme coordinator. As the participants noted, hosting a session like this offers me a way to 'allay any fears' that potential contributors might have and also provides a suitably flexible forum for us to come together to understand what we can expect from our involvement in the future project. As George said, an inclusive approach like this can, in this way, ensure that there are 'no surprises' for the contributors to the future project.

Valuing the experiential knowledge of practitioners as part of my design process proved further useful where Pamela's comments altered me to the need to keep the project active by filling places on the future programme. Similarly useful were Pamela's remarks about how public libraries may be amiable to hosting the future project.

Comments from George and Pamela about the busy lives that many older people lead and Christine's remarks regarding how some older people's responsibilities for caring for grandchildren, led me to explore previous research which reflects these ideas (AONTAS, 2008; Jarvis, 2004). Again, my designs can benefit from the voice of experience where the participants comments describe for me a suitable timetable for the future project. It seems to make sense for me to timetable future sessions for forty-five minutes to an hour, with a half-hour break, followed by another forty-five minutes to an hour. This expressed desire for the provision of part-time educational opportunities, which can accommodate those contributors to the future project who have family or work commitments, or who depend on public transport, also seems consistent with the literature I reviewed on the basis of these findings regarding suitable timetabling (AONTAS, 2008; Fagan, et al., 2014; McKenna, 2012; The Equality Authority, 2002).

Facilitating a welcoming environment

The participants' comments regarding their positive experiences of learning seem to me to suggest something of the value of learner-centred approaches to facilitating adult learning. Again I should stress that my analyses of my research findings, derived from the comments from among the participants, are what led me to engage with the literature on facilitation. I subsequently added some of the ideas I encountered to my literature review chapter (Brookfield, 1986; Corder, 2002; Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Jarvis, 2004; Nesbit, et al., 2004; Rogers, 2007). George's comments, for example,

indicate how being sensitive to negative experiences of school, requires an approach to facilitation that encourages the contributors to understand that there are no 'mistakes' only an ongoing process of learning. Based on the participants' comments, and what I subsequently garnered from the literature some essential components to creating welcoming environment include: valuing individual difference and diversity among the lived-experiences, levels of self-confidence, prior knowledge and future aspirations of learners, engaging them in purposeful dialogue and reflection, and offering reassurance that there are no correct or incorrect answers (ibid.).

I had not considered the possibility that belonging to a community of contributors to the future project may benefit me personally as a facilitator. Jim and George's comments about the sense of fulfilment they derived from belonging to a community of learners led me to reflect on how narrow-minded my focus had been, until their remarks encouraged me to think differently. If I am honest, perhaps this influenced the development of the circle metaphor that emerges throughout my thesis.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Technological advancement

Looking at other areas of my findings, some of the participants describe how the development of ICT skills may help older people feel more engaged with modern life. Pamela, for example, describes how older people increasingly find that computer skills are a 'necessity', or 'essential' (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 5), to their participation in society which, as Paul said, they may feel 'lost' without. Despite, as I described in chapter two, how the limitations of this study preclude me from engaging extensive critical analyses of these matters, nonetheless, I think it is important for me be critical of how international and national policy agendas can drive the promotion of ICT in society generally and in Irish educational provision specifically (Murray, 2014; Walsh, 2014; 2012). Yet, at the same time the participants' comments, and the literature they led me to explore (AONTAS, 2008), reveal a sense of need expressed by older adults themselves regarding their interests in developing ICT skills and I feel this cannot be ignored.

IT skills among older adults

Pamela, Tracy, Christine and Martin's comments regarding how my intentions for requiring contributors to the future project to have a prerequisite set of skills for creating

a website were a huge finding for me. Prior to conducting my fieldwork interviews I had not considered that this requirement might discourage some people from getting involved in the future project. Once again, as I noted previously, this makes sense to me having since gained some insight into the kind of heterogeneity that characterises existing knowledge and experience among older adults, both through my fieldwork and from my engagement with the literature that these findings provoked (AONTAS, 2008; Thalhammer, 2014; Caprani, et al., 2012; Holland, et al., 2014; Lalor, et al., 2009, p. 38; McDaid, 2012). Invariably this heterogeneity is also bound to manifest among IT skill levels and familiarity with computer technologies. Importantly, as Christine and Martin explained, excluding potential contributors by insisting upon prerequisite ICT skills means I may miss out on capturing some interesting stories.

