UNPICKING THE LEARNING FROM THE DOING:

AN EXPLORATION OF INFORMAL LEARNING IN A VOLUNTARY GROUP

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of informal learning in a voluntary group.

The research identified a large body of learning which has been done over an extended period of time by a group of people who have been motivated to learn in order to do.   This learning is both implicit in their stories and explicit in their descriptions of their learning through their work for the group.

This research demonstrates that the group's learning extends in both directions between the workplace and the voluntary group, and between this voluntary group and others.   It also identified some key formal and non-formal learning in the group and demonstrates that informal learning is a powerful source of learning. The taken-for-granted nature of informal learning has also been encountered.

Attitudes, understanding and beliefs form both part of the learning and of the motivation for the learning and the doing. However, unpicking the learning from the doing, unpicking the knowledge and skills from the attitudes, understandings and beliefs in that learning, unpicking the what and the why from the how have been difficult and subjective.

The extent of the informal learning uncovered in this research lends weight to the argument that informal learning is the most significant learning situation and it challenges the definition of informal learning as a residual of formal and non-formal learning. This research has implications for adult and community education policy as it clearly demonstrates the importance of informal learning. It may also have implications for other volunteer groups who want to obtain state funding.

1 CONTENTS

1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

I live in a small rural town in the midlands, which, like many others, has many voluntary and community groups. In many ways these groups are the lifeblood of the social and community life of the area. I have been involved in a variety of those voluntary and community groups for many years, starting when I joined the local Macra na Feirme[1] club in 1985. I have learned a lot through my participation in them and little of this learning has taken place through formal education.

Some of these voluntary and community groups were clubs which are part of national organisations such as Macra na Feirme and the Camogie Association[2]. Others, such as the local Credit Union, are local instances of national and international movements. Still others, including the Local Development Group (LDG), the Drama Society and the local magazine are purely local groups, unaffiliated with any regional, national or international organisations. All of these organisations rely on unpaid volunteers to populate their boards and committees and in most cases to run them on a day to day basis. Some of them have paid employees, and the volunteers manage the employees.

I became involved with the Local Development Group in about 2009, when they proposed a refurbishment project in the Community Hall including the stage and its curtains and lights. They asked the Drama Society for input into what should be done. As one of the people who directed productions for the Drama Society I heard the request and got involved in the project. I was subsequently asked to join the Local Development Group. After the refurbishment project I was an intermittent attendee at meetings and didn't do much real work for them until 2016 when I walked in late to the Annual General Meeting and was nominated for the position of chairman. I was elected (in the absence of any opposition) and, since then, have spent many hours on different types of work for LDG.

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[1] An organisation for rural youth: https://www.macra.ie/welcome-from-the-president
[2] Camogie is a team sport closely related to Hurling: http://www.camogie.ie/about-camogie.asp

When I was accepted onto the Masters in Adult and Community Education in Maynooth and discovered that I needed a research topic, after a few false starts, I decided to explore the informal learning experiences of some of the members of the Local Development Group.

1.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND THE RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This thesis will attempt to answer the question "what are the informal learning experiences of the members of LDG?"

The reason for doing this research was that I believed that the volunteers of LDG have learned a lot over the years, that the majority of that learning was informal, and that it is both valuable and undocumented. This was largely borne out by the findings.

I believe that the majority of my own learning has been informal, despite the fact that I have completed large amounts of formal and non-formal learning in school, university and on many professional education courses over thirty years in the IT industry. Learning to use that education in the workplace was a far greater informal learning effort than any of the formal/non-formal courses I ever attended, as was informally learning to perform many professional tasks for which there was no formal education available. I have also acquired knowledge such as how to chair a meeting by attending meetings over many years and seeing how it was done without consciously intending to learn it or even being aware of that learning until after I had chaired many meetings. I have also acquired understandings, beliefs and attitudes, for example about the value of voluntary and community groups, and even now I cannot say exactly how or when I acquired them.

1.3 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

This research has established that much informal learning has been done by the participants over an extended period of time and has identified the interconnectedness of that learning across multiple sites.

The major themes were the extensive learning about participating in the group itself including committee roles, running the Community Hall and the Community Centre, grants and fundraising, digital skills and corporate governance in community groups.

The findings also included some of the attitudes, understandings and beliefs the participants acquired including learning to value community, leadership, community work and the work the group does. Some of this learning took place in the group but how, where and when the participants acquired these attitudes, understandings and beliefs was not always clear.

This research has also established that while that the group's learning was largely informal that some of the members did some courses to help them in their work and some formal learning in accounting and finance has been significant for the group.

The taken-for-granted nature of informal learning emerged clearly.

The importance of documenting this learning is that it demonstrates, albeit in a small way, the power of individuals' and voluntary groups' capabilities to learn and do significant things without needing instructors or curricula or educational institutions to teach them. It suggests that policymakers would do well to consider this capability thoroughly and fairly in their policies on adult and community education.

I also hope that this thesis may help this and other voluntary groups to understand and appreciate the extent of their own learning, their capability to learn and how, in my opinion, this capability is core to their success of the group. I hope it could also, perhaps, help other voluntary groups to gain an overview of some of the learning that they could usefully acquire.

1.4 THE RESEARCH GROUP AND ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The group, which is referred to as the Local Development Group or LDG in this thesis, formed in the mid-1990s. One of the triggers for the group's creation was the availability of EU Leader funding for rural development projects. While they may have

had an initial intention to support economic development, the economic situation in Ireland had improved since the dark days of the 1980s so they decided to focus instead on running projects to improve opportunities for social interaction in the local community. They have run a number of short-term and long-term projects in the town.

The story of how the group was created and of some of their projects they have run are included in the words of the interview participants in Appendix two. The group started as a purely voluntary group and later set up a limited company in order to obtain state funding for staff wages in the Community Hall. It is now a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) with a board containing eleven members and it runs both the Community Hall and the Community Centre.

Throughout their existence the projects the group have run have been influenced strongly by the availability of grant aid. Their activities have coincided with ever increasing demands for detailed justification of their eligibility to receive those grants and accountability for the grants they have received and the demands associated with grant aid have driven some of the group's learning.

It seems reasonable to say that the infrastructure projects they have carried out – the refurbishment of the green area and the renovations in the Community Hall – would not have been carried out in the same way without grant aid from EU Leader funds. If they happened at all it would have been on a much smaller scale. It also seems reasonable to say that the staffing would not have been possible without grand aid from Pobal's Community Services Program for the wages. In addition, the group's structure and operations have been significantly influenced by the increasingly onerous conditions attached to that funding.

1.4.1.1 Leader Funding

LEADER has been the European Union's program for supporting locally initiated rural development projects since the early 1990s. "Local Action Groups" (LAGs), decided which projects to fund. Funding was generally awarded as a percentage of the total project costs, had to be applied for and awarded before the project started and could only be drawn down after the project had completed. Thus, it could only be obtained by groups who had fundraising capacity and, usually, who were able to borrow money

to pay for the project, claim the percentage awarded when the work was completed and pay off the balance through fundraising.

LDG's first project was the refurbishment of a public green area in the town in the late 1990s which they funded through a combination of Leader II funding and local fundraising.   Further Leader funding enabled the group to carry out improvements on the heating, lighting, dressing rooms and toilets and to refurbish the stage in the Community Hall in 2009.

The overhead associated with applying for Leader funding increased over the years, both in terms of cost and effort, in response to increasing requirements to justify the eligibility of projects for grant aid. In 2017, when the group applied for funding for a €100K project in the Community Centre, they had to use an EU-wide e-tendering system to obtain quotes for the work because the €100K they needed was above a financial threshold which forced it into the process for "large" projects. Due to the complexity and the skills required they had to pay a Consultant to manage the tendering process on their behalf and create a design which was detailed enough to allow those tenders to be created. All of this was required before they could submit the application for the grant. The demands of this process placed considerable strain on the people involved.

By 2018, when the group applied for funding for a much smaller set of improvements in the Community Hall, the level of documentation required to justify a grant of less than €20K took several weeks to collect and prepare, even with considerable assistance from a staff member in Meath Partnership (who manage the Leader process on behalf of the LAG in Meath). Once again, the difficulties of obtaining and/or creating this documentation put a lot of strain on the people involved.

So, while the availability of Leader funding has allowed the group to run several infrastructure projects, the increasing demands for evidence of eligibility and accountability has increased the time, effort and cost of applying for those grants for the group.

1.4.1.2 Community Services Program for Small Halls

In the mid-2000s the group took over the local community hall which had fallen into disrepair and, in 2009, obtained funding through Pobal's Community Services Programme (CSP) to employ a caretaker and two part time assistants. The CSP provides funding to community-based companies who generate income from services. CSP Strand 1 provides funding to groups who run "community halls and facilities" (Pobal, 2019).

The contract with Pobal was for three years and required the group to form a limited company and to appoint a board of directors and external auditors. It also required them to allow Pobal to audit their finances and operations and to implement recommendations from those audits.

In the succeeding years, through audits and several re-applications and renewals of that contract, increasing requirements from Pobal for formal structure and operations and evidence of accountability forced the group to formalise many things including financial operations and staff management, to create business plans and policy documents and to expand the number of company directors.

In much the same way as the Leader grant application process changed over the years, the time and effort needed to apply for this funding also increased substantially. The first application, in 2009, took a few hours by two group members. The most recent application, in 2018, took weeks of sustained effort by several members of the group.

All of these changes entailed significant learning for members of the group and the funding was retained only because the members were willing to learn and adapt to the changing demands.

1.4.2 Some of my own learning in LDG

My own learning in LDG is almost unfathomable. In addition to some of the above history and context, since I joined the board I have learned about company structure, director's responsibilities and annual accounts and have participated in the group's move towards more formal governance structures and learned much from that move.

Since becoming Chairman I have learned a lot more about Pobal and Leader funding and become aware of the group's dependency on them. I have become much more aware of the strength of the group through the sustained commitment of some members and employees. My eyes have also been opened to the level of activity in both the Community Hall and the Community Centre, by the amount of voluntary work done by the groups who use them, by the extent of the work being done by parents of children with intellectual disabilities, the need for the work they do and what they have done with the facilities that have been made available to them in the Community Centre.

1.4.3 The Research Participants and how they got involved in the group

The research includes contributions from 12 people. All of the current members of the group's Board of Directors and the former chairman agreed to be interviewed. I have known and worked directly in voluntary groups with some of them for over thirty years and with most of the others for several years.

I have referred to them using a random set of first names in this document and refer to the group as the "Local Development Group" or LDG.

Edward is a local farmer with a lifetime's involvement in voluntary groups.

Richard is from the town and is an elected local representative.

Elizabeth came to live in the area many years ago and works in the laboratory in the local hospital.

Michael is a local farmer and retired butcher.

Kevin is an accountant and business owner.

Oscar is an auditor who moved to the town about sixteen years ago.

Samuel is a pharmacist and local business owner and long-time resident of the town.

Emma's professional background is in Sales, she is from the UK and moved to the area three years ago.

Marianne is from the area and works in a Community Development organisation.

Patrick is from the area and is an engineer and business owner and chairman of the local St. Patrick's Day Parade committee.

Miranda is a primary school teacher and is from the town.

Most of the participants have been involved in other voluntary groups for several years. All of the participants are currently board members with the exception of Michael who stepped down a year ago after over ten years as Chairman.

The participants got involved in the group in several different ways over the years:

Edward was a founder member. He asked Kevin, Michael, Miranda and myself to join the group. Elizabeth attended an LDG meeting in the very early days of the Twinning project as a representative of the Accordion Band and was elected Secretary of the group at that meeting. Samuel was asked to attend a meeting in the early days as a representative of the Business Association. Oscar "ended up" on the committee.

Michael and Elizabeth were the original Board members when the group set up the Company. The rest either became Directors when the board was expanded as a result of feedback from a Pobal audit or were elected to the Board in recent years to replace people who retired. Marianne was asked join the Board three years ago and to take on the Secretary's role. Richard and Patrick were nominated from the floor at the same AGM. Emma got involved on the Community Centre committee and was asked to join the Board and take on the Secretary's role a year ago.

1.5   VOLUNTARY AND VOLUNTARY GROUPS – A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The terms "voluntary" and "voluntary groups" are contested, as is the meaning of "community" and "community groups" and participating in those debates is largely beyond the scope of this research.

I will use the terms voluntary group and community group in relation to LDG and other groups interchangeably in this document. I will refer to the participants in the research as participants or interviewees and to other members of the group as members or volunteers, or, if they were on the board, as board members or directors.

1.6 OVERVIEW OF THE REST OF THIS THESIS

In this chapter I have presented the background and rationale for the study, positioned myself in relation to it and introduced the research group.

Chapter two considers some of the literature on volunteering and the voluntary sector and on learning while volunteering, reviews the position of informal learning in learning theory, considers some of the literature which attempts to categorise various types of informal learning and argues that informal learning has been relegated to a residual position in modern society largely because it is difficult to identify, difficult to measure and difficult to control.

Chapter three presents my view of the social world and explains my understanding of knowledge in the context of this research, presents the research methods I chose for the project based on this ontological position and epistemology, discusses the ethical considerations which arose in this research and concludes with some reflexive thoughts on my methods.

Chapter four presents the findings from the interviews and the focus group.

Chapter five analyses the findings and considers them in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two and attempts to answer the question: What are the informal learning experiences of the members of LDG.

Chapter six presents the conclusions I have drawn from the research, some thoughts on things I would do differently if I was starting again and some ideas for future research.

Appendix one contains a sample consent form.

Appendix two contains some of the stories the participants told me about the group and its work.

2   CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

As this research is situated in a voluntary group I will begin this chapter by considering some of the literature on volunteering and the voluntary sector and on learning while volunteering. I will review the position of informal learning in learning theory and the debate over its definition in relation to other situations in which learning takes place. I will also consider some of the literature which attempts to categorise various types of informal learning in order to understand it more fully. I will also review some of the arguments that reflection can be required to make incidental and tacit learning explicit and will highlight the recognised difficulties associated with researching tacit learning. I will argue that informal learning has been relegated to a residual position in modern society largely because it is difficult to identify, difficult to measure and difficult to control.

2.1   VOLUNTEERING

As stated in Chapter one the terms "volunteering" and "volunteer work" are contested and participating in those debates is largely beyond the scope of this research, however some discussion of the literature is needed to position the research.

For the purpose of this thesis I will use Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky's definition of volunteer work and what it includes:

> Volunteer work, understood in its traditional meaning, as unpaid activity oriented to help others and to improve society, has existed throughout the history of humanity. (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 3)

> Volunteer work includes activities that we choose to engage in beyond the realms of paid employment and household work, whether joining community-based organizations or just helping neighbours. (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. xiii)

While volunteering takes place in many environments e.g. internships in both the public and private sectors, in international, national and local voluntary organisations and completely informally e.g. the farmers who voluntarily cleared roads after the big snowfall in 2018, this research is about volunteers in a community-based voluntary group.

The Collins Dictionary defines the Voluntary Sector in economic terms as "the part of the economy consists of non-profit-making organizations, as opposed to the public and private sectors" (Harper Collins Publishers, 2019). Frumkin argued that the features of groups in that sector are:

(1) they do not coerce participation;
(2) they operate without distributing profits to stakeholders; and
(3) they exist without simple and clear lines of ownership and accountability (Frumkin, 2002, p. 3).

However, Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky argued that there can be some levels of coercion present. They referred to it as "a continuum of volunteers' volition" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 20).

LDG, as a non-profit-making organisation, fits with the second feature of Frumkin's definition and, as it is also neither in the public nor private sectors, fits with Collins' Voluntary Sector definition. However, changes in legislation aimed at making groups in that sector more accountable, including the Charities Act 2009[3] which created and granted extensive powers to the Charities Regulatory Authority[4] to ensure compliance with the law, and the increasing overhead associated with obtaining state funding (e.g. via Pobal and Leader) as discussed in Chapter one, have created some tension between both the requirements for accountability and the coercion implicit in this legislation and the less coercive nature of voluntary groups and their lack of clear lines of accountability. Learning in relation to these changes emerged in the research.

Duguid, Mundel and Shugurensky identified three categories of voluntary organisation: Community Service (activities which provide services to community members), Community Representation (activities representing a community on boards or committee) and Community Development (activities which "builds capacity and empowers groups to affect changes in their own communities" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 10). LDG seems to fit in all three categories: their Hall and Community Centre

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[3] http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2009/act/6/enacted/en/html
[4] https://www.charitiesregulator.ie/en

facilities provide services to the community (Community Service), those facilities also enable other groups to exist, grow and thus "affect change" in the community (Community Development) and group members have been elected onto some local government committees representing community groups (Community Representation).

To conclude this section, I will use Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensly's definition of volunteering and volunteer work, LDG fits all three of their categories of voluntary organisations, the level of coercion associated with voluntary groups is debated and some of the learning in this research relates to external pressures on those levels of accountability.

2.2 INFORMAL LEARNING IN VOLUNTARY GROUPS

Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky considered that while much learning does take place through volunteering that most definitions usually imply that volunteers are using previously acquired knowledge and skills (Duguid, et al., 2013).

They also wrote of the "breadth, depth and complexity of volunteers' learning" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 191) , referred to "super volunteers" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 10) who are active in multiple groups and suggested that "This undoubtedly has an impact on their learning processes" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 180).

Sarah Coss pointed out that sites of informal learning such as voluntary groups are often overlooked (Coss, 2016, p. 3).   Foley argued that "learning in such situations is largely informal and often incidental – it is tacit, embedded in action and often not recognised as learning" (Foley, 1999, p. 3).

