LEARNING THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the

MEd in Adult and Community Education/ Adult Guidance and Counselling

Department of Adult and Community Education

National University of Ireland Maynooth

2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I must acknowledge my debt of gratitude to the participants in this research for generously sharing their time and their experience(s).

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor David McCormack for his guidance and support.

I am especially grateful to Gertie, John, Gráinne, Siobhan, David and my friends and family who supported me.

ABSTRACT

This research is an arts-informed inquiry into the informal learning of a group of writers to explore the ways in which writing creatively and participating in a writing group contributes to their learning. The inquiry investigates self developmental, emotional and reflexive processes which are key aspects of transformative learning. Artistic ways of knowing are incorporated in the representation of the text and in the research data. This is a reflexive inquiry to investigate the potential contribution of creative writing processes to the practice of an adult educator. Key findings include the use of creative writing practices as a personal coping strategy and the self exploration and development engaged in through creative writing.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I begin by introducing the purpose of this research and what is being explored. I then describe the background of the research; explaining my motivations for conducting this inquiry, considering this research in the broader context of the field of adult education and acknowledging the limitations of this study. I follow by introducing myself as Educator, Learner, Writer, and Researcher. Throughout this introduction I describe the assumptions which underpin this research and discuss my understanding of terms used in this inquiry; learning, creative writing, and artistic ways of knowing. I conclude this chapter by discussing the structure and layout of the following chapters.

Research Question

The purpose of this research is to inquire into the informal learning which occurs by exploring artistic ways of knowing through the process of creative writing and examine how participating in a writing group contributes to this learning. I explore the nature of this learning and focus on (i) Self development, (ii) emotional understanding, (iii) and reflexivity. I discuss the ways in which the learning described in this research can contribute to knowledge of adult learning.

Background

Influenced by the informal learning which I experienced through my own engagement in creative writing, I wanted to explore the possibilities of creative writing as a way of understanding and learning from our experiences. In order to do so I asked a group of writers to share their understandings and their experiences of creative writing. These writers are members of a writing group, of which I am a member, who meet regularly to write together and share their writing. In this study I consider the informal learning perceptible in their accounts and the context in which it occurs. I explore aspects of the learning processes identified during the research process. I discuss the potential for writing to provide an opportunity to engage in reflexive processes required for adult learning which is creative and transformative.

I hope to enhance adult education practice by providing an insight into ways of knowing and learning which can be explored through engaging in artistic processes. Ways of knowing are themselves interactive processes. In order to explore and develop our understanding of the human condition it is necessary to recognise the various interconnected ways in which we come to know our experiences. Although I focus on coming to know, learning, through creative writing, I acknowledge that we cannot engage in this process independently. Our various ways of knowing interweave and collaborate in the constant shaping of our understandings and engagement with our experiences. Exploring artistic ways of knowing contributes to our understanding of the many ways in which individuals experience the world.

I argue that artistic ways of knowing are often undervalued compared to more literal ways of knowing, this is despite the important role they can play in adult learning (Lawrence, 2008). Lawrence discusses the role of the arts in exploring affective ways of knowing and providing a space for the exploration of emotional understanding of our experiences. Emotions are central to our experiences of and understandings of adult learning (Dirkx, 2008). Lawrence (2008) goes on to claim that through the arts we can become aware of inequalities in the world yet the arts can also allow us to imagine a transformed, more equal world. While I cannot claim that this is evident in the empirical study in this research, I do believe that through focussing closely on the learning of the participants (re)presented in the context of this research we learn more about the individual, subjective, emotional nature of our experiences (of learning). In doing so we gain a greater understanding of the ways in which individuals come to know and experience their world. We are also provided with an insight into the ways in which we can hold an awareness of the ambiguity and contingency of understanding without having to limit our understanding by relying on literal, logical ways of knowing which only partly provide us with an understanding of our experience.

I propose that the importance of this research lies in its potential for enhancing our understanding of learning and its edification in the context of adult education practice. I propose that through exploring how we form our understandings we can begin to imagine the possibilities for their transformation and continued transformation; we can begin to

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imagine the possibility of reflecting this process throughout our lived experience and in all our social interactions. However, as education systems and practices become more focussed on measured performance (Lynch, 2010) and Irish government adult education policy increasingly focuses on standardized, certifiable, job-centred training (Department of Education and Science, 2000, 2008; Department of Education and Skills, 2011) how can adult education practitioners meet their challenging task? How can educators maintain a space for adult learners which allows them to explore their understandings, many Selves and ways of knowing, not necessarily acknowledged or valued in course exams and evaluations? How can adult educators meet the demands of the institutions and systems in which they work while at the same time encouraging the development of creative learners who recognise their potential for transforming themselves and the world they live in?

Below and in the following chapters I tackle some of the concerns which I have as an adult educator and suggest ways in which this research may "speak" to other adult learners and educators. I stress, however, that any claims made in this research can only be done so propositionally. The knowledge created here is 'partial, local, historical' (Richardson, 1998, p. 348). The (re)presentation of the research experience provided, while born out of a collaboration between myself and the participants, is finally shaped by myself as the researcher (Banks, 2008). As such, the interpretation presented is subject to the way I view the world and would be different should another have embarked on this process. What follows is an excerpt from a continued, ever-evolving conversation with adult learning and social change located within the context of this particular research experience.

Educator, Learner, Writer, Researcher

My interest in this research topic developed as a result of the dialogue, and lack of dialogue, between the different Selves which I play in various parts of my life; Educator, Learner, Writer, and now Researcher, to name but a few. I wanted to explore the learning and different ways of knowing which connect and serve to develop these various Selves. My engagement in this research has constantly challenged the way in which I manage the relationship between the several roles that I play and I have learned to embrace the various, yet intertwined understandings and perspectives which they bring to the research process.

Educator/Learner

I work as an English language teacher and more recently as a creative writing facilitator for an organisation that works with the homeless. I have volunteered as an adult literacy tutor and in a creative writing centre which provides free workshops for school groups. These roles are varied and demand differing skills, experience and knowledge, yet they all require me to act as some form of Educator. My task as an adult educator is to encourage students to develop the confidence to direct and evaluate their own learning, to explore the relationship between their learning and life/lives "outside the classroom", 'to view truth and knowledge as contextual, to see value frameworks as cultural constructs, and to appreciate that they can act on their world individually or collectively and that they can transform it' (Brookfield, 1985, p. 10).

To fulfil my role(s) as Educator I must ask: How can I encourage my students to explore their Self development and personal experiences and become aware of the various ways of knowing experiences? How can I encourage my students to question and investigate the value which is placed on certain kinds of truth and ways of knowing? How can I encourage students to relate their learning across their life experiences and appreciate their own potential to transform the world?

Brocket and Hiemstra (1985) argue that educators must recognise themselves as learners. All of my Educator roles must involve myself as a teacher who is also Learner. In order to appreciate and demonstrate openness to ways of knowing and understanding I need to investigate the various ways in which I have engaged in learning, explore the ways in which my perspective and understandings of experiences have been formed, and examine the context in which this learning occurs.

Learning

In this research I focus on learning explored in informal contexts. Informal learning is the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skills which occurs outside of formal, organised learning courses and institutions (Taylor, 2006). This research involves learning which occurs outside of work or formal study. The intent of the research participants is to engage in writing for the purpose of writing itself and not to complete a formal learning programme.

Informal learning can be characterised into various differentiations depending on the intention/un-intention of the learner to learn and consciousness/un-consciousness of the learner to the learning achieved (Taylor, 2006). The question of relevance in this research is not *which* kind of learning is engaged in but *how* a particular context contributes to learning (Vadeboncoeur, 2006). I explore the ways in which learning occurs in the context of creative writing practices.

The learning theories I examine in this research are based on the essence of how we come to know our experiences, how we perceive and interpret them. Brookfield (1985) gives a summary of the psychology of an individual's perception of experience: The nervous system receives information, stimuli and messages, and mental strategies are used to process, code and internally classify this data. Mezirow (1985) adds to Brookfield's theory, and indeed revises and explicates his own theory (2007), and explains that to interpret our sense perceptions we rely on frames of reference. Frames of reference consist of meaning perspectives which filter and shape our experience. They are subject to the limitations of our symbolic/language codes, social norms, psychological development, learning styles, etc. Frames of reference also consist of meaning schemes or points of view which are 'composed of the specific beliefs, feelings, judgments, intuitions and attitudes that accompany and shape a specific interpretation' (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11).

According to Mezirow deep learning involves the transformation of our frames of reference. This occurs when previous learning engages with present experience and we critically reflect on the process by which we assess our assumptions. Brookfield describes the examination and challenging of value frameworks, belief systems and moral codes which influence our assumptions as 'an internal change in consciousness' (1985, p.15). In the following chapter I explore transformative learning in the light of further literature and research which examine the process of transforming our ways of viewing the world. I specifically focus on artistic ways of understanding our experiences.

The view of learning presented in this research, in recognising its interpretive nature and essential connection to our past and present experiences, sees learning as a cyclical process in continuous flux as we constantly negotiate what it means to be in our world.

Understandings and claims to knowledge are contingent. Recognition of the contextual nature of our understanding means that we can never rely on one 'true' interpretation of experience. Acknowledging alternative interpretations allows us to appreciate the wealth of interpretations which can make up our understanding of human experience. Each individual's understanding of the world is as important as any other. Each individual's understanding changes throughout and across their lives as they constantly, consciously or unconsciously, engage in various types of learning processes.

I next look at another of my Selves, Writer, a Self through which I have identified important learning strategies and deepened my understanding of the various ways in which I can understand and interpret my experience.

Writer/Learner

While I am sure I had written creative pieces for school assignments before this time, my first memory of creative writing, having an urge to write creatively, was when I was 14 years old and my grandfather died. I was not particularly close to him but he was the first person that I knew who had died when I was at an age that this made me wonder about the nature of life, death and relationships. I needed to express my emotions and confusion in some way and I found that poetry allowed me to do this, not only to "blurt out" my feelings on the page but to process my experience and come to a better understanding of how I was feeling and why I was feeling that way.

Throughout my life, to varying degrees, I have looked to creative writing as a way of understanding my experiences. I write for the artistic processes which it requires me to engage in. It is in these processes that I discover ways of knowing the world. I write poems to express and articulate my feelings and interpretations of experiences and explore my emotional connection to the world. While I aim for a well-constructed poem which invites the reader to imagine the experience, it is in the process of re-writing and attempting to succinctly articulate my experience that I come to know and understand it. Cixous explains that writing helps her to go further than herself, gives her more knowing, and furthers her knowing (Cixous, Calle-Gruber and Derrida, 1997).

Through poetic and metaphorical representation of my experiences I gain access to unconscious processes which help to form my understanding of the world. John Steinbeck's literary character, Ethan, says of the unconscious:

> 'this secret sleepless area in me I have always thought of as black, deep, waveless water, a spawning place from which only a few forms ever rise to the surface... I think some people have closer access to this place than others – poets, for example' (1996, p.86)

I don't think that writing poetry privileges an individual's comprehension of unconscious processes but I do feel that embracing a space where we can hold and recognise paradoxes and contradictions allows us to know the world in alternative, to logical and literal, ways and that this enriches our knowing.

