



Creating space: accounting for where I stand

Jane Spiro

Jane Spiro

*Oxford Brookes University,
Oxford, UK*

Copyright: © 2009 Spiro.

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

This paper explores the journey through a career which combines that of teacher/educator, team leader and writer, and attempts to find connections and coherence between them. In taking this journey, I am asking the question: which values and beliefs connect the different roles I have played as an educator, a poet and novelist, and a team leader? Why has creativity as a driving force been important to me throughout these roles and since childhood, and what exactly do I mean by this term? Why do I continue to use the term *creative* when it is so fraught with debate and ambiguity? In this paper I aim to explain where I stand in relation to these questions, and what impact they have had on my own practice and on my professional community. I explain by offering a window into two specific examples of my practice, firstly as a novelist, and secondly as a teacher and teacher educator. The paper arrives at two concepts reached as a result of these reflections: *knowledge transformation*, and *creative space*. I conclude with a story that acts both as an exemplum of my own creative practice, and also of the creative space generated by a deeply effective teacher/learner relationship – a mythologised account of my own doctoral studies with Jack Whitehead.

Key words: Creativity; Language-teaching; Story and narrative; Teacher-reflection; English-language education.

1. Introduction

This paper explains the values which shape my practice, how I have come to recognise them and the influences from which they derive, and why I continue to stand by them. By *practice*, I am referring to my roles as a ‘creative’ writer, an English language teacher and teacher educator in International Education, and Learning and Teaching Coordinator in a vibrant and successful modern Institute of Education in the UK. In explaining these roles, I am focused in particular on the connecting thread of *creative practice*, and in so doing, am responding to the following questions:

- Why does an understanding of creativity matter?
- What values and beliefs underpin my view of ‘creativity’?
- Where do I stand amongst current debates about creativity?
- What are the experiences and practices, which have shaped my understanding of the creative process?
- What living theory emerges and why does this matter?

By ‘living theory’ I am working with the definition offered by Whitehead (2008) in the first issue of this journal: ‘A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work’ (Whitehead, 2008, p.104).

I will answer these questions by offering a window into my practice as writer-teacher with its experience of diversity and fragmentation and then explore connecting threads and beliefs and their impact on learning and teaching. The paper ends with a story which acts as a metaphor of the creative learner/teacher partnership, in which participants are both learner and teacher simultaneously, generating new and living understandings in being so.

2. Why does an understanding of creativity matter?

Three voices in recent ‘conversation’ represent where I stand with regard to the question of why ‘creativity’ is important:

‘Creativity develops the capacity to imagine the world differently. We all need an ability not just to cope with change, but also to positively thrive on it and engineer it for ourselves’ (Creative Partnerships, 2007).

It is a pity that the notion of ‘creativity’ in education has to be fought for or reclaimed, as it should be a central feature of teaching and learning. It is the crucial element in each generation’s renewal and enhancement of itself. Without it society would roll backwards. Human imagination and spirit are what drove civilisation forward. (Wragg, 2005, p. 2)

I ask you to consider the inner life of the student who sits, often reluctantly, before you. Your task is to take that particular person into the living field of your discipline and in some way to change him by so doing. No transformation, no education! (Abbs, 2003, p.10)

As an educator over a 25-year career in different educational settings, I have been concerned, because the student-experience in that ‘freedom to change’ has become

increasingly constrained by the demands of assessment and prescribed curriculum. The teachers' capacity to 'be themselves' as educators and creators of the learning experience, has been minimised by institutional demands: to meet league tables which record only what is quantifiable and mainstream, and to match nationally-given objectives and benchmarks. Finally, I celebrate the re-emergence of creativity in the rhetoric of education. The following accounts explore the meaning of creativity for schools and teachers and embed these into the National Curriculum, for example Buckingham and Jones, 2001; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2001; Buckingham, 2003; Creative Partnerships in Education, 2004; Department of Education and Science, 2004; Robinson, 2006 (National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education); and Creative Partnerships, 2007. Yet in spite of organisations such as the Department for Education and Skills bringing the notion of creativity into the mainstream, I am concerned that teachers may consider this a further burden to what is expected of them, and even a further category by which to measure and judge them. In 2008 I worked with a group of artists, musicians and storytellers, funded by the Department of Education and Skills, to bring creative projects into schools. Their common experience in schools was that teachers:

- abnegated responsibility for the creative process to the 'experts';
- felt their own creative capacities were being undervalued;
- saw the creative project as an 'add-on' that detracted from the 'real work' of the curriculum (Certificate for Advanced Education Practice, 2008).

The educators I have quoted above echo my own concerns in the following specific ways. They suggest that the capacity to be 'creative' – or in my sense, to generate positive change – is essential to our progress as a community of fellow human beings (Wragg, 2005). Indeed, creativity, 'is essential, not only for science, but for the whole of life. If you get stuck in a mechanical, repetitious order, then you will degenerate. That is one of the problems that has grounded every civilisation' (Bohm, 1998, p. 16). In order, therefore, to limit opportunity in educational contexts becomes a matter of urgent concern. First, Pope (2005) suggests that creativity is a component of the healthy and balanced individual; the capacity to initiate and own change is part of what it is to be 'sane' in a community that increasingly appears to forgo emotional health for other values. Secondly, for us to be educators, we need to be aware of our responsibility in this debate, and to consider our role in empowering learners to change, so that learning really makes a difference, both to the learner and to the knowledge-base itself (Abbs, 2003). Thirdly, creative learning goes far beyond specifically educational contexts; it is a capacity to live in the modern world and respond to its challenges and changes (Creative Partnerships, 2007). In my own practice, feedback from students years after their specific experience of learning with me was over, reveals the impact transformatory learning had on their decisions and aspirations in other aspects of their life. Here is Courtney, formerly an undergraduate student on a Bachelor of Arts course in English Language and Linguistics:

A few years ago I would have never imagined that I could do a postgraduate degree, and furthermore, I didn't know if there was anything that interested me enough to make it worth my while. But when I was a student in your classes, a 'light' finally went on over my head, and now that I am here, I know who I have to thank. (C., personal communication, January 15, 2008)

This paper explores what *being creative* has meant for me in practice, how it has enhanced my own identity as writer, educator and manager, and why and how I have been committed to sharing its transformative potential with students, trainee-teachers, and my teaching team. The contexts I draw on include:

- running undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English language, linguistics, language teaching and literature in four UK institutions of further and higher education;
- running teacher development programmes for English teachers from one week to two years in length, sponsored by the British Council and Ministries of Education in Mexico, Poland, Hungary, Switzerland, India, China and Japan;
- drawing on recent experience working with creative practitioners working in UK schools and researching their practice;
- experience of leadership-roles as a Head of Applied Linguistics (2004 – 2007) and as Learning and Teaching Leader (from 2007) at Oxford Brookes University.

The following are examples derived from these different teaching contexts:

- retraining Russian teachers in Hungary to teach English whose lifetime profession has been suddenly discredited by the dismantling of the Berlin wall;
- teaching English to Vietnamese ‘Boat People’, and finding one of them persistently missing class afraid to confront the English winter;
- developing new literature curriculum drawing on Indian writers, with teachers in India trained to teach Shakespeare, Wordsworth and the traditional English literary canon;
- developing research-vitality in a University Language Centre under threat of privatisation and the loss of academic status.

To be open to change or learning of any kind, the participants in each of these situations had somehow to reclaim a sense of worth, strength and capacity, and it was my role to participate in this process. In order to participate meaningfully, each situation demanded a sensitivity to its specificity and complexity, and a clarity about what was amenable to change and what was not.

While this brief teaching-resume suggests a single-minded journey, it really tells only half the story. What is hidden is a creative practice as a storyteller, poet and novelist struggling to run alongside, that both emerges and is submerged through these career moves. ‘All through there was a thread I never let go... I wanted [the creative writer role] to be not a parallel life but one that informed all my work’ (Spiro, 2007b).¹ As a creative writer I knew there were strategies and skills that had led me towards experiences of excitement and fulfillment, which I could not easily find as an educator. In Further and Higher-education settings, my efforts to bring creative opportunities into classrooms for my learners were marginalised or subversive to the expectations of my role. For example, training primary teachers, I was warned that the daily hour dedicated to literacy did not allow time for

¹ See www.ukfuturetv.com/janespiro.wmv for a clarification of this idea.