Kerka quotes McCabe "Learning is part of the contract between the organization and the volunteer" and Ross-Gordon and Dowling "Volunteering is a powerful source of learning" (Kerka, 1998, p. 2) and argues that "Informal and incidental learning that occurs in the process of activity is a significant part of the volunteer experience"

(Kerka, 1998, p. 3). Kerka also references Elsdon (1995) who found that many volunteer activities trigger "growth, confidence, and interpersonal skills" even though they have no direct learning objectives (Kerka, 1998, pp. 3-4).

The Census of Ireland 2013 reported that "Over a quarter of adults aged 15 years and above volunteered in Ireland (28.4% of persons)" (Central Statistics Office, 2018). The implication of this is that if volunteers do significant amounts of learning through their volunteering then volunteering represents a very significant site of learning. However, Duguid, Slade and Schugurensky argue that little is known about the learning aspects of volunteering and that

> The research literature on the extent, modes and effectiveness of volunteers' acquisition of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values, and on the relationship between formal, non-formal and informal learning in this process, is scarce (Duguid, et al., 2006, p. 83).

They attribute this partly to the lack of regard for unpaid work and partly to the difficulties associated with researching informal learning (Duguid, et al., 2006, p. 83). This research attempts to make a small contribution to closing this gap.

2.3   INFORMAL LEARNING IN LEARNING THEORY

Illeris argued that there are three dimensions of learning – the content dimension (learning - the noun), the incentive dimension and the interaction dimension, and that all learning (the verb) involves two integrated processes – the acquisition process and the interaction process (Illeris, 2018) (Illeris, 2011). Illers also argued that learning is an emotional process or

> "a process involving psychological energy, transmitted by feelings, emotions, attitudes and motivations which both mobilise and, at the same time, are conditions which may be influenced and developed through learning" (Illeris, 2004, p. 18)

This seems to me to be a useful way to look at learning because it addresses what we learn, the motives and emotions which influence what and how much we learn and the related level of mental energy that we direct towards learning, and that we learn through our interactions with the world. It also addresses the idea that what we learn attitudes and motivations which can in turn encourage or enable further learning.

What we learn - the content - "may be any kind of human capacity, such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, understandings, beliefs, behaviour, competencies, etc." (Illeris, 2015, p. 1) and can be explicit or hidden. So, what we learn is huge – it extends far beyond, for example, how to take minutes in a meeting or how to turn off the alarm in the Community Centre to our beliefs about ourselves, our place in society and the value of community.

I believe this is consistent with the content that I learn including attitudes and beliefs and that it is consistent with how I see my students and former professional colleagues learning and not learning. Examples I have observed include students at an evening class whose motivation to learn is exceeded by their tiredness so they can't summon up enough mental energy to learn more than a small subset of the content in the lesson, and, in the past, IT support staff who figure out at 2am why one of their systems has been down for many hours – their motivation to learn how it works so that they can fix it is sufficient to overcome their tiredness. Their motivation to go home also strongly influences what they learn - they learn just enough to resolve the problem – further learning about the details of what led to the problem and the changes that may be required to prevent this issue from happening again is postponed until the following day.

Illeris also argued that all learning is "decisively influenced by the situation in which it occurs" (Illeris, 2004, p. 177), that informal learning is an example of "situations in which learning takes place" (Illeris, 2004, p. 178) and that the divisions between formal, non-formal and informal learning are not concerned with learning itself but "only the context in which it takes place". (Illeris, 2007, p. 34). I understand this to mean that informal learning is not part of his theory of learning dimensions and processes but that it is consistent with that theory. Informal learning is therefore a subset of human learning which takes place in specific situations or contexts, it takes place across the three dimensions – there are content, motivation and interaction dimensions to every piece of informal learning - and it takes place through the acquisition and interaction processes.

While this too seems reasonable to me it is then necessary to consider the definition of these learning situations or contexts in order to understand what is meant by the term "informal learning" and to establish its significance in human learning.

2.4   LEARNING SITUATIONS, THEIR DEFINITIONS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

There are many views on the number of learning situations, their characteristics and the boundaries between them and no definitive agreement. Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley confirmed this when they analysed 250 publications in search of clarification (Malcolm, et al., 2003, p. 313).   Some authors define three learning situations – formal, non-formal and informal and others prefer two – formal and non-formal.   The details of the debates over the number of situations and the boundaries between them are beyond the scope of this research, however a general definition of informal learning is needed to position it.

The definitions in the literature tend to reflect the sometimes shifting interests of the authors. For example, Illeris' earlier view of informal learning was that it "occurs in non-industrialised societies, where learning has not yet gained its own institutionalised space" (Illeris, 2004, p. 178) however Illeris later went on to study learning in the workplace in an industrialised society and identified informal learning as a significant form of learning that takes place there i.e. his definition changed as his interests shifted. (Illeris, 2011)

Other authors, including the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2000), Eraut (Eraut, 2000) and Schugurensky (Schugurensky, 2000) define learning situations in ways that place formal education, largely characterised as structured, accredited and taught, at one end of the scale and informal education, characterised as unstructured and learner-defined and instructorless at the other. These definitions typically consider informal learning as a residual i.e. what is not formal and/or non-formal and they imply that formal learning is valuable and significant, and informal learning is less so.

It is worth noting that the compulsory aspects of education are greatest at the formal end of the scale – where school attendance is compulsory for several years, where there is a high degree of control over the curriculum and where measurement of attainment is standard - and lowest at the informal end where the learner has most control over what and how much is learned and decides whether it is of value.   The use of the term informal learning rather than informal education is also significant - Schugurensky pointed out that he deliberately used the term "informal learning" rather than "informal education" because "in the processes of informal learning there are not educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 2). I have used the term informal learning for this reason.

It is also recognised that there can be overlap between the various learning contexts – Illeris pointed out that "there are almost always informal elements in formal learning" (Illeris, 2011, p. 70), as do Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley (Malcolm, et al., 2003, p. 317). Obvious examples include informal sharing of information and experiences during breaks at a formal course.

The other significant aspect of the definitions of the various learning situations is that definitions have power (Murray, 2014), particularly when published by an institution as powerful as the European Commission. The European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2000) defined three categories of purposeful learning - Formal, Non-Formal and Informal. Their definition of Formal learning includes all learning that takes place in "education and training institutions" and leads to recognised qualifications. (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8) They define Non-formal learning as learning that "takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalised certificates", hence more clearly positioning formal education as "mainstream" and making non-formal and, by extent, informal learning into non-mainstream residuals.

The Commission's definition of informal learning as a subset of purposeful learning is both vague and contradictory: "Informal learning is a natural accompaniment to everyday life" (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8). They stated that it may not be intentional and may not be recognised by the people who do it, so it does not really fit in their definition of "purposeful" learning at all. However, they also recognised that people's own informal learning resulted in computer technology being used in their homes long before mainstream education deployed it into schools i.e. people learned informally before mainstream education systems were ready to educate them. Despite this concession, the EC only consider informal learning as a source of "innovation for teaching and learning methods" (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8) instead of a major source of the lifelong learning that the memorandum is about.

So, a powerful institution has defined informal learning as a residual and as a largely irrelevant learning situation. However, this attitude to informal learning is not ubiquitous: Eraut and Illeris performed research on informal learning in the workplace, found it in large quantities and considered it to be significant (Eraut, 2004), (Illeris, 2011) and Foley identified "the need to break out of the strait-jacket which identifies adult education and learning with institutionalised provision and course-taking" (Foley, 1999, p. 6). Eraut believed that most learning does not happen in formal contexts (Eraut, 2000, p. 114).

To conclude this section, there is debate over the definitions of learning situations, the significance of which is that they are part of a discourse in which formal learning is sometimes presented, particularly by powerful institutions such as the EC, as the most significant learning situation and informal the least significant. I believe this is a misrepresentation of people's informal or everyday learning capabilities and that the findings in this research support this argument.

Putting aside the details of the debate, to enable an analysis of the research findings I used Livingstone's definitions as I found them useful - formal education being all

formal schooling including university and post-graduate courses and non-formal education being all other courses offered by any other institution and his definition of informal learning:

> Informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. The basic terms of informal learning (e.g., objectives, content, means and processes of acquisition, duration, evaluation of outcomes, applications) are determined by the individuals and groups who choose to engage in it. Informal learning is undertaken on one's own, either individually or collectively, without either externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorized instructor. (Livingstone, 1999, p. 3)

It includes a limited list of learning content: "understanding, knowledge or skill", possibly because Livingstone's paper was focused on explicit informal learning, so I have chosen to use Illeris' broader definition of content - "any kind of human capacity, such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, understandings, beliefs, behaviour, competencies, etc." (Illeris, 2015)" as I believe it represents a more complete view of what we learn.

2.5   TYPES OF INFORMAL LEARNING

As the above discussion demonstrates, informal learning is a huge topic. I will now consider some of the literature on types or categories of learning that can be identified within the informal end of the learning scale. The difficulty identifying these categories is an indicator of the difficulty identifying and analysing informal learning in general. The usefulness of these categories is in helping to understand "how and what people learn" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 25). Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky argued that the key considerations in this debate are the level of intentionality involved in that learning and the learner's awareness that learning has taken place (Duguid, et al., 2013).

Schugurensky (Schugurensky, 2000, pp. 2-5) proposed a taxonomy in which he identified three forms of informal learning - self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialisation or tacit learning. Eraut proposed a different set of categories of

informal learning - deliberative learning, reactive learning and implicit learning (Eraut, 2000, p. 115).

Schugurensky's self-directed learning is similar to Eraut's deliberative learning - both are intentional and the learner is aware of learning. This is also consistent with the adult learning projects which Tough identified and which he considered to be extensive. (Tough, 1971)

Schugurensky's socialisation or tacit learning, which he defined as:

> the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life. Not only we have no a priori intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we learned something   (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 4)

is similar to what Eraut called implicit learning i.e. learning that is not intentional and the learner is not aware of learning.

Schugurensky argued that "tacit learning can usually only be recognised retrospectively" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 5).   Eraut spoke of inferring tacit knowledge from observed behaviour (Eraut, 2000, p. 117) and that

> a whole string of authors talk about making tacit knowledge explicit: this can mean either that the knower learns to tell or that the researchers tells and seeks respondent verification (Eraut, 2000, p. 118).

Eraut, however, pointed to some disagreement among researchers in the level of awareness that people have of their tacit learning and on the extent to which it can be made explicit either by the learners or by researchers when he wrote: "Does it refer to knowledge which is not communicated, or knowledge which cannot be communicated?" (Eraut, 2000, p. 118).

So, there are questions about people's ability to retrospectively recognise and communicate their tacit learning.   Livingstone suspected that "…reports may very substantially underestimate the total amount of informal learning that people do because of the embedded and taken-for-granted character of their tacit learning" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 1).   Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky found that the literature

that they reviewed argues that "most informal learning tends to be tacit" (Duguid, et al., 2013, p. 26)

So, the self-directed end of the scale is reasonably clearly agreed while at the tacit end of the scale there is a question over people's ability to recognise and articulate their tacit learning. The other debate is about learning in the middle of the scale of informal learning.

Schugurensky proposed a third form of informal learning in the middle of the scale of informal learning, which he called incidental learning and which he characterised as learning experiences that were unintentional and where the learner realised that they had learned something.   Eraut, on the other hand, recognised a type of learning that he called reactive learning which is "near-spontaneous and unplanned", (Eraut, 2000, p. 115).   Reactive learning addressed the idea that some learning takes place as opportunities arise however he believed that the level of intention to learn "will vary and often be debatable" (Eraut, 2000, p. 115).

With Schugurensky's incidental learning, how much later the realisation could occur was not entirely clear – his table of taxonomies stated that the awareness was "at the time of learning experience" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 3). However, some of the examples in the text implied that awareness may not be immediate e.g. in example b), a teacher who "after enough exposure to this environment begins to challenge some of the initial assumptions" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 4). This example implies that awareness of the learning can emerge after the learning experiences occur and that awareness can emerge over a period of time. In the example quoted above the teacher's learning experience started to take place first and then sometime afterwards a realisation of learning began to emerge. I believe I have experienced this type of learning (e.g. realising while driving home from a meeting what was meant by a statement I had not understood at the time) however, this does not seem to be consistent with the words "at the time of the learning experience" in the taxonomy table. The idea of a period of learning during which awareness begins to emerge is also quite a different concept to Eraut's "near-spontaneous" reactive learning.   In both

proposals the learning is unplanned – it is opportunistic or "just-in-time" in Eraut's view and incidental in Schugurensky's. However, Schugurensky sees this type of learning as clearly unintentional and with realisation at a point which may be later while Eraut sees it as a variable level of intention with awareness at the time of the experience. So, there are two quite different ideas of what happens in middle of the informal learning scale between the self-directed and tacit learning ends. The theories propose variable levels of intention, variable levels of awareness and the potential for both immediate learning and longer periods of learning with awareness emerging.

Livingstone made a simpler distinction in types of informal learning – between tacit and what he called "explicit informal learning" - by "peoples' conscious identification of the activity as significant learning" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 1). Hence Livingstone's explicit informal learning seems to include what Schugurensky called self-directed learning, what he called incidental learning when made explicit by retrospective recognition, (Schugurensky, 2000) and what Eraut called reactive learning (Eraut, 2000) as they are all, eventually, explicitly recognised as learning. He also argued that "most people do not recognize much of the informal learning they do until they have a chance to reflect on it" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 3) and concluded that "measuring the iceberg of explicit informal learning remains an elusive task". (Livingstone, 1999, p. 10).

If measuring explicit informal learning is difficult then measuring tacit learning is problematic at best. As Livingstone said, "the much larger sea of tacit adult learning remains unfathomed" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 20).

However, Livingstone's arguments imply that the research process itself could have triggered some reflection which caused the recognition of some informal learning and therefore making some previously tacit knowledge explicit. Furthermore, it seems unlikely, based on both Livingstone's and Eraut's arguments about tacit and implicit learning, that all of the participants learning in LDG was identified i.e. some of it remains submerged.

So, in conclusion, multiple authors have tried to identify categories of informal learning, the intention to learn and awareness of learning taking place are key distinguishing features of the various categories they identified and, while there is a reasonable level of agreement about some categories there isn't agreement on all. They have also argued that incidental learning and tacit learning are types of informal learning which are sometimes unrecognised, that reflection can be required to make them explicit, that our ability to articulate such knowledge is incomplete and that therefore research into tacit learning in particular is problematic.

While there is a lack of agreement on the definitions of the categories of informal learning, all of them seem to have some validity to me and they have all emerged in the findings.

Having reviewed the literature on the position of informal learning in learning theory, the debate over the definitions of the various learning situations and over the types of informal learning, I will now turn to consider the residual nature of the definition of informal learning in some of the literature and its impact on the perception of its importance.

2.6 THE RESIDUAL NATURE OF THE DEFINITION OF INFORMAL LEARNING

If Livingstone, Schugurensky and Eraut are correct it would appear that informal learning is the dominant form of human learning and that it would be more accurate to describe informal learning as all human learning minus the much smaller amounts of formal and non-formal learning that people do i.e. the residuals should be non-formal and formal education.

However, we live in a world where the dominant discourses are about economics and the need for accountability and measurement, where technology has become a dominant force and where more (formal and non-formal) education (rather than more informal learning) is perceived by policymakers, politicians and much of the education and training sector to be a requirement to compete effectively in that world. Evidence

of this thinking is clear in the European Commission's memorandum on lifelong learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). While stating that lifelong learning brings informal learning "more fully into the picture" of thinking on policy (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8), the document focused almost exclusively on the need to develop formal and non-formal education. Informal learning is side-lined throughout. The extent of their interest in it was a desire to monitor it and to recognise competencies gained informally (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, pp. 16, 28)

If Livingstone and Schugurensky are correct and informal learning is frequently unrecognised by the learner and, as a result, hard to identify and hard to measure it is therefore largely beyond the control of institutions. Hence, for institutions such as the European Commission, formal and non-formal learning, which are more controllable and measurable, take centre-stage and informal learning is relegated to a lesser class of learning, in part, by defining it as a residual.

2.7   RESEARCHING INFORMAL LEARNING – RECOGNISED DIFFICULTIES

Eraut's analysis of informal learning in the workplace provided some useful input on research into informal learning. He identified interviews, ethnographic studies and short observations as useful methods. He also highlights the difficulties associated with this type of research as follows:

- informal learning is largely invisible, because much of it is either taken for granted or not recognized as learning; thus, respondents lack awareness of their own learning;
- the resultant knowledge is either tacit or regarded as part of a person's general capability, rather than something that has been learned; (Eraut, 2004, p. 249)

While Eraut's research focused on informal learning in the professional workplace the first two points about informal learning being invisible and the resultant learning being tacit or regarded as part of the individual's general capability were relevant.

The above theories about tacit learning led to me to wonder how much tacit learning could be identified without teaching people something about those theories. This

question stayed with me throughout the process and, in the end, became one of the things that I would do differently if I was starting again.

2.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have considered the literature on the terms volunteer and voluntary sector and on the learning that takes place there. I have reviewed some of the literature about informal learning and its position in learning theory and how it is extensive and significant in human life. I have also considered some of the literature which attempts to categorise various types of informal learning in order to understand it more fully and have highlighted the arguments that reflection can be required to make incidental and tacit learning explicit and that there are recognised difficulties associated with researching tacit learning. I have also argued that informal learning has been relegated to a residual position in modern society largely because it is difficult to identify, difficult to measure and difficult to control.

