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Sites of Memory: Positioning thresholds of artistic identity

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ABSTRACT
Through an education the individual learner can affect changes as he or she achieves a set of skills and knowledge that will provide opportunities to operate within a chosen discipline or context pushing beyond the known. As learners make their way in the world assuming and reframing their identities they create and recreate life stories within personally constructed spaces and places. As the concept of a self forms and reforms, what has existed becomes transformed and assimilated into a changed identity. This transformation of self also involves challenges that confront conceptual beliefs and understandings not only within an educational context, but also within other facets of life. This paper will discuss Thresholds Concepts in relation to artistic identity and will argue that preoccupation with the ways we might influence learners in terms of knowledge acquisition can distract from other important notions of learning and self. While concentrating on the external drivers such as discipline content we can easily ignore or conveniently forget that there may be other drivers that are internalised and adopted as a motivating force in the desire for authorising an identity or identities. Such drivers may well be the most important elements in the acquisition of knowledge and the successful crossing of life's thresholds.

"The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind" (Khalil Gibran)

Recording life stories

Memories often seem to begin or end with a journey. From the distance of reverie it seems that journeys are the punctuation marks in a life story. Childhood is a time in which the smallest journey can seem endless.

A significant memory of a journey's end is the day I was taken to live with my mother. It is the end of the journey I remember; the journey itself has vanished however the memory of my grandfather's car disappearing down a gravel road remains with me. It is a singular image, like a photograph that has been taken and somehow the movement has been captured in just one frame that repeats itself over and over again. The memory is made more powerful by the intense sadness I associate with it. It's not that I can feel the sadness still, rather it is a sense or a knowing that I retain in the sensory memory. This is what returns.

From that time, I have discontinuities or flashes of remembering—dark memories with little joy or happiness to lighten the way. From that time on, I lived in many houses. My stepfather and mother were restless and wanted to improve their lot, so the houses became status symbols and

outward signs of success. Much of my memory is associated with the periods of time delineated by the particular house in which we lived but the house that retains constancy is the house of my grandparents who lived there all their married lives until their deaths in the mid 1970s.

In that time of my childhood in suburban Perth, Western Australia, custom had it that at the age of 21, a young person would receive a "key to the door". This was a symbolic recognition of the rite of passage into adulthood. It represented a threshold over which the new adult passed, casting aside adolescence and childhood in the face of a future life of work and responsibility. My grandmother would show me the one she had given to my mother. It was made of wood and had the number 21 etched into it and painted gold for affect. Around the stem of the key was a pink ribbon tied in a bow. It was made plain to me that I would receive a similar key when I was big enough and old enough to deserve it.

For my sons in their adolescent years, important facets of an adult life such as the right to vote, the gaining of a driver's license and legal drinking of alcohol were all achieved at eighteen years of age and it seems that the completion of a secondary education became the significant delineation of changed status. However the key to the door and the doorways into and out of sites of memory are the metaphors with which I commence this discussion regarding the thresholds an individual will confront and ultimately cross as they progress through life.

Sites of memory: doorways to the past

Metcalfe talks about the importance of doorways as markers in a life journey:

> Simply closed doors also allow me to believe (sometimes) in the beginning and ending of the journeys and stories that mark space personally. They give me insides and thresholds to farewell and outsides and foreign ports at which to arrive, they provide me paths to travel and centres to return to. Moreover, through marking out my life this way, they let me imagine purposes around which I can orientate my biography, separating where I've been from where I'm going. Simply closed doors are the beginning of ends, as evident in the etymology of 'limit' and 'threshold,' which both refer to the limen of the door. They're fundamental to my sense of and desires for an ordered and integrated life (Metcalfe, n.d., para. 14).

He introduces ideas of life as constant change and review; a recursive process and tells us that doors may open and close as each action in turn provides opportunities for changes in direction and action. It exemplifies the way individuals record how they shape and reshape their lives. Metcalf suggests that each door is a marker of times when choices have been made. It is this liminality; the times of partial understanding, that he chooses to represent through the doorways of memory.

> Cousin (2006) describes liminality as an unstable space where the learner becomes:

> Engaged with the project of mastery unlike the learner who remains in a state of pre-liminality in which understandings are at best vague. The idea that learners enter into a liminal state in their attempts to grasp certain concepts in their subjects presents a powerful way of remembering that learning is both affective and cognitive and that it involves identity shifts which can entail troublesome, unsafe journeys (Cousin, 2006: 139).

When writing about the recursive nature of life and narratives, the metaphor of the door as a memory trigger is advanced by Gaston Bachelard (1969: 224) in *The Poetics of Space*: "If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life". I have used this thought in my teaching to enable individuals to tell their stories using the doors as triggers for incidents and experiences often associated with a passage through or crossing over thresholds within their life journeys. This metaphoric device enables an individual to reflect upon and acknowledge the events that have proved important or pivotal in making choices informed by prior experiences and knowledge.