'creative ideas'. I was not permitted to share or trial with these teachers any new materials for teaching poetry and story.² In 2001, the literature/creative-writing components of the teacher-development programme were deleted and I was made redundant. The combined development of creative-writing and its embedding in teaching were not counted as valid research output, so it was hard to find a place in a higher education setting. On finally finding new employment I was advised through appraisals to redeploy my energies to meet institutionally-recognised criteria. Yet I continue to hold that the writer and the teacher are indeed not parallel lives, but inform one other, and the opportunity to do so is enriching both for myself and my learners. Where it has been possible to bring creative goals and practice into teaching settings, the outcomes for some have been life-changing. Here is Maria, participant in a summer workshop on creative-writing for language teachers: 'Jane's workshop has helped to liberate myself in the way I looked at creative-writing... She has led me to a brand new world where we ourselves can be creative' (M., written course-evaluation, August 8, 2007).

3. Which values and beliefs underpin my view of creativity, and where do they come from?

Through struggling to survive, understand and transform complex challenges such as those described above, certain core values have emerged. I will illustrate this process of emergence and recognition briefly through a critical incident which relates to the widening sphere of teacher-engagement: teacher – student; teacher – class; teacher – school/institution; teacher – community. It describes a situation, like the account in the section above, capable of only limited resolution by my intervention alone. However, this incident is one of many that revealed to me core values and how they might shape actions.

While training a new and first generation of English-language teachers in southern Hungary, I experienced the hostility and resentment of one of the students in the class. During sessions he was morose and obstructive, palpably impacting on the morale of the whole class. During one session, he suddenly ran out of the class, and it emerged he had accidentally 'stabbed' his neighbour with the point of his pencil. I found myself not only concerned that this student was damaging the health of the class as a whole, but also that he may have a similarly demoralising effect on the children he was being trained to teach. I set up and carried through a disciplinary process. No other member of staff was prepared to support me or corroborate my analysis of this student although we had informally exchanged many examples of how the student behaved in similar ways in their classes. The disciplinary process returned a verdict in support of the student, saying 'the teacher from England does not understand the Hungarian way of teaching' and the student returned to the classroom. The students in his class did not thank me for trying to 'protect' them; in fact, several students appeared to inherit from this incident the very hostility from which I had tried to shield them. Various layers of explanation emerged: his father was a respected member of the community; colleagues had known this student since childhood; they knew he in fact had no intention of teaching (and indeed, after graduation, set up a shop selling

² These materials (Spiro 2004, 2007a) were later published as two books by Oxford University Press.

leather jackets); combining together to form a collective voice amounted to ‘collaboration’ – a negative and terror-inducing term in recently ex-Soviet Hungary. I remember being humbled by my failure to take a nuanced and culture-sensitive approach. I had assumed the class shared my perceptions of the situation, and I had not connected with either their position, or those of my colleagues. My own sense of fairness had overruled theirs, and in doing this I had also overruled their own strategies for repair. There were other ways of dealing with difficulties such as these, without opening the community to public scrutiny or abdicating control to a mistrusted authority. Yet at the same time, I felt some sense of grievance that no-one had attempted to understand my position or the motives behind it. They also had not allowed for the possibility that I was amenable to change: I would have changed my view of the situation, had anyone troubled to explain it. At core, I valued the wellbeing of the class over my own safety in the community. I was acting authentically, with integrity on my own terms, even though I was being isolated in doing this. Yet mistakes were made on both sides. I had not really understood the community I was in, asked the right questions, or listened subtly enough to connect with their story. Yet by allowing me to make a mistake of this kind, I felt a lack of empathy shown towards me.

These values were those that emerged for me in many of the situations briefly suggested and illustrated above: wellbeing, authenticity, connection, empathy and empowerment. The section below will briefly define each of these terms.

a) Wellbeing

Wellbeing, for me, involves providing the best possible conditions for learning. These conditions account both for physical wellbeing – warmth, safety, comfort – as well as spiritual and intellectual wellbeing: the space to explore, experiment, learn from mistakes. This involves a belief in learners’ capacity to achieve at the height of their ability, and a commitment to making the conditions right for this to happen. In this, Maslow’s notion of the hierarchy of needs is enshrined; he recognises a chain of dependence from basic physical needs to higher intellectual and spiritual ones, and suggests that one level of need can only be fulfilled in conjunction with others (Maslow 1943).

In this, I am aware of notions of wellbeing emerging explicitly in school curriculum (the Office for Standards in Education³, 2005; Baylis and Morris, 2007) as well as recent critiques of wellbeing. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) suggest that explicit focus on wellbeing infantilises the learner, and diverts attention away from content and achievement and towards a therapy-culture in which dysfunctionality and low achievement are the norm. It may be seen from my definition above, that my own meaning of wellbeing is the opposite. It is concerned with creating the space for everyone within it to achieve and be the best they are capable of being. Farren (2008) describes this educational space as ‘providing opportunities for participants to accept responsibility for their own learning’ (p.50).

³ Usually expressed as an acronym, OfSTED.

b) Connection

As with the incident in southern Hungary described above, connection is not an 'easy' or safe value to hold in the sense I intend it. It includes an honouring of the specificity of a situation. Through care for detail and capacity to listen to the deeper story I recognise not only that every story is uniquely different but also that every story offers insights into the broader human condition. Experiencing a connection with each situation has meant I have disallowed making assumptions that one situation will be like another; that what appears on the surface to be parallel really will be; that what I learnt or the way I behaved in one setting will work for another. Connecting has in fact involved stripping away expectations and stereotypes, and starting again with each situation so that it is possible to continue learning afresh from each. In the examples cited in the section above of teaching challenges, I cited as a common factor the sense of disempowerment experienced by each of the communities: the newly disempowered Russian teachers, the imminently privatised teaching team, the colonial reading experience of Indian teachers in a post-colonial world. Yet in order to effectively connect with them, what I learnt was the specificity of each of these circumstances, the non-transferability of experiences from one to the other, and the unique story of each case. Whilst at surface levels there might have been similarities, what was important about each were their differences.

c) Empathy

Whilst connection involves, in my sense of this, learning the story of the other, in the notion of empathy I am bringing myself into the equation. I empathise with others in recognising that their experiences and dreams resonate with mine, and it is through this mutuality that we can better understand one another. Through empathy I am finding and learning what is common in my experience and yours, and acting on this understanding. Mutual empathy, for example, might have repaired the Hungarian example described above: here I would have reached towards an understanding of why colleagues chose non-involvement, and they would have reached towards why I chose the opposite. In this dialogue, we would have understood that both of us in fact held the same ideal of wellbeing. I am engaging here with the notion of inclusionality developed by Rayner and colleagues at Bath University. Rayner writes that 'through inclusionality we can soften the hard-line definition of our selves and others as independent subjects and objects isolated by gaps, into interdependent, dynamic relational flow-forms, pooled together in space' (Rayner, 2009). Rayner's wish through the practice of inclusionality is to:

develop a more empathic, more fulfilling way of thinking/feeling about relationships amongst ourselves, other organisms and our living space, which acknowledges the fact that the boundaries we inhabit are not absolute and fixed but rather inform dynamic, interactive domains that allow a rich variety of patterns to emerge and transform our lives. (Rayner, 2008)

This kind of empathy and inclusion has real and political implications. For example, Mandela's view of the liberation of South Africa included empathy for his oppressors and the desire for their liberation too (Mandela, 1994). His government demonstrated this empathy

in the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, a vehicle for mutual understanding as an alternative to punishment and blame.

d) Empowerment.

In the descriptions of different teaching settings described above, I cited the importance of each community to reclaim their power. I regard it as a core responsibility of the teacher: to give power back to the learner and to provide a rich environment that allows this to happen. In precise terms, this has meant energising learners' highest capacities and raising the bar of their aspirations. Here the teacher makes the learner aware of what he/she is capable of doing, and provides him/her with the tools to achieve this. In the story at the end of this paper, Thought Doctor is contrasted with the Fellow Traveller. The Thought Doctor engenders in learners awe for the teacher's knowledge and skills whilst the Fellow Traveller leads the learner towards a discovery of his/her own knowledge.

e) Authenticity

I am only prepared to act through these beliefs, rather than through desire for power, status, recognition, or fashion. I regard my own authenticity as acting with integrity in congruence with these beliefs, and wherever they are compromised or threatened I will seek repair and resolution, however hard-earned these might be.

Living with and by these values has provided a means to navigate the struggle for creative space. It has also provided a way of accommodating setbacks, challenges and failures such as those mentioned in earlier sections.