Sampson says of poetry 'it records an experience that is not fully worked out' (1998, p.138). I argue that all imaginative engagement with experience has this quality. Sometimes we may not have explanatory words to represent our experience and understanding but we do have impressions, feelings, emotions – the essence of poetry/imaginative work. Throughout the process of finding a way to accurately express ourselves we can sometimes move closer to working our experiences out. Metaphorical understanding allows us to engage with the messy aspects of experience which we may not necessarily find a logical explanation for. It engages with what is difficult to explain and offers us alternative, interpretive, non-definitive understandings.

As part of this research I ask a group of writers to explore their metaphors for creative writing. Below is part of an extract from the metaphor I wrote during the creative writing workshop:

> 'Clowning... the expression is everything, show not tell...you wear a mask...insides out... it's playing, it's pushing boundaries, for yourself, first of all, for others... exaggerating the real, by pulling apart the real, deconstruction of the mores, of the outsides, of the faces we see'

Through writing stories I play and experiment with characters. Writing helps me to step outside my thoughts and feelings, look at them from a distance, and learn from them. I imagine my experience and the experiences of others. I can imagine other possible Selves

and the possible Selves of others. 'The text may act as a mask behind which the writer can experiment with the possible and the actual' (Sampson, 1998, p.140).

Our Selves are constantly constructed by those around us and this construction does not end with our interactions. Salman Rushdie (1999) writes in *The ground beneath her feet*:

> 'Lover or enemy, mother or friend, those who know us construct us, and their several knowings slant the different facets of our characters like diamond-cutter's tools.' (p.510)

Our identities are shaped by the social and cultural context in which we live and the roles which we play and are required to play. The Selves which we may find on the page are influenced, and limited, by the language and writing we use which 'carry the weight of social and cultural meanings' (Stuart, 1998, p.142). Questioning and challenging our writing provides us with an avenue to construct and deconstruct, write and rewrite our interpretation of the world. Having others to share our writing with, and if they share their interpretations of the experience which we represent through writing, we are offered the opportunity to reflect on these interpretations, examining how we have come to form them.

Creative writing

Above I have described my understanding of creative writing. It is a form of expression, it is a way of representing and knowing our experiences, it is a way to explore our Selves and our identity, it is subject to social and cultural influences, and it has the potential to offer a mirror, or better a crystal (Richardson, 1997), to reflect and refract our understandings and imaginings of the world and its possibilities. I consider the importance of writing in my life to lie in the processes which it requires me to engage in, artistic/ creative/ imaginative processes, rather than the physical product of these processes, it is in the *doing*.

Researcher/Learner

I inhabit the role of adult learner across all aspects of my life as I continuously grow and develop as a person. By engaging in this research I become Researcher/Learner, enhancing my knowledge and ways of coming to know but also building on knowledge, created through research, theory and practice, in the field of adult education.

I have come to better understand my Researcher Self by exploring my role as Writer, which I described myself as earlier. I sometimes feel uncomfortable identifying myself as such. Educator is more easily adopted; I have qualifications and recognised experience to "prove" my skills and I get paid for it. Writer is a self-appointed title, and in a way, so is Researcher. Schneider urges us to remember 'a writer is someone who writes' (2003, p.186). So in that case a researcher is someone who researches. However, Schneider was emphasising that we should not shy away from the title of Writer, as many do, because we fear we are not good enough to warrant it. Lawrence (2008) argues that many of us do not call ourselves artists, poets, writers, etc. because we feel the pressure of having to produce great art. He claims that we are often not encouraged to embrace creative ways of knowing the world as rational-cognitive ways of knowing are more valued in dominant Western culture.

Artistic ways of knowing

'We come to understand the world in many ways; the arts are among these many ways' (Eisner, 2008, p. 11). In this research I explore the way artistic ways of knowing can contribute to learning. Cole & Knowles (2008) argue that artistic, and personal, narrative, embodied and aesthetic, ways of knowing are ones which 'stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks' (p.55) yet are indeed ways of knowing through which we interpret and understand the world. I focus my lens specifically on writing as an artistic way of knowing. It is through the artistic processes which the development of writing skills requires that I explore ways in which we can enhance our present and future learning by exploring our Selves and the emotions which constitute our learning. I use the term 'artistic' and assume everyone to be Artist, a creative being, and believe that exploring that role can help us to become more creative learners. Artistic ways of knowing are not engaged in solely by those who have a painting hanging in a gallery or their name on the cover of a book. We all engage in artistic ways of knowing to some degree in our daily lives. I adopt Eisner's (2002) definition of what it means to be an artist; An artist is an individual who has 'developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills, and the imagination to create work that is well proportioned, skilfully executed, and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which [that]

individual works' (Eisner, 2002, p. 8). This research examines the ways in which exploring our Artist Selves contributes to learning.

I return again to my discussion of Researcher. As I conduct this research I have come to fill this role. But how can I claim to be a "good" Researcher? In order to more deeply explore artistic ways of knowing and develop myself as Writer I am a member of a writing group, the group who participate in this research. Throughout this research process I also joined another writing group, attended writing workshops and kept journal notes of my experiences as a creative writing facilitator, as a volunteer in creative writing workshops and as an educator who engages in creative writing in her practice. These experiences of course also served to inform my role as Researcher of creative writing. I have also found that through creative writing I could explore and learn about the role of Researcher and my understandings of experiences in this role.

The interpretive arts-informed approach which this research takes, and which I more fully explore in the methodology section in Chapter 3, requires a researcher to maintain a 'reflexive presence' in the research (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61), be constantly aware of and acknowledge the interpretive nature of research *throughout* the research process (Denzin, 2009), keep issues of communicability and accessibility to the audience at the forefront (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and 'focus on the inherent promise that artful representations have the capacity to provoke both reflective dialogue and meaningful action and thereby, to change the world in positive ways that contribute to progressive, participatory, and ethical social action' (Finlay, 2008, p.75). In order to fulfil my role as Researcher I have discovered that engaging with my other Selves in a creative way could help me in this process. Hunt states that 'fictionalising from ourselves...helps us to engage more deeply with our inner life, opening up possibilities for greater insight and self-understanding' (1998, p.33). Below is a piece of writing which I produced as I grappled with understanding the research process, what it means to be Researcher, and Researcher/Writer, and the form and structure that this (re)presentation of research should take:

[There are many voices wanting to tell this story]

Researcher – This story begins with questions. My journey involves seeking out the answers to questions about the learning process and the writing process. I begin by 'asking the elders' what they have to say and 'having a conversation with theory', as my supervisor advises me. I intertwine this with my empirical research and look for the answers to my questions in the thoughts, words and actions of people whose experiences, and whose telling of their experiences, can teach me about learning through creative writing....

Writer –Excuse me, why are you telling the beginning of this story? Why are you the protagonist?

Researcher – Well, this is primarily a piece of research.

Writer – This thesis is primarily a piece of writing. Research is the empirical work, the academic reading and the discovery.

Researcher – So you are admitting your only role in this story is to record the work I have done, the ideas I have put together, the discoveries I have made?

Writer - No, I am not saying that. You misinterpret me. I engage with what you have discovered, are discovering, actually, you could really say I am the agent of discovery. Discovery through writing. The form of this thesis is ultimately constructed by me. I put words and structure to ideas. I develop and shape ideas.

Researcher – You write words on a page, I act. I am a practitioner. What I do has consequences, makes a difference.

Writer – To who? How can your work be of consequence until it is in communicable form? You forget the importance of audience. Surely research is ultimately judged by how much it can engage the audience, expand their understanding of the human condition, raise awareness of social issues and stimulate change. How will you engage people, really tell your story to them unless you have their attention, make things memorable for them and matter to them? You must make your audience inhabit the lives of your participants in some way, how else will you make them care about the consequences, what happens after?

Researcher – Yes, presentation-wise this piece is dominated by you. However, the origins of these ideas and indeed the source of all the 'information' is the researcher's domain. You entertain the audience but I provide the meat, the bones of this piece. I provide back up for your words. Indeed any colourful descriptions that you provide rely on my observation skills and attention to detail.

Writer – You completely miss the essence of this piece! Awareness of the nuances of speech, exploring poetic and metaphorical understandings, subconscious processes are surely my realm. I ask you to pay attention to these. I require you to inquire into these aspects of human experience so that we can build a creative piece of research writing.

Researcher – You admit again that I do the leg work.

Writer – Don't be so petty. For you to put your whole self into this piece you need a writer to ask you questions. You need me to demand from you a full account of the research experience, not just observation, comparison and correlation. I ask you to feel and you ask me to imagine. You need me to play with words, interpretations and meanings in order to show the audience learning through creative writing and not just tell them about it.

Researcher - Ok, so you try to show...

Writer – I'm not finished speaking. I want to point out that I engage in the very process that is being investigated.

Researcher – Right. I think you've made a few good points there. You have. But actually your use of 'we' earlier is probably the most significant. There have been too many 'you's and 'I's . Something I may also have been guilty of, yes. However, this division and focus on parts instead of a whole doesn't seem constructive.

Writer – Go on.

Researcher – Well, we do need to, I suppose, deconstruct in some way to examine the research process...

Writer – And writing process.

Researcher – Yes. But they are interlinked.

Writer – You are talking about how we could not exist without one another.

Researcher – Exactly. Researcher-as-writer. Writer-as-researcher.

Writer – In other words, or leading on from what you are saying, then to make this a creative piece of research writing we must explore and develop the researcher and the writer but not position them in opposition.

Researcher – Right. In fact, not only are we investigating the writing process, which is the topic of this piece I'll grant you, the research process is also in the limelight or, excuse me, under the spotlight... It does seem to be an awfully cyclical exercise though.

Writer – Well, that's the nature of research/writing I suppose we can say. There are no endings or even beginnings. There is what happens; our interpretations, our attempts to highlight aspects of and make-meaning of what happens. And in doing so, we try to promote and contribute to positive social change, what is happening now and what happens in the future.

Researcher – Doesn't that seem like a bit of a grand claim to make?

Writer – We deal in specifics in this piece, I don't disagree. We look at learning through creative writing, and we examine it in a particular context. However, recognising and appreciating the contextuality of our experiences is what gives richness to research/writing and is what this piece is really concerned with, when you think about it. Don't we focus, here, on the possibilities of learning through creative

> *writing by exploring the heart and the context of these creative/learning experiences?...*

> *[The conversation continues]*

Doing the piece of creative writing above helped me to understand (again) the importance of questioning and challenging my actions and motivations as Researcher, of engaging with my other Selves and of the relationship between the form and content of this research.

Structure and layout of this Research (Re)presentation

Intertwined in several sections of this dissertation are pieces of writing in *italics*, indented, single-spaced, and which I identify as my own personal research notes. I have also included quotations from a wide sphere of texts. They are present (i) to provide a way for myself, as researcher, to imaginatively and creatively engage with the research and, (ii) to enlighten and enhance the (re)presentation of this research for the reader by allowing a space for artistic ways of knowing. Additionally, while my research notes are not used as primary data, maintaining these notes throughout the research process allowed me to check the internal generalisability of some of my findings (Ní Chathain, 2011). I present a mixed-genre text in an attempt to look at this inquiry from many sides.

Richardson (1998) urges that more attention be paid to the writing which a researcher engages in. She argues that by deconstructing traditional research writing practices researchers can discover and get to know their research in different ways, the *process* of research writing is given value and more attention, and researchers become more present in the text which makes the text more interesting for the reader and increases its accessibility. 'Writing from our Selves should strengthen the community of qualitative researchers and the individual voices within it, because we will be more fully present in our work, more honest, more engaged' (Richardson, 1998, p.346).