3 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This thesis is about the informal learning that has been done by the volunteers of LDG. In this chapter I will present my view of the social world and will explain my understanding of knowledge in the context of this research. I will then present the research methods I chose for the project based on this ontological position and epistemology. I will also discuss the ethical considerations which arose in this research and will conclude the chapter with some reflexive thoughts on my approach and methods.

3.1 ONTOLOGOGICAL POSITION

I do not believe that there are laws which govern the social universe i.e. there is no single social "truth". In the social world I believe there are views, meanings and interpretations, that people construct their understanding of the social world through their interactions with it, that each person's view is unique to them and is influenced by all of their learning in life whether they recognise that learning explicitly or not.   I believe these views are consistent with how Creswell characterised Crotty's assumptions about social constructivism (Creswell, 2003, pp. 8-9).

Crotty also argued that it is useful to use the term constructivism when focused on "the meaning-making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58) and to use the term constructionism for collectively generated meaning.   Given that this is a piece of research in which the interviews and focus group can be viewed as collectively generated meaning, and the development of findings and analysis is my individual meaning-making of that collectively generated meaning then both terms have some relevance. However, I will use the term social constructionism in this thesis as it is consistent with the reasons why I chose to do this research in the first place in that it "emphasises the hold our culture has on us" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

Voluntary groups are a fundamental part of my culture.   I believe that voluntary, as opposed to public or private sector, action is essential to positive human life and

society. While I have been involved in a wide variety of voluntary activities for many years I hadn't given much thought to why I did them - my understanding of this has crystallised through this research project. I am involved in voluntary groups to participate in a small way in making the world the way I want it to be.

It would be impossible for a single individual to run the projects that LDG has run – multiple people are needed both to do the volume of work and to supply the diverse set of skills needed. So, a group of people who co-operate and take collective action was needed. However, the commitment is by individuals who have, through their interactions with the social world, developed beliefs that value community and motivate them to contribute to their communities.

I believe that agency exists and that agency combined with social co-operation is the keys to the ongoing success of the group. Structure or external power, in the form of the state, also exists and both constrained and influenced the choices the group have made, but is contrasted with the agency that the individuals and, collectively, the group have to choose how to respond to that external power. LDG have chosen to adopt a company structure in order to obtain funds to do the things they wanted to do, so they have taken the opportunities that the external power presented. While both terms agency and or structure are contested (O'Donovan, 2017) and the debate over the relative power of agency vs. structure is beyond the scope of this thesis I will state that I believe they exist and will use Ahearn's definition of agency as quoted by O'Donovan "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" for the same reason as O'Donovan – "to allow for structural influence" (O'Donovan, 2017, p. 2).

3.2 EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge, and therefore, all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between humans beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998, p.42 quoted in (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 6))

Because there are many views and understandings of the social world non-trivial knowledge about it is complex and difficult to articulate.   This is also why some of our

knowledge of social things is transmitted in the form of stories - hence the inclusion of the stories the participants told in Appendix two.   These stories are interpreted by the teller, the writer (as I edited them for brevity and clarity) and the reader. The writer (or, in this case, the researcher) about a social situation can only write from their own viewpoint. So, everything in this thesis is my subjective interpretation - of the interviews, the focus group and the literature – which are themselves subjective interpretations by the participants and writers.

My first job, at age eighteen, was in the Civil Service. Six of us started on the same day – 11th November 1984. We were told that there were jobs available in Data Processing and asked if we would be prepared to do an aptitude test. We all did, and it seemed that four of us passed it, because we were put in a taxi and sent out to the Central Data Processing Services on Inchicore Road in Kilmainham.

I was assigned to the Payroll Technical Support group and was to be trained "on-the-job". The job mostly involved helping the Salaries teams in several government departments run their own payrolls on the mainframe computer. When something went wrong with the "jobs" run on the computer to process the payroll they called us and we had to help them fix it. It was a very technical job and I was given no formal training to get me started.

The success or failure of the "on-the-job" training approach depended, I now believe, on three things - my senior colleagues' willingness and ability to explain enough to get me started, their willingness to support me as I learned by answering my endless questions and my willingness and ability to learn and figure things out for myself.   So, learning, in this context, meant the ability to take my colleagues answers and explanations, to use them and, eventually, to go beyond them and be able to do new things myself and to help others to learn.

Looking back at it now we were creating knowledge together, it took place in an informal learning situation and it worked well for me.

I set out to research LDG's informal learning because I believe it exists and is significant. I believe that the volunteers had learned many things, that they have done

most of this learning through informal means and that while some of that learning had been recognised that it was likely that some of it had not. My view that knowledge about the social world is socially constructed has directly influenced how I have conducted this research, the findings I have produced and how I have interpreted them.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH

I adopted a qualitative approach to this research which is consistent with my social constructionist position (Creswell, 2003) and chose to use semi-structured interviews and a focus group as research methods.

Kvale stated that "The research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Kvale, 2007, p. 1) thus identifying interviewing as a method which is consistent with a social constructionist position. I chose to use semi-structured interviews as described by Kvale as they are flexible as to sequence of questions and allow for follow up questions (Kvale, 2007). I also used a focus group because the participants fit some of the characteristics that Creswell considered to be "advantageous" : "when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, where interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other" (Creswell, 2007, p. 133).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the current Directors of LDG and with one former Director. I transcribed each interview afterwards and asked each participant to review them and let me know if they wanted to add, change or delete anything. The interviews were as relaxed and conversational as I could make them. I conducted them wherever worked for the interviewee, mostly in their homes.
After I transcribed the interviews I did an initial pass at coding the findings and created a set of draft findings which I used in a single focus group.   I also transcribed this and gave the recordings and transcriptions to each participant to review.

3.3.1 Choosing Research Participants

When I started the research LDG had eleven directors, three employees and several other volunteers, all of whom could have made contributions to the research. For simple clear boundary I decided to ask only the Board members, plus the former chairman who stepped down from the Board a year ago, and whose contribution as chairman I only began to appreciate properly after I took on the job myself (as I was learning by doing).

I approached some of the Board members informally first to explain my idea about the research and to see what sort of reaction I would get and, having received a positive response, I asked for support at a Board meeting.   The general response was again very positive and enthusiastic, and discussions immediately started about various learning experiences that have occurred, and the Board chose to endorse the research.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews - Considerations

I believed that the interviews needed to be conversations about the participant's involvement in LDG which would then lead to a discussion about what they have learned in LDG and that I could not ask participants to start by telling me what they learned in LDG i.e. just to give me a list of their learning.

Livingstone considered the leading questions that were used in the early empirical research into self-directed learning and stated that:

> The genuine difficulty here is that researchers do have to engage in a probing process precisely because most people do not recognize much of the informal learning they do until they have a chance to reflect on it. (Livingstone, 1999, p. 4)

So, the interviews were an attempted balance between the possibility that the participants would underestimate their learning, and try to draw it out, and not straying into telling them what I thought they had learned.

Most of the interviews took place in the participants homes and a few in the local hotel. The aim was to create a relaxed atmosphere, to try not to let the fact that they were

being recorded impact too much and in a place that was quiet enough to get a good recording.

3.3.3 The Focus Group - Considerations

The intent of the focus group was to try to validate some draft findings and generate further discussion using the group's well-established patterns. Apart from anything else, the fact that I was researching a group suggested that the process should include a group discussion. The hope was that a group discussion might trigger topics and uncover learning that was not identified in the individual discussions.

3.3.4 Coding and Analysing the Data

I used Berg's summary of Strauss' Open Coding process (Berg, 2001, p. 255) and the Barbour's discussion on coding focus group data (Barbour, 2007, pp. 116-128) as a guide to coding the data. I used the notes I had made during transcription on learning that I suspected was significant and where multiple participants talked about similar and related learning and created a first draft coding document. I used this to generate some draft findings for discussion in the Focus Group.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I followed Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy (Maynooth University, 2016) in this research project. The major focus areas in this policy are compliance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, respecting authorship, informed consent, maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality and a duty of care towards participants in the research and disclosing conflicts of interest.

Throughout this project I maintained my duty of care towards the participants in my research and towards the community in which they live by carefully considering the risks associated with the research. Given the subject matter – a positive story of learning through voluntary activity in the local community - the risk of negative repercussions for the participants and the group seemed low. I obtained informed consent from all participants and explained as clearly as I could about the participants rights to confidentiality before and after interviews and when sending them recordings

and transcriptions. Some of the participants welcomed the opportunity to have their story told in the hope that it can help other community and voluntary groups.

As not all of the participants were comfortable with being named in the research I anonymised all of it and removed the location name. These participants understand that they may still be recognisable by local people.

I have respected the authorship of all the sources I have used in this paper by citing them appropriately.

I also have tried to be sensitive to issues of power, most specifically the potential conflict associated with my position as member and, currently, chairman of the group that I am researching, by making it as clear as I can that participation is completely voluntary and that participants could withdraw any or all of their data until a few weeks before I had to submit the first draft.

In addition, I was conscious of the need to avoid compromising my role as Chairman in order to maintain support and participation for my research project and to try to avoid damaging the cohesion of the group if any critical data emerged.

3.4.1 Use of Personal Data

Maynooth University's Data Protection Policy (Maynooth University, 2018) states that Personal Data means "information relating to a living individual who is or can be identified directly". By this definition the personal data collected during my research included the recordings as the participants could potentially be identified from their voices, and both quotes which are attributed to identifiable individuals and references to identifiable individuals in the summaries and in the thesis itself. While some names may be common and therefore not readily identifiable to a specific individual, when a person's name is combined with the name of a small voluntary organisation or a small town such as mine it then refers to a clearly identifiable individual so the names of the participants combined with the name of the voluntary organisation and/or the town must be treated as personal data.

The policy also requires that personal data shall only be collected for "one or more specific, explicit and legitimate purposes", therefore I explained to each of the

participants that the data I collected during this research will be used only for the purpose of this research. I also explained the definition of personal data and asked each participant to consider whether they would agree to my naming the organisation and location and whether or not I could name and attribute quotes to them.   Where the participants mentioned other people's names I have not used them in this thesis.

No personal data was collected which would be classified as "sensitive personal data" and which would require special processing.

3.4.2   Securely Managing the Research Data

I have followed the guidelines in Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy (Maynooth University, 2016) as follows:

I recorded each interview on my iPhone, then, to protect the data from accidental damage or deletion, I emailed and downloaded a copy to my laptop and backed them up to storage in Microsoft OneDrive. After transcription I deleted them from my iPhone and finally encrypted and archived them to a DVD which will remain in my house.

I sent a copy of each recording and the transcription to each participant either via email or as a physical copy: For those participants who are not regular computer users, I copied the recordings onto DVD and gave it so that they could play them back in a CD/DVD player. I also had to do this for a few recordings which were too big to email and for a few participants who were using business emails as I felt there was a risk that the recordings could be accessed by other people in their business e.g. personal assistants who have access to the person's email and the IT staff in the company. I also printed out a copy of the transcript, put it into a sealed envelope and gave it to them. This was to make it easy for them to read over it and write any corrections they wanted onto it.

Where the recordings were short and the participants were regular computer users I emailed both a copy of the recording to them and a password-protected copy of the transcription to them so that they could review them and request any corrections or deletions they wanted. I chose not to encrypt the recordings as this would require the participants to have un-encryption software and the skill to use it in order to listen to

the recordings and I believed it was extremely unlikely that many of the participants would figure out how to unencrypt the recording in order to listen to it.

Maynooth University's Research Records Retention Schedule states that research data and findings should be retained for "the duration of the research project plus 10 years" (Maynooth University, 2018) and that responsibility for retaining the data lies with the individual researcher.   I explained this to each participant.

3.5   REFLEXIVE APPROACH

In this project I set out to find learning that I believed existed – a highly subjective position - so it was important to acknowledge this subjectivity and to try to avoid letting it distort the process. For this reason and because I believe that knowledge of the social world is subjective, I attempted to adopt a reflexive approach throughout the research process consistent with Mason's position that "Qualitative research should involve critical self-scrutiny by the researcher, or active reflexivity" (Mason, 2002, p. 7)'.

3.5.1   Insider Research

I have known some of the participants in the project for many years and have worked closely with most of them for several years both in LDG and in other voluntary groups, so I was clearly an insider in this research project. I chose this research topic because of my insider knowledge of the work the group and individual participants have done. Taylor considers the issues involved in this type of research to include both challenges to data quality as a result of "insider blindness" (Taylor, 2011, p. 13) and risks of over-disclosure.

The data quality challenges she raises include her view that

> Researchers' connectedness to their culture, and indeed their emotional attachment to their friends, may make them resistant to an unsympathetic critique of the field. (Taylor, 2011, p. 14)

Given my very positive view of the group it was important to keep this in mind and to try to be objective.   The advantages of my insiderness included the fact that I had a good understanding of the history of the group for the past few years (although I learned a lot more during this project), that I understood the terminology, background

and contexts that people spoke about without a lot of explanation and understood many of the challenges they had dealt with because I had either been involved directly or had heard them being discussed in meetings over the years. My insider knowledge was also a factor in that some of the questions I asked arose from my knowledge of the group's and the individuals' professional lives and their involvement in other voluntary groups.

So, I believe this was of value however the challenges to data quality included those described by Burke:

> Such an 'immersion' experience tends with time to render so many of one's observations banal. With this goes the related problem of retracing and unpacking what have become almost 'second nature' understandings. (Burke, 1989, p. 222)

Burke's approach to this issue was to note both her "objective" observations and her "subjective" reaction from the outset. She was able to do this because of both her eight-year situation in the community she was researching and the fact that she was there from the outset as a researcher. As I have only been a researcher for one of my years in LDG this is not an approach I could use, so this challenge remained and it materialised – by the time I had worked through several versions of the findings and analysis I felt that much of it was very banal. It remains to be seen what other readers will see.

Taylor also considered the risks of over-disclosure where friends may unintentionally tell the researcher more than they would really be comfortable reading about themselves in a published paper. She refers to occasions when

> I understood implicitly that what they were telling me here was not as a researcher but as a friend and therefore – it felt to me – unethical to transcribe this statement for future analysis". (Taylor, 2011, p. 14)

To try to avoid this I transcribed the interviews fully so that participants could review them and remove or change anything they were not comfortable with and people did ask me not to use a few of the things they said. I also bore this in mind while developing the findings and analysing the data.

At the early stages of the project I was also concerned that people would feel they could not refuse to talk to me regardless of whether they believed they had learned much from their experiences in LDG - because I am an active member of the group and the current chairman they would not refuse me. In retrospect I don't think this was the case – people told me when they believed they hadn't learned much in LDG.

3.5.2 Reflections on the Semi-structured Interviews

The questions developed as I worked through the interviews. In the first interview I started by asking Edward what he had learned during his time with the group and then asked him about his history with it. I decided afterwards that I should ask people how they got involved and about the work they have done for the group to help trigger the discussion about what they learned from it. I also realised that people had brought learning both into and out of the group so I began asking about it.

My first interview was with Edward who was very conscious of the recording for about the first 30 minutes, then less so. I paused the recording after about 40 minutes as we thought we were finished and we chatted for a few minutes about the project. Then he spoke more about leadership and learning so I restarted the recording. This also happened with some of the other interviews.

We spoke more about the project after I stopped the recording for the last time – Edward thought that we rarely look back at what we have done in this way and that the difficulty would be to extract the learning from the doing. This struck me as one of the core issues with this research project.

My initial learning about the interview process after that first interview:

- The recording process itself can make more people self-conscious and the conversation may be stilted until they forget about it.
- One interview per person may not be enough to identify all of their learning (although one interview per person plus one focus group has proven to be all that is possible in the time available). In some cases people have to think back over many years of involvement with the group.

By the fifth interview with Kevin, I felt that some common themes were starting to become clear however, new findings were created from every interview.

During transcription I wondered whether a more experienced researcher would have found a way to keep the interviews shorter but I found the stories and ideas that people told me fascinating and I wouldn't have wanted to miss any of it.

3.5.3 Reflections on the Focus Group

I ran a single focus group. Eight out of the eleven interviewees attended. I used a projector to show 6 slides each containing a single statement of a draft finding and asked the group to discuss them.

Those draft findings were:

- I brought a lot of useful knowledge/skills with me when I got involved with LDG
- Some of my learning in LDG was deliberate and some was incidental
- We need to know a lot more now than in the past to do what we do
- I have learned that personality conflicts can be a challenge to the effectiveness of voluntary groups
- I have learned that skills with digital technology are becoming essential for LDG members
- I have learned more from my involvement with LDG than I first realised – I may not yet have realised all of it

At the time I felt the group was a little uncomfortable. Listening to the recording later I felt that the discomfort was mostly my own - I had never been involved in a focus group, didn't know what to expect and was not terribly confident that the statements that I had written containing draft findings would generate a lot of discussion.

The group qualified some of the statements including the one about Digital Technology. There was some reluctance to accept the statement on "personality conflicts" however, the group's general practice of discussion was evident as they talked through the topic.

3.6   CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have presented my view of the social world and explained my understanding of knowledge as they relate to this research. I then presented the research methods I chose for the project based on this ontological position and epistemology. I also reviewed the ethical considerations which arose in this research and concluded the chapter with some reflexive thoughts on my methods.

> …there is an awful lot to be learned by just sitting round the table. If you said nothing some nights at an LDG meeting, and just listened…(Kevin)

This chapter contains the findings from the research process. It attempts to present what can be no more than a brief overview of the large and complex body of learning which the participants spoke about. Some of this learning has been recognised through this research process. The complexity of human learning and the taken-for-granted nature of informal learning emerged clearly. The act of classification makes it look less complex than it really is.