4. Where do I stand amongst current debates about creativity?

I claim, as part of the experience from which I derive understandings, to be a *creative* writer. Why do I use this term and with what meanings and implications? Writers do not call themselves *creative* writers, and indeed I have only done so in this paper in order to differentiate two dis-integrated kinds of writing and being. One of these writers writes the paper you read at this moment. Here I struggle to make meaning direct and transparent, and to embed this in a community of shared academic conventions and discourse. The other 'self' wrote the story that concludes this paper. Here I am searching to change my meanings into the symbolic, by making the experiences not-mine and at the same time universal, by inventing places and people that both do and do not exist, by using the tools and conventions of myth and metaphor. In most cases, these two kinds of writer would not appear in one place: they tend to publish, be read, work, and live in different places.

The word family (creative/creativity) derives from the Latin verb *creo* – to make, or do, and its range of synonyms: to generate, to give birth, to produce, to manufacture, to change, to invent, to transform. *To make* is the capacity of the principle of life - to make artefacts which are both life's quest for survival and crafted, as are hand-thrown pots, woven carpets, spiders' webs and birds' nests. Thus creativity in this sense does not privilege

the activity to the specially gifted or the unique; on the contrary, it is the essential skill of the survivor. Other synonyms are ethically ambiguous; *to invent* semantically carries the idea of *to lie*, as in *creative accounting*, and indeed, the capacity of the storyteller to fictionalise the truth. *To give birth* suggests the notion of creation from first beginnings; whilst *to transform/change* assumes raw material, a pre-existing starting point (Pope, 2005). Thus the word itself suggests the core debates and dilemmas which attach to creativity as a phenomenon. In defining some of these core debates in the section below, I am also identifying those which have been part of my own authentic and continuing struggle to create space as a writer: teacher.

- Do creative ideas derive from the stimulus of the outside world, or do they spring from nowhere, *ex nihilo*, the unbidden voice of a muse? Sartre (1964) and Cocteau (1952) claim god-like inspiration which ‘comes from beyond and is offered us by the gods’ (Cocteau, 1952, p.82). Yet, these same artists are simultaneously articulate about the influences that shape them – cultural, social, psychological. The novelist Joseph Conrad describes the inspiration that sparked his novel *The Secret Agent* (Conrad, 1920); Isabel Allende describes the drives that make her a storyteller (Allison and Gediman, 2007). By unravelling the sources, influences and shaping forces, do we minimise creative uniqueness, or illuminate it?
- Is creativity part of the ‘natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community’ (Pope, 2005, p. xvi) or is the creative person specially, mystically gifted? Is there any value or meaning in the notion of ‘genius’ as part of abnormality, or does this simply serve to offer us elitist and alienating paradigms of the creative process? (Weisberg, 1993; Miller, 2000; Nettle, 2001).
- Does creativity *do* something, or is it merely decorative and luxurious? What is the artist’s responsibility to the outside world, and what is the point of his/her work? Most artists have a powerful sense of the worth of their work: the composer Leonard Bernstein, in interview, said ‘I believe that man’s noblest endowment is his capacity to change. We must know ourselves better through art’ (Bernstein, 2007, p.21). To share this with the world is an artistic imperative: ‘what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don’t give it away? Of having stories if I don’t tell them to others?’ (Allende, 2007, p. 15). Yet how far does the sense of worth depend on recognition by others? Is it helpful – or misleading and unhelpful - to measure the worth of creative process, by the impact it has on others?
- Can we call all examples of human enterprise *creative*, or only selected and privileged examples? Carter, for example, develops the idea of a decline of literariness in texts, in which literary/creative language lies at one end and non-literary lies at the other (Carter, 2006). A cluster of categories define this distinction, including the conscious and crafted use of language. An ethnographic approach, alternatively, values all human productivity as windows into the human condition and the culture/context in which it finds itself (Clifford and Marcus, 2004; Morrison, 2007). Yet, to describe everything we do, or make, as creative could empty the word of meaning. Do we need such a label at all, if it is incapable of distinguishing one action, or outcome, or product, from another?

- Can creativity be developed and trained, or does it spring fully formed for those privileged to do so? In other words, is it teachable, and to whom? In placing creativity within the curriculum, educators have made a commitment to its developmental capacity (Buckingham, 2003; Balshaw, 2004, *Creative Partnerships in Education*, 2004; *Creative Partnerships*, 2007). Yet, how can creativity be taught and developed, if there is so much disagreement about what it actually is? If creative outcomes lie at each point along the spectrum from everything attainable by the healthy human being, to privileged examples of exceptional talent, how can it possibly be taught – and why should it be?
- In analysing the creative process, a broad agreement emerges that there is a chaotic, free association stage – what traditionally and mythically was described as ‘inspiration’ - and a stage involving detailed crafting, honing, shaping and ordering. These two processes have been described metaphorically: the potter throwing down the clay and then shaping it (Elbow, 1973); ‘writing down the bones’ and then fleshing them out (Goldberg, 1986). How do artists themselves perceive and live with this relationship? How do inspiration and discipline work together to generate creative outcomes? What do analysts of the creative process (such as Hayles, 1991; Coveney and Highfield, 1995) tell us and how does this map over what artists actually do?

In exploring my own experience as writer-teacher, it has been possible to understand my own position amongst these several debates and to arrive at my own living theory of what it means to be *creative*. The next section will offer ‘windows’ for the reader into the practice and experience which has enabled me to recognize the theory which I live, and the values which underlie it.

5. What are the experiences and practices which have shaped my understanding of the creative process?

a) Writing a novel

In June 1995, my twice yearly working visits to Poland took me to a new place called Vigry, high up by the north eastern border near Beloruss – or what was once part of Lithuania. I had been walking through the flat bleak fields on the north eastern border, with two colleagues who had each moved to Poland, learnt the language fluently, and dedicated their careers to Polish culture. We were walking in this bleakly remote open landscapes when the heavens opened, and a torrential downfall almost blinded us. We beat our way through this shelterless terrain, the ground turning to swamp underfoot, when the scene below took place.

They all three felt it together and moved together in a line towards the place of being saved, and the person there in the threshold, another person with eyes and a nose and a face stood there watching stood still as stone but they knew she was real by the moving of the eyes and the falling of the hair under the scarf and the jumping of the hair in her breath.

As they came nearer, she stayed planted there, without moving. Her eyes and theirs focused, and narrowed. They were all human, she in the threshold newly warm from the fire inside,

and they the three of them drowned into transparent ghosts of themselves, washed in and out and in by the storm. She watched them and took in the story of them, learnt it by heart and learnt what to do. She swivelled round, like a doll on a stick. They saw the strings of her shawl spiking down her neck. She moved faster than they did, by a footstep. As they moved nearer, she moved into the door, opened it, slid behind it, and as they came into its shadow, it closed clack matt against the wall. (Spiro, 1995, diary notes)

I remember being aghast that the woman had offered us no shelter – but had established our humanity before doing so. It was not that I minded being soaked by the storm: we were not really far from home and our situation was not serious. What I felt powerfully, was that, had the situation actually been serious, her rejection would have been the same. It seemed to me a replaying of something that had happened here before. It was not my own plight I could feel in this: I could hear others, almost palpably, in this plain between Poland and Lithuania, for whom ‘not offering shelter’ was a matter of life and death.

In February 1996, I visited another town in the north eastern corner of Poland, called Suwalki. While I was there, I was able to befriend an ex-patriot teacher of whom I could ask the questions I chose to avoid with the Poles themselves:

- Were there any Jews in this town?
- Do you know if there is any record or memorial to them?

Yes, there was not merely a memorial, but in fact, it was still possible to visit the whole site of the former Jewish cemetery. My friend led me to this place on an exceptionally bleak slate-grey February day. Our journey took us through the back streets of Suwalki, where chickens ran across the wooden porches of long low houses, and women in black headscarves shooed them away from their doorways. The experience felt powerfully that I had become my own grandmother, and was running through the back streets of my Lithuanian shtetl⁴ to find the small Jewish enclave where I could be safe. When we reached the place which had been the cemetery, what I saw, and later recorded in my notebook, was this:

In the middle of the field was a wall. It was impossible to ignore because the rest was so flat, a snow desert, and so far from anything standing that man had made. It had wandered in from a town, and stayed there.

I took to the field. Every footstep piped down into a tube of snow, and I loped towards the wall, the wall loped towards me, my boots picking up giant moulds of snow with each step.

Nearer to it, the stone sent out a layer of heat. I scraped the frost from the surface, and as it lifted onto my glove, images hove into view under the cobweb of snow. Each piece was covered with tight stone scribblings, Hebrew words, some Russian, names and pictures. There was half a Rachel with her last letters butted in beside an Avram, and an Eva with a wrist cut at the hand, a Jacob with a lion's paw on his head, and a Rebecca with half a holy book.