Richardson uses the metaphor of a crystal to explain the way in which mixed genre productions (of research) can deconstruct traditional ideas of validity and call attention to the partial nature of our understandings. She uses the image of a crystal as it may change and alter yet holds a shape. 'Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within

themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off [light] in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose' (Richardson, 1998, p.358). Throughout this research process, and as can be seen in the (re)presentation of this research, I embrace the various understandings that can be formed by engaging in traditional academic investigation and exploring imaginative investigation of the research topic; creative writing and learning. I aim to explore the possibilities that "reflecting" and "refracting" within the research can bring.

Above I have set the scene for this inquiry, describing my current "angle of repose", and referred to the criteria by which this research should be judged. In Chapter 2 I provide a review of the literature and research which form a basis for and illuminate this inquiry. Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach which shapes this research and the methods which were employed in the empirical component of the research process. The research findings are presented and analysed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 I discuss the implications for my practice as an adult educator and suggest ways in which this learning can contribute to adult education practice.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I discuss existing literature and research on learning and creative writing. Throughout the discussion I investigate the understanding of learning introduced in the previous chapter and examine its relationship to theories on emotional and Self exploration. Reflexivity is then examined in the light of this discussion and, with a focus on the artistic processes involved, I examine reflexivity through creative writing.

Reflecting on Transformative Learning

I mentioned theories of learning developed by Brookfield and Mezirow in the previous chapter. I established that both refer to internally developed, yet extrinsically influenced, modes for interpreting our experiences, which Mezirow calls 'frames of reference' (2007, p.10). Mezirow argues that transformative learning occurs when we question, or critically reflect on, these established yet ever evolving ways of viewing the world. I describe them as evolving to highlight the socially constructed, contextual nature of our frames of reference. Mezirow claims 'transformative learning experiences are emancipatory in that they free learners from the constraints and distortions of their own frames of reference. A more fully developed and dependable frame of reference is one that is more inclusive, differentiating, more open to alternative perspectives and more integrative of experience' (2007, p. 11). While he does describe the transformed frames of reference in comparative terms we can see from this explanation that he presupposes learners to have already developed distorted frames of reference and to be in need of emancipation.

Mezirow (2007) acknowledges the influence of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich on his own learning and the development of transformative learning theory. Freire's writings position us in an unequal world and outline (dialogical) learning as 'a political project with the objective of dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society' (as explained by Macedo, in Freire & Macedo, 1995, p.378). We cannot argue of the presence of inequalities in our society and education systems; In 1997 the Department of Education and Science published a report stating that 25% of Irish adults had literacy difficulties (Department of Education and Science, 1997) yet since then the Irish government

has not developed an adult literacy strategy (National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), 2011). NALA emphasise the importance and necessity of strategic government intervention in adult literacy to create a more equal society:

> 'Literacy is about opportunity – and having equal access to opportunity is key. There is a widening gap between the "haves" and "have nots" and compounding this is those who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted... We know that people with literacy and numeracy needs are treated less equally in society with less access to services and opportunities' (2011, p.10).

Questioning Knowing

Freire & Macedo (1995) argue that the social change required for a more equal society can be stimulated by dialogical learning which involves not only giving voice to and exploring lived experiences but requires both educators and learners to question knowledge itself and how we come to know our experiences. They contend that curiosity about the nature of knowing should be fostered in order to encourage learners to critically engage with their world. Epistemological inquiry is required to transform our frames of reference. According to Freire & Macedo this questioning can help us not only to understand our historically located experiences but to universalize our understanding, making connections with others' understandings. Boal writes:

> 'We cannot live in isolation, under arrest inside ourselves. We learn enormously when we recognise others in alterity: the Other also loves and hates, fears and has courage – just like me, like you, even though she/he, you and I have cultural differences. Precisely because of that, we can learn from each other: we are different, being the same' (2002, p.2).

As we strive to understand how we interpret, we call into question what it means for us to know, to experience, to understand. In so doing we question these processes in others, gaining an understanding (even if imagined) of what it means to know, to experience and to understand for another. We do need to investigate our personal experiences, but to fully explore the ways in which we interpret our experience we must also situate our learning within the relational and social context in which it has been formed.

The Emotional Self and the Development of Selves

In this inquiry I look to ways of knowing which Dirkx (2006) states critical reflection for transformation does not fully account for, that is the emotional aspect. In Mezirow's explanation of the two dimensions of his 'frames of reference' he does refer to emotional aspects; meaning schemes include our feelings and meaning perspectives include 'repressed parental prohibitions that continue to dictate ways of feeling in adulthood' (2007, p.11). According to Dirkx, further elaboration of the affective component of transformative learning is necessary as emotions are involved in learning in fundamental ways. For instance, questioning the way we experience the world, including the motivations and justifications for our past actions, may produce intense emotional reactions. He also argues that our unconscious may express the process of Self/Selves development through emotional responses. Dirkx follows Jungian inspired theory to describe this development as individuation – 'a process by which we come to recognise and develop an awareness of who we are and how we relate to others' (2006, p. 18).

Dirkx argues that we hold potential Self knowledge in affective, imaginative and unconscious representations of our experience. He explains how these 'emotion-laden' representations may manifest in an educational context; for example, students' complaints that there is too little structure and guidance provided may reflect deeper, underlying issues such as a need for strong, external authority figures (2006, p.20). Likewise a teacher's reluctance to provide structure may reflect an underlying fear of failing to fulfil the role of authority figure. Through exploration of our relationship with these representations we can gain a conscious awareness of how our Selves have developed and how this development finds expression in our lives. An increased Self awareness and understanding provides us with a starting point from which to explore how we come to know and interpret our experiences, and to transform our understanding of these experiences.

Stuart (1998) gives an account of 'social interactionism' to explain the ways in which our identities are shaped and re-shaped through our experiences with others, which is the material explored in individuation processes. He argues that we come to symbolise/imagine ourselves through the eyes of others and that it is through language that we represent

ourselves to others. The way in which we represent ourselves through language is a complex ever-refracting process. To return to Dirkx's theory, language can be seen as a medium through which we represent our unconscious understandings of our experiences in daily life. Stuart states that language, and writing as an integral part of language, influences the development of our Selves. 'This is not only as a form of individual encounter with the wider society, but also because language and writing carry the weight of social and cultural meanings' (Stuart, 1998, p.142) and as Mezirow describes, we are therefore limited by our socio-linguistic codes which help to shape our meaning perspectives (2007).

Questioning Language

Richardson argues that 'language is how social organisation and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our *subjectivity*, is constructed' (1998, p. 349). To explore the development of our Selves involves exploring the competing discourses within which we negotiate our identity. Hunt (2004) discusses the importance of awareness of the power of language and discourse to colour and distort our attitudes. She states that in the social sciences this process is called reflexivity.

The Business of Reflexivity

I have discussed important aspects of the transformative learning process such as; the questioning of knowledge and knowing, exploration of our emotional engagement with experiences, Self understanding and development, and investigation of the ways in which through the social and cultural context of language we interpret, understand and communicate our experiences. I acknowledge that a deeper understanding of transformative processes would require much further investigation of the vast array of social, cultural, relational and environmental influences on adult learning. These processes are recognised as complex, intertwined and inherent in learning which is transformative. No doubt the processes explored here exert influence on and are influenced by other processes which constitute adult learning. However, the purpose of this inquiry is to investigate those processes of learning which can be engaged in through creative writing, which reflect the

existing literature on this subject, and which are evident in the experiences of the participants recounted in this research.

Reflexivity is now examined as a way in which we can consciously explore elements of the transformative learning process mentioned above and face the challenges which this exploration poses. The term reflexivity is used to describe the processes involved in Mezirow's 'critical reflection', and in the light of further exploration of the nature of learning, the term encompasses the Self development and affective processes involved in transformative learning.

Exploring Selves

> 'It seems to me that I catch a glimpse of you in a certain present of writing, "sticking out your neck", sticking out one of your heads which tries to look towards the other' - Mireille Calle-Gruber to Hélène Cixous (Cixous, Calle-Gruber & Derrida, 1997, p. 90)

Hunt (2004) states that practicing reflexivity on ourselves means an increased awareness of the rigidity of our ways of perceiving ourselves and our ways of being in the world. Reflexivity involves the process of finding a way to "see" our various Selves (the 'heads' which Calle-Gruber refers to above) and to make them "speak" to one another so that we can understand and investigate the experiences through which they have been shaped. Through this investigation we are called to question the relationship between our Selves and our previous and present interpretation of the world. Hunt (2004) refers to the theories of cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser (1988) to explicate the different ways in which we know ourselves. She explains that our 'conceptual self' is understood through our various socially and culturally constructed self-concepts, that this Self represents what we think we *should* be, and that it tends to be most dominant (Hunt, 2004, p.163). It is important that we recognise and explore our other Selves which develop for example, through our relations with others, through our memories of the past and anticipations of the future. She contends that writing exercises can allow us to bring into dialogue the different aspects of our Selves so that we investigate the ways in which we exist in the world.

In *The self on the page: Theory and practice of creative writing in personal development* Hunt & Sampson (1998) present practical examples of ways of engaging in discovery and

exploration of our Selves through writing. Moskowitz's (1998) example deals with a patient suffering from serious illness who examines the relationship between her Sick Self and Healthy Self and thereby the discourses which define and shape each one. Through writing, the patient created characters for her conflicting Selves. The characters were made to meet and engage in story form. By undertaking this task the patient gained a greater understanding of her emotional experience of illness which assisted in dealing with her health crisis. Hunt (1998) provides an example of reflexive practice through writing in which she asks students to engage in fictional autobiography, writing with the voice of a child. She explains that since autobiographical memories are interpretations of the past from the point of view of the present they can tell us about how we have come to develop in the present. Hunt (1998, 2004) explores the role that creative writing can play in both therapeutic and educational contexts. She cautions that as personal exploration may lead to painful feelings, in an educational environment teachers need to maintain a great degree of awareness and provide supports for their students.

The Personal and the Political and the Problem with Questions

Teachers must allow a space for students to explore their Selves but, to promote transformative learning, global influences on, and consequences of, learning need to be acknowledged. Freire & Macedo (1995) argue that teachers must ensure learning spaces do not simply become group therapy sessions whose sole purpose is for individuals to state their grievances. As mentioned previously, they contend that it is necessary for teachers to encourage students (and themselves) to continually question not just *what* they know in their lived experience but *how* they have come to know their experiences and the forces which shape their knowing. This is a political project.

'The moment when a feeling enters the body is political' (Rich, 1971, p.24)

If we take into account the continuing influence of historical, social and cultural contexts on personal interpretations of experiences, we recognise that all which is personal is also political. But questioning the personal-political nature of our experiences inevitably raises further questions, uncertainties and doubts - uncomfortable thoughts in educational contexts where emphasis is placed on the establishment of clear goals and objectives and the measurement of competencies (Romanyshyn, 2010, p.106).

> 'And then a plank in reason, broke,
> And I dropped down and down--
> And hit a world at every plunge,
> And finished knowing—then –'
> (Dickinson, 1996)

In Emily Dickinson's words we can sense the turmoil caused by recognising the cracks in reason and fixed truths. Laying open to questioning anything taken for granted is essentially socially and politically disruptive (Bolton, 2001).

We are left with a not insignificant question – How do educators; (i) maintain a space for individuals to explore the unconscious processes at work which shape their understanding of their very existence in and experience of the world, (ii) call this "new" understanding provisional, (iii) ask those individuals to "listen" to the understandings of others and allow these understandings to have significance, (iv) all the while holding the tensions which emerge from these uncertainties of an enlightened mind aware of its own darkness (Romanyshyn, 2010) (v) without trying to resolve these tensions (vi) and without becoming therapists?