Needless to say, everything in the 70,000 thousand words of transcriptions did not fit neatly into a single category and I have made many subjective decisions in this effort. My own insider knowledge was a factor here in that some of the questions I asked arose from my knowledge of the group's and the individuals' activities.

The major themes were the extensive learning content about participating in the group itself including committee roles, running the Community Hall and the Community Centre, grants and fundraising, digital skills, learning about support from "officialdom" and corporate governance in community groups. The participants also spoke about some of the attitudes, understandings and beliefs they acquired including learning to value community, leadership, community work and the work the group does. Some of this learning took place in the group but how, where and when the participants acquired these attitudes, understandings and beliefs was not always clear. The findings include some of the challenges they have encountered and of a small amount of formal learning that they did to help them.

Attempting to unpick the learning from the doing, to unpick the knowledge and skills from the attitudes, understandings and beliefs in that learning, and to unpick the content and the motivation are all difficult and subjective.

4.1 FINDINGS

For the purpose of this research I have attempted to group the themes according to the different types of content in Illeris' definition i.e. as "knowledge, skills, attitudes, understandings, beliefs, behaviour, competencies, etc." as discussed in Chapter two (Illeris, 2015, p. 1). Not everything fit neatly into these types of content so rather than bend it to fit I have included categories for types of informal learning, some formal/non-formal learning, learning from challenges and barriers and some recognition of learning through this research process. The set of categories, themes and sub-themes below may seem complex and somewhat contradictory. I believe this is consistent with the complexity of the learning the participants have done.

I have edited much of what people said for brevity – these edits are indicated as (…). I have occasionally added words of clarification – these are indicated as […].

As this chapter cannot really do justice to the stories the participants told me about their work in the group I have included them in APPENDIX two.

I have indicated where comments originated in the focus group as [FG].

4.1.1 Content - Knowledge and skills

The participants spoke of a large body of knowledge and skills.

4.1.1.1 Learning to run the Community Hall and Community Centre

The Community Hall was a major source of learning. Miranda spoke of the financial operations that have developed:

> Miranda: …the manager looks after the day to day running of the hall, so he takes rents…he would lodge rents so the treasurer then is responsible for keeping an account of what monies we have coming and going out of that account, then reports back to the committee. Michael is assistant treasurer…regularly meets with [the manager]. So, between the 3 of us we kind of know what money is in the account, know what money is coming, know what money is due to go out, know when…we're coming very close to the end of the Pobal money and if we need to make sure there is money in there to pay wages…

More learning from the Community Hall is included throughout this chapter. Elizabeth spoke of the learning to run the Community Centre and gave a long list of examples

– "setting up rosters", running the heating system – "There were 3 pumps and 3 boilers and the gas heating system was different", 'dealing with tenants', 'dealing with the Guards when there was break-ins', applying for grants – 'that meant getting all your accounts correct', as well as building and security maintenance.

4.1.1.2 How to participate in the group, committee roles

Some of the participants had not known much about the group before they joined it. Patrick explained how he learned how the group worked: ."."for the first while…I didn't really participate a lot because the group was new to me, and the organisation and the structure and the way it worked. …I was just soaking it all in and trying to get a better knowledge so that I could participate going forward".

Marianne had never been in a group that had a formal structure: "I never knew you had to have a secretary, treasurer, chairperson", and had to learn the Secretary's role from scratch:

> Marianne: Talk about being thrown in at the deep end at the AGM when I was voted in – I don't think I was ever at a proper meeting like that before – ever - for anything. Then all of a sudden it was "OK Marianne, go up and finish taking the minutes of the meeting". I just wrote down everything because I didn't know what to write down. And then when I went back and looked through all Elizabeth's minutes, then I realised what I had to be writing down and what I had to be taking out."

Elizabeth had to learn to do the Treasurer's role: "I suppose I learned as I was going along from Kevin producing his [treasurer's] reports at the LDG meetings.… So, I just copied what I saw he did. It was learning on the job I suppose."

Michael spoke about the learning he brought into the group about the role of the Chairman:

> Michael: I learned - as chairman of a local community group - you don't take on any decisions on your own... If anybody comes with a problem, or asks something, you never say yes or no – you go back to the committee and you get their permission or you get their approval or their disapproval… The chairman's job is to achieve a consensus rather than make a decision…[O]ne of the most important things is to bring everybody with you and don't go on a solo run. If you do that…you won't offend anybody.

Participants also spoke of learning to do whatever was needed when it was needed, sometimes, as Oscar said "…just diving in and hoping for the best", and Elizabeth: "I had to learn skills…I didn't go deliberately looking to learn them, but I had to", and Marianne spoke about how she learned to do other work for the group:

> Marianne: I think most of my learning was done by asking other people who were involved for longer…and by looking up [stuff] - I used to find the Wheel's website was brilliant for looking up different things….

Oscar spoke, on the one hand, of realising how easy it can be to get grants by filling in forms but, on the other, of how much work can be involved:

> Oscar: … we'd gone through the Leader process which was very very heavy and despite, like, 40 plus hours of work, we failed with the application and it was one of the biggest learning lessons for me over the last 2 years.

Marianne explained how she learned to do fundraising the group "Everything I learned for how to do fundraisers would have been by Googling it" and of how hard fundraising can be: "fundraisers are hard work unless they are small things that can be organised very quickly. Any of the big things – it's hard work."

Several participants spoke about recognising your own and other people's skills, strengths and weaknesses:

> Kevin [FG]: …it does become obvious after a while that people have better skills and different skills than you have yourself
>
> Edward: Not only recognise your own strengths but recognise your own weaknesses.
>
> Richard: With regards to the actual bureaucracy of filling out forms I am rubbish at that, so you know it is something I try to avoid at all times. I know that there are people within our group – shared skills – that enjoy that a little bit more than the part that I enjoy doing.
>
> Patrick: Kevin is brilliant at the accounts…I don't have those skills.

Some of the members of the group were elected to local authority committees as representatives of the community sector. These committees were part of the local authority's efforts to engage with community and voluntary groups. Oscar was a member of the Meath County Council's Public Participation Network (PPN), Edward is one of the Community representatives on the Local Community Development

Committee (LCDC) and Kevin is on the Independent Evaluation Committee of the LCDC. In addition of bringing learning to those committees Richard spoke of the importance of the knowledge this has brought to the group:

> Richard: …that's something, I think, that gives us a very broad reach of understanding of how the system works because we have somebody who sits around that table

4.1.1.3 Knowledge/Skills brought to and from the group

I asked about the skills that the participants brought into the group from elsewhere. The answers included learning from a broad list of both professional and voluntary areas. Kevin identified his professional knowledge about accounting, Elizabeth had been the Secretary of the Accordion Band before joining LDG, Oscar used the interview techniques that he learned professionally and Michael had spent 25 years as Chairman of the local Co-Operative Creamery – "that's where I got my experience". Patrick spoke of his "engineering and construction background knowledge" and of being undaunted by joining a "more organised structure and company/committee and having all these professional peers" because of the experience he gained in another voluntary group. Emma spoke of her bringing her business experience and of her surprise that her skills with digital technology had proven useful. Patrick spoke of "life skills" – that he has learned to wait until all the facts are in before giving an opinion because he has seen speaking too early cause trouble in the past. Miranda said "I came with a skillset because I'd say I learned more from my involvement with Macra" and Edward spoke of bringing the patience he learned while farming – "seriously – you do need patience".

In the focus group I proposed a draft finding "**I bought a lot of useful skills/knowledge with me when I got involved with LDG**". Despite the above long list of learning brought from elsewhere there wasn't universal agreement: Edward said that the group members brought experience with them but Marianne said she brought none "I didn't have any experience really with - working with committees or being involved in any other committees before I started on the LDG ". This was solidly contradicted by some of the others "your organisation skills, your secretarial skills -

you know, all of that". This led to Oscar's statement that most group members were "handpicked", a discussion about the skills of the group as a whole and Samuel's opinion that "We all have different skills, which, knitted together are, you know - I don't think anybody has the complete set".

Edward raised the question of experience vs skill:

> Edward: Would experience be as valuable as skill in some situations?

And Samuel wanted the reduce the finding:

> Samuel: If you changed "lot" to "little" I think I'd go for it

In most of the interviews I also asked specifically about the skills and knowledge the participants brought elsewhere from the group. The answers were varied and included helping other local groups gain support for fundraising and to obtain grants, helping other groups get set up and telling their story to other community development groups to help them develop. Kevin spoke of using his learning from the successful fundraising that LDG had done for the Fair Green project to the Parents' Association in the school, Elizabeth said that Edward gave advice to other groups about grants "he was able to steer them the right way", Oscar explained how he had given advice to groups like LDG in other locations around the country and Samuel said:

> Samuel: I think that benefit went both ways – I learned a lot from LDG and I learned a bit on the other committees obviously as well and I hope I brought some of that back in my own activity on the committee.

Marianne, Oscar and Michael all spoke of bringing learning from LDG into their professional lives:

> Marianne: I wouldn't have got the job that I'm in [in Community Development] if I hadn't been involved with the LDG…I was able to talk about all my involvement in the community and that's what got me the job.

> Oscar: I got promoted last year – I'm Director of Audit in [a large company]. I wouldn't be here today in that position only for the community experience, for sure.

4.1.1.4 Learning about "officialdom"

The group have dealt with the local county council, Leader, Pobal and other state agencies and have learned that, by and large, those agencies support their efforts. Kevin spoke of learning that "…if you do persist with the local authorities…there is goodwill", Michael reported that "you learned that it's not always a stone wall in front of you - it's amazing what you can get if you knock on the door" and "...it was amazing how co-operative the Council were. At a meeting over there one morning they said they would give us anything, any help, anything but money".

However, there was sometimes a big learning curve to figure out how those agencies worked in order to gain their support. Samuel spoke of learning how the to work with the LEADER organisation: "learning to deal with them was serious ball of wax. … The coming and going with Leader was just unbelievable", and Kevin spoke of learning to work with the County Council through the Community Centre project:

> Kevin: …there was huge negotiation with the Council, how it was going to be done and how it could be structured, and...how this project actually could happen - legally how it could happen. We were into legal agreements, we were into lease agreements… Even before that there was a huge amount of learning in seeing who makes the decisions within the Council – how do you get to the people who are going to make the decision.… how could we convince someone [in the Council] that this is for the benefit of the town.

4.1.1.5 More knowledge is needed now

Kevin, Elizabeth and some of the other participants spoke of needing to learn about new things and to do new things which they had not needed to know in the past. A lot of this was driven by the demands of the agency that funded staff wages in the Community Hall. Kevin spoke extensively about the learning how to implement corporate governance in a community group and the challenges associated with it:

> Kevin: Pobal funds local community projects…You can take on staff and they will be funded… So we [applied] for some funding. And that's where a bit of a change happened in the LDG because…Pobal will only fund limited liability companies. Up to that we were a community entity – a voluntary body with no legal structure – and Pobal won't fund those…   We set up [a company] … and we hired staff and it went reasonably well. …We probably were very raw or innocent as to what we were supposed to be doing with it. …we eventually got

an audit through Pobal, and Pobal indicated to us that there was a lot of stuff that we were doing that didn't fit in with corporate governance…

It was the whole idea that you are now a director of a limited company so you must be doing things that tie in with company law… I suppose that was the biggest change that I would have felt that has happened and the biggest learning curve for me over the years in community groups.

They learned about more than corporate governance through this process. Elizabeth spoke of learning about recruitment and interviewing. Kevin considered these changes largely positive but challenging for voluntary groups:

Kevin: ..but I do think it is probably a huge difficulty for community organisations because people get it very hard to get it into their head what is corporate governance [when you are] running a community organisation. Everybody is doing it in their free time, they are doing the best they can, it's voluntary – that's a bit of a difficulty.

He suspects that it may make it difficult to get new directors in the future because it is "a fairly onerous task". However, not everyone agreed that company directorship is onerous. Michael said "I don't know how many years I've been a director, until two years ago. It's not an onerous task, you know", and not everyone is very comfortable with the oversight associated with the funding:

Miranda: …there is the fact that it has become very legal…so…when I was writing a newsletter all I was worried about was that the information in it was correct…When I'm keeping the accounts for the Community Hall I'm very aware that we are … spending State money…and that...the State will come and audit that some day.

Kevin and Elizabeth spoke of the increase in paperwork.   Kevin said of the paperwork associated with the applications for Pobal funding: "If I look back at the Pobal application back in 2009 and the Pobal application in 2018… there is no comparison". In 2009 "I did the Pobal application with Edward… We did it in a matter of hours" while the 2018 application took weeks and "there was a huge amount of work on policies, and policies cover every area you could ever imagine".

In the Focus group, the discussion on the draft finding of We need to know a lot more now than in the past to do what we do, the group mentioned a number of other areas of learning which were driven largely by external pressures including digital technology

and communication, writing policies, data protection, employment law and rules & regulations and county development plans.

There were differing opinions on how much each person really needs to know now. Kevin spoke about the need for expertise in today's world and that every individual can't learn everything:

> Kevin: … You can't deal with everything in corporate governance yourself….and…if you haven't got the expertise at the table it is your responsibility to make sure you get [it].

> Kevin: I suppose…we do get to situations where maybe we shy away a bit from the learning…- the stuff that's not our field - because we probably have somebody within the group that…is probably better at it

Patrick spoke of needing to be able to oversee the professionals you hire and to be able to assess the quality of what they do and Elizabeth believes you need to know something about it yourself:

> Elizabeth: ...we had a lot of professional help – but you had to learn about it yourself.

In the Focus Group there was a discussion about whether the services provided by community groups are better than they used to be because of these changes:

> Kevin: …are we offering any better service than we did 50 years ago? Probably not…

> Emma [FG]: But maybe safer …I think that's why the legislation and regulation and all that's come in because not everybody was going a good job…so it's maybe safer. I don't know if all this regulation…is for good or not, but I think that's the intention of it anyway…to make it safer and to make it less open to being abused…

> Kevin [FG]: So we probably need to know a lot more to do the same thing we were doing.

4.1.1.6 But in the end….

Kevin made the point how important it is not to lose sight of the group's real objectives in all of the paperwork and oversight:

Kevin: …you can't lose sight of what you want to do, what you are there to do. At the end of the day…our role in the Community Hall is to make sure it is run as a hall but we have to try and be compliant – but not the other way around – the running of the hall can never become secondary…I suppose that's the biggest thing I would learn, is how to see the wood from the trees.

And in Oscar's opinion the core elements have not changed:

Oscar [FG]: I think the core elements of being a community group will always be the same, will never change, so the core elements – people get together, have a common goal and work towards that goal and get it done whatever it takes, it's the ingredients to make that happen have changed dramatically.

4.1.1.7 Digital Skills

Some members of the group talked about learning digital skills for the work they did in the group and using their digital skills to help LDG and other groups:

Elizabeth: …I had to learn more and more computer stuff. Myself and Edward did an ECDL[5] course…it really did improve that sort of stuff

Emma: Yeah, the technical stuff – I've been quite surprised at how useful that's been in several different groups here, not just the LDG.

Miranda mentioned Microsoft Excel as a source of stress and Michael spoke of lack of digital skills excluding people from the group: "I didn't learn…one of the main reasons why I'm not up there – technology…it's not for me to be quite honest" and "It would have excluded me to a big point". Michael also believed that digital technology will impact community effort by reducing direct social interaction.

In the Focus Group I proposed a finding: I have learned that skills with digital technology are becoming essential for LDG members. The group worked their way through a discussion about whether essential was "too strong a word" and whether digital technology was "essential for all LDG members".

Edward said "I have no digital skills or very little anyway but I wouldn't say it inhibits me greatly and Kevin believed that "I think it's essential we have it…in the group" but that "I don't think it's necessary that everybody has [digital skills] and that for people who don't "there's probably things that they can't do for the group". However, Kevin

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[5] European Computer Driving Licence

also pointed out that most grant applications now have to be done online and Elizabeth acknowledged that "more and more…the minutes are sent by email or whatever like that". Marianne believed that "the Chair and Secretary and Treasurer definitely do need them but other board members I don't think do". They concluded that members who have limited digital skills have a lot to contribute to the group and that the group should "always be mindful of that and not to exclude anybody because they might not have digital technological skills.

4.1.1.8 Other knowledge / skills

Oscar reported learning public speaking skills, Emma mentioned problem solving and learning about Irish employment law, Samuel said his experience in the group has improved his understanding of people and his communication with people. Oscar spoke of recognising the need for structure.

Learning from your mistakes and failures was acknowledged, both in the individual interviews and in the focus group:

> Michael: …by making mistakes and by doing wrong
>
> Richard: …I was doing it at the time with the right intentions, but in hindsight it should have been done in a different manner. But it is again part of the learning.
>
> Oscar [FG]: …in that particular case, we failed miserably, or I failed miserably. Whatever. But it was a key learning.

Patrick noted learning how the community as a whole does not see the work the group does and that some knowledge is not public in the first place: "between Kevin, say, and Elizabeth and [another person] – a lot would go on in the background."

There was also some evidence of unrecognised learning in the members and other people who help the group:

> Kevin: If you asked them to write a risk assessment they would never be able to write a risk assessment, but when they read it invariably they say … I knew all of that.

4.1.2   Content and Motivation - Learned attitudes, understandings and beliefs

While Edward pointed out the difficulty of extracting the learning from the doing, the story of the group is not just one of doing, it is also one of attitudes, understandings and beliefs – those that drove the creation of the group and that sustain the effort required over many years. Those attitudes, understandings and beliefs are learned. While the research did not identify much about where and how most of these were learned, some participants spoke about learning them and some of it took place in the group.