⁴ Shtetl: a Jewish village or small-town community in Eastern Europe.

It was a wall of tombs, broken tombs that had been snapped off like teeth and crisscrossed in together. This had been the cemetery, this field: all that was left a single standing jigsaw puzzle of people and their picture descriptions. (Spiro, 1996, diary notes)

I knew this scene was haunting in a way I could not resist.

I knew it was the beginning of a long story: mine, my family's, the unknown people carved on the tombs. I knew that this, and the accumulated images of loneliness and rejection, were primal ones that belonged to my ancestry, and that I had a collective responsibility to speak of it. I knew that it was the beginning of a profoundly compelling creative project, the moment described by Seamus Heaney as a 'marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind' (Heaney, 1980, p.131).

As part of the journey towards an artistic or 'creative' account of this experience, I researched the story behind my own family's escape from Poland in 1938. Through a series of interviews with my uncle, Julek, extensive reading and further travel, I accumulated knowledge of details such as: the home-made vodka which was both purple and powerful; the horse and droschka⁵ which took the family out into the countryside for holidays; the safe houses that sheltered the refugees in the forest; the trains they clung to, the open ditches they hid in, and a great deal of further reading besides that expanded, confirmed, and deepened what I had sensed in northern Poland. But *I* still needed to make the poetic leap into the narrative, the 'metaphorical confrontation' with myself that would turn this cluster of scenes into driven narrative (Cox and Thielgard, 1987, p. 45). In other words, I needed still to 'put (myself) on the line and to take risks. These risks are predicated on a simple proposition: this writer's personal experiences are worth sharing with others. Messy texts make the writer a part of the writing project (Denzin, 1997, p. 225).

The catalyst, or alchemical transformation, came with a *what if?* question. What if I had happened to be born a generation ago, in the same situation as my uncle or his sisters, the ones left behind? How would the *I* have felt, behaved and lived, dropped into this very different world? What if I were to compare that hypothetical girl, with this one? From this evolved the idea of a double narrative and a specific time-lapse between them: one girl living in Poland in 1939 in the wake of the Nazi occupation of Poland, and another girl living in 1989 in north London, the year the Berlin wall came down. How would their two lives compare or run parallel? What if both had potentially the same spirit and yet were shaped by such different worlds, if, in fact, they are blood relations - say, grandmother and granddaughter? Now, imagine the contemporary girl, as I did, ends her journey by the memorial wall in northern Poland: and the 1939 girl ends her journey as a refugee in north London, each travelling in opposite directions across Europe. What if they somehow 'cross'-spiritually, or meta/physically, on the way.

Here I had everything I needed. As Conrad (1920) said when he found the central idea for his novel *The Secret Agent*: 'There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of life' (p.6). The issues, sensibilities, personal mythologies this plot structure offered were huge: belonging and not belonging, separation and loss, my own family's story

⁵ This is a kind of cart.

of regeneration and starting again, the different meaning of 'escape' for the 1939 and the 1989 girls, the different options for *finding themselves* and discovering their personal courage.

With this clear vision of the parallel women, fifty years apart, I set about planning them, being them, hearing them. The 1939 grandmother character, Rosa, adopted composite characteristics of all grandmothers I had known – including my own. Rosa is feisty, brave, clever, strong, and is not prepared to be left behind – like the sisters in my uncle's story, who had encouraged him on his escape without a consideration for their own safety. The 1989 girl, Laura, has had few opportunities to understand her own strengths, having been sheltered and cosseted by an over-loving family, so her slant on the world is freshly naïve. To place Laura psychologically and physically in the story, I developed episodes in her childhood which were significant – even quintessential – moments for me too.

The Laura stories were great opportunities for creative play. I 'became' her, speaking in her voice as she grew from child to adolescent to young woman in the course of the novel. Here is an extract from Laura's childhood. She has in error joined the Christian prayers at school, not realising that she belongs to the much smaller group that meets in the classroom down the corridor.

I had never seen anything like it. There was a picture of a man in a white nightie with brown hair down to his shoulders and strange brown eyes and there was a lightbulb round his head. He seemed quite nice, but I didn't know anyone like that at all. Polly and Lisa seemed to know him quite well and even knew his name.

Eventually the mistake is realised by the teachers, and she is led away to Jewish prayers down the corridor. The extract below tells the story in the child's words as they gradually mingle with the words from the scriptures that she recognises.

The words in English made me tingle all over and made my ears go red.

Let these words which I command you this day, be always in your heart, teach them diligently to your children and speak of them in your home

Yes and on your doorposts and foreheads I will do what you say and the words will shower down like great walls of thunder

We are from the desert all of us in the room with the baking sand and men with rolling white beards and sticks

Inside us we are all wearing white sheets and veils and wash our clothes in the Dead Sea

Inside our plaits and white socks we are ancient which means very very very old because Jessie beget David beget Deborah beget Susannah beget Samson beget Daniel beget Hagar beget Rebecca beget Rachel beget Sarah beget Peter beget Jonathan beget Jacob beget Laura

Beget means to have a baby

If you were beget you lived in a tent and wore a veil if you were a girl and collected water in a vase from the well

In the other Sembali⁶ room they must have had different sorts of grandmas or maybe fathers who wore nighties. (Spiro, 2002, pp. 17 – 19)

There are more epiphanies for Laura, struggling to understand her identity and place herself in the outside world. Here she describes her first experience of singing with boys in the school choir:

We began the Kyrie Elieson with Miss Doubleday on the piano and the girls came in with papery voices and floated off into little puffs of ash. Then the boys' voices rolled in and I was knocked through the back of my neck into a beanstalk world with giants rolling boulders round the edges of the world. I could feel them thumping behind me with their giant feet, and the benches were purring like cats. The sound through the floor grew trees up through my heels and washed my stomach dark like a plum.

'Now boys, you need to watch the beat, not each other!' Miss Doubleday shouted. I could feel the dinosaurs snorting behind me, and the giants with troll-black hair thundering through the mountains like yetis. But when I turned round to have a quick look, I was shocked to see the row of boys still there, some of them spotty and with dandruff on their blazers. (Spiro, 2002, p.97)

Meanwhile Rosa, became a symbol for all those who had left their lives behind, by train, boat, on foot. Here is Rosa on her last journey out of Poland, lucky enough to have time to leave by train (as my uncle did), her lover left behind on the station platform. Like the sisters in Julek's journey, he has chosen to stay for the sake of family – in this case, his elderly father who would not have survived the journey.

The train was moving in a tunnel of freezing darkness and there seemed never to be landscape, only the laughter of the guards in the corridor drinking vodka and playing cards, the long rattled breathing of the old woman snoring in the corner of the carriage, the chundering of her grown-up sons in their sleep. And Rosa sat upright looking out through the window at her own image, a ghostly negative in the glass.

All through the journey, the rattling, the snoring, the chundering, the vodka-drinking, Jacob repeated through her as if they had turned inside out and it was she left behind and him on the train. The landscape crumbled as they passed it, broke off and hurtled out into the blackness so she wanted to stop the trees and barns flash by, shout, 'Let me keep that,' before they passed and crumbled and were lost. (Spiro, 2002, p.88)

She also came to symbolise for me all the language learners I had ever known, (including myself living in Hungary and Switzerland), whose flight forced them to function without their mother tongue. I grew up with empathy for the second culture learner, was fascinated to know how my family and their large circle of resettled compatriots, had come to learn English. None had learnt comfortably, or even tediously, in a school class. One had learnt by reading a dictionary while in hiding between the floorboards of a Warsaw apartment block. My grandmother had learnt by reading everything she could lay hands on in English, whether she understood it or not. My uncle learnt by giving the other boys English lessons, always being three words ahead of his pupils. My father started off with three words of English, 'I bicky par' (*I beg your pardon*) which he was told would take him

⁶ Assembly

anywhere: and learnt the rest within a year of arriving in England, by studying and reading so he ruined his sight. There were no kindly teachers to mediate for any of them, no communicative methods to make it palatable: and yet they learnt it anyway, to brilliant effect. Rosa represents, and is in honour, of all of them. In the extract below, she tries to learn English by reading the dictionary in the local library:

In the afternoons for one hour she sat in the public library and read at the no smoking table. Her favourite was the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Each day she read ten new words, starting with A. She learnt Aardvark, Aaron's beard (a name), abaca⁷ and abaciscus⁸ on the first day, but even with the dictionary explanation she couldn't really understand them, and there didn't seem to be any opportunities to use them. So the next day she started volume 2 and learnt marl, marlite (a variety of marl⁹), marmalade and marmoset. These seemed more useful words, because she knew for a fact that marmalade really existed because Mr. Gobelman had a pot with the word written on it. Anyway, with words written in front of her she had hope again, even if she couldn't understand them; and she could talk quietly into books and they quietly back to her. They were the best conversations of the day. (Spiro, 2002, p.52)

The Laura/Rosa roles, and the engagement with character at a symbolic level, helped me to 'find myself' in the narrative and drive it forward with 'passionate conviction'.