Ambiguous Understandings

Romanyshyn (2010) explains that for teachers to tackle the question above, it is essential that *they* become hospitable to unconscious processes and therefore, ambiguity, and embrace them within educational environments. He posits that we cultivate John Keats' 'Negative Capability' when one is:

> 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Scott, 2002, p.60).

He describes this as the act of inhabiting the 'imaginal domain' between sense and intellect (Romanyshyn, 2010, p.104). Romanyshyn argues that unconscious processes are an important part of learning and that metaphors can represent and allow us to explore them. He uses the term 'metaphoric sensibility' to describe the capacity to hold meaning as a constructed yet changeable concept; he describes metaphor as a perspective (2012, p. 104-107). Cook & Gordon (2004) also suggest that metaphor is more than an instrument of rhetoric and may be viewed as 'a fundamental form or process of thought, having basic epistemological functions' (p.651). Metaphor allows its subject to exist within the paradox

that it is itself and at the same time, that it is something else. The essence of metaphor is 'the experiencing and understanding of one thing in terms of another' (Richardson, 1998, p.351). According to Romanyshyn, the importance of metaphoric sensibility is that it allows us to view our understanding of the world as provisional and make space in our understanding for a view of the world from another's perspective.

As mentioned earlier, Dirkx (2006) also argues the importance of exploring the unconscious and imaginative processes involved in learning. He provides an example of facilitating transformative learning processes by focusing on imaginative representation, discussed earlier. A group of students he was teaching were having difficulty interacting with each other and conflict was arising. In order to explore the roots of the conflict he asked the students to engage in a writing activity which constituted imagining the group as a person and having an imagined dialogue with that group "person". Students were then asked to reflect on how they felt during and after the process. Following this, Dirkx found that the group was able to move 'through the impasse in which it seemed stuck' and students reported that the activity helped them to 'get in touch with issues that were part of their experience in the group' (2006, p. 21). The "language" and the awareness needed to explore the emotional and unconscious processes involved in transformative learning, Dirkx contends, are best discovered through imaginative reflection.

To engage with and to explore imaginative understandings is to be creative. Metaphorical exploration allows us to use experiences and contexts familiar to us to understand and represent the ambiguous, the unfamiliar, that which is difficult to explain in literal terms. Through this process we not only develop a deeper understanding of the way we view the world but we also learn to imagine other possible ways of viewing the world. We do this by deconstructing and constructing interpretations. This is a creative process.

Artistry in Reflexivity

Creative and artistic processes are vital to reflexivity as part of the process of transformative learning. Creativity involves the stimulation of the imagination and the challenging of

conventions. Artistry, as well as attending to aesthetics, involves *sensibility*. That is attention to and awareness of our senses, how we perceive, and our emotions. From the discussion above, we can see that imaginative and emotional exploration enriches reflexive processes and the possibility of transformative learning. I now look at artistic processes in more detail in the light of their relationship to reflexive processes.

In the article entitled 'What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?' Eisner (2002) argues that by paying more attention to artistic processes, learning environments become more conducive to learning. Exploring artistic ways of knowing can foster curiosity, creativity and questioning in students rather than, as Romanyshyn (2012) fears may be happening, encouraging acceptance of commonly held beliefs and suppositions. Eisner explains, for example, that an artist, while they may begin an artistic project with an aim, they are flexible and shift their aims while in the process of completing their work; 'the work yields clues that one pursues' (Eisner, 2002, p. 10). Of course, they may follow guidelines and certain artistic conventions but as an artist is expected to create unique works of art, they are faced with unique challenges. Rather than the process being predetermined, the artist considers alternatives and makes choices throughout.

Eisner argues that, in contrast, educational systems and courses are often standardised and rigid in the outcomes which they demand. It seems unreasonable to expect that a student will be aware of all their learning needs when they begin an educational programme. This is particularly true in adult education where learners may be entering an unfamiliar environment and are unaware of what to expect. The experiences of adults returning to education explored by Corridan (2002, p.30) highlights the importance for some students of being given time to choose the educational programme which suits them best and not experiencing pressure to commit to a particular course at the initial stages. Teachers and learning institutions need to remain flexible if they are to attend to students' changing needs and goals and allow room for students to experiment and test alternatives rather than accepting the assumptions previously made about themselves. Since transformative learning involves the questioning of established beliefs and expectations, it is not just

important, but vital that educational institutions that hope to foster this learning allow and encourage students to engage in these reflexive processes.

As with Eisner (2002) and Romanyshyn (2012), Elbow (1998) expounds being open to uncertainties, ambiguity and paradox. Romanyshyn and Eisner's specific concern is the learning process whereas Elbow discusses the writing process. Nevertheless, the writing process which Elbow advocates can be compared with aspects of the reflexive process. As he describes it, writing is a way of looking at different ideas, possibly conflicting ideas and letting them interact together on the page. Putting one idea down on paper allows you to move on to another while keeping the first in sight. In this way, we can hold contradicting thoughts simultaneously before we decide on which alternative to explore. In reflexivity we need to be able to acknowledge and explore our own perspective but also do the same of others'.

'Freewriting' is an exercise recommended by Elbow to encourage putting thoughts uncensored on the page; writing continuously for a timed period, without editing and 'without thinking' (1998, p.3). In this way writing becomes a process which allows for surprises, for unconscious thoughts to surface from 'the black, deep, waveless water' (Steinbeck, 1996, p.86) of the unconscious. As we learn to break free from our inner censor we can begin to engage in writing as an expressive and exploratory process, it can become one in which we engage with and examine our emotional reactions to experiences. Writing can provide us with a way to explore the affective, imaginative and unconscious representations of our experiences, whose investigation can provide us with greater Self awareness and understanding (Dirkx, 2006).

I have explored examples of artistic processes and discussed how features of these processes are important in reflexive practice such as being flexible in the learning process and recognising its uncertainties, acknowledging conflicting ideas and interpretations to lay them open for questioning, and engaging with our unconscious. Exploring and developing artistic sensibility and ways of knowing in many shapes and forms can develop our capacity for reflexivity and enrich our learning experiences. I next look at a further example of reflexive practice, again highlighting the importance of creative and artistic processes.

Bolton (2001) argues that the artistic processes which are involved in creative writing mean that the act of writing itself can help us to engage in reflection and reflexivity, which together she calls *reflective practice*. According to Bolton, *reflection* involves looking at the "who, what, where, when, how, why" of experiences and examining them in physical and psychological terms. Through the artistic eye of a writer we observe, see details that we might not see if we weren't trying to represent the essence of a situation or experience in print. We give an account of the situation and then through this come to a deeper, in-depth, retrospective understanding of it. Writing involves exploring all our sense perceptions, *showing* the experience rather than telling it. Additionally, Bolton argues that by writing we are making a record of the story-making processes which we engage in throughout our daily lives. Schneider agrees that we lead storied lives as:

'Creating with words is our continuous passion' (Schneider, 2003, p.xix).

Connelly & Clandinin (2006) state that story can be viewed as 'a portal through which a person enters the world and by which his or her experience of the world is interpreted and made' (p.477). The stories that we write capture our interpretation of an experience in the past, from the perspective of the present, and the product of our writing can also be located in the present context in which it was written.

'Our letters do not arrive at the hour they leave, nor do our heartbeats' (Calle-Gruber, quoting Cixous' (?) novel Deluge , in Cixous, Calle-Gruber & Derrida, 1997, p.13)

Having a written record of our story/experience allows us then, later, to step outside of the experience and view it from other sides, other perspectives, examining it with critical eyes.

Bolton (2001) contends that to engage in *reflexivity* involves critically examining our story-making processes. She claims that reflexivity requires the support of a critical group of peers or co-mentor who act as listeners. The stories shared with the group can then, through discussion, be (re)interpreted by viewing them from the other perspectives that the group offer. Stories are given a more global perspective as the group also search out texts, from as

wide a sphere as possible, to aid in the re-writing of their stories. Various types of writing exercises are employed in this reflexive, re-writing, re-interpreting process. Each of these exercises explores different ways in which creative writing processes can develop reflexivity. For example, writing in the third person - imagining from the perspective of another; unsent letters - engaging with emotional issues; writing inspired from objects – exploring experiences by engaging all our senses (See Bolton, 2001, 2011, for further examples of writing exercises). Bolton states that this model of reflective practice allows experience to be 'refracted through different lenses, in different lights, and with different senses predominating, as well as material considered from psychological, social, political and spiritual arenas' (2001, p.39).

The place of the teacher in reflexive processes: Guidance or Control?

The educational approach adopted in reflective practice is in line with Eisner's (2002) emphasis on the importance of flexible aims. Bolton (2001) argues that too much structure works against itself as the more structure, the more assumptions, and this requires a moving backwards to question those assumptions. She cautions heightened awareness of issues of control. Too much guidance of a discussion can be destructive as participants may feel subject to the interpretation and direction of a superior. It must be noted that Bolton's discussion centred on professional development and as such was based in working environments rather than strictly educational contexts. Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1995), on the other hand, is wary of a teacher who only "facilitates" and does not acknowledge the power which they inherently hold as a teacher. How can adult educators negotiate the difficult terrain of learning spaces, judging the appropriate guidance and intervention to provide, and being careful not to neglect and not to constrict?

We cannot standardise a teacher-student relationship as we cannot standardise a student's learning progress. We can look to the sites in which learning takes place to investigate the features of this learning, unique as they may be, to understand in different ways what constitutes learning, what contexts prompt a familiar experience to look strange and that strangeness to become a discovery. No learning takes place without social interaction,

without external sources of existence, be they human, material, within learning groups, community groups, etc. (Brookfield, 1985). Furthermore, no two learning experiences could ever be the same as they will all involve the complex relationship between the personal and political, the influence of an individual's historical, social and cultural context, and the individual's unique perception of their experiences. However, investigations of learning processes in practice can provide a valuable insight into the possibility of learning for transformation and social change and help us to enhance our understanding of the possibilities of own learning/teaching experiences and their global context. Through this investigation ways of knowing are explored by the researcher and the participants and knowledge created in the process. In remaining provisional, this co-constructed knowledge invites others to question, de-construct, construct, all the while learning in the process.

Conclusion

In this research I examine the ways in which the participants engage in a shared interest, creative writing, and explore the learning processes which are involved in the context of this self- directed activity. The learning explored in this empirical inquiry can be considered informal in that it is engaged in without a learning imperative and outside of a formal learning institution. I aim to explore the ways in which reflexive processes are fostered in this environment – How do transformative learning processes manifest in an informal learning environment? I then investigate, informed by the literature previously discussed and the questions which have arisen, the ways in which we can use the knowledge created in this research to explore how formal educational contexts can enhance ways of fostering transformative learning processes. In the following chapter the methodological approach of this research is discussed and the methods are introduced.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which reflexive processes, essential for transformative learning, are present in an environment where learning is informal. I have chosen to investigate the experiences of a group of writers as the focus of this research is the ways in which exploring artistic ways of knowing can stimulate and enhance reflexive practice. The participants' voices are central to this research as they are the experts of their own knowledge and experiences. As researcher, I aim to maintain a reflexive presence throughout the research. I critically examine and account for the interpretation of the inquiry process which I (re)present. Below I examine the principles which have provided the framework for this research and research (re)presentation. I also outline the research methods used.