4.1.2.1   Why do this – valuing community, the group's work and other group members

Several members of the group spoke about learning about community and how it works and its value through their work in the group:

> Marianne: I learned how important it is to become part of a community... You feel that you have accomplished something.

> Michael: I've learned how the community works for itself, how they work for each other and how, by working for each other, they can achieve a lot.

Oscar pointed out that "There's no central 'Communities for Dummies' book anywhere" and that "It is all down to how" …"the local community is engaged and then who is there to do that and help that." Edward spoke of trying to "motivate people to, as it were, donate their skills to the public good". Richard believes he learned the value of community and community work from his family, but Oscar believes he learned it through his work for the group:

> Oscar: So that's where I became heavily involved in LDG. With that I began to see the bigger picture in the town. I was [also] running the CE[6] scheme … The overall vision of a community began to kind of stir in me then…where I began to understand what drives a community, what stimulates activities in a community. From then I started to see – with my in-depth involvement.

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[6] CE– Community Employment – a state funded program to help people get into employment by providing short term employment and training in jobs in local communities typically operated on a voluntary basis by a locally based committee.
https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/employment_support_schemes/community_employment_scheme.html

Richard acknowledged that it can be hard for people who are not involved to understand why others are:

> Richard: I suppose it's difficult to understand community work unless you're involved in community work. It's difficult to be able to pick apart why people do something.

Samuel and Edward spoke about the purpose of the group being to work in the interests of the community, which implies a belief in its value:

> Samuel: The idea was being mooted to set up an organisation consisting of the organisations in the town… that we were all, kind of, ships in the night and we didn't know what was going on in each other's committees and clubs and that we might be able to assist each other and have a more ergonomic development of the area.

> Edward: I…became involved in trying to establish some kind of overall community body that was not sectoral in its ambition but for the good of the whole community.

Samuel and Edward spoke of the value of the group:

> Samuel: …it has unearthed a value in the community that we didn't actually tap into until LDG came along…the sum of the parts being more than the individual pieces…

> Samuel: We have done amazing work with very little financial resources. If you look at what we've got from the public bodies – I know there has been a fair bit of money put in in grant aid and Leader but it is really small beer when it comes down to the value that has been delivered for it.

> Edward [FG]: It's the harnessing of the skills and the experience of the group that really brings value to what we do

Edward also struck a note of caution:

> Edward: …it is important that the team ethic is maintained at all times. If it becomes personalised or it becomes a clique or small groups imposing their views on others it is doomed to failure.

Some of the participants talked about the skills that are available in small communities and believed that you have to look for them and ask people to help. There was a strong sense that people value community and are prepared to help if asked.

> Edward: The first thing it would make me conscious of is the resources that are within relatively small communities, that there are talents and skills available in

most communities that frequently are not harnessed…. because nobody asked the particular individuals what they could do or were they willing to do it.

Kevin: …it's difficult in a community organisation to go and outsource expertise – we don't have any spare money to be doing this…[but] I feel the expertise is out there and it can be got without paying for most of it – if you ask for it.

Participants spoke highly of other group members.   Marianne, when asked to take on the secretary's role: "I felt really privileged because Elizabeth is brilliant at everything she has ever done, so for her to trust me to do it…", and Patrick: "…Elizabeth - she always says something that I didn't know…she's a fountain of knowledge" and "Kevin is brilliant at the accounts", and, in the focus group, Elizabeth referred to Edward as "...the master of it all…".

4.1.2.2 Beliefs / Understandings: Building a track record, gaining trust and goodwill

Kevin and Richard both spoke of gaining trust of the local people – which is learned behaviour.

Kevin believed that local "people have developed a level of trust…[that] the LDG people do know what they're about.", and that "one of the things that definitely helped [getting agreement to lease the Community Centre building] was that the LDG had a track record that they could do it. This wasn't a new organisation. This was an organisation that had a track record already of doing a community centre" [i.e. the Community Hall].

Edward spoke of public support for the projects they had run:

Edward: …with the Fair Green project, the goodwill that was behind that meant that the raising of the money involved was a relatively painless experience because there was so much public support for it.

Michael, Richard and Edward all spoke strongly about the need to be clear that there is no personal gain for the people involved in order to gain this trust:

Edward: ...it must be absolutely clear that they derive no personal remuneration or rewards for what they are doing, that they are seen as being totally motivated by the value of the project to the community.

4.1.2.3 Beliefs / Understandings: Types of volunteer

Oscar and Edward both recognised different types of volunteer:

Oscar: I have thought that there are 2 different types of volunteer – One who has a personal interest in an activity that will benefit themselves or a family [member] or a colleague and a second one who has the same as that but who wants to drive change and strategy and who sees the bigger macro environment. …They are the types of volunteer that I see – two distinct types of volunteers, equally important.

Edward also recognised different types of volunteer but rated them differently:

Edward: In my experience there are people who, in community activities, there are people who do things and there are people who get things done...In many ways the person who can get things done is more valuable than the person who does things.

4.1.2.4 Learning leadership

Some of the participants spoke about various aspects of leadership. Edward spoke of learning to identify and motivate people who will participate in community groups and how a little coercion is sometimes needed:

Edward: A lot of the learning process is learning how to deal with the people. Some people you can encourage to do things, but there are people who have to be asked to do things and there are people who have to be driven to do things, and you need to be able to recognise what category they fall into.

He also spoke of the importance of developing leadership within the community:

Edward: I suppose that, it all, basically, boils down to leadership within a community. If you can identify leaders, provide leaders, who are able to identify the skills that are within their own community, and not just identify but get them on board and motivate people to, as it were, donate their skills to the public good.

Richard noted the importance of learning about and supporting people's potential, that leadership in a voluntary group "[is] an honorary position" and that "Honorary leadership is a much more powerful form of leadership because people want to follow you." Edward pointed out that

Edward: It is important to recognise that it is leadership and not drivership. You … give other people the opportunity to put their talents at your disposal or at the disposal of the project on hand.

Also, in Edward's opinion, "it is important that your visible figures are not controversial or at least have a position in the community that people will row in behind them".

4.1.2.5 Attitudes: Persistence, Confidence and Ambition, Doing the right thing

Participants also mentioned other important attitudes to have – persistence, confidence and ambition – some of which were learned in the group:

> Kevin: When this [Community Centre] was originally broached with the Council they didn't want it. It was persistence from 3 or 4 within the organisation - probably Edward, Samuel, Elizabeth and [another person] – were the ones that actually persisted at it…

While the group were building a track record which persuaded the County Council and other funding agencies to support them, they gained confidence in their own ability to deliver on projects and the ambition to take them on:

> Michael: I learned what can be achieved when you try.

> Edward: [the success of the Fair Green project] probably gave us great confidence to embark on anything else that we wanted to do.

> Oscar: …I've definitely learned that anything is possible

> Michael: We saw the development potential [of the old school building which became the Community Centre]

And, Patrick spoke of the importance of doing the right thing even if it embarrasses someone else.

4.1.2.6 Positive Attitudes: Enjoying it is important

Others also spoke about realising that they enjoy participating in the group, and learning that others will participate in activities if they enjoy them:

> Patrick: I enjoy it and I've learned, I suppose, that I could see myself continuing doing that and progressing...I like the involvement and the interaction.

> Samuel: It doesn't matter if it's work – they'll come and do it if they enjoy it. So that was an eye-opener for me.

> Oscar: I think another core strength is the…dynamics of the group, we're all at humour with each other, we're comfortable with each other as well…. and have a bit of a laugh and fun which is what's important in a community group.

4.1.2.7 Changed perspectives

Patrick, Elizabeth and Oscar both reported that their perspectives changed through voluntary work for this and other groups. Patrick recognised that his opinions on some

things had changed through the discussions at LDG meetings: "a question would be asked, and you'd have an opinion but by the time it goes round the room you'd be totally changed". Elizabeth spoke of recognising the litter problem in the town through her involvement with the Twinning project: "it was funny how I noticed it most was when the French came and we were walking up the town and I just saw, through their eyes, how bad the town was as far as litter was concerned". Oscar spoke of beginning to notice exclusion: "I don't know where it came from…Teresa, but I began to see people in the community who were vulnerable, who were displaced or were socially excluded" and Elizabeth spoke of realising how unique the Community Centre has become:

> Elizabeth: I've learned that there is no facility like that in the county and there are people with special needs – coming to Special Hands and the Autism Support Group – from all around Meath and beyond it. They are coming from Cavan and from Ashbourne, they are coming from Mullingar and from Drogheda – all to [us] because there is no other facility that they can use.

4.1.3 How they learned - some of the types of informal learning

While much of the learning above took place in informal contexts, I specifically asked in the focus group about deliberate and incidental learning because I was surprised how much deliberate learning was identified in the interviews. Considerable amounts of deliberate learning were acknowledged – by asking people who know more, by searching the internet and by watching and listening to others. However, as Richard noted, they don't necessarily agree with everything they hear:

> Richard: …my learning process is very much that I get to sit in a room with other people who have expert opinion on things…I mightn't always agree with it – but I'll certainly absorb it.

Edward believed that learning about other people's skills arose incidentally and "that was crucial to the success or even the running of the organisation throughout the years". Oscar spoke of tacit knowledge being lost and the importance of recording groups' histories:

> Oscar: I also started to learn about the importance of recording group's histories, because that tacit knowledge is often lost in the community… We've seen it before – people have passed on – what I would call, with respect, the Elders in the community – who have an unbelievable amount of knowledge.

For some there was a mixture of both incidental and deliberate learning: Marianne: "it was both, because when I joined the LDG first I was studying Community Development at the same time so it kind of just all ran in together".

4.1.4 Formal/non-formal learning

The participants attended a handful of formal and non-formal courses over the years – Marianne's course in Community Development, Elizabeth and Edward's ECDL course and some French classes when they Twinning project was started first. Some group members also attended courses on Child Safeguarding.

Significantly, Elizabeth, who has been the Secretary of several community groups, said "I've never gone on a course to become secretary of a committee".

4.1.5 Challenges and barriers

I asked each of the participants about the challenges they have faced in relation to their involvement in the group and how they have overcome them. Challenges were acknowledged, and they were sometimes overcome.

4.1.5.1 Committees can be hard work

In the midst of all the positivity about the group and what it has done, the challenges of committee work came up in a number of individual interviews:

> Kevin: One of the biggest challenges we still face is that they are committees and committees are difficult, committees are hard work.

> Miranda: I find there are times when I find, Teresa, that I find meetings very frustrating – I'm sitting there and I want to throw something at somebody…because you can't always say what you're thinking.

Oscar talked about learning to deal with conflicts within the group:

> Oscar: The personalities are probably the most challenging end to deal with, and I've learned a lot how to deal with that and how to manage it.

And learning not to let conflicts stop the work:

> Oscar: …it's bringing people back into what our core values are and stop bickering about other stuff

Not everyone believed that conflicts in the group had been significant:

Richard: But by and large there's very little division within the group – everybody works very well together …

Given that the topic had arisen in several of the individual interviews I tested it as a finding in the Focus Group with the statement: I have learned that personality conflicts can be a challenge to the effectiveness of voluntary groups. Initially there was some resistance to this suggestion which led into a discussion about the need for different personalities in the group:

Patrick [FG]: I think personality conflicts can be a challenge to any group…

Samuel [FG]: …every group, business or…

Patrick: [FG]…or any relationship or any organisation so, yeah, it's a broad stroke, you know…

Elizabeth [FG]: It's good to have different types of personalities on a committee and, like, to have different views, on certain things because….

Emma [FG]: That's true actually – sometimes the conflict can bring value…

Elizabeth [FG]: Because if everybody is singing off the same hymn-sheet…you're not representing the whole community…

Emma suggested that conflict "can challenge the effectiveness cos it can mean things take a lot longer to get done, maybe". From there the discussion moved on to an agreement that there is a difference between personality differences and personality conflicts and Marianne noted that conflicts "…can make it very hard. Like, if there's bickering going on all the time, in any meeting, it's hard for anybody to listen to, and to get over, you know."

Several people believed that the risk of such conflicts is that people leave the group, or, that other people leave the group, which was considered to be worse. But the discussion ended with the statement:

Samuel: [FG]…. But I think that it's been a very good working group in that there haven't been any real personality differences. I mean, nobody's ever banged a table or slammed a door.

4.1.5.2 Getting other people involved

Samuel and Richard spoke about how important it is to be open to new members and to be seen as such:

Samuel: ..that is definitely in my view a huge challenge – that we have to attract more people into it and we have to give off the aura that this is not a closed club, that everybody is welcome to join and everybody's experience and input is welcome…. And we need to get new blood in all the time.

Richard : Perhaps there is a perception out there that it's a closed group. Anyone involved knows it's not.

However, Emma's experience trying to get involved with voluntary groups was: "that some of the groups aren't as open as they might be" and Elizabeth and Marianne both spoke of people's reluctance to get involved and take on committee roles in voluntary groups:

Elizabeth: I ended up being elected secretary at that meeting and becoming part of LDG. And there was no opposition – there was a lot of silences waiting for somebody to take the job.

Marianne: I'd love to have the knowledge to know how to get people involved – to get more people involved. It annoys me when I sit and I listen to my own friends and they talk about "they don't do this" and "they don't do that" and I'll say "but you know that there's a group of people that do that and they're trying to do that – why don't you just go to one of the meetings?" "oh no I'm not going to one of them meetings". It's so annoying.

However, Richard mentioned the risks when new people join groups:

Richard: …one of the biggest problems is when your succession is based upon, not family but upon ideals, that it can be quite tricky - all of a sudden, with one or two appointments the whole direction of the group goes away.

4.1.5.3 Other challenges

The group spoke of other challenges and learning from them. For Elizabeth these included "dealing with people, with the employees… it's quite difficult and challenging cos each year you get people with different skills and you have to learn – ok this person can do this but I can't expect them to do some other things". For Oscar and Marianne the challenges included managing the demands on their own time, energy and emotions and included reaching personal limits:

Oscar: I suppose one of the other important elements is the personal end, which is the physical and emotional limits…I had a seizure in work, a full-blown grand-mal and it woke me up to say "Oscar, you're doing too much".

> Marianne: …being involved with the two [LDG and the Community Centre sub-committee] at the same time – it drained me

Elizabeth spoke of having to remind people that they are volunteers: "…when… there's complaints… you have to be very genial with them and talk to them and say sorry it won't happen again, or it probably will happen again – we try our best, we're all volunteers" and Kevin pointed out that "there are lots of things we would like to do but there are limited resources".

4.1.6   Some recognition of learning through this process

Elizabeth realised through this process how much she has learned over the years:

> Elizabeth [FG]: …going through this process with you Teresa, has opened my eyes to what I have learned over the years, you know, when I had to talk about it. I wouldn't have thought about it before that, cos we were just going along doing whatever we had to do to get from A to B, and…we did learn.

Patrick believed there was still more unremembered learning: "I'm sure I'm forgetting other things that I've learned along the way" and Miranda, who started out saying "I wouldn't say I actually learned anything from my involvement in the LDG…" acknowledged by the end of the interview: "…as we're having the conversation I probably have realised that I have learned more than I thought I did, maybe just a different kind of learning"

However, there was a dissenting voice:

> Michael: I wouldn't say I learned anything more at the LDG than I did at the University of Life. You might have picked up little bits of things but by the time I came into the LDG I had 50 or 55 years under my belt so I had my degree.

4.2   CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to present a brief overview of a large body of learning which has been done over an extended period of time by a group of people who have been motivated to learn in order to do. Some of this learning has been recognised through this research process.

There was extensive learning content about participating in the group including committee roles, running the Community Hall and the Community Centre, grants and

fundraising, digital skills, learning about support from "officialdom" and corporate governance in community groups. The participants also spoke about some of the attitudes, understandings and beliefs they acquired including learning to value community, leadership, community work and the work the group does.

Unpicking the learning from the doing, unpicking the knowledge and skills from the attitudes, understandings and beliefs in that learning, unpicking the what and the why from the how are all extremely difficult and subjective. However it seems reasonable to conclude that much learning has taken place, that the learning was largely informal and that attitudes, understanding and beliefs form both part of the learning and large parts of the motivation for the learning and the doing.

5   CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

> I'm very glad you asked me that, Mrs Rawlinson. The term 'holistic' refers to my conviction that what we are concerned with here is the fundamental interconnectedness of all things.
>
> Douglas Adams, Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

I set out to explore the learning that has been done by the members of LDG because I believed it to be extensive, valuable and undocumented. This chapter will attempt to answer the question: What are the informal learning experiences of the members of LDG and to identify the implications of that question to this and other voluntary groups and to policy-makers and practitioners in adult and community education.

This analysis will consider the extent and significance of the participants' informal learning and its interconnectedness across multiple sites. This interconnectedness makes it difficult to unpick where things were learned. This chapter will also attempt to analyse the findings compared to what Livingstone characterises as explicit informal learning (Livingstone, 1999) and to tentatively identify some of the participant's tacit learning. It will also consider the importance of learned attitudes, beliefs and understandings in motivating the group's efforts.

This chapter also will consider the significance of some formal learning to the group's activities, the group's approach to learning committee roles and will conclude with a discussion about their recognition and non-recognition of their informal learning.