Hunt (2000) writes: 'When a writer says that she has 'found her voice' it seems to me she is saying that she has developed a deep connection in her writing between her inner life and the words she places on the page' (p.16). It is true, that through Rosa and Laura I was able to explore again the sources of my own identity and the collective memory of my community. The opportunities to slide between inner and outer voices, child and adult, to become Rosa and Laura, was liberating and empowering. Like Heaney, when he found his voice as a young poet, 'I felt that I had let down a shaft into real life' (Heaney, 1980, p.41).

b) Teaching as a writer

In 1987, I progressed from being a teacher of access, General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations¹⁰ and the Advanced Level examination¹¹ in English in a further education college closeted in the privacy of my own classroom, to course-manager of a Diploma in English Language Teaching in Switzerland. My early English teaching days had been gloriously unsupervised and, as my first experiences in the classroom, filled with trial and error. Yet I was able to resolve my mistakes quietly within the sanctuary of my own classroom and with the trust of my students. My passion for good practice was in place, but my knowledge of how to arrive at this was still limited and untested.

Through constant exposure now to classes and conference groups of teachers, the components of best practice needed to be explicit and rationalised. Specifically, I came to

⁷ Fibre.

⁸ A tile or square of a tessellated pavement.

⁹ Marl is a calcium-carbonate, mudstone.

¹⁰ Examinations taken in England and Wales usually taken at 16, referred to normally as GCSEs.

¹¹ Examinations taken at 18 as a rule, and referred to as 'A' Levels.

understand more clearly my own answer to the questions: how can non-English speaking students become excited and empowered by reading and writing in English? The following realisations emerged, based on experiences in my first teaching incarnation:

- appreciation of a text is more meaningful when readers have ‘entered into the shoes’ of the writer, and experimented themselves with the writer’s strategies and themes;
- creating personal texts such as a poem or story engages the ‘whole’ learner in a way that other merely language-focused exercises will not;
- it provides them with an incentive to write for an audience, and thus to edit and reformulate their work, with an awareness of both the writer and the reader;
- more importantly, it gives the learner the opportunity to share information which is unique and not replicable by the teacher or any other learner in the class: and thus alters the balance of informant: informee in a way that gives the learner power and autonomy;
- it provides a context in which new language can be learnt in order to fill a perceived communicative need, rather than to meet the needs of the course-book or syllabus.

As the practice became refined and moulded by these more clearly stated values, new questions arose:

- What are the strategies and processes which have worked (or failed to work) for me as a writer, and are these generalisable or teachable?
- What processes, for me, characterise movement into linguistic adventure and change lived story into created story/text?
- How could these strategies be transformed into learning activities and with what effect on learners and learning?

With these questions, subliminal or otherwise, I began to formulate activities which were more carefully structured, theorised and recorded. Rather than ‘scraps’ of poems copied from student work at the end of class, I began meticulously to collect notes recording the full process by which these texts were arrived at. Below is an example of such a process, evolved over a number of years, and in a number of guises: with young newly-arrived Bedford refugees, Swiss trainee-teachers, adult language-learners in evening classes, adult pre-university international students in the UK.

Fundamentally, the activity draws on two powerful strategies which are part of my own practice: first, it draws on what is deeply and personally known and thus unique to the writer; secondly, it transforms this knowledge into the symbolic, so that the personal and specific become metaphors for the human condition itself. Thus here I uncover the *transformation of knowledge* as a creative process; the discovery of deep personal knowledge (knowledge as experience, feeling, belief), and the changing of this into something new.

The activity starts by discussing the notion of *praise song*. Much can be unpacked from the two words:

- *praise* – something we love, value, admire, describe in words, an admiration made known, ‘flung to the heavens’.
- *song* – something chanted out loud, perhaps with musical instruments such as drums, perhaps accompanied by dance and movement.

All of these are the case with traditional praise song from black Africa. Just a few lines capture their quality and impact:

*You lime of the forest, honey among rocks,
Lemon of the cloister, grape in the savannah.
(from an Amharic love song, highlands of Ethiopia)
(Heath, 1993, p. 102)*

*My bull is white like the silver fish in the river,
White like the shimmering crane bird on the river bank
White like fresh milk!
(from a Dinka praise song, south of Sudan)
(ibid., p. 104)*

Having introduced the topic of praise song, shared interpretations of what it might mean, and offered examples, the stages of the activity involve moving ever nearer to the learners generating songs of their own. The first example above is praising a lover; the second is praising a bull. But praise songs could be about anything we admire. Pablo Neruda (1973), for example, writes in praise of ironing:

*It wrinkles, and it piles up,
The skin of the planet must be stretched,
The sea of its whiteness must be ironed.
(p. ii)*

A moment of visualisation gives time for the group to conjure up something loved and admired, object, activity, human being, animal. In my own experience of this activity, I conjured up my violin, to which I have been monogamously attached since the age of 14. Other participants have chosen to praise: the hairdresser, the washing machine, new shoes, although more frequently, praise is for best friends and family members. Especially is this the case when the learners are distant from home, and my examples in this section will be from such a group – a group of adult international learners on a short course in the UK, away from home for three weeks during a cool English summer.

Our next stage is to form a collective list of the objects of praise, as in Column A below. Having done so, and allowed this to illustrate the shared values in the group, I offer to the class a second list of words describing the natural world, side by side with the first. The task is simply to choose the word from the ‘natural’ list that most exactly describes/compares with, the praise object; or to add a new one that suits better.

Table 1: Blackboard plan for praise poems

COLUMN A	COLUMN B
Husband	Shell
Wife	Rock
Sister	River
Brother	Lake
Mother	Stream
Father	Mountain
Aunt	Flower (rose, violet)
Friend	Fruit (lemon, lime, peach, fig)

With this choice, a simple first sentence is formulated. There are two choices here:

Simile: My _____ is like a _____

eg. my mother is like a lake, my father is like a rock

Metaphor: My _____ is a _____

eg. my friend is a shell, my wife is a rose

We have, in one move, leapt into the realm of linguistic adventure. However new the process of writing creatively in English, however great the blocks, few participants have been unable to respond to this process.

From this point, the writers are asked to 'grow' their metaphor (or simile) by explaining in two or three short lines, why mother and lake (or father and rock, or wife and rose) are similar.

Poems from Oxford International Summer School class

My sister is a tree

She is tall and I look up at her

She is freshly green and she gives me oxygen.

When the wind blows at me, she sings for me through the leaves.

When the cloud comes, she cries for me through the rain.

She keeps growing and offers me bigger shelter,

Oh, how I love my sister!

And I hug her round with both my arms

(Student from China)

My grandmother is now an orange
Her skin is no longer smooth
She's seen – not only – sun in her days
At 90 she's still full of juice.
(Student from Peru)

My brother is a tree.
While his roots burrow deep,
He grows up into a new world.
(Student from China)

My husband is a river
He flows quietly along
My daughters are flowers
Even their skin blooms
(Student from Switzerland)

In some ways, the poems are their own testimony. They reveal both the universal story -the common experience of life and loves, and the specificity of these stories; the lively 90-year-old grandmother, the brother just leaving home who 'grows up into a new world', the fresh skin of young daughters: 'even their skin blooms'. The poems also illustrate the balance between revealing self: 'Oh how I love my sister!' and establishes a safe distance through metaphor: 'she is a tree'. Most of all, the poems also make clear that capturing feelings creatively and memorably is within the capacity of every language-user and learner, if they choose to make the 'poetic leap'.

To be fully congruent with the process, I offer here a poem I wrote alongside my students, in response to this task. I began with the violin as my love object. The violin then became a metaphor for marriage: my violin is my husband/my husband is a violin. As the one became the other, the following poem evolved, and I add this to the mix. It will be apparent to the reader that I broke my own 'rules' – starting with the simple figurative sentence and proceeding to 'unpack' the metaphor. As a writer, I edited out this first opening line, making the poem something of a riddle, making the reader work at interpreting, and making both halves of the metaphor equally strong: is this about a husband, or is it about a violin? The process of editing, selecting, introducing further layers of ambiguity, is something my learners may have progressed to, had there been the purpose and objective to do so.