Methodology: Interpretations, Subjectivity and the Arts

Transformative Learning requires individuals to recognise the interpretive, subjective nature of their experiences. A subjectivist approach to research is called for if we are to remain true to the central principles of learning which is transformative. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) explain that approaching research from a subjectivist standpoint means recognising that the understanding each participant brings is a result of their interpretation of the world and as such, is just one version of a multitude of truths which may be discovered through research. They place the subjectivist approach in opposition to an objective, positivist view of the world. Broadly speaking they identify the objectivist approach as one which posits an external reality imposing itself on individuals and determining their fate in a collective sense. Knowledge is something to be acquired and accumulated. In contrast, the subjectivist approach holds reality as a product of individual consciousness and knowledge as a matter of personal experience. However, construing a subjectivist, interpretive approach to research as merely anti-objectivist is problematic. It places more focus on what an interpretive approach is not, instead of what it could be. Guba & Lincoln (2005) argue that rather than setting paradigms and perspectives in opposition, blurring paradigm boundaries and incorporating multiple perspectives can provide more learning. The framework of this

research can be broadly described as interpretive but also relies on an arts-informed perspective. Below I explore the interpretive approach further. I follow by discussing the arts-informed inquiry in more detail.

The Interpretive Process

> 'By 2050 – earlier, probably-all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of the Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like "freedom is slavery" when the concept of freedom has been abolished? The whole climate of thought will be different' (Orwell,1990, p.56)

Orwell's idea of a past re-written, in the novel *Nineteen eighty four,* stemmed from his own experience of the Spanish civil war. His version of events differed significantly with the subsequent reporting of those events in the popular press. The incongruity between the two frightened him:

> 'because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world' (Christopher Hitchens quoting Orwell, in Orwell, 2001, p.xi).

Orwell feared the ability of one leader or ruling class having the power to wipe all others voices from the records of history and promote a version of past events which suited their future objectives. However, interpretive researchers could say that holding *any* one interpretation of experience as "true", despite its contents, is suspect. How can we decide whose voice, whose interpretation of events, is objective when truly we all have our own individual interpretations? How can I, as researcher, say this is the "true" account of the research when the participants will all have their own accounts and, the truth being, they are all true? In interpretive approaches the researcher is required to recognise the limitations of their research conclusions. The research (re)presentation, as it is finally decided on by an individual or closed group, can only make provisional claims to knowledge. Stating that all accounts provided are subjective, however, is not significant acknowledgement of subjectivity in research. Not only must it be stated, but the interpretative nature of the research must be investigated throughout the research process.

Denzin claims that rather than diminishing the "problem" of interpretation researchers should embrace its potential –

> 'Interpretation is a productive process that sets forth the multiple meanings of an event, object, experience, or text. Interpretation is transformative. It illuminates and throws light on experience. It brings out and refines, as when butter is clarified, the meanings that can be sifted from a text, an object, or a slice of experience. So conceived, meaning is not in a text, nor does interpretation precede experience or its representation. Meaning, interpretation, and representation are deeply intertwined in one another' (2009, p.94).

My role as the researcher is to explore the interpreting process and its transformative possibilities. This requires cultivating reflexivity within the research. In the design of the research methods, and while conducting the empirical investigation, I must always be aware of the context in which the research takes place and the power relations at work throughout (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The site of power negotiation is an ideal starting point from which to question assumptions and established beliefs. This involves being aware of not only the researcher and participant relationship but the power struggle between discourses, as described by Sampson (1998). She argues that discourses, ways of experiencing and articulating according to specific rules and viewpoints, are fighting over conceptual discursive territory. When certain discourses acquire a hegemonic position they are held as knowledge /truth. She posits that literary and imaginative writing takes part in struggles of discursive survival. Throughout this research process I have had to negotiate between different forms of writing, and ultimately different ways of knowing and coming to know this research. This negotiation has served to enrich the research. I explore 'crystallisation' as a way to represent this negotiation and as a process of constructing a text which opens itself up to questioning and further interpretation. In this (re)presentation of research the voices of the participants should be apparent. Not only the content, but the structure of the text should reflect their voices. By exploring the possibilities of this (re)presentation to do so I have become aware of the need to display the artful Selves of the research participants as well as the artful Self of the researcher, which Richardson (1998) suggests.

Arts-Informed Inquiry

The approach and process which this research adopts should be appropriate to the nature of the investigation. Investigating the informal learning which is evident in creative writing experiences requires acknowledgement and investigation of artistic ways of knowing and artistic processes in both the research methodology and methods. This research has taken an arts-informed approach in addition to being influenced by subjectivist research theory. Indeed, Cole and Knowles (2008) came to define an arts-informed approach as a result of their quest for inclusive approaches to inquiry processes that ' honoured the diverse forms of knowledge that were part of everyday experience' (2008, p. 79). Arts-informed research can be considered as existing under the umbrella term of "interpretive approaches".

Arts-*informed,* rather than arts-*based,* describes research which interweaves elements of traditional academic forms of inquiry and representation with artistic forms, but could not be said to be based solely within the arts (Cole & Knowles, 2008). However, the art form under investigation remains a central element of the creative research process. Other defining elements of arts-informed approaches include:

- The creative inquiry process – the researcher is flexible and responsive to events throughout the research process
- Reflexive elements – researcher retains a strong reflexive presence but is not the subject of the inquiry
- Audience engagement – there must be an explicit intent to reach an audience including but beyond the academy, and the research text must 'involve the reader/audience in an active process of meaning making that is likely to have transformative potential' (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61-62)

Coles & Knowles (2008) state that in arts-informed inquiry the relationship between the form and content of the research must be explored and developed throughout the process. They detail the interconnected nature of the process of inquiry and the development of the research text, arguing that research is an emergent process and the researcher exercises and develops her knowledge of the genre used throughout the research process.

I now discuss the ways in which the elements of arts-informed research above are present in the process of this research. Creative writing is the subject of this inquiry. It is a key feature of the research method and it helps to shape the (re)presentation of this research. Throughout this research process I have engaged in creative writing in various contexts, i.e. as a member of writing workshops and as an adult educator, in order to develop my skills and knowledge. Additionally, the process of writing this research text has involved engaging with my Researcher and Writer Selves requiring reflexive engagement in writing. This research text has pockets of creative writing and quotations from a wide sphere of sources interspersed throughout. This is intended to open up the communicative possibilities of an academic text. During the research process I ran a creative writing workshop for adult literacy tutors in order to share this exploration with an audience outside of the academy. This workshop was based on the understanding of this inquiry which I had formed at that stage of the research process. The workshop is discussed further in the final chapter.

Methods

Here I provide a description of the research methods. Their design has been influenced by the methodological approach of this inquiry, the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, and further research which has involved creative writing. This description includes passages, adapted from my research journal, which provide an account of my experience as Researcher/Participant. These personal accounts are an attempt to capture the atmosphere of the environment in which the research took place. They also provide a way for me to maintain a reflexive presence in the research. These passages are indented, single-spaced and in *italics*. First I begin by giving a brief background of the participants and their group meetings.

Context of the inquiry

The research participants, Angela, Eithne, Niall, Patricia and Shauna, meet weekly in a creative writing centre in Dublin's North inner-city. They usually meet for two hours on a week-day evening to write in each other's company, and share and discuss their writing. They are volunteers, including myself, in the creative writing centre, which, during the day, provides free writing and arts-based workshops to primary and secondary school groups

and adults. Three members of the group have also been creative writing facilitators in other settings.

The research methods involve the writers taking part in two sessions held a week apart. The first is a writing workshop and the second is a focus group. The setting is the space in which the writing group regularly meets and as such, it is intended to contribute to a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere. For convenience, the research sessions are held at the same time as the group usually meets. Prior to the workshop, the participants are each provided with an information leaflet and a consent form (Appendix 1 and 2).

Session One: The Creative Writing Workshop

Researchers should ask themselves what they are trying to achieve by the methods which they use (Mason, 2002). Oakley (2000) too highlights the important issue of choosing methods which best suit the purpose of the research. The methods employed in this research are intended to, in the most relevant way possible, provide a space for participants to explore the knowledge which they bring to the research and which they co-construct by taking part in the research. As creative writing is the central focus of the study, it seemed wholly appropriate, if not essential, that creative writing be involved in the methods. I choose to hold a writing workshop with the research participants as this involves artistic ways of knowing which they commonly engage in, and which are the focus of this research.

This research journal entry describes the beginning of the workshop and the first workshop activity:

> *'Some of the group are already here and busy settling down. I can hear other voices in the office and the kettle whirring. The room feels bright as always, even though it's dark outside. The blinds are half-pulled on the ceiling-to-floor windows. On the back wall there are several comic book strips which must have been made by a school group a few weeks ago. Remnants of today's group are still about; pencil pairings scattered under a table and the smell of rubber sneakers sliding on a wooden floor. The other walls are covered with book shelves. The tables are white with letters of the alphabet as their legs. Everybody has assembled around the tables. As the chatting of the group quietens down a bit, I realise they are waiting for me to begin.'*

> *'In order to create an open and sharing atmosphere and encourage an equal relationship between all, I have asked that we sit in a circle around one table. This is*

instead of our usual separate, spacious tables facing each other in a square shape. A minor adjustment with possibly little consequence so why feel compelled to make it, I wonder? Is it a small clue to the awkward negotiation that goes on between the selves of a person in a familiar situation that's become a strange one? How much should I take into account the habits and routines of the group and how much should I sacrifice them to orchestrate the creation of 'an equal space', if that's possible?'

'I have timed, structured activities planned, the first being biscuits and a chat. And a discussion of the consent forms. First; Freewriting-style exercise. I ask the group to put pen to paper or hand to keyboard, and start writing/tapping. I instruct them not to 'think' but to put down whatever comes to their heads and let their imagination take over. They are to use 'a metaphor for creative writing' as their starting point. I tell them that afterwards we'll read out our pieces to the rest of the group. There are a few in-takes of breath when I say 'metaphor' and the pens that were about to hit paper pause for a second. After what feels like a few minutes everyone is writing and I do the same.'

The aim of first writing activity described above was to explore imaginative understandings of creative writing. Cook & Gordon (2004) used metaphor as a tool in the teaching and learning of qualitative research. They ascertain that metaphor 'can be used to "open up" understanding by allowing students to break free of certain ways of viewing concepts' (p. 654). As it is a freewriting-style exercise, according to Elbow (1998), it should be done nonstop, without planning or worrying about mistakes; as a stream of consciousness would look like on a page. This is to encourage a free flow of ideas and discourage editing, which can inhibit the production of ideas.

The next writing activity is borrowed and adapted from research undertaken by Jennifer Schulz (2006). In this activity participants are invited to read out their pieces of writing in turn without commenting in-between. The other participants are asked to listen and make a note of any words or expressions from the readings which resonate with them. Shulz describes the activity of identifying words which resonate with us as "pointing" (2006, p. 218). While Schulz began her activity by reading a previously written story out to participants, the activity used here has drawn on metaphors provided by participants. This is because encouraging the sharing and exploring of metaphorical imaginings can 'enable others to understand how we feel and, indeed, enable us to recognise our own feelings' (Eisner, 2008, p.8), thus encouraging both empathy and self-reflection in the participants. Participants are then asked to call out these lists of words to the rest of the group without explaining or interpreting them.