The difficulties of researching and analysing informal learning pointed out by Livingstone (Livingstone, 1999) and Eraut (Eraut, 2000) have been encountered throughout this analysis. The group's extensive learning and the power of people's capabilities to learn significant things without needing instructors or curricula or educational institutions to teach them is also apparent throughout this chapter. It suggests that policymakers would do well to consider this capability thoroughly and fairly in their policies on adult and community education and on lifelong learning.

5.1 THE EXTENT, INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GROUP'S LEARNING

It emerged that the group seeks new members who have done good things elsewhere i.e. who have already demonstrated learning that the participants believe would be useful to the group. Examples include Kevin's recruitment for his finance background and Marianne's for her administration experience. This is consistent with Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky's assessment that the definition of volunteering usually implies using existing skills (Duguid, et al., 2013).

Despite recruiting people for their demonstrated capabilities, the interviews and focus group identified large quantities of learning through the participants activities in the group in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, understandings and beliefs. This broad set of learning was consistent with the examples of learning content (the noun) considered by Illeris (Illeris, 2015) and discussed in Chapter two. The depth and breadth of the learning as evidenced by the stories told in Appendix two and the summary of findings in Chapter four is also consistent with both Eraut (Eraut, 2000), (Eraut, 2004) and Illeris' (Illeris, 2011) uncovering of extensive informal learning in the workplace and with the extensive learning identified by Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky and by Foley through volunteer work (Duguid, et al., 2013), (Foley, 1999).

The group's learning extends in both directions between the workplace and the voluntary group. There are multiple examples of this including Kevin's workplace learning about corporate governance being extended and modified to apply in the voluntary group and Oscar and Marianne both advancing in their careers as a result of their learning in the group. Marianne's background in administration was a significant reason for the group seeking her participation. Oscar too spoke of using his professional learning in LDG.

There were also some interconnections between formal and informal learning – Kevin's formal training as an accountant formed the basis of his work for the group and this in turn helped Elizabeth learn the treasurer's role.

The importance of prior informal learning though efforts in other voluntary groups is also evident and is consistent with of Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky's suggestion that involvement in multiple voluntary groups impacts volunteers' learning processes

(Duguid, et al., 2013). Examples include Michael's 25 years as Chairman of the Co-operative Creamery and Miranda's learning in Macra na Feirme and Patrick's involvement in the St. Patrick's Day parade committee.

Willingness to share learning with other voluntary groups was also evident – Oscar spoke of helping other groups to get funding and to get set up properly and Kevin of bringing his learning about fundraising to the Parents' Association.

All of this interconnectedness made it difficult for the participants to identify where exactly something was learned – in LDG or elsewhere or both – and in some cases participants said that the learning was interconnected e.g. Marianne's formal course in Community Development and her work for the LDG "all ran in together".

The informal learning that took place was consistent with Livingstone's definition of informal learning i.e. it took place outside of educational institutions, with no authorised instructor, no externally imposed criteria and its terms were defined by the person(s) doing it (Livingstone, 1999). However, I suggest that this informal learning was not consistent with the European Commission's definition as "a natural accompaniment to everyday life" (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8) on the basis that informal learning is core to how the group functions and the willingness of group members to learn informally is key to the group's success. It makes the EC's definition of informal learning as "natural" and in "everyday life" reasonable, however, labelling it "an accompaniment" is inaccurate and devalues this learning.

5.2   INFORMAL LEARNING IN VOLUNTARY GROUPS – DIRECTOR/COMMITTEE ROLES

One of the aspects of the group's behaviour which emerged clearly was the informal way in which participants learned to perform director/committee roles.

Elizabeth, who spoke of being secretary of several different voluntary groups, noted that she had never done a course in being the secretary of a committee. Marianne learned how to write minutes by reading Elizabeth's old minutes. Michael delivered a very clear definition of the Chairman's role and said he learned it as chairman of the Co-Op. Nobody mentioned any formal or non-formal education for director or committee roles.

So, the director and other committee roles in the group seem to be passed on exclusively through informal learning. The group Treasurer is a professional but the knowledge of how to perform some of that role has been learned informally by sub-committee Treasurers both from Kevin and from other groups.

The other aspect of these roles is the extent to which they are unwritten and therefore open to personal definition and interpretation. Michael made his own definition of the chairman's role which he did not relate to me (as his successor) until he told me in his interview, and I never thought to ask - I made my own definition too. Marianne and Elizabeth both defined the secretary role for themselves albeit that Marianne read Elizabeth's minutes to help her figure it out.

It is largely taken for granted that people who join the board or a committee or take on a specific job do their own learning and are willing to do so – no training is offered to new group members, and new officers are largely left to figure out the job for themselves. One possible implication of this is that this method of informal learning and transmission of job roles seems to have worked for the group and can reasonably be expected to work in similar groups elsewhere.

5.3   ATTEMPTING TO NAME THE EXPLICIT INFORMAL LEARNING

In Chapter two I argued that Livingstone's explicit informal learning (Livingstone, 1999) includes what Eraut (Eraut, 2000) called reactive learning, what Schugurensky called self-directed learning, and, when recognised retrospectively, what he called incidental learning (Schugurensky, 2000). In this section I have attempted to name the explicit informal learning in the findings using these categories in order to better understand the learning itself and how the participants learned.

Reactive, self-directed and incidental learning all seem to be present in the findings although it is not easy to unequivocally label any individual piece of learning as one specific type. There seemed to be substantial amounts of reactive and incidental learning and less self-directed learning among the explicit informal learning.

Elizabeth's extensive list of things they had to learn about running the Community Centre, Oscar's learning to use the eTendering system in order to apply for a Leader

grant and Kevin's account of figuring out what corporate governance means for community organisations in response to the audit recommendations by Pobal all seem to be examples of reactive learning in that they were "unplanned and near-spontaneous" and the learners were aware of the learning (Eraut, 2000).

Given that it was intentional and there was awareness of the learning at the time it seems reasonable to label Marianne's learning how to write minutes as an example of self-directed learning.

Elizabeth's realisation that the French people spoke better English than the Irish spoke French, her learning how to structure her Treasurer's reports by seeing Kevin do it, Marianne's realising that there are "standard" roles on a committee, Kevin's and other's statements about what they learn just by listening at the meetings, and the realisation that they can learn in this way i.e. learning about learning, seem to be reasonable examples of what Schugurensky called incidental learning as there was little evident intention to learn but the person realised they had learned something, (Schugurensky, 2000).

So, there are several clear examples of what Livingstone called explicit informal learning (Livingstone, 1999) taking place in the group, some of which fit into Schugurensky's categories of self-directed and explicitly recognised incidental (Schugurensky, 2000) and some of which fit into Eraut's (Eraut, 2000) reactive learning.

However, some of the learning does not fit neatly into any of the categories in the literature examined. Oscar spoke of growing awareness - that "the overall vision of a community began to kind of stir in me then" and "I don't know where it came from…Teresa, but I began to see people in the community who were vulnerable, who were displaced or were socially excluded". This seems consistent with Schugurensky's example of the teacher's growing awareness discussed in Chapter two - which does not really fit into his definition of incidental learning. Eraut's "near-spontaneous and unplanned" reactive learning seem to be a reasonable fit for Patrick's learning by quietly "soaking it all in" at meetings and Richard's conscious efforts to learn by listening to others. It seems there was both intention to learn and awareness of the

learning at the time so in this way they also fit Schugurensky's definition of self-directed learning. However what was learned was dependent on the topics that arose i.e. the content was incidental. The term "self-directed" seems to imply some control over the content of the learning so it does not seem reasonable to label learning where the content was not chosen by the learner as self-directed. On this basis, Schugurensky's analysis seems to be missing a category for learning that is intentional and where the learner is aware of learning taking place but where the topic is incidental.

On the other hand, Eraut seems to be missing a category where the realisation occurs some time after the learning experience such as Richard's "in hindsight it should have been done in a different manner". Tacit learning which is later made explicit (Eraut, 2000) does not seem to fit Richard's hindsight example - Schugurensky's incidental learning (Schugurensky, 2000) seems to fit better here.

To conclude this section, the participants have provided several examples of explicitly recognised informal learning, some of which can be categorised as self-directed, reactive and incidental. Schugurensky and Eraut both identified intentionality and awareness as key aspects in the categorisation of different types of informal learning and their categories have proven reasonably useful if incomplete.

Clearly the majority of the learning identified in this research is learning of which the participant is aware. I will now consider evidence of tacit learning or socialization, of which the learner is unaware.

5.4 Tacit learning / Socialization

Tacit learning or socialisation is, by definition, harder to identify with confidence, as discussed in Chapter two. If the person who learned it hasn't explicitly named it as learning, it could be because they haven't recognised it as learning because their definition of learning is limited to what is learned in formal education, or it could be that they do not realised they have learned it at all e.g. unconsciously absorbed rules of conduct.

So, it is impossible to make any definitive claims about the tacit learning that the participants may have done except where they have subsequently recognised it

themselves and spoken about it. Having said that, Miranda's statement about behaviour in meetings - that "you can't always say what you think" – may well be an example of tacit learning, where Miranda has unconsciously absorbed rules of behaviour in meetings but has not labelled it as learning in her interview. However, taking Eraut's recommendation of good practice in identifying tacit learning (Eraut, 2000, p. 119), to be sure of this it would be necessary to ask Miranda to verify this assessment, which was not possible in the time available.

The beliefs which sustain the way key committee roles are learned informally did not emerge explicitly in the research either however, Livingstone's characterisation of tacit learning as "taken-for-granted" (Livingstone, 1999) does seem consistent with the way the Chair and Secretary roles are learned but not explicitly passed on. The learning appears to have been tacit, and Michael has reflected on it and made it explicit and then explained it in his interview. However, again, it is not possible to state this definitively without asking the participants.

The short list of tacit learning tentatively identified here seems to confirm the arguments made by by Livingstone and Eraut that tacit learning is difficult to identify and make explicit and with Eraut's suggestion that verification is required when tacit learning is tentatively identified by researchers (Livingstone, 1999) (Eraut, 2000).

The implication of tacit learning in general is that it is not possible to explicitly pass on learning that has not been recognised. While it seems to have worked for the group, it could be argued that there is some risk associated with relying on tacit learning to pass on required learning. However, a deeper discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this research.

5.5 LEARNED ATTITUDES, UNDERSTANDINGS AND BELIEFS

Illeris' theory that motivation influences what and how much we learn and that what we learn includes attitudes, understandings and beliefs as well as knowledge and skills (Illeris, 2004) was discussed in Chapter two. This implies that the attitudes, understandings, and beliefs that drove the creation of the group and that sustain the effort required over many years were learned at some time by the participants. It also

implies that this learning can subsequently motivate other learning. There was some evidence that this happened: Some participants spoke of learning attitudes, understandings and beliefs, some of this had taken place in the group and some took place elsewhere. However, when and where much of this learning took place was far from clear.

Richard, who recognised this learning, said he learned the values of community work from his family. Oscar seems to have learned some of them through his involvement in this group and others: "From then I started to see – with my in-depth involvement.". Marianne may have learned them through the course on Community Development that she was doing when she joined the group but seems to have become more aware of them through her participation: "I learned how important it is to become part of a community".

Other participants did not speak directly of learning to value community and the work the group does. However, it could also could be that values, attitudes and beliefs were not recognised by the participants as things they had learned and therefore they did not mention learning them in the interviews or focus group i.e. more direct questions about when and how the participants learned their values, attitudes and beliefs might establish. This could also be could be more tacit learning which might not be identified easily. Richard recognised this when he said "I suppose it's difficult to understand community work unless you're involved in community work. It's difficult to be able to pick apart why people do something."

Regardless of whether it was recognised as learning, learning from the group's successes provided motivation to continue: Edward spoke of the success of the Fair Green project giving the group confidence to do other projects and Oscar learned that "anything is possible". So, a learned attitude of confidence and a learned belief in the possibilities have provided further motivation to do more for some of the participants, and when the doing required more learning such as setting up the Community Centre, the motivation has been carried into the learning. This cycle of learning and motivation seems consistent with Illeris position outlined in Chapter two that attitudes and motivations can both mobilise learning and be influenced by it (Illeris, 2004). It is also

reminiscent of Kerka's reference to Elsdon (Kerka, 1998) in Chapter two about volunteer activities triggering growth and confidence despite the fact that volunteers do not explicitly set out to learn these things.

Given the amount of effort the participants put into this group, evidenced throughout Chapter four and in Appendix two, I suspect that there is more learning about the attitudes, understandings and beliefs the group members have acquired which motivate them which has not been uncovered by this research. This could indicate that, as suggested by Eraut and Livingstone (Livingstone, 1999), (Eraut, 2000), much of this learning may be unrecognised. However, I did not explicitly ask about the participants motivation, so if they did not recognise motivation as learning then they may not have spoken about it. Either way, further research would be required to uncover this learning.

5.6 FORMAL/NON-FORMAL LEARNING

There was some limited attendance at formal and non-formal classes by the group in all of the years the group is in existence. Elizabeth and Edward did an ECDL course. Elizabeth mentioned that some members of the group did a course in Child Safeguarding. Marianne was studying for a FETAC level 5 certificate in Community Development when she joined the group.

The shortness of this list could indicate that the group don't feel the need for formal learning to do what they do, however this was not really a topic of discussion in the interviews or the focus group, so it is not possible to draw a conclusion here.

However, there was evidence of the importance of some formal education to the group's activities. Kevin's training and professional experience as an accountant has supported many of the group's own fundraising activities, has enabled the group to create the corporate structure and governance required to obtain state funding and has shown other group members how to perform the treasurer's role. However, given that his formal education and informal experience in the workplace are intertwined, it is impossible to say how much of the benefit can be attributed to the formal education

and how much has resulted from his informal learning in the workplace, it is only possible to say that the combination has been of significant benefit to the group.

The implications of this for other voluntary groups and for policymakers and training practitioners in the community/voluntary area are that they should be aware of the need for knowledge and skills in accounting and corporate governance in order for groups like this to obtain state funding.

Apart from Kevin's professional learning, the broader lack of engagement with formal/non-formal learning is neither consistent nor inconsistent with Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky's assessment that most definitions of volunteering imply that volunteers are using previously acquired knowledge and skills (Duguid, et al., 2013) as the prior learning which drives recruitment into the group can be formal, non-formal and informal.

5.7 RECOGNITION AND NON-RECOGNITION OF INFORMAL LEARNING

There were some indications of unrecognised learning, of quite a narrow definition of learning and some doubting the value of some types of learning by participants.

Emma, in reference to taking minutes and administering the recruitment process, said: "I haven't done anything that isn't so basic that you'd need to learn how to do it", however Marianne spoke specifically of learning to take minutes. So, there are differing interpretations of what needs to be learned with some participants believing that some things do not need to be learned. Emma's characterisation of tasks being so simple as to not require learning seems to indicate perhaps that learning is only considered learning if it reaches some threshold of significance or difficulty – below this level it is taken it is "regarded as part of a person's general capability, rather than something that has been learned" (Eraut, 2004, p. 249). This also seems to support both Livingstone's characterisation of informal learning as an iceberg – where a large proportion of it is submerged and not-visible – and his distinction between explicit informal learning and tacit learning by "peoples' conscious identification of the activity as significant learning" (Livingstone, 1999). Emma's non-labelling of some of her skills as "learning" could suggest that this was more tacit learning.

Edward's question in the Focus Group: "Would experience be as valuable as skill in some situations?" doesn't necessarily imply anything about the value of informal learning i.e. that skills are learned through formal learning and experience is informal, but it does seem to indicate a doubt about the value of one type of learning (experience) compared with another type (skill).

Towards the end of her interview Miranda conceded that she had realised during the interview that she had learned more in LDG than she originally thought, so, reflection was needed to make the learning explicit as Livingstone suggested (Livingstone, 1999). Miranda also recognised that this was "a different kind of learning". The idea of a "different kind of learning" suggests that Miranda had a definition of learning that did not include the type of learning that she recognised when she reflected on it, and that the reflection caused her to broaden her definition.

It could be argued that the learning capability of group members is taken for granted i.e. there is an expectation that new recruits will be willing and able to figure it out for themselves without explicit explanation from someone else, partially because it is not considered difficult. This expectation could be compared to the perspective in Kerka's quote from McCabe in Chapter two that "Learning is part of the contract between the organization and the volunteer" (Kerka, 1998) but in this case the organisation expects the volunteer to do their own learning.

On the other hand, other members of the group – Oscar, Kevin, Elizabeth, Edward and Patrick in particular - recognised and valued a lot of their informal learning, Michael spoke of having a degree from the "University of Life" and Oscar spoke of the danger of learning being lost and the importance of writing down group history, so the undervaluing and taking for granted of their informal learning is not ubiquitous. It seems reasonable to suggest that one of the reasons for the group's longevity and success is the willingness of the members to learn informally on an ongoing basis.

5.8 LEARNING ABOUT COERCION?

There was evidence of some acceptance of coercion by the group – both as coercers and as the coerced. Edward spoke of learning that "there are people who have to be

driven to do things" which is consistent with Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky's assertion that there can be some levels of coercion present in voluntary groups (Duguid, et al., 2013).

The coercion implicit in the demands for corporate governance and accountability have also been at least partially accepted by the group – Kevin considered the governance requirements to be generally a good thing while Miranda was less positive about the idea that the state will eventually audit her accounts, and the group have persisted with funding applications despite the increased effort involved.

5.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an analysis of the findings. The extent of the learning identified is consistent with Kerka's quote from Ross-Gordon and Dowling in Chapter two (Kerka, 1998). Much of it is also consistent with Foley's position on the informality of learning in social action and its embeddedness in that action (Foley, 1999).