I knew from the first moment
we would find a voice, a way to sing,
you just wood and string
without me, and I a reaching
in space, a breath between notes
without you.

I knew how the singing
would be, like a kite on air,
a running like a wild child
into sea.

I wonder now about the mystery
in your wood, if you mourn the forest
where you were, if the wine-brown memory
in your grain holds all the singing
we have done, all the ways we have
reached for new notes,
all the ways we have found our place.

Other examples of students responding to creative space can be found in the following locations:

- poems generated with teachers at a British Council workshop;
- lessons and student writing: in national journal for English teachers.

I have found that being congruent with my own practice and beliefs has made it possible to communicate within increasingly broad parameters: from my own classroom, to communities of fellow teachers on Master of Arts and teacher-development programmes, to large conference audiences, to global publishers such as Oxford University Press (Spiro, 2004; Spiro, 2007). The Image 1 represents a number of developments for me: visually it shows how very small one person is, and potentially invisible, amongst a large sea of people. Yet interestingly, the same image can suggest the opposite, in that it shows how one person can inhabit a space which is commanding and draws attention to itself. The situation itself, of course, offers permission to 'hold the floor' and includes expectation of 'something to say'. In fact, discourse conventions would suggest that the audience will struggle to find meaning and value in the speaker, simply by virtue of these conditions. However I have stepped off the stage which was set up for the speaker; I have also broken the conventional

silence between speaker/audience by involving them in the dialogue and walking between the aisles, eliciting responses to my story cues and openings.



Image 1. Storybuilding with teachers at the Malaysian International Conference for English Language Teachers, April 2004

6. What living theory emerges and why does this matter?

It is interesting for me to observe that my expanding terrain of influence has emerged concurrent with my own understanding of what it is I am doing and why. As I have lived the experience of teaching/writing, I have also understood what the values are which guide me, and where I stand within the struggle for creative space. In effect, as I have created this space for myself, I have been able to expand it so more and more are able to share it with me. In so doing, it is possible to return to, and respond to, the debates about creative process identified in Section 3 above.

a) The creative process as finding a voice.

As a novelist, I explored ways of shuttling between timescales, so that narrator-as-child and narrator-as-young-woman ‘spoke’ to one another using their own contrasting voices. Only through finding *their* voice was I able to fully define their character and the architecture of the novel as a whole. In so doing, in effect I found my own voice and confronted the issues and concerns which had subliminally influenced me. Similarly, these approaches formed a basis for guiding students to find their own voices through hearing and empathising with one another, and speaking to (and sometimes for) influential people in their lives.

b) The nature of research/information as the stimulus for creative process:

Here I refer to the transformational nature of *information* as a grounding for empathy and connection. Conrad described this sudden transformation of information into creative process, as catalyst: 'what a student of chemistry would best understand from the analogy of the tiniest little drop of the right kind, precipitating the process of crystallisation in a test tube' (Conrad, 1920, p.6). I too engaged in this 'chain' of learning when writing my novel, by drawing on library research and oral history as catalyst for the story. In effect, the writing process involved an interweaving of system (what there was to learn from life narratives other than my own), and freedom (how I might change and transform these to create story).

c) The creative process as connecting the specific and the universal.

The process of moving from a single point to an all-embracing one, is described by the Turkish Nobel prizewinner Pamuk: 'when a writer shuts himself up in a room for years on end, with this gesture he suggests a single humanity, a world without a centre' (Pamuk, 2006, p.17). In describing the specific, personal or anecdotal, storytellers invite the 'compassionate leap' of the reader to recognize these stories as part of the larger human story, and deriving from an honest account of this. So, whilst my novel drew on the stories of a specific uncle, it also became symbolic for me of all displaced people. The poems written by students over the years of experimentation and practice, describe both the small and the large: homesickness for Cyprus, Iraq or Chechnya and at the same time, the pain of war, separation, loss and longing.

d) The creative process as the embracing of paradox.

This is the possibility of holding several truths simultaneously. Several of the creative processes described above, are also parallel truths which are held side by side: as a writer one must balance the specific and the symbolic. As a teacher one must balance the role of empowering the individual, with the role of preparing the individual for public and accountable success; assessment as the bridge between individual learning and external validation.

e) The creative process as capable of development, nurturing and 'scaffolding'.

Understanding the 'machinery' of the creative process can help to drive it more energetically forward. As an educator it has been important for me to anatomise the skills and knowledges I mean by *creative* in order to frame it for others. As a writer it has been important for me to deconstruct what I have practiced intuitively since childhood, in order to understand what it is that continues to drive and shape me as a writer. In this enterprise I have been able to arrive at an understanding of my own values as a writer, and to recognize a commitment to perpetual self-improvement as a driving principle.

f) The creative process as doing something in the world.

This paper premises that the creative process does something in the world because it makes something happen: growth in self-esteem, in knowledge of self or other, in curiosity and purpose; improved practice in the classroom, a shift amongst learners from readers to reader/writers.

Thus, I arrive at my own meanings of *creative* as I describe myself as a *creative writer*:

- the capacity to transform knowledge (knowledge-as-experience) into something new, unpredictable and unique;
- an inner drive to continue doing this;
- a belief in the value of what I am doing;
- an awareness of audience, and the continued tuning of my message for this purpose;
- a dedication to the discipline of writing as craft, and to a process of perpetual self-improvement.

In my own definition, the creative process involves the discovery of deep knowledge and the changing of it into something specific, shaped and new that communicates to others. By knowledge, I include: what emerges freely from the unconscious; deeply felt experience; the understanding that emanates from empathy and connection; the insights derived from new information. All or one of these are starting points for creative transformation. When I write, in addition, I aim to trigger in the reader a similar leap in understanding, to be perhaps the starting point for another chain of learning and transformation. In unravelling this process educationally, I have aimed to provide the opportunity for learners to discover their own deep knowledge and to transform it into a new shape that communicates powerfully. This new shape may be a story, a poem, a performance, a speech, an image, but it carries the knowledge beyond the self and towards others, extending the collective understanding of what is possible, what can be made, and what can be imagined. In doing this, the writer/learner is him/herself transformed. The experience of writing or 'making' in this way can lead to changes such as an expansion in understanding, in self confidence, in independence, in self discovery, in motivation to do or say something new, in the shape and scope of knowledge itself in the learner's mind and what the learner can then do with this. It is this chain of discovering knowledge, making of it something new, and being transformed by it, that I call *knowledge-transformation*.

Whilst *knowledge-transformation* explains where I stand in relation to the creative process, *creative space* defines the environment needed for this to happen. This is the space created by the teacher/mentor in virtual or actual classrooms that allows the learner to work at the height of his/her capacity. It is no therapeutic, comfortable space. It combines the expectation of best possible achievement, with the opportunity for this. It maximises the possibilities, stretches the boundaries, and raises the bar of expectations. In creative space, the learner/writer strives for the best he/she is able to be, patient with the trial and error, the discipline and the tedium, that this entails. Here the chaos and the order of the creative process are at liberty to come together as they need to, both for the project and its maker.

My story, 'Eye and the Fellow Traveller', enacts the meanings I have discussed above. The story describes my journey towards a doctorate in education, a goal which seemed unachievable without the kind of supervision I was fortunate to experience from my Bath University tutor, Jack Whitehead. The story emerged as part of my reflection:

- Why was this so successful a learning experience?
- What did it look like, feel like, and lead to?
- What did it teach me about the optimal conditions for learning – about *creative space* itself?

I answer these questions by setting up my own myth – characters that are representative rather than specific and named and a setting which is any-place. The journey is both guided by the teacher – in that he understands the destination- but also by the learner, in that she/I am permitted to find my own route and stepping stones on the way. My story at one level is an example of what it means to transform knowledge-as-experience into something new. On another level, it illustrates what *creative space* might look like, translated into myth: an open landscape with multiple pathways, in which the traveller needs to discover his/her own capacity in order to reach the destination. It contrasts the controlling teacher who creates the learner in his/her own likeness, with the empowering educator whose influence allows the learner to become more truly and fully him/herself. This optimal learning relationship, and my own supervision-experience in particular, seemed to contain these ingredients:

- A mutual sense between learner and teacher of the intrinsic value of the enterprise;
- the time for 'slow' learning to take its natural time and course (including false starts and mistakes on the way);
- the mutual commitment of learner and teacher to work at the highest level of their capacity;
- a mutual belief that learning comes from a deep investigation of one's own resources; a mutual openness to learning from one another.