> *'It feels a little awkward as we read out our lists of words the listeners are completely silent each time. It's different to reading the previous writing as there are no sentences and their meanings to hold on too, just isolated expressions. I ask the others how they feel about reading out the lists. They stay mostly quiet or nod that it was fine. I move on quickly.'*

The next activity involves participants writing for 20 minutes about an experience of 'learning through creative writing'. I advise participants to use as prompts the words which they had pointed to from the previous writing.

> *'There is a little sigh of relief after the end of each exercise but the room is quite silent and serious. When a quick tea break is offered, Eithne asks for a whiskey, laughing. Having such a structured evening is very out of the ordinary for the group.'*

We again share our writing with the rest of the group and point to words from others' readings. Participants are then invited to work on a poem.

> *'There are a few smiles. Shauna laughs and shakes her head. She writes stories.'*

The poem does not necessarily have to use all the words on our lists but it must contain *only* the words on the lists. By limiting the use of words it is hoped that this will stimulate a playful attitude. As all participants have this restriction it may ease the pressure of producing a piece of "great art" and maintain focus on the process of writing. I give this a shorter time limit, 10 minutes. We then read out our poems to the rest of the group. Schulz describes the personal experience of participating in this exercise: 'my words in the hands of other writers hearing and using these words, became uniquely truthful and genuine in the sense that they opened up meanings *beyond* my intentions, meanings that lead to a deeper understanding that seemed somehow communally shared' (2006, p.221). That is the last of the workshop activities. I invite the participants to bring any other pieces of writing on the topic of creative writing and learning which they would like to share to the focus group discussion a week later.

Session Two: The Focus Group

This discussion is held a week later at the same time and in the same place. One of the participants, Patricia, is unable to come to the focus group for personal reasons. I have chosen a focus group in order to further explore the participants' interpretations of their

lived experiences of creative writing and participating in a writing group. It is important that research methods are intrinsically linked to the research question and to the issues explored in the literature review (Mason, 2002). A focus group provides participants an opportunity to share their experiences and learn from the experiences of others. They can explore not just their own interpretations, but the interpretations of the other group members.

When a group context provides conditions for the possibility of transformative learning, Mezirow (1998) describes this as dialogical learning (not to be confused with Freire's (1995) 'dialogical learning'). Mezirow's theory is based on Habermas' (1998) "public sphere". Habermas himself found inspiration in the coffee houses, salons and table society of Europe which were inclusive literary public spaces because of their equality, critique, accessibility, reflexivity and problematizing the unquestioned (Fleming, 2000). While the defining features of the ideal dialogical learning situation are impossible to ensure, Mezirow argues that they can be used as valuable criteria for judging conditions of learning. I now discuss these ideal conditions and then refer to aspects which were present in this focus group, providing the potential for reflexivity and the possibility of transformative learning. The ideal conditions include:

- Full information about the issue being discussed - All participants, being members of a writing group, have a shared interest in creative writing and knowledge of the subject.
- The ability to argue their points and reflect critically on matters discussed –Members of the group would have gained some experience of arguing their points and engaging in critical analysis through weekly discussions on writing.
- Full equality, free from coercion or constraint - In the writing group, while some members are there longer than others, there is no procedure which places any member at a higher status than the others. However, my presence as a researcher, and the very fact that this discussion is part of a research process, potentially affects the way in which members of the group share their opinions. Additionally, it is possible that some members of the group might feel limited by how "honest" they can be without offending others. The role of the researcher is to maintain a space which invites all participants to share what they feel comfortable sharing and to

promote questioning of what is discussed. In order to promote as free a discussion as possible the focus group questions are loosely structured.

- Having self-knowledge, no self-deception – This is impossible for a researcher to determine. However, it was hoped that the reflexive nature of creative writing and participating in a writing group, which was the focus of the discussion, would generate a secure atmosphere, allowing members to share their personal experiences with the group.

Parker & Tritter (2006) argue that to provide a balanced and holistic picture of the research setting, a focus group should be combined with other research methods. The focus group complements the creative writing workshop methods. The time lapse in between the two provides a period for reflection. This allows participants time to think about the workshop before giving feedback. The workshop invites the participants to engage in imaginative work, exploring unconscious and artistic ways of knowing. The focus group provides an opportunity for participants to investigate other ways of knowing, and to explore the themes which emerge from the writing.

The combination of methods is intended to promote reflexivity within the members of the group through their participation and within the research process. The feedback which participants provide in the discussion group is invaluable to the evaluation of the writing workshop as a research method and to the analysis of the research findings. The following chapter incorporates the feedback provided during the group discussion, the pieces of writing produced in the workshop, and the notes taken by myself as a researcher in an analysis of the research findings. This analysis is illuminated by the literature reviewed in the previous chapter. The intention is to determine the ways in which transformative learning processes can be identified as features of the creative writing process in the context of participation in a writing group.

Data to be explored

The findings of this research are drawn from the participant's writings in the creative writing workshop and from the focus group discussion. The writings examined as data are the metaphors which are produced in the first workshop activity. The focus group discussion is

also examined as data. This discussion focuses on the participants' impressions of the workshop and reflects out from this to participants' experiences of creative writing in other contexts. The following chapter discusses these findings and draws from the topics discussed in the previous chapters to add depth and colour to the analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

I choose to structure this chapter by grouping together the common themes from the metaphors written by the participants in the first Writing Workshop activity, previously discussed in Chapter 3, and their Focus Group discussion. The participants each use multiple metaphors in their writing and some of these metaphors were discussed in the Focus Group. This occurred organically in the conversation and in response to my questions. In this way I have inquired into the participants' imaginative understandings of creative writing and their verbal discussion of their experiences. This guided me in the organisation and analysis of the findings, allowing me to select and discuss the themes from the metaphorical representations which were reflected in the Focus Group.

I developed the categories of the themes in the participants' writings and discussion based on the ways in which they reflected the literature and research discussed in Chapter 2. I found inspiration for the names of the categories through my engagement with the data during the research process (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and they reflect my personal impressions of the participants' understandings and experiences. These categories include; personal meaning, personal healing, the unexpected, mutability and criticism and support. I introduce each theme by including excerpts from the participants' writings. I follow the introduction of each theme with an analysis of the ways in which they are reflected and expanded upon in the focus group discussion. The focus of this analysis is to explore the understandings of creative writing which the participants bring to the research and the extent to which reflexive processes are manifested in the participant's experiences of creative writing and participating in a writing group. The ambiguous quality of the metaphors leaves them open to further interpretation and their inclusion is intended to allow a space for the reader to develop a further understanding of this research.

Personal Meaning

Writing can be an expressive and an exploratory process (Bolton, 2001).

Patricia describes creative writing as 'an open mother-of-pearl lined shell' which she holds 'in a sacred place in eye view and as an object that settles and grounds' her.

In Niall's metaphor:

> 'We all as individuals put the screen in place that is the filter of our own most treasured beliefs. These change slowly. The confidence we get when somebody appreciates our writing feeds into our skills for exploration and expression, broadening and expanding them exponentially.'

The participants' use of metaphors of precious objects to be treated with care suggests that writing is of deeply personal significance.

Writing provides a way of recording personal feelings and emotions. In the Focus Group, Eithne said that writing gives us a way 'to hear ourselves'. 'You actually listen to yourself. I think it's in the listening, you know, that you hear what's in your head or your heart at the time' (Eithne). The written record provides an acknowledgement of personal experiences. The author's personal thoughts and experiences are given authority by their presence in an artistic form (Sampson, 1998). In the focus group the participants articulated the personal significance of writing in their lives and their appreciation of the time and space to write which the Creative Writing Centre and the Writing Group offered them. While Niall stressed the solitary nature of writing, it was also important to the participants that they had a place outside of home where they could write and share their writing with a group of like-minded others. Shauna described the Writing Centre as 'a little home' in which she had found others who empathised with the 'heartache' that 'goes into things you create'. All of the participants shared the objectives of coming to the Centre to volunteer and to develop their own personal writing skills.

The writing process also provided a secure way of exploring personal feelings. Angela discussed the 'safe distance' between herself and the text which writing in the third person allows; 'you kind of create something around [the personal feelings expressed through writing] and it allows you to explore ideas'. It was important for all the participants that the feedback which they received was appropriate for their work and focused on its artistic qualities rather than any emotional content or the inspiration for the work. Having the security of fiction in creative writing can allow individuals to express and explore feelings and experiences that they do not want to share explicitly. This can be an important tool in transformative learning if strongly held beliefs are called into question resulting in personal

anguish. Fictional writing can provide a way for exploring imaginative representations of inner development processes which may be difficult to articulate (Dirkx, 2006). An environment where there is not emphasis on the therapeutic or the emotionally developmental potential of writing, but on developing as a writer, can provide the safety to explore emotional Selves should one wish to do so.

Personal Healing

Engaging with imaginative representations of experiences and exploring emotions can aid in Self development (Dirkx, 2006).

> 'Creative writing for me is like a band-aid I place over my little hurts and cuts[,] my scrapes and scratches with life. It helps me to heal. It allows me the time to work through my pain. It protects me from further hurt. I[t] allows me to see at times that whatever it is that has hurt me is quite superficial, non fatal to me or my heart. And like a band-aid my writing is there as a reminder to me that I have something I want to say that is of importance to me.'(Eithne)

Patricia wrote of her mother-of-pearl shell in which a candle had been placed: 'I initially felt that the object had been damaged, ruined, defiled but on closer examination the blood red wax frozen into rivulets, caught in the grooves of the underside were striking.'

Eithne's metaphor for creative writing refers to a healing quality but also to the 'time' which writing allows her for Self discovery. The destruction but then beautification of Patricia's shell describes a potentially damaging process which resulted in an enhancement.

During the Focus Group, feelings of fear, pride, embarrassment, and security all surfaced in the experiences of writing recounted. This suggested that writing was an emotionally engaging process. The participants all articulated the necessity of writing in their lives. Eithne stated that 'we have a great need to be heard'. Niall said that writing made him 'conscious of externalising what was already going on internally.' The participants' statements suggest that it is important for them to engage with the feelings and unconscious processes they can explore through writing. Writing can be a way of searching the depths of our experiences to learn more about our Selves. Through writing about experiences which invite strong emotional reactions we can discover that it is in the process of our Self development that the struggle is occurring (Dirkx, 2006). Consciously exploring

the imaginative representations of our Self development process through writing can allow us to 'hear' our inner struggles and do some personal healing. Writing can offer some a means of Self acceptance and Self preservation. Bolton's (2011) poem, called 'Poetry', captures the difficult nature of Self exploration and the healing qualities of writing, but also a certain pride in having a "war wound" and claiming the healing process for her own:

> 'Sometimes surgery probes no further than skin,
> smoothing out the bumps and wrinkles of experience.
>
> To cure, the knife cuts deep through fat and muscle
> excising hurt from gut, breast or heart.
>
> The needle reconnects veins, arteries, sinews,
> tucks away raw edges.
>
> Leaving a jagged scar:
> the signature of healing.' (p. 13)

Writing can provide individuals with the opportunity to engage in an ongoing process of Self exploration and development as they develop their own strategies for dealing with difficult experiences.

The Unexpected

The writing process can produce unexpected insights (Elbow, 1998).

In Angela's metaphor writing is 'sometimes a ponderous stream, sometimes a punctured dam' and sometimes 'a mist' through which indistinct shapes 'may or may not become clearer.'

Shauna's metaphor for writing contains the image of a jug, 'a Grecian one.' She takes a drink from it:

> 'A drop. It is cool, this water, an edge to the after taste, like it is so fresh you can still taste the soil or the residue of the rocks where it had flown. You tip your head back even further. And then. It splashes out, suddenly, too much of it and you drink.'