Some of this learning has been recognised through this research process although it does not seem like enough to directly support Livingstone's position "most people do not recognize much of the informal learning they do until they have a chance to reflect on it" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 3). Further research would be needed to establish whether this applies to most people. In my opinion it probably does.

Both the interconnectedness of learning across multiple sites and the taken-for-granted nature of informal learning have been encountered. What the participants learned and why they learned it i.e. their motivation to learn, are deeply connected to what they do for the group and why they do it. What they learned and why they learned it also seem to be interconnected through beliefs and attitudes about the value of the work, the group and community and these attitudes and beliefs are themselves learned - which is consistent with Illeris' definition of learning content (Illeris, 2004).

As stated in Chapter four, unpicking the learning from the doing, unpicking the knowledge and skills from the attitudes, understandings and beliefs in that learning, unpicking the what and the why from the how have all been difficult, subjective and

tentative. It seems to be only possible to conclude that much learning has taken place, that the learning was largely informal and that, as Illeris argued (Illeris, 2004), attitudes, understanding and beliefs form both part of the learning and large parts of the motivation for the learning and the doing.

The implications include the fact that the group's largely unspoken system of informal learning has worked for them. For policy-makers such as the European Commission the power and extent of informal learning is something that should be considered more fully. Conversely, further reflection and, potentially, research on the group's tacit learning would be needed in order to make it explicit so that this learning could be passed on explicitly.

> Events, personalities, conflicts, crises may occasion a burst of insight and create a myriad of refractions of great brilliance: but these are always partial, even as our efforts to capture them are no more than approximations.
>
> (Burke, 1989)

This research asked the question: what are the informal learning experiences of the members of LDG?. When I started this research project I thought that almost all the learning that I would find would be informal and that a lot of it would be about corporate governance and obtaining grants and that there would have been little deliberate learning. While the majority of the learning the participants spoke about is informal, the research also identified some key formal and non-formal learning and more deliberate learning than I expected. It emerged that people brought a lot more prior learning into the group than I had realised and that, in fact, that visible evidence of their prior learning through previous activities, while not necessarily recognised as learning, is largely why they were asked to join.

Despite the fact that I set out to look for it, I have been surprised by the volume and breadth of learning that the participants have spoken of, both implicit in their stories in Appendix two and in their explicit accounts of learning. The extent of the informal learning uncovered in this research, and the fact that it greatly exceeds the formal/non-formal learning done by the participants in their work for the group also seems to lend weight to the argument that informal learning is the most significant learning situation. It also challenges the definition of informal learning as a residual of formal and non-formal learning – if anything, in this group, formal and non-formal learning are the small, but significant, residual. It also challenges the European Commission's definition of informal learning as "a natural accompaniment to everyday life" (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p. 8). When everyday life for a volunteer in LDG involves regular informal learning, then informal learning is a key part of everyday life, rather than an accompaniment.

This research demonstrates, albeit in a small way, the power of individual's and voluntary groups' capabilities to learn and do significant things without needing instructors or curricula or educational institutions to teach them and that policymakers

such as the European Commission would do well to pay more attention to it. It has implications for adult and community education policy as it clearly demonstrates the importance of informal learning.

This research may also have implications for other volunteer groups who want to obtain state funding as it highlights the need for some formal skills and experience in accounting.

Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky (Duguid, et al., 2013) recommended that voluntary groups use critical reflection to identify more of their tacit learning and to explicitly harness it for social change. However, given their success and longevity, and the fundamental implication of this research that the group's largely unspoken system of informal learning has worked for them, I am reluctant to offer any major recommendations to the group themselves or groups like them other than that they consider whether a more explicit identification of their learning would be useful to them.

6.1 SOME LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT THE RESEARCH METHODS AND POSSIBLE AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

If I was starting this research again I would do some things differently:

First, given the findings and analysis above about possible unrecognised learning by the participants I would start with a focus group discussing a definition of "learning", tacit learning and learned attitudes, understandings and beliefs. The objective would be to consider whether the participants agree that these are things that we learn and, if so, whether they have learned them through their work in the group.

I realise that this means in some ways I am trying to teach the participants what I think they need to know so that they can answer my questions in the way that I want, but I feel that the research uncovered a lot of learning about how to do things and not very much about why they do the work that they do for the group i.e. what I believe to be the learned values and beliefs that motivate them.

I would then move on to the semi-structured interviews and the other focus group.

Second, because I suspect that a lot more tacit learning has been done by the group than has been uncovered here I would try to use Eraut's approach where the researcher gathers the initial data, performs an analysis attempting to identify tacit learning and then goes back to the participant to verification (Eraut, 2000). However, twice as many discussions with the participants would be needed so this might be an area for future research.

Finally, given their involvement in multiple voluntary groups for several years several of the participants could be considered to be the "usual suspects" for voluntary activities in the area. It would be interesting to do a more in-depth piece of research on these people with a view to uncovering the characteristics of the "usual suspects" from the perspectives of their learning (the noun) and their approaches to learning (the verb) with a specific focus on where and how they learned the attitudes, understandings and beliefs that motivate them.

6.2 FINAL THOUGHTS

Regardless of the volume and breadth of informal learning uncovered in this research I am left with the feeling that I have only just begun to scratch the surface of the learning that the members of this group have done over the years. While a lot of learning of knowledge and skills were identified as were some learned beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, I remain unconvinced that the learned beliefs, attitudes and behaviours uncovered can account for the level of motivation that drove the effort that several members of the group have put in over many years.

I have learned a lot from the participants during this piece of research, not least about my own blind spots – things I thought "everybody knew" such as standard committee roles and operations, that we make big assumptions (usually correctly) that new members will figure out how the group works by themselves, that several people had knowledge and skills that I did not know about and that there is still a huge well of untapped skills and knowledge there.

Doing it has led me to think more about why we all do this and how the group as a whole works and I have concluded that it works largely because members are open to

doing new things that they believe to be of value in their community, and that they are open to continued learning in order to do those things.

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8   APPENDIX ONE: CONSENT FORMS

Consent to take part in the Research project

provisionally titled

An exploration of Informal Learning in Community and Voluntary Groups through the eyes of LDG

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research into informal learning as part of my studies for a Masters in Community and Adult Education in NUI Maynooth.

The purpose of the research is to collect and analyse data on the informal learning of members and directors of LDG during their voluntary work for that group.

The research will be conducted in the form of individual interviews followed by a small number of group discussions, all of which will be recorded. Each recording will be summarised after it takes place.   A copy of the recordings in which you participated and the summaries of them will be made available to you if you wish to hear or read them.   The recordings will be made and stored temporarily on a smartphone, then emailed and downloaded to a laptop and backed up to storage in Microsoft OneDrive. All of the research data including recordings, summaries and results will encrypted, archived to DVD, kept for ten years and then destroyed. The final research paper may be published if it is accepted.

If you wish I will anonymise your input – for example if I use quotes or extracts from the recordings in the final research paper neither your name nor any personal information about you will appear in it.   Your participation is completely voluntary. After the interview and group discussions you may withdraw any or all of your data at any time until April 30th 2019.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at [email address] or my research supervisor [name] at [phone number] or [email address].

The interviews do not constitute any form of counselling. Should you experience any kind of distress or discomfort as a result of the study, you can contact the Samaritans at freephone 116 113 or at (01) 872 7700.

If, during your participation in this study, you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Declaration:

I have read and discussed this consent form and agree to participate:

YES ☐ NO ☐

I want my input to remain anonymous: YES ☐ NO   ☐

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Name: _____

This appendix contains some of the stories the participants told me about their activities in the group.

Editing Notes:

1. Names and locations have been replaced with generics in square brackets e.g. [a local lady]
2. The stories have been trimmed for brevity but the words are those of the interview participant with occasional clarifications in [square brackets]

9.1   HOW THE GROUP WAS STARTED: SAMUEL'S STORY

I know that it was maybe '94 - sometime around then. [A local lady] came into the shop one day and she asked me to go to a meeting that was on in the Credit Union which was in [streetname] Street at the time. So it must have been before '94 [the Credit Union built new premises on a different street shortly afterwards]. The idea was being mooted to set up an organisation consisting of the organisations in the town. I unfortunately couldn't make the original couple of meetings. There were a couple of meetings held and LDG was set up. I don't know if it was labelled at that time but the idea was that it was to become the senate of, kind of, committees and structures within the parish or within the area, and that people would be able to assist each other, that we were all, kind of, ships in the night and we didn't know what was going on in each other's committees and clubs and that we might be able to assist each other and have a more ergonomic development of the area.

At the time there was a good recession on. It must have been before that then – it could have been '92 or '90, sometime around then – there was a bit of a recession on and they were trying to organise. The previous structure, which was the Community Council, had collapsed. It was kind of a very much - and I'm saying this now as a kind of person who was only at it a number of times - it seemed to me that there were political components in it. There were a group of Fianna Fail people at it, there were

Labour people, there were Fine Gael people, and it became a bit of a joust – they were jousting in public. Some people did wonderful work on it – there were very good things happened at it – but it fell apart eventually because it wasn't going anywhere, it wasn't achieving much.

I think that the only thing that it had achieved that had stayed going was the St. Patrick's Day parade committee was spawned out of the Community Council and that kept going and that was a great thing.

Then this LDG started. The whole idea in the beginning was to try and attract industrialisation or some kind of jobs to the area, to improve the economic outlook of the area, to try and get jobs in and that kind of stuff. But very quickly the social benefits of it became apparent. There is a good level of employment in the area. People needed to connect on a social basis and improve the living standards in the area, improve the amenities of the area.

I remember coming here [moving to the town] and thinking how wonderful it was that there were all these organisations there – the football club, the hurling club, the rugby club, the bridge club, the Boy Scouts – all the things were there. I think somebody said at some stage there were something like 70 or 75 amateur bodies – the Pantomime, the Drama group, the sewing group, the knitting group – there were all kinds of groups involved – the athletic club is a fantastic organisation, so many other groups. I just couldn't get over it – I thought it was a fantastic sign of a healthy community that they had that many groups in it. And I thought that the benefit of amalgamating their expertise together and amalgamating their effort to an overall larger game would have been a fantastic achievement and it would have been beneficial for all of the groups that got involved and that it would make life easier for them. And I think that has proven true – because if you look at what has happened, as I said, with the St. Patrick's Day Parade – the showcase that has become for all these groups. The Gun Club, the ICA, all the smaller groups that are involved in it as well as the really big groups. They have all, I think, developed dramatically with assistance from each other, and experience shared.

9.2 THE FAIR GREEN REFURBISHMENT

9.2.1 Edward's story:

The first major project that was undertaken was the re-establishment of the Fair Green as a site for community activity. Over the years it had been used for the purpose of fairs, agricultural use for the fairs, and then that was on a monthly basis, but then there were a number of trustees who had charge of running the Green and they operated on the basis that if it just generated enough income to pay its rates and any other incidental expenses that might arise that that was all that was required to do, but in the LDG we recognised that it had a more significant role to play in the life of the community and since the fairs had more or less, had definitely died out in the face of competition from the commercial marts, the site was basically available but nothing was happening on it. So the LDG made an approach to the Trustees of the Fair Green with a proposal that we would raise money to develop it as a community facility with seats and tree planting and paths for people to have recreational walks, and, in fairness to the Trustees, they were amenable to the suggestion, and they agreed that we should go ahead with that project. So we initiated a fundraising effort on our own behalf and we applied for matching funding to Meath Leader. At that time, I think it still holds, projects needed to be 50% funded by local contributions and 50% from Leader funding. We organized a scheme whereby people donated, I think it was £100 and each month there would be a draw when, I think, 3 people, I'm not sure of that now, either 1 or 3 people got their money back. And that was each month. But that generated a very useful fund for us in as much that we had a significant amount of money in our bank account which we could use as matching funding. It would be diminishing slightly with each passing month but not very significantly. And on the basis that we had that kind of funds available we were able to raise funds that we needed immediately from the bank and that in turn gave us the leeway to access funding from Meath Leader.

9.2.2 Kevin's story:

I think it was around 1996. At that stage I got involved because Edward was actively involved in the set up or getting it set up. He would have known of my community

involvement but [it was] probably more to do with my background - my finance background at work - they probably were looking at. So they saw that it was probably useful enough - from a finance background – to have somebody. So that's my original involvement. They were getting set up to get involved in a project in the Fair Green. That's where it started originally.

My recollection is that there was a small group of people at that meeting, probably 5 to 10 people I'd say. The idea was to set up – there had been a Community Council in the town – which I had no involvement in but I had seen it – and it was to try and get back to have a similar type of idea to a Community Council but not actually [the same].

I don't know – I don't have any recollection of where the LDG name came from, whether that was already decided before I got involved, I certainly don't have any recollection of being involved in the naming of that thing. And I think it was around 1996.

So, I know the Fair Green draw was in 1997, when we developed the Fair Green, and we had a fairly large fundraiser for the Fair Green which was in 1997-98. And I would have managed a huge amount of the finances on that. We had to raise – we were spending a hundred thousand on the Fair Green and we were getting seventy thousand from Meath Leader at the time – Meath Leader it would have been called. So we had to raise thirty thousand – it was pounds it was at this stage – pre-Euro time.

[The Gaeltacht community] used to be involved in organising fundraisers around the country. What they used to do, which was a great idea – it was run through the Gaeltachts, I think, around the country – but [one Gaeltacht community] actually ran it. So they would have a draw, and I think the tickets were £80, was my recollection. I thought it was a great idea when I saw it first. It was the first time I'd seen it.   [The Gaeltacht community] were organizing the draw and they provided all the prizes. So there was a draw for 12 months. And [the Gaeltacht community] provided all the prizes. I think there was a 12-month draw or maybe a 10-month draw – one a month for 10 months. So you could buy a batch of tickets off them, so you weren't responsible for any prize money.

What we agreed with [the Gaeltacht community] at the time was that we bought 300 tickets off them, which would be 300 tickets at £80, or it must have been more…. I think it was 300 tickets at £80, which was €24,000, and I think we had to pay £6000 to [the Gaeltacht community] for those tickets. And we kept the rest. And that £6000 went to [the Gaeltacht community] and out of that they funded the prizes.

So, once we sold the tickets we knew we had £18,000. The great advantage was that even though we were only selling 300 tickets – there could have been 10,000 tickets in this draw around the country so the prizes were very good, for £80 the prizes were very good. But there was no way we could have put up the prizes if we were only selling 300 tickets.

So that was my first [involvement] with the LDG. We set a target of selling 300 tickets - which seemed a huge task to try and sell 300 tickets. We actually went back to [the Gaeltacht community] before the draw because we ran out of tickets. We raised all the money we needed to raise in that one fundraiser. So it mustn't have been quite €30,000 – it must have been a bit less than that. Because I know we raised all the – I think we raised £21,000 or £22,000 out of that, and that was enough - between that and voluntary labour – and that's how the Fair Green was funded.

It was a big enough job. I remember when I took it on it seemed a small job. I would have done the finances.   A lot of people were paying – you could pay a tenner by standing order over the term of the draw so you didn't have to pay it all up front. So we had a fair lot of managing to make sure – who was paying what and how it was financed. It had to be checked every month to make sure that all the direct debits were being paid.

9.2.3 Miranda's story:

I was involved initially in newsletters and things like that because, particularly when we were involved in fundraising for either the Fair Green or the Community Hall when we were getting grants and we were trying to explain to people where we were getting money from and what the money was being spent on and why we needed matching funding and things like that to go on, and we used to do newsletters and then we ran a community lotto for a period of time so I know I was involved in the newsletters – I

used to…just basically…compose…I wrote them and formatted them and whatever had to be done and then we printed them out and we circulated them that way.

9.3 THE TWINNING

9.3.1 Samuel's story:

The Mayor of the [Area Name] Villages, or the group of Mayors, wrote to every town within 50 kilometres of Dublin because they are 50 km from Beauvais airport. They wrote to every town – to the Mayor of [Big town], the Mayor of [Town], the Mayor of [Town], the Mayor of [Village], the Mayor of [Village], and they wrote to every town as the Mayor. In our case, the mail came to [a person in the Post Office] who was in LDG, and he said – there's no Mayor but the LDG is where it should go, so he delivered it to us. I think [Town] got the same letter – somebody there sent it to somebody who was involved in the community and they replied, and we replied – they were the only two replies they got. They [the other town who replied] replied and said "good idea, but not now, we're not able for this right now" and we replied saying "it sounds like a good idea, we'd like to talk about it, come over if you like". They came over and we over to them and we had a chat and 3 or 4 visits back and forth and all of a sudden the Twinning started. That got people together.

I think the benefit of the Twinning, from my point of view, it wasn't about getting to know the French, it was getting to know the Irish. It's alright meeting people for a drink or meeting them at the Panto or meeting them at wherever it is, but actually to go on holidays with somebody for a weekend, you meet them and you start to get to know them really well. This thing of going over and back to France was, I thought, fantastic from that point of view.   It got people excited. I found that working in clubs – I was involved in the Rugby Club for a long time – when you're always asking people to buy tickets or to raise funds or to do work or whatever – people get tired of that. You need to have an attraction – something that people come to enjoy. It doesn't matter if it's work – they'll come and do it if they enjoy it. So that was an eye-opener for me.

9.3.2   Elizabeth's story:

Elizabeth: It was back in the year 2000 – the Millenium etc. – also it was the year that were got letters from France – the Twinning.

TC: Who's "we"?