In representing this experience of optimal learning as story, I am enacting the values I have explored in this paper: discovering the deep knowledge that emerges from a life as a poet/writer and a life as an educator, and transforming this duality into something symbolic and new. In this article, too, I am joining academic and creative selves, allowing the two to live, and write, and publish, side by side.

Story Epilogue: Eye and Fellow Traveller

One day I came to the edge of a cliff. There seemed no way forward, and the way back was blocked by a strange and faceless creature that stood with his huge arms stretched across my path.

‘Only members of the Laurel Crown Club may proceed,’ he said.

‘Which Club is that?’ I cried, tired from all my many travels, ‘and how can I join it?’

‘You join it by following my dance, step by step, and after each step, proving you are as good as I am.’

‘But that’s ridiculous,’ I said. ‘Why should I want to do that? Look, here is the garland of the storyteller, woven by myself from a thousand stories.’

‘That is nothing,’ said the creature.

‘And here is the crown of the teacher, made of shells excavated from a thousand shores and threaded together with spun learning.’

The faceless creature laughed a bitter icy laugh.

‘None of these will bring you the Laurel Crown, because none of the steps are like mine,’ he crowed. ‘Without this, how do I know you are good enough to continue the journey?’

‘Because of all the journeys I’ve already travelled!’ I shouted. ‘The bridge-building journey, the river-crossing, the boat-making, the flower-blooming, the story-making, the wisdom-excavating journeys. Do none of those count?’

‘None are mine!’ yelled the creature. ‘And I, Thought Doctor, am the only one that can lead the way. Take my journey or none at all.’

‘OK, if you must, show me the way then. Since I have travelled so far, I might as well do this further journey.’

Thought Doctor pointed with his long bony finger towards the hills. I noticed a long narrow track like a railway that burned an unbending route through the valleys, tunnelled through the hillside, and plunged into the woods the other side.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘You follow me, along the track, copying my dance, and at the end you win the crown.’

The journey seemed possible, and better than throwing myself over the cliff. But still, it did not seem a very exciting or useful way to travel, with so much landscape to explore on either side of the narrow track, and so many ways to explore apart from following his single step. And how would I carry with me all the garlands, sarongs, shells, and songs of previous journeys, if I was not allowed to offer them and share them on the way?

I threw myself down onto the grassy ground to think about my options. As I did so, I noticed appearing from behind Thought Doctor’s cloak, a silent group of people, cloaked, pale and downcast, gathering around me on the cliff.

‘We are members of the Laurel Crown Club,’ they said.

I looked at them now as they stood nearer me.

‘But you all look the same!’ I cried.

‘When we started we were all different,’ one of them said, ‘but by the end we have all learnt Thought Doctor’s moves so well, we look just like him.’

‘If you are Laurel Crown members, where are your crowns?’

'Here!' said one, and threw off his hood to reveal a shiny metallic crown that looked far too heavy for him and made him stoop forward.

'Here!' said another, and revealed the same metallic shiny crown but it was so large it kept dropping over her eyes, and she had to push it up every few minutes.

'Here!' said another, and there was the crown again, but every so often the poor owner picked up a corner and began scratching underneath, shifting it round so it would sit more comfortably.

'None of your crowns fit!' I cried, concerned for them.

They laughed in chorus, like a pond of hippopotami.

'Of course not. There's only one size crown. If it doesn't fit, well that's just too bad. They all need to be the same size, to make sure it's all fair.'

'But being just the same size makes it NOT fair,' I cried.

Thought Doctor rolled his eyes, exasperated, and turned away.

'She clearly doesn't understand,' he snorted. 'Come, Club, let's leave her here to think.'

I sat by the cliff edge, suddenly alone, and looked in both directions. In one direction was a sheer drop down to a fast running river gorge. On the other was the Laurel Crown track, long and straight, with bunches of flowers every so often along the route where travellers had failed to survive. What to do? Now, with the Thought Doctor gone, there seemed to be many more possibilities. Looking again at the landsCape ahead, it seemed laughable that there should be only one track forwards; on the contrary, there seemed to be an infinite number of paths, and surely nothing would stop me exploring them?

Encouraged by this thought, I stood up and again reviewed my options. In one direction was open hillside scattered with a blue dusting of heather; in the other direction was the path I had come from, winding over the cliff edge and dropping back down to a chain of rocky bays. I chose the new direction, the open hillside. Surely, if I set foot there, Thought Doctor wouldn't stop me?

So I began the new path, into the blue heather and the unmarked terrain. It was welcoming underfoot, and comforting to walk inland away from the cliff edge, wading through the tall grass, not knowing where it would lead me. After a while, as I walked, I suddenly became aware that there was a Fellow Traveller quietly beside me, and like me, quietly tracing the path of the wild flowers. I looked up to take note of him, and to my surprise, saw he was wearing a crown too.

'Oh! Your crown fits!' I cried.

'Of course it does,' said Fellow Traveller. 'I made it myself.'

We carried on walking, quietly for a while.

'But is it a Laurel Crown, like the others?'

'Yes, of course it is.'

'But did you do that long journey, like the others?'

'Yes, yes I did,' said the Traveller patiently.

'But how is it you don't look just like all the others? How is it you have strayed off the track?'

'Well I worked out the route for myself.'

'Is that allowed?'

'Of course it is. That's what I did, and I have a Crown and it fits just fine.'

I could see that all of those things were true. It seemed an exciting and revolutionary way to become a member of the Club.

'Could you show me how I might get a Crown that way too?'

'Sure, of course.'

We carried on walking, and the Fellow Traveller didn't seem to be showing me anything at all, but just following where I went along the hillside.

'But you aren't showing me. Shouldn't you be showing me the way?'

'No, quite the reverse. You choose which way you want to go, and I'll come along with you.'

'Are you sure?' I asked, nervously. It all seemed so different to Thought Doctor.

'Look, the end of the journey is over there.' He pointed beyond the wood where the narrow track disappeared. 'You can get there any way you like.'

I took from my sack a handful of shiny stones gathered from a Mexican beach and threw them down.

'Can I use these as stepping stones?'

'Sure, of course,' and we jumped from one to the other, first me, and Fellow Traveller following.

'Take a stepping stone to put in your crown,' he said, as we reached the end. 'Now, where next?'

'If I scatter the marigold garland we could follow its scent,'

'Sure, try that,' said Fellow Traveller.

It was tiring, running after the scent of the marigold as it blew in the wind, and at the end, I threw myself down on a rock and sighed.

'I don't know where to go next.'

'Yes you do. Look in your bag.'

'I've nothing there. Nothing useful at all.'

'Of course you have. Just have a look.'

'A sari from India, a sarong from Hawaii, a branch from the learning tree, -'

'OK, let's start with the first one. Find out where the sari wants us to go next.'

I took the sari out of its bag. It was buttercup yellow with streaks of quiet lavender, and as it unfolded from the bag it began to blow like a sail towards the east.

'There we are then,' said Fellow Traveller, 'that's the direction we have to go in.'

So we followed the sail of the sari, and then the kite of the sarong; and then the branch of the learning tree doused us around the tors and I hardly knew we had travelled so far before I realised the station had appeared at the end of the Thought Doctor's narrow track.

'Do you mean we are nearly there?'

'Sure. You need to get your laurel crown ready for submission to the Club.'

'Oh no, one of those terrible metal ones that fall over your eyes and itch?'

Fellow Traveller laughed

'A made-to-measure one, made with all the mementoes of your journey. It will take two months to craft'

'Are you sure?' I said. 'Will it be as good as the others?'

'Well, I think it might be better, because for one thing it will fit, for another it will be quite unique and for another it will have mementoes of your journey inside it.'

'What do I do when I reach the last station?'

'When you arrive, and put on the crown, look in the mirror. There you will see what you have become and where the journey led.'

In a quiet place at the station gates, I unfolded all the contents of my travels around me and spread them on the ground. How to fit them together? Surely they could never be crafted into one coherent and beautiful piece?

But as I stared at them hour after hour alone now outside the gates of my destination, it all became clear.

The learning branch became the strong anchor that held the crown together. With the golden learning thread I wove in the Mexican stepping stones, securely at the front. Then I rolled the lavender and buttercup sari and the sarong with the silver fish and turtles, into long narrow drapes and plaited them together with the learning thread to hold the branch in place. Between the binds and threads, I planted small clusters of heather from the journey. The crown was fragrant and colourful as a spring garden. Then I lifted it to my head, and tied the plaited fronds behind just tightly enough to be comfortable and secure.