There is a strong sense of exploration and discovery, but also of unknowing and of the unexpected.

The act of writing, when writing creatively, is not necessarily one in which we can predict the results before we start. Richardson states that she writes because she wants to find something out, something that she did not know before she wrote it (1998, p.347). Writing metaphorically invites us to peer through the 'mist' of the unconscious but does not warn us what we may find there. In the Focus Group, Niall said that 'through metaphor the unconscious is freed.' Shauna said it triggers something 'at a deeper level.' Before writing, the writer may not be aware of what will lie 'behind thought' (Cixous, in Calle-Gruber & Derrida, 1997, p. 27). During the Focus Group, the writing process was described as 'exploration' and an 'experimental zone.' Angela explained that trying different writing styles can 'let writing reveal what's inside you' suggesting that there are unknown depths to our Selves and our understanding of experiences to be discovered. Writing can be a way to explore the unconscious and through this exploration develop greater insight into our experience of the world. All participants expressed enthusiasm for hearing the metaphors of others and were curious about how their fellow writers had represented creative writing. By listening to the imaginative representations of others we are provided with the opportunity of learning about their experience of viewing the world and this can enrich our understanding of the world.

During the Workshop I had noticed a pause when I said the word "metaphor". In the Focus Group, Eithne explained that having to think of a metaphor initially 'threw' her. When she started writing, two metaphors emerged and later she could not choose between them, saying they both represented what creative writing meant to her. Eithne's metaphor of writing as a 'band-aid' stimulated interactive conversation at the beginning of the Focus Group. The other participants discussed their understandings of the 'band aid' and expanded on the metaphor describing the way in which 'it makes you think of being a kid again' (Shauna). This added another dimension to the original metaphor. While it was Eithne's metaphor, the other participants were able to make meaning from it. Exploring metaphorical representations as part of this research inquiry allowed the participants to gain a new insight into their, and others', understandings of creative writing. Discussing the metaphors allowed the participants to share their understandings of other's metaphors and co-construct knowledge of their experiences. Shauna was surprised at the range of different metaphors produced by the group. But it seemed that one metaphor, or one understanding,

could not possibly describe the potential or possibilities of creative writing for the group. For transformative learning to occur it is necessary to be aware of the interpretive nature of experiences and be able to examine our perspectives (Mezirow, 2007). Writing can allow us to imagine the Selves of others (Sampson, 1998). Sharing writing and listening to and discussing the writing of others provides us with an opportunity to explore the interpretations and experiences of others.

Mutability

Through writing we can explore our fractured selves (Stuart, 1998).

The shell in Patricia's metaphor has an 'external finger pricking exterior' but the red candle placed inside causes wax to melt and ooze through from the shiny inside.

Niall's writing allows him 'a more expanding reality' where he can 'try on different suits, clothes, different interpretations of reality.'

For Eithne:
> 'creative writing is also a wonderful mask that I put on that I can hide behind in order to reveal the true me, that allows me to reveal the truths that are hidden in the depths of my being. That might sound a bit of a contradiction but for me[,] it's not. It permits me to be the person I want to be. The person I'm often afraid to be. Within my pages I can be the beauty or the beast, the owl or the pussy cat.' And 'My creative mask is something I put on everyday. It takes me from the kitchen to the palace, from the palace to the highest heights, to the top of the world and back again.'

These metaphors have a certain playful quality. Nothing is as it seems. Like Richardson's (1998) crystal these images grow, change and alter, but they hold shape. These metaphors account for understandings and for Selves which are mutable. The metaphors above demonstrate how reality can be changed or 'expanded' when viewed from other perspectives. Through the metaphors different characters emerge and represent a single identity which can alter into different forms - The shell can prick fingers but is also smooth, shiny and beautiful.

The Focus Group discussion touched several times on transformation and change. For example, through writing you can 'release things into your imagination' (Angela) where they can be experimented with. Also participants discussed how metaphors require you to explore description and alter the representation of something. Shauna explained how she would have written something completely different if she hadn't been asked to write about a metaphor. Engaging in metaphor can be a way of altering or enhancing understanding.

A large portion of the Focus Group discussion centred on interpretations and the way in which one experience can be viewed from different perspectives. This topic of discussion stemmed from questions about how participants felt about doing the Workshop activities. Apart from the first writing activity in the Workshop, all other activities required participants to use the words of the other participants in their writing. These criteria caused controversy during the discussion. For some it was inspirational, for others it was 'shoplifting' (Eithne). This discussion demonstrated again just how personal writing is to each of the participants. Niall explained that in his writing he has to make the words his own. As a result he didn't feel comfortable reproducing expressions which had been put together by someone else. Shauna argued that it was in her listening to others' words and taking down what resonated with her that those words became her own. She said 'the way I was taking them down was my understanding.' In her writing and re-writing of them in a different text, the words and expressions were transformed to hold her meaning. The collaborative process was not one which all of the participants felt comfortable doing. All of the participants agreed that it was extremely important for them to feel that they had full ownership of the writing which they had produced and that it represented their interpretation of experiences. This indicates that Self identification with a piece of writing can be very strong. In contrast to the dialogue, the co-constructing of meaning by sharing and exploring metaphorical representations through writing can diminish an individual's identification with the metaphor.

The discussion of interpretations and their "validity" promoted a lot of dialogue. The participants discussed the criteria that they felt necessary for using the words of others and in their discussion they debated about the merits of one another's criteria. During the Focus Group some participants discussed the ways in which sharing their writing with others allowed them to check the ways the extent to which it could communicate with others. Niall

said that if writing cannot communicate with others 'it isn't of great use to myself as a developmental tool at that stage because it is totally internalised. It can only be validated against myself and no one else'. It was important for the participants that they would be able to communicate with others through their work. Writing can provide a way for individuals to express their understanding of their experiences and that understanding can serve as a reinforcement of the "validity" of their interpretation.

The participants all recognised that each person has a unique perspective. In highlighting the subjective nature of written representations of experiences, they also acknowledged the unique way in which each writer represents themselves in print. Valuing an individual's own way of using language also values the way in which it represents their individual identity. Exploring poetry, for example, involves the setting apart, deconstructing and constructing the different strands of our identity as we search for the style, themes, types of words that will best represent how we understand our Selves and our experiences (Sampson, 1998). The Seamus Heaney poem 'Personal Helicon' is used by Sampson (1998) to demonstrate this. In this poem Heaney first describes how, as a child, he used to play around wells and search for his reflection in their depths. Now poetry provides him with way to explore and discover his Selves:

> 'Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
> To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
> Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
> To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.' (Heaney, 1990, p.9)

As can be seen in Eithne's metaphor, writing can provide a way not only to explore other Selves or roles which we have but also to explore our possible Selves. The participants discussed the ways in which writing allows them to explore their 'voices' (Shauna, Niall) and the potential of their voices. Writing allowed the participants to imagine the possible ways that they can exist in the world.

Criticism and Support

The support of a critical group of peers aids in reflexive practices (Bolton, 2001).

Niall describes writing as 'group therapy' – 'this is the primary benefit of the group – feedback – permission to experiment.'

In Shauna's metaphor there is a sense of apprehension:

> 'You take a step towards the jug, wrap your fist around its handle. It feels rough. Like it could cut you. You tighten your grip and take a deep breath. You lift it.
> It is alarmingly light.'

These metaphors demonstrate the paradox of writing to explore and develop yourself and the confidence this brings, but also the anxiety that the process of writing may not yield positive or comforting results. The significance of writing to personal development is contradictory and should be recognised and analysed carefully (Stuart, 1998)

During the Focus Group the participants discussed different environments in which they have shared their writing and sought to develop their skills as writers. The ethos of the Creative Writing Centre was considered an important factor in generating a warm, friendly atmosphere in the Writing Group's weekly meetings. Eithne described the Centre as a 'genuine, giving place.' Shauna emphasised that everyone was present because they are all volunteers and they all have a love of writing. That the participants have a shared interest and shared objectives has had a positive impact on how the Group has evolved. Through time the members have come to know one another and one another's writing and are able to give feedback based on this understanding. Writing for an 'embodied' readership is important for the promotion of reflexivity (Bolton, 2001, p. 11). Sharing writing which is so personal however, can leave a person feeling vulnerable. It takes time to become comfortable sharing with a group and receiving feedback on your writing. Angela discussed the nervousness she felt the very first time she attended the Group and how it took her a week to read their written feedback notes. Now she has 'eased into it' and is enthusiastic about the advice she is given. Attending the Writing Group improved the confidence of some of the participants in their own writing and their ability to share their writing.

The success of sharing writing with others in order to engage in and nurture reflexive processes depends on the nature of the group (Hunt, 2004). The participants reported being in other writing groups where power relations were a site of conflict and diminished the

potential for the group experience to be a learning one. Shauna witnessed feedback being given 'in a very negative way.' This served to devalue the work of the writers. Eithne similarly described how she had once received feedback which advised her to cut out a section of writing that described a place of personal significance to her. She had felt 'mortified.' Feedback on writing which devalued her work also devalued the personal experience which had inspired it. Niall explained that he felt writing groups had nothing to do with creative writing when there is 'not a skilled mentor but teacher, or dominant person who feels that their role is to run everything.' A common feature of the negative experiences described by the research participants is the presence of an authoritarian figure. Promoting an environment which fosters learning through writing requires individuals who hold positions of power, such as group facilitator or teacher, to maintain a space which recognises the personal significance a piece of writing holds for its creator. In group contexts, reflexive processes are encouraged when the members participate 'fully and freely in dialogue so that they can come to understand their experience better while preserving the rights of others to do the same' (Mezirow, 1985, p.28). The research participants described the Writing Group as a place in which all members respected the rights of others to participate fully and freely.

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates the various understandings of creative writing which the research participants have provided through their writings and through discussion. I have provided an interpretation of the data, however, the metaphors remain open to the various understandings the reader will create. The participant's metaphors have provided the reader with an artistic way of knowing the research data and both sets of data have highlighted the ways in which the research participants engaged in informal learning processes through writing creatively and the potential for learning through writing. Writing provided an avenue for Self exploration, development and healing. Through writing participants were able to explore their understandings of their experiences in different ways. In the next chapter I explore my own learning and suggest ways in which this research can contribute to understandings of reflexive practices in formal educational contexts.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This research process has involved my exploration of a subject which has deep personal significance for myself. Creative writing is a way for me to express, to explore, to experiment, to discover and to learn. Through my writing, and the artistic ways of knowing that this constitutes, I learn by engaging in reflexive practices, exploring myself and my experiences. I have chosen to investigate learning through creative writing as a result of my personal experience and as a result of my concerns as an adult educator. This role involves promoting and encouraging reflexive practices within my students so that they may develop themselves as individuals in transformative ways and discover their potential for contributing to social transformation. I recognise that although I hold a position in authority as an educator, I am also a fellow learner. This investigation of the creative writing practices of a group of writers, exploring their understandings of creative writing and the ways in which they also engage in learning through writing, has contributed to my learning as an educator. This research provides an insight into the reflexive, developmental processes involved in creative writing and the potential which creative writing has to contribute to transformative adult education. Here I discuss the learning I have engaged in through this research process, including my learning as Researcher, Writer and Educator. I describe the ways in which this inquiry has been a transforming process. I also discuss the ways in which this research can enhance understanding of adult learning and contribute to adult education practice.