Elizabeth: The town. I wasn't involved in the LDG at the time. I didn't know anything about it. I was in the town Accordion Band as the Secretary and my children were there.   I went to a meeting that was called by LDG bringing all the groups in the town together, representatives, to see how we would go about twinning with France. So then I understood that LDG was an "umbrella" group for the town, for all the groups in the town. And we did go ahead with the twinning with the [Area Name] Villages in France.

The next meeting of LDG was the AGM, which I went to, I was representing the town Accordion Band again, and I ended up being elected secretary at that meeting and becoming part of LDG. And there was no opposition – there was a lot of silences waiting for somebody to take the job. I sort of felt sorry for Edward sitting at the top so I ended up going up to join him. Immediately we were preparing for the group going to France. That was a huge thing. Sorry – the group COMING back from it. We were going to France first of all but a lot of that had been organised so the next things was the backfill which was coming back to Ireland here and doing the big signing of the Charter with the French group. And that meant organising the first big twinning event here in the town.

TC: So that was all through the LDG – there was no independent Twinning [group]?

Elizabeth: No – [is was] LDG. [A person in the Post Office] got the letter [which was addressed to the "Mayor of the town"]. He talked to [a local lady] – she was the secretary of the LDG and they decided Edward was the Mayor of the town because he was the chairperson of LDG at the time. So that's how that happened.

And it remained part of the work of the LDG for over 5 years completely. So was well as being secretary of the LDG I was also secretary of the Twinning subcommittee. Edward was the chairperson of the Twinning and Kevin was the treasurer of the

Twinning. The Twinning had no bank account. The grants that the Twinning were getting were through the LDG because it was the umbrella group. There was no separate Twinning "committee" until more than 5 years down the line so all of the events were organized through the LDG. This means organising all of the accommodation for the French coming over, and all of the speakers, writing to all of the different elected representatives, TDs etc. to come to the big event - the signing of the treaty etc. And that was it – that was the first big thing [that I was involved in] – that was in 2001.

9.4 THE ANTI-LITTER GROUP – ELIZABETH'S STORY

At the same time as that [the Twinning] - a lot of positive things were happening in the town at that time – there was a group that wanted to set up – an environmental group, in the same year, which ended up being the Anti-Litter Group.

They came to the LDG to see how they would do that. [A local lady] would have come. The first meeting of that was at the LDG and I was secretary there. So I ended up getting involved in what became the Tidy Towns. It wasn't called the Tidy Towns for years – it was called the Anti-Litter Group. Basically we just picked litter in the town because the town was very dirty at the time. There were lots of papers everywhere – it was really bad. Actually I felt it more – it was funny how I noticed it most was when the French came and we were walking up the town and I just saw, through their eyes, how bad the town was as far as litter was concerned. The two just joined together for me. So I was involved in both and stayed involved in both. I may not have got involved only I was in the LDG.

TC: So, again, they approached the LDG?

Elizabeth: Yes - because there was no other group - to set up a group. Then we had to set up separate groups. Within a few months they were set up on their own. They had to get grants. Edward had a lot of information about Meath Partnership and everything like that at that time and he was able to steer them the right way. It was great. So that was how they set up a [separate] group.

9.5   THE COMMUNITY HALL

9.5.1   Elizabeth's story:

The Community Hall then started – the whole renovation and refurbishment that you were involved in. In the background I was involved because we had to fundraise for our portion of it, and we did the Lotto – through the Lottery. That was a lot of paperwork because we had to keep all the records of all the individuals that took out Lotto membership for the year, and collect the money, then have our monthly draws and then put up the results of those draws every week and all.

Then the Pobal grant then came through after we had the renovations done in The Community Hall - we got the chance of getting Caretakers for The Community Hall. That would have been 2009 I think. This meant we had to create a Limited Company, which I didn't know anything about – I was never involved in Limited Companies or being a Director or anything. So it ended up that myself and Michael were the Directors of the Limited Company to begin with. And learning about your responsibilities as a Director – which I didn't really know anything about before that – and that was interesting. We had to then create a bank account for that because we had to draw down the money from Pobal. Also we had to have the interviews for candidates for Caretaker, advertise it etc. do all that, learn about scoring sheets – which we did. But we had help – we had a lot of professional help – but you had to learn about it yourself. And that was interesting. Through that I would have had to send out letters to the candidates to those that were successful and not. Down the years we had very few employee related issues – you had to be careful with them – it was all confidential. You had to learn that as well – these were community things and everything had to remain confidential – that was the way in a small town.

9.5.2   Kevin's story:

One of the things we came up with was that we would need some staff if we were going to run this hall. We would have to try and get some staff. It was never going to be possible, we felt anyway, to pay these staff [out of the revenue]. Pobal funds local community projects – one of the things it does – through their Community Service

Program. You can take on staff and they will be funded through the Community Services Program.

So we went about applying for some funding. And that's where a bit of a change happened in the LDG because one of the criteria of that is that Pobal will only fund limited liability companies. Up to that we were a community entity – a voluntary body with no legal structure – and Pobal won't fund those. So we realised that we'd have to set up a limited company, which we did. We set up a LDG [company] back in 2009 I think. And we hired staff and it went reasonably well. We were probably very new to this and, whereas we set up the company, we probably were very raw or innocent as to what we were supposed to be doing with it.

Through time we eventually got an audit through Pobal, and Pobal indicated to us that there was a lot of stuff that we were doing that didn't fit in with corporate governance which, I suppose, was a phrase that I had come across, but most people who were sitting around the table at a community group didn't know what we were talking about – corporate governance. It was the whole idea that you are now a director of a limited company so you must be doing things that tie in with company law, that tie in with employment law. You are acting as a limited company so you must be acting in a proper [way].

I suppose that was the biggest change that I would have felt that has happened and the biggest learning curve for me over the years in community groups. To a certain extent it's a bit unusual for me because I had a good handle on corporate governance because I would act for a lot of companies in my day job but I didn't really link that to what we were doing in the LDG – as a community organisation. We set up a limited company because we were told we had to. We had to have the structure [to get the money], I knew enough of what the structure was, and off we went. And we weren't doing anything particularly wrong – there was no question of anything not being done right – we were documenting the money that came in, we were paying the staff correctly, we were doing things correctly in according with wages records and all of that. It was all because Pobal said you have to have it. It came to a head when we originally had an audit and Pobal said there's a lot of issues here that need to be dealt

with but they are more corporate governance issues – like do you have proper accounting systems, are you documenting meetings correctly, and I suppose to a certain extent that was a huge learning curve for me as to what, like, it's a community organisation but you have to run it as a business. It is probably the biggest change that has happened, and it has happened more dramatically in the last 4 or 5 years in the LDG generally.

9.6   THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

9.6.1   Samuel's story:

The Community Centre is another no-brainer in my view. You could wait for a state-of-the-art community centre to be developed in 10 or 15 years time but you will have 10 or 15 generations of kids who have been exposed to smoking marijuana on the corner and listening to these yobbos telling them that the way forward is not to put on a pair of running shoes – it is to smoke a marijuana joint and that it makes you feel better. Then the rot just accelerates and people are on the wrong the wrong path for the rest of their natural life – not just for a year or two – they take a wrong turn and they're gone for ever. That's why the Community Centre is such an important thing that we have. It may not be state of the art but it's there. It has given so many kids an opportunity to, and adults too, to get involved in different things.

9.6.2   Michael's story:

[The Community Centre] came about…Redress – the old school building was offered to the Department of Education by the Sisters of Mercy under Redress. The Council turned it down at first I think. We went to them and said maybe they could undertake it and redevelop it into a [Community Centre]

TC: So we went to them?

Yes, we went to the Council and we talked to the nuns and it was all over Redress. That's how it came about. The Council turned it down first – they didn't want it. Then we saw the development potential and we went to them and it was amazing how agreeable they were after that.

TC: That the LDG would take it on?

Yes, well, the Council would take it and own it. The LDG would lease it – a 10 year lease on the main part and a year by year, you know all that, a year by year lease for the small bit of green area to which they might think they need quick access at some time. As and from then they were very co-operative. It was up to the committee of the LDG, then the committee of the Community Centre – they took it on after that.

9.6.3 Elizabeth's story:

After that, in 2011, because I was still secretary of the LDG, we had a lot of groups coming to us querying what was going to happen when the secondary school closed. Because a lot of them used the facilities, the gym etc., and Comhaltas used all the rooms for their classes. What they were going to do and where they were going to go when the [secondary school] facilities were going to be gone. Because [the new school] was a PPP school, getting to use the facilities in the new school would have been difficult. So, in the interim, we approached the Mercy nuns to see if they would lease the building to us straight away when it was closing. After a lot of meetings and talk – they were first of all going to knock it down – there was a lot of talk about that – we pleaded with them that a lot of the community groups needed the facility so they had second thoughts and they said that they would do a short term lease with us. Again, I had never been involved in something like that. Negotiations and short term leases. The whole LDG read through the lease and said yeay or nay to different aspects of it. They insured the building but we had to have public liability for it – we already had insurance for The Community Hall – so we just had to add it on. So, talking to the insurance companies – that was another thing that was a learning curve for me.

We got access to the building within a month. We were negotiating for a few months before that, in the August say, and we got access to the building in November – we took up the lease – and the school had only moved out at the beginning of November – it was great – there was only a 2 week gap. Because if you leave a building like that unattended it will get vandalised straight away and it already had gotten broken into.

From then on there was a lot of negotiations because the nuns said that wanted to hand it over to a public/government body so they approached the HSE, the County

Council etc. and there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with that and a lot of rejections. In 2016 we got it handed over to the County Council.   In the mean-time we had to bring the building up to scratch - fire regulations etc.   And again – learning about all those – fire regulations, and what we needed to do and what the gap was. We had a lot of people coming around and surveying the site and the building. Again, I wouldn't have known much about that – I still don't.

When we got the building to lease we had to learn – we had to start setting up rosters and rent and all that. We would have had a bit of information from The Community Hall, so that was grand – it was the same idea.   We had no caretakers there. Edward got wind of the word that there was Tús caretakers available so we immediately got two people as caretakers and we've always had that since.   This meant we had people to open and close the building when we were working or whatever but we'd still be there to fill in. We all were working fulltime and we couldn't run the building ourselves so we did need caretakers straight away. That involved creating set tasks for them because it wasn't like our Pobal caretakers who would take on the role themselves. We have to give them times and when they were available what jobs they should do. That happened yearly because they were only taken on on an annual basis – one year contracts. So every year they have to be trained up.

I had to learn about how to run the heating system, the gas system, where the fuses were for all the different [unintelligible] because that information had to be handed on every year to all of these caretakers and they had to be trained in. But my husband, who had been the principal of the school, had all that information, which was a very lucky thing. Because none of us would have had a clue where everything was. And that led to a lot of continuity in the building and in the actual running of the building – which room was heated by which heating system… There were 3 pumps and 3 boilers and the gas heating system was different.

Then it came to being involved in collecting the rents, because we didn't have a fulltime caretaker as such, and these people [Tús] were moving on each time, so it was very hard to give that role over to any of them. They took the money in. We set up a bank account for the Community Centre and rent was collected and receipts were given out

and bills were being paid for oil, gas, insurance, whatever. I got a lot of advice from our treasurer Kevin - not using the rent to pay for things, putting it straight into the account and taking it out again, accounting for every penny because Pobal and all these groups want to see our accounts and we have to make sure everything is above board. That's the way we run it, so it's all very clear and there is no money going missing anywhere along the way, So hopefully we have done that.

Dealing with tenants and problems with heating and fuses etc. That's been the run of the place. Demolitions of prefabs – that was good fun. Dealing with break-ins and dealing with the Guards when there was break-ins – and there was a lot of that – writing reports for them, what happened, what was taken, what was broken, whatever.

We had to bring the building up to fire regulation standards and we had to apply for grants for that. We had to apply for grants for a lot of things down the years. That meant getting all your accounts correct, getting quotes for different jobs that had to be done, tax clearance certs, insurance, policies etc all had to be in place. When you are applying for a grant there is an awful lot of paperwork involved, not just "please can I have €10,000?" You have to explain why you want it and what it entails so that's important as well.

Learning about the fire alarm and the maintenance of it – we expanded that and we also put in an intruder alarm and we had to learn about the maintenance of that, and everybody having their own code and the safety of the building. Because we had some many break-ins we thought it was important to have that. So many groups are using the building now that we need to make sure that their facilities and all of their equipment is safe. Because they are allowed leave their stuff there – we wouldn't have done this in The Community Hall – there was a bit. They all have their own insurance as well but they would all be asking [about the alarm]. Each time we would add on a little but more to the intruder alarm the culprits would break into another room so we expanded it in such a way that nearly each room is covered now and all of the groups have their safe storage. There are a lot of groups using the building at the moment. It's a success story really.

I love the fact that we have all these groups with special needs in the building. We have Special Hands, Autism Support – they are using all the facilities that we have – the kitchen and the rooms that they have developed themselves. We give them a room and they say can we paint this / can we develop it so that it provides everything we need for the kids that we have? And I get great joy out of them using it. If no other group was using it I'd be just so happy that they were using it and using the facility.

TC: How did that come about?

[Another local lady] became involved in the LDG because she was working in the county council when we were going through the whole process with the lease and taking over the lease from the nuns and the County Council – negotiating with them and she was doing the paperwork in the background. And Edward was going in and out to her, and she came to some meetings with us and then she was retiring and Edward said to her would you like to be a member of the LDG. So she was moving on and she was very interested in the whole project and said yes.

Then, because of that, and she was also involved in Special Hands and she - the group then started to use the building. It was an open door for them. They had been looking for places and struggling to find places. They used a place in Kells, but only when they could get it, and they used the swimming pool as well. And now they actually have their own room in the Community Centre and all the equipment in it and they can also use the kitchen for their cookery classes.

They are expanding because they have the facilities to do so and we're working with them because we are actually developing the building in such a way that it is special needs friendly. We are at the moment developing the building to put in a ramp down to the gym and today the Arjo-Huntley people are there putting in the hoists and the beds in the "changing places" room, it's a facility where there are showers and toilets and it's all wheelchair friendly. So anybody that's in a wheelchair or has broken a leg or whatever could go in and have a proper shower – they may not have it at home – or if any of the children who are there using the facilities has had an accident they can have a shower and all there. So it's fantastic – the building is developing to provide the needs of the people that are using it.

The Special Hands group has brought a lot of good things to the building in the sense that they are getting grants and putting them back into the building. They helped with the boilers. One of the old boilers was on its last legs and we got two new ones last year – we provided the money for one and they provided the money for the other through the grants. They also got a grant for the new cooker in the kitchen which is state of the art. Then we put in our new windows and our new insulation which has really helped as well. So all in all one group is helping the other in the building. It's all a good service, working together.

I've learned that there is no facility like that in the county and there are people with special needs – coming to Special Hands and the Autism Support Group – from all around Meath and beyond it. They are coming from Cavan and from Ashbourne, they are coming from Mullingar and from Drogheda – all to the town because there is no other facility that they can use. A support group – it's as much for the parents as for the children.   There's actually nothing out there like that. There should be more being done, but I think that in a way the County Council realise that and they are pumping money – they are giving us grants – we are pushing an open door – every time we ask for a grant we get it because they know they have to provide this.

But the Special Hands group are a very strong group. The parents are lobbying TDs, County Councillors the whole time and they are asking for this because when their children come to 18 there is nothing out there for them. They go through the special needs school in Navan, St. Marys and there's maybe the autism units in schools but when they get to 18 they could be put into workshops where an 18 year old is there with a 60 year old man. There is no proper further education or whatever for them. Each parent has to push and push for their own child.   I don't know enough about it but I'm sort of learning from listening to them.

Downs Syndrome [Ireland] had their group doing a 2 year course where they were learning reading and writing there

TC: In the Community Centre?

Yes, they had that for two years all day Monday and all day Tuesday and they got their certificates from it. It was a course that was attached to the University of Melbourne. Again, It was run by Downs Syndrome [Ireland] – they were looking for a facility to use. They had to have enough parents, enough children for a group for it to work and then when they are finished the next group of parents will have to see are there enough of them to actually hold this again. So it is all down to the parents. And then they have to find a teacher, which they did – they found a retired primary school teacher and he taught them the English and Maths or whatever they writing skills and all, and there was enough of them there with the right ability to do this course. Again it is the parents that are pushing it.

TC: Do you know how did that come about? Whose idea? Who spotted this – the education - the idea of the course?

I think it was [yet another local lady] who is also in Special Hands with [the local lady]. She is the parent of a Downs Syndrome boy. So she sort of organised it – she asked the other parents – she saw there was others in the Special Hands group. It's only for Downs Syndrome children and it was funded through Downs Syndrome Ireland. So when we get our rent it would be from Downs Syndrome Ireland – a cheque from them for the rent for the year. So they would have organised the course and the teacher, they had to get the teacher, and then they had to get the parents and the teacher and all in to meet. I remember being there for that, sort of to help them meet up. Then they got their certificates last year – certificates for the Latch On Program. Basically it was a literacy program. I could see these children – their writing would be indistinct at the beginning and they were able to write lovely cards at the end of it, perfectly.

9.7   HOME SECURITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE - SAMUEL'S STORY

TC: You mentioned the beginning of the LDG but you also mentioned the fact that they had done things before the Fair Green – the locks…

Samuel: They had done the home security for older people – that was part of a Fás scheme, I think, at the time that we got involved in, where we hired - trained people to fit locks and peepholes and personal alarms for people who were living alone and who

were vulnerable. That went on for a number of years – Edward would fill you in on that because I think he would have been the guy who managed it to a large degree. That went on for quite a while. I think they probably fitted up to a hundred houses with locks and alarms and stuff like that for older people.