History

Street-games

Revisiting the literature as a result of George's comments about the limited number of possible street-games, and their variations, I encountered something to the contrary. According to the work of those authors I read, and the comments of other participants, there may be a sufficient number of street-games to record (Brady, 1984; Marsh, 2012), and variances purportedly tend not to impact the fundamental characteristics of a particular game (Whittaker, 2012). Nonetheless, George's remarks led me to reflect more on my intensions for the future project and whether or not street-games should necessarily be its core focus.

This is drawn into further question were Christine's described her experiences of growing up, and how her 'farming background' meant that her experiences would be markedly different from those of someone growing up in an urban area like 'inner city' Dublin. I can see the benefits to Christine's recommendation that I would find richer narratives by going 'around areas' to visit people to record more general stories and memories of childhood.

Human memory and storytelling

Prior to conducting my fieldwork, I had not anticipated that developing an 'autobiographical memory' (Findsen & Formosa, 2011, p. 71), by revisiting and recollecting positive memories of childhood or keeping an active mind (Corrigan, 2012; Thalhammer, 2014), could potentially benefit the mental health of some contributors to

the future project (Chiang, et al., 2010; Lowenthal, 2009; O'Shea, et al., 2011; Schank, 1990; Stinson & Kirk, 2006; Stinson, et al., 2010; Wu, 2011; Zusman, 2010). Admittedly, my explorations of memory and recall, and the implications for their uses as part of future project, only appear in my literature review chapter as a result of my findings that emerged from my second fieldwork interview with Tracy. These ideas only, categorically, became known to me via my fieldwork interviews and my engagement with the participants and my lectures, and not through any act of my own foresight; so, I feel it is best to declare them as such.

Contested nature of oral and life histories

The idea that future project might produce a digital repository of sorts that has cultural, and educational value, is something expressed among the comments by the participants, particularly among Tracy's remarks about how children's games can retain some 'cultural' commentary that provides insight into the past. What I find most interesting is how the participants describe this value as residing in the preservation of their, as Jim terms 'day-to-day' experiences for future generations. There is something revealing about Martin's comments about the importance of recording how 'we talked, lived, and worked'. Similarly, Jim noted the importance of recording our memories of local struggles to ensure that they are not overwritten by the 'official' version of events, or overshadowed by narratives of 'the big events' as Jim terms them. There is a part of me that finds the idea that the website/ exhibition created as part of the future project presents some opportunity for resistance quite appealing. Again, the participants' comments led me to explore a wealth of literature that I had not previously considered around memory, storytelling and oral history and their implications for the future project.

Facilitating story work

It is important here for me to acknowledge that, despite my previous scholarship, training and practice as an aspiring adult educator, I admit that I have come to understand something more of the power of listening through the participants' stories. My commitment to reflectivity in my research methodology, again, compelled me to explore some of the ideas brought to my attention by the participants' remarks. This led me to discover Pam Schweitzer's set of essential skills, which also added to my literature review chapter. Skills and qualities, such as listening skills, receptiveness, curiosity, sensitivity, accepting attitude, reasonable memory, sense of humour,

adaptability, imagination (Schweitzer, 2007), and my reflections on the participants' remarks, helped me to relate aspects of the participants experiences to my own, more recent, experiences of education as part of my current studies at Maynooth University. These reflections helped me further develop my principles education, research and programme design principles, which I see nested among the essential skills for facilitating memory work (Schweitzer, 2007).

Concluding comments

In this chapter I discussed how my research findings compare and contrast with the literature. As I explained previously, I wish to return 'full circle', using my discussion circle metaphor, to critically examine the implications for my analyses of these finding and relate them to my design intensions for the future project in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

As I mentioned in chapter one, my intentions are to establish some of the possibilities for, and challenges to, realising my ideas for the future history project. Since departing on our journey from where I described my ideas for the future project, from within the realm of what I called my 'personal sphere', in chapter one, we have largely explored the other three spheres pertaining to my enquiry in subsequent chapters. Journeying through these explorations involved introducing various perspectives and voices to our discussion circle from among those contained in the literature and those who participated in my fieldwork interviews. Returning 'full circle' to revisit my ideas for the future project, and once again to my personal sphere, in this chapter I critically examine how my ideas are impacted by our journey.