Engaging with Research through Writing

This research has been a reflexive inquiry. While investigating creative writing I have also used creative writing as a tool in the research process. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, writing has helped me to understand the ways in which my Researcher Self and Writer Self interact and how this interaction contributes to the research process. The creative writing I engaged in during the process has allowed me to maintain a reflexive presence both in this text and in the research process as a whole (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Richardson, 1998). Throughout the research process I kept a research diary in which I recorded my observations, thoughts and feelings. These notes, for example, provided a way

to describe the context in which the empirical inquiry took place, they served as a memory tool to aid in the analysis of the Focus Group discussion and they helped me to map my learning journey in this research process. Through writing I learned to locate myself within the research.

Emergent understanding

In addition to exploring my different Selves, the dialogue in the opening chapter between Researcher and Writer also heightened my understanding of the necessity of finding an appropriate form for the (re)presentation of the research findings. It would have to enable the participants' artistic ways of knowing through creative writing to remain open to interpretation but also maintain cohesiveness within the analysis. The two sets of data I had collected included both the recording of the Focus Group discussion and the participants' writings, specifically the metaphors produced in the Writing Workshop. These data were intertwined as the Focus Group had involved a discussion of the metaphors and enhanced my understanding of their meaning for the participants.

At first it was not clear as to what form the (re)presentation of the findings should take. The form emerged during the research process (Cole & Knowles, 2008) as I engaged with the data in different ways. I initially examined the Focus Group discussion and engaged with it as a traditional piece of social science research listening for the themes which emerged. This helped me in identifying relevant themes but I had lost sight of the significance of the metaphors and their relationship to the understandings and experiences of the participants. I had felt obliged to rely solely on established forms of data collection. It took some time to realise that the research was lacking in the very creativity and artistic ways of understanding that it was exploring. I returned to the writings of the participants and I found words and images which articulated the powerful significance of writing in their lives: '[Writing] allows me to reveal the truths that are hidden in the depths of my being' (Eithne).

I learned to question the appropriateness of relying on tried and trusted methods which I had assumed were the best way to understand this research. When I explored the metaphors again I developed a better understanding of their significance and in that light my understanding of the Focus Group was enhanced. My appreciation of the different ways

of understanding creative writing and the experiences of the participants only emerged slowly through the research process. Patterns crept up time and again but I had to keep coming back until I noticed them in a new light, I had to see and re-see, search and re-search. Emergence was an important quality in this research and is in all research that aims to generate new knowledge yet it is often under-recognized (Sommerville, 2007).

I also found that this emergent quality is true of the learning process, which of course is an intrinsic part of research. My understanding of the learning involved in creative writing emerged and then seemed to emerge again and again. Despite the fact that I was investigating creative writing as a way of engaging in reflexivity, when I ever felt stuck in the research process or that I was unclear about my next step, I realised it was because I had not looked to my reflexive strategy of creative writing. While many other strategies and supports have played a part in my learning, such as discussing the research process with a peer or mentor, I found that writing was a way for me to reinforce the aid that those learning strategies had provided. The learning engaged in was continuous. I realised no matter how enlightened I felt by engaging in reflexive practices my learning was never at an end. Many times I had just learned again that it was important to remain reflexive and open to change. Transformative learning is an ongoing process in which there may not be sudden lightening bulb moments but a re-emerging of understanding.

Reflecting My Learning in My Practice

Several times during the research process, despite my personal connection to the topic of inquiry, I found I had to not only ask how I could locate myself within this research, as Researcher, but also how I could locate the learning from this research in my practice as an adult educator. In Chapter 1 I introduced several concerns I had as Educator. They involved the ways in which I could encourage reflexive practices within my students and how I could encourage them to be more self-directed in their learning. In my role as Educator I also have to question the ways in which I meet my responsibility to my students. In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which the presence of an authoritarian figure served to discourage the writers from participating in the creative writing practices which were an important way for them to engage in Self development and Self exploration. In the Focus Group the participants revealed that they had felt quietened by criticism which was given

negatively and did not focus on ways in which the writer could improve their skills. The criticism devalued their work and so, had devalued their expression and exploration of their understanding of the world. An educator's role is to help learners to acknowledge the significance of their experiences and understandings of their experiences in their own development. A key finding in the research was the personal significance which the participants placed in their writing. The developmental potential of creative writing is negated if the learner feels that the experiences that have inspired the work are not considered worthy of recording. I have learned that without support and encouragement, encouraging learners to express themselves though writing can be a damaging process. The authority which making a written record of experiences can bring to its creator is diminished if that written record is not valued.

In contrast to the criticism described above, the research participants found that the criticism they were given, when directed towards the improvement of the creative potential of their writing, had provided them with a secure space in which they could explore their own personal development. These findings have helped me to realise that in my own practice it is important not to impose exploratory exercises on students in which they feel revealed and vulnerable. They must feel comfortable that the personal feelings and experiences they may be representing will not be the object of criticism. I can encourage learners to explore their learning and development by providing them with opportunities to engage in creative practices but it is important to focus on the artistic practices involved so that the learners can feel comfortable sharing their work.

Through the metaphorical writings of the participants I gained a deeper understanding of their experiences and this was enhanced both through the Focus Group discussion and through my engagement with the data as Researcher. One of the findings to emerge from the Focus Group was the alternative or enhanced understandings that metaphors can provide. The participants found a great deal of meaning in their metaphors and the understandings and experiences which inspired the metaphors came up in the Focus Group. I have realised the contribution which metaphors can make to educational practice. Metaphors can be used to 'open up' understanding by providing a way for students to make creative and imaginative links between existing conceptual frameworks and those associated with new knowledge (Cook & Gordon, 2004).

The participants in this research, as explained in Chapter 3, attend weekly meetings to write together and develop their writing skills. There is no formal instructor or leader present. In this space they have been able to develop important healing and coping strategies, as I have discussed earlier. The findings also suggest that they find ways to reflexively question their interpretations of experiences by sharing their writing with others. If that writing has communicative value then it can provide them with a 'developmental tool' (Niall). The participants also engage in Self exploration. It was revealed in the findings that writing provided a way of exploring possible Selves. The ability to form positive possible Selves, i.e. conceptions of future Selves, can be an important factor in educational attainment for adults (Lips, 2007). In my role as Educator I can help to foster the development of future Selves of within adults and encourage them to explore their Leaner Selves.

Intention to Communicate to a Wider Audience

In order to fulfil my commitment to create research which is accessible and communicable to an audience outside of the academy, as discussed in Chapter 3, I have held a writing workshop with fellow adult education practitioners and located it in the Dublin Adult Learning Centre. These educators ranged from literacy and ESOL (English as a Foreign Language) tutors to a learning and development manager. I presented my understanding of the research at that stage in the process and held a writing workshop. My aim was to provide an opportunity for those practitioners to engage in reflexive practice through writing. I also shared ideas and educational materials with the practitioners and held a group meeting two weeks later. During the discussion practitioners shared their thoughts on creative writing and the benefits and obstacles which can result from introducing creative writing into the classroom. I made a summary of the discussion and provided a copy for each of the practitioners. Their feedback was extremely helpful in guiding my practice. I intend to hold further writing workshops in the future to provide support and materials to adult educators who wish to explore learning through creative writing with their students and also to provide them with an opportunity to explore reflexive practices through writing and develop their own learning.

Limitations of this research

The inquiry that I have engaged in has been small scale and qualitative in its design. As such, the quality or the depth of the research was the main focus. I intended to contextualise and develop a better understanding of informal learning engaged in by a group of writers. I explored their artistic ways of knowing of and strived to employ my artistic ways of knowing in the research process. The interpretation of data included exploring metaphors. This provided a rich understanding of the research. The interpretations were made by myself, as Researcher, and it is intended that the research text provides an opportunity for the reader to investigate their interpretation of this research. The findings in this research cannot be made as general claims. Any claims to knowledge are propositional. However, the learning that has arisen from this research provides an understanding of adult learning which is informal but nevertheless extremely meaningful and important to the learners. The context of this research provides a lens through which we can view this learning and understand the conditions which have promoted its development. An area which merits further investigation is the ways in which learners and educators engage in informal learning in their recreational activities, or in other ways, outside of formal educational or work environments and how the different ways of knowing and learning through their experiences can be understood.

Conclusion

I have inquired into the informal learning which occurs by exploring artistic ways of knowing through the process of creative writing and examine how participating in a writing group contributes to this learning. I have explored the key areas of Self development, emotional understanding, and reflexivity. I have found that the informal learning of individuals can play an important role in their development. This research has created knowledge which contributes to my adult education practice and has relevance for all adult educators who which to foster reflexive practices for transformative learning within their students. Creative writing can be used as an important reflexive tool which can help in the development of creative learners. Cultivating artistic ways of knowing within students and within teachers themselves can produce deep learning and develop alternative ways of viewing the world. Writing can become a personal tool for dealing with emotional disturbances or stresses. The

research participants, and myself, by engaging in creative writing regularly, contribute to our learning across our lives.

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Research title:
learning through creative writing

In part fulfillment of a Master's in Education (MEd), I am undertaking a supervised research study. The aim is to explore creative writing as a learning resource through an arts-informed approach. In other words, doing creative writing to learn about creative writing.

Calling Creative Writers!

I would like to draw on the experiences of a group of writers who volunteer in a creative writing centre and explore with them their understandings of creative writing. We will do this by participating in a collaborative creative writing workshop.

This involves two sessions, one on Wed. 15th Feb. (lasting approx. 1 ½ hrs) followed by a session on Wed. 22nd Feb. (lasting approx. 1 hr). The first session's activities involve writing creatively and sharing our writing with the group. The second session involves reading out writing inspired by the previous session and a group discussion on the experience of participating in the workshop.

I hope that this will be a fun, inspiring and educational experience for all involved. I intend this research to be used in the future to enhance educational practice.

For your information: Please read

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may, should you decide, withdraw your participation in the study at any time. Your confidentiality will be respected and your name will not be published in this research or disclosed to any third parties outside the workshop group. There is also the possibility that the investigator may withdraw your participation in the study at any time without your consent. This study is conducted under the guidance of the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth. This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance. There is no payment for participating in this study.

Contact details:
If you would like further information please do not hesitate to contact me by email roisin.s.keane@gmail.com or my supervisor David McCormack at david.mccormack@nuim.ie

APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS DOCUMENT

<u>Consent Form</u>

<u>Project title:</u> "Learning through creative writing"

<u>Principle investigator:</u> Róisín Keane

<u>Background:</u> As an adult educator I am interested in exploring the potential for creative writing to be used as a learning resource. I believe that through using creative writing as a way to learn we can open up new possibilities and discover different ways of understanding, experiencing and living in our world.

I would like to conduct a collaborative creative writing workshop which includes a group discussion. You will be asked to participate in the group discussion and in the writing activities. This discussion will be recorded for the purposes of a 'memory tool' for myself as a researcher. I will keep a copy of your writings which may be included in the research. The data collected will be used for the sole purpose of this study and will not be used in future unrelated studies without your permission. The data will be kept secure at all times. You will be provided with a copy of the research on request. Your identity will remain confidential and will be undisclosed to anyone outside the workshop group.

<u>Declaration :</u> I have read, or had read to me, the information leaflet for this project and I understand the contents. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and I have received a copy of this agreement.

Participant's name   ………………………………..

Contact Details   ………………………………..

Participant's Signature ………………………………

Date   ………………………………..

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 david.mccormack@nuim.ie in the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner. You can also read more at: http://research.nuim.ie/support-services/research-ethics