I have a strong interest in the use of narrative to engage students in dialogues of learning and later in this paper I will describe how, through a narrative research methodology, I was able to reveal the thresholds a group of artists made explicit when coming to terms with the idea of accepting the identity of artist. The crossing of any threshold may bring with it certain anxieties and questions of insecurity; will I fail to open the door; when the door is opened will I recognise what lies beyond; who are the ones who have gone before me; are there others who have failed; are there doors that remain closed while others remain open and waiting?

Perkins (2006) using yet another metaphor of entering or crossing over, when he says: "Threshold concepts are pivotal but challenging concepts in disciplinary understanding. They act like gateways. Once through the gate, learners come to a new level of understanding central to the discipline" (Perkins, 2006: 43).

Through education the individual can effect changes as they achieve a set of skills and knowledge that will provide opportunities to operate within a chosen discipline or context and to push beyond the known. As individuals make their way in the world assuming and reframing their identities they create and recreate their life stories within personally constructed spaces and places.As the new concept of self forms and reforms what has existed becomes transformed and assimilated into the changed identity. This transformation also involves challenges that confront conceptual beliefs and understandings not only within an educational context but also within other facets of life.

The sentinels of memory

The following passage, a story from my past, was written initially as part of a collection of stories to acknowledge the contribution of educators at Melbourne's Phillip Institute of Technology before it was amalgamated with RMIT University. The purpose was to record how each of the educators came into teaching. In 2003 I included this narrative in my PhD thesis, *Common Threads* (Flood, 2003) as an example of how stories can elicit understanding of the past, present and future. I reproduce it here because it reveals several key issues that confronted me as a beginning teacher.

> The year was 1969, my first year of teaching and I had been posted to a country town, 190 km north of Perth. I was very young, only 18 years of age and had just completed a Diploma of Teaching. I was appointed Teacher in Charge of Art at the District High School and was quite apprehensive, as I had never previously travelled alone beyond the outskirts of Perth.

> The classes in the high school were streamed, the brighter students were placed in the A stream, the next able were in the B stream. Those who were identified as "educationally challenged", mainly the indigenous Australians and a few other individuals, ended up in the composite classes such as 3C/2, the homeroom group I was allocated on my arrival at the school. In typical fashion I was the youngest and least experienced member of staff and I was given the most difficult group of students that no one else wanted.

> I taught Art to all students. I was well equipped with my rules firmly implanted in my head. I was going to follow on and become as successful as Miss M. I had been teaching a few weeks when I noticed that the indigenous students chose to paint the same images over and over again: dark silhouetted gum trees standing against an intensely burning red sunset. I wanted them to paint the images I had decided were the requisite images for their folios but they were non compliant with my instructions. They either painted these same images or they sat and did nothing. In desperation I asked them why they chose to paint such stereotypical "aboriginal" images. Their non response I took to be sullen disobedience. (In my teacher training there had been no mention of indigenous people, even though well over 75% of graduate teachers were bonded and sent to the country to teach for up to three years where they were almost certain to encounter indigenous students). At the end of that week, I was driving home to the city, as I did on Friday evenings to escape. It was close to sunset as I drove away on what was referred to as the 'crystal highway', its gravel edges littered the whole length with the remains of car windscreens. As I sped along, I glanced out of the side window and saw, towering black gum trees silhouetted against a fiery red

sky. The intensity of the colour took my breath away, but much more importantly, the truth of what I had neglected to understand about the students and their environment and the images they had created brought me to a sudden halt. I stopped the car and watched the sun set with the sky changing colour from intense red to gold to the soft haziness of the pink dusk closing in. All the while the trees stood like sentinels (Flood, 2003: 46).

What can we glean from this constructed text of memory?

My high school art learning had provided me with all the answers or solutions I needed to succeed. In fact the Western Australian High School syllabus had been created by my art teacher so she knew how and what to teach to maximise her class results. Three of us topped the State in the final exams: if you followed her instructions you were ahead of the game. She taught us to pass and to pass well. Any deviation was frowned upon. She would say to us, "Trust me girls." She was our own Miss Jean Brodie! By responding with complete attention to her demands for imitation I developed and succeeded very well in school art and learned to keep my home art hidden. I took with me into my own teaching her rules so that I too could become a recognised "good teacher" and forgot about my home art as I was now an art teacher.

When appointed Art mistress to a large District High School north of Perth, all I knew was how to teach in that same way. I can recall still the instructions for painting portraits that I duly passed onto my students:

Miss M's Painting Rules:

Skin tones:	Yellow Ochre + white + vermilion (girls) Yellow Ochre +white + burnt sienna (boys)	No outlining in black permitted. (All Black paint was confiscated each year). No texta colours allowed.
Shadow tone:	Red + blue + yellow (in equal quantities)	No erasers permitted. Light sources appeared from the left hand side of the picture.
Highlight:	Yellow Ochre + white	

(Flood, 2003: 38)

It did not take long to realise the rules were not working. Unlike Miss M., I was not teaching white middle class city kids. Rather, I was in the country teaching a diverse range of students; children of the professionals, who would go to Perth in the following years to attend boarding schools, children of farmers and workers who themselves had varying levels of education, and the Indigenous students from two different groups, the