Implications

The participants' comments gave me insights into the lived-experiences of older adults in ways that reading the literature did not. My encounters with the people I interviewed compelled me to confront my assumptions about older adults. Before embarking on my journey I had not considered how my experiences of growing up with an ill father influenced how I perceive of older people. My father's illness, I think, invariably contributed to creating my impression of older people as elderly, with all the associated negative connotations of frailty and dependence. This image is in stark contrast to the one revealed to me through engaging the lived-experiences of those whom I spoke with. Many of the participants talked about their active and busy lives, their independence, and how they are just as eager to learn new things and have new experiences as ever.

I recognise how I had been guilty of overlooking the heterogeneity I now see as existing among the educational needs, motivations, interests, knowledge, experiences and ambitions of older adults. However, it is necessary for me to place the experiences of those who participated in my fieldwork in context. The stories from those with whom I spoke reveal, to me, a commitment to maintaining a positive outlook on life. It would be wrong of me to assume, without asking the participants their opinions, that they have always expounded this positive attitude. Nonetheless, it is possible that the participants I spoke with, who advocate for greater engagement with education among older adults, may be representative of individuals who have always tried to push themselves forward in life. So, again the view through my lens is narrowed once more.

Furthermore, I now consider myself somewhat more aware, not only of individual difference and diversity among older adults, but also of how wider political and economic agendas, such as those I described in chapter two, can drive educational provision. I feel that further critical analyses of the impacts of these agendas on how the educational needs of older adults are perceived, by older adults themselves and otherwise, would be helpful in this regard.

As I mentioned previously, I think, what I described as, the individual-centric benefits to the inclusion of older adults in education fair better when they are couched within a wider set of considerations that involve the social and community wellbeing of older adults. One possible response, which I had not initially set out with specific intensions to include, may be to adopt an intergenerational dimension to the future project. As a result of my fieldwork and research, I am open to incorporating an intergenerational aspect, particularly where it may strengthen communities. At the same time, I acknowledge that this may present challenges for those older adults who may be discouraged by the presence of younger learners.

I can see how my 'initial' ideas for the future project had, before I conducted my research and fieldwork, largely focused on how participation in the future project could potentially benefit older adult contributors by helping them develop their ICT skills. I failed to realise how insisting on incorporating a self-directed technological dimension to the future project, and the prerequisite set of ICT skills this would require, I would inadvertently exclude potential contributors.

Having moved away from my focus on ICT skills, although I cannot say exactly when, I have also let go of the idea that the future project should be strictly limited to street-games. Whenever this can be said to have occurred, I have since become more determined that the experience of childhood and play, more generally, should be at the fore of the future project's focus. No doubt the enjoyment and intrigue I experienced from listening to the participants retell their stories impacted my decisions.

The results are that I now see possibilities for new trajectories for the future project. The use of oral histories, memory work, stories and narrative enquiry in research, and how they might challenge the 'official' historical record by capturing people's lived experiences are areas I wish to explore further. I will, however, need to engage the polemics of oral history in greater depth in the future. A further challenge concerns facilitating reminiscence whilst minimising the potential for causing unintentional harm.

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Concluding reflections

It is hugely difficult for me to temporally locate specific points-of-origin for the learning I encountered throughout my research journey. Perhaps, most importantly, I have come to realise, rather embarrassingly, something of the extent of my ignorance regarding individual difference and diversity among older adults. To drag an old cliché into our circle, looking back, I can declare with full confidence that hindsight really is a wonderful thing. But, whenever I look back and feel shamefully embarrassed about how ignorant I was about a particular issue in the past, I am reminded not to be too hard on myself. I take some comfort from the fact that the greater my feelings of embarrassment the more I must have subsequently learned in the interim.

I hope I have since become more mindful of the assumptions inherent to my view of older people, their relationship with the past, and what I think that reconnecting with the past can do for me in my own life, in terms of my grief, loss and healing. As our discussion circle begins to dissipate, I sense my father somewhere on the periphery and, I am thankful to you for engaging my ideas.

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APPENDIX A: ONLINE RESOURCES I HELPED DEVELOP

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