'Will this do?' I asked.

'What does the mirror say?'

I looked in the mirror. I saw myself, like a spring goddess with all the colours of the hillside in her hair. I didn't look a bit like Thought Doctor or even like Fellow Traveller.

'I look like the goddess of my story!' I cried, surprised.

'Exactly that,' said Fellow Traveller. 'The journey was yourself, so it follows that the journey leads to yourself. And your Crown celebrates yourself.'

'Is that going to be alright, do you think?'

'That's the only way it *would* be alright. I think you are ready to submit your Crown to the Club,' said Fellow Traveller.

And together we walked towards the gates of the station at the end of the mountain path, both of us with heads high, wearing our Laurel Crowns.

References

- Abbs, P. (1994). *The Educational Imperative: A Defence of Socratic and Aesthetic Learning*. London and Washington DC: Falmer Press.
- Abbs, P. (2003). *Against the Flow: education, the arts and postmodern culture*. London, RoutledgeFalmer.
- Allende, I. (2007). In Giving I Connect. In J. Allison and D. Gediman (Eds.), *This I Believe* (pp. 13–15). New York: Holt.
- Allison, J., and Gediman, D. (2007). *This I Believe: the personal philosophies of remarkable men and women*. New York: Holt.
- Allott, M. (1959). *Novelists on the Novel*. London: Routledge.
- Balshaw, M. (2004). Risking creativity: building the creative context. *Support for Learning* 19(2), 71–76.
- Banaji, S. and Burn, A., with Buckingham, D. (2006). *The Rhetorics of Creativity: a review of the literature*. Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media Institute of Education, University of London: Arts Council England.
- Baylis, N. and Morris, I. (2006). *The Skills of Well-being*. Wellington College: Personal Health and Social Education Department.
- Bell, J. (1995). *Teachers Talk about Teaching*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ben Peretz, M. (1995) *Learning from experience: memory and the teacher's account of teaching*. University of New York Press, Albany New York.
- Bernstein, L. (2007). The Mountain Disappears. In J. Allison and D. Gediman (Eds.), *This I Believe* (pp.19 – 21). New York: Holt.
- Boden, M. (1990). *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Boden, M.A. (2001). Creativity and knowledge. In Craft, A., Jeffrey, B., & Leibling, M. (Eds.), *Creativity in Education* (pp. 95–102). London and New York: Continuum.
- Bohm, D. (1998). *On Creativity*. Routledge: London.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement and Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brown, L.D. (ed.). (2002). *Practice-research engagement and civil society in a globalizing society*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University/Hauser Centre.
- Buckingham, D. (2003). Living in a Young Culture? Youthful Creativity and Cultural Policy in the United Kingdom. In Mallan, K. and Pearce, S. (Eds.), *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images and Identities* (pp. 92–107). Westport Connecticut, London: Praeger.
- Buckingham, D. and Jones, K. (2001). New Labour's cultural turn: some tensions in contemporary educational and cultural policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(1), 1–14).

- Certificate in Advanced Educational Practice. (2008). *Practitioner reports from Lancashire Creative Partnership projects*. Certificate in Advanced Educational Practice, validated by Oxford Brookes University. Unpublished.
- Carter, R. (2006). Is there a literary language? In Goodman, S. and K. O'Halloran (Eds.), *The art of English: literary creativity* (pp. 84–88). Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan/Open University.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. (eds.). (1986). *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cocteau, J. (1952). The Process of Inspiration. In Ghiselin B. (Ed.), *The Creative Process: A Symposium*. (p. 81). New York: New American Library.
- Conrad, J. (1920). Author's note. In Conrad, J. (1993, ed.). *The Secret Agent*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth.
- Coveney, P. and Highfield, R. (1995) *Frontiers of Complexity: The Search for Order in a Chaotic World*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Cox, M. and A. Thielgard (1987). *Mutative Metaphors in Psychotherapy: the Aeolian mode*. London: Tavistock.
- Craft, A. (2000). *Teaching Creativity: Philosophy and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Craft, A. (2001). *An Analysis of Research and Literature on Creativity in Education*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Creative Partnerships in Education. (2004). *Young Roots, Your Roots: creativity, schools and community cohesion - how to give children a voice*. London: Creative Partnerships in Education. Retrieved February 24, 2009, from <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/data/files/young20roots20toolkit-36.pdf>
- Creative Partnerships. (2007). *Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity: Action Research programme*. Retrieved February 26, 2009, from <http://www.artsmarts.ca/media/preferredlearningstylesandcreativityintro.pdf>
- Cropley, A.J. (2001). *Creativity in Education and Learning*. London and Sterling: Kogan Page.
- Denzin, N.K. (1997). *Interpretative Ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Department of Education and Science. (2004). *Excellence and Enjoyment and Creating Conditions for Learning*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Ecclestone, K. (2007). Resisting images of the diminished self: the implications of emotional well-being and emotional engagement in educational policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(4), 445-470.
- Ecclestone, K. and Hayes, D. (2009). *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Education Guardian. (2005, November 14). *Tedd Wragg Retrospective*. p. 2.
- Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without Teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Elbow, P. (1986). *Embracing Contraries: explorations in learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farren, M. (2008). Co-creating educational space. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 1(1), 50–68. Retrieved February 24, 2009, from <http://ejolts.net/node/78>
- Ghiselin, B. (1952). *The Creative Process*. New York: New American Library.
- Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the Bones*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications.
- Hayles, N. (1991). *Chaos and Order; Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heaney, S. (1980). *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968 – 1978*. London: Faber.
- Heath, R.B. (ed.). (1993). *Tradewinds* (3rd Impression). Harlow: Longman.
- Hunt, C. (2000). *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative-writing*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mandela, N. (1994). *Long Walk to Freedom*. London: Abacus.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370–396.
- Miller, A.L. (2000). *Insights of Genius: Imagery and Creativity in Science and Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Morrison, M. (2007). What do we mean by educational research? In Coleman, M., & Briggs, A. (Eds.), *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management* (pp. 13-36). London: Paul Chapman Publishers.
- Negus, K. and Pickering, M. (2004). *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.
- Neruda, P. (1973). La poesia e bianca. In Walsh, D.D.(Ed.) *Residence on Earth*. Losada, S.A., Buenos Aires and New York: New Directions.
- Nettle, D. (2001). *Strong Imagination: Madness, Creativity and Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- OfSTED (2005). *Healthy minds: promoting emotional health and wellbeing in schools*. Retrieved January 12, 2007, from www.ofsted.gov.uk
- Pamuk, O. (2006) *My Father's Suitcase: The Nobel Lecture* (trans. M.Freely). London: Faber and Faber.
- Pope, R. (2002). *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pope, R. (2002). *Rewriting Texts: reconstructing the subject: work as play on the critical-creative interface*. London: Palgrave.
- Pope, R., (2005). *Creativity: theory, practice and history*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Pope, R. (2005). The return of creativity : common, singular and otherwise. *Language and Literature*, 14(4), 376-389.

- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (2001). *Creativity: find it, promote it*. Retrieved March 29, 2006, from <http://www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity/whatis.htm>
- Rayner, A. (2008). *Essays and Talks about Inclusionality*. Retrieved 12 January, 2009, from <http://people.bath.ac.uk/bssadmr/inclusionality>
- Rayner, A. (2009). *Introduction to inclusional research*. Retrieved February 13, 2009, from <http://www.inclusional-research.org/introduction.php>
- Robinson, K. (2006). *All our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*. London: National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education.
- Sartre, J.P. (1964). *The Words*. Greenwich, USA: Fawcett Crest Books.
- Spiro, J. (1994). Storytelling as an Image of Life. In Hill, D. (ed.), *English Language Teaching* (pp. 161 – 167). Bologna, Italy: British Council.
- Spiro, J. (1998). *Etzbah Elohim: Julek Tigner's story*. Unpublished family archive.
- Spiro, J. (2002). *Nothing I Touch Stands Still*. Norton St. Phillip: Crucible Press.
- Spiro, J. (2004). *Creative Poetry Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spiro, J. (2007a). *Storybuilding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spiro, J. (2007b). *Television interview*. English UK. Retrieved from www.ukfuturetv.com/janespiro.wmv.
- Weisberg, R.W. (1993). *Creativity: Beyond the Myth of Genius*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Whitehead, J. (2008). Using a living theory methodology in improving practice and generating educational knowledge in living theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 1(1), 103-12. Retrieved February 24, 2009, from <http://ejolts.net/node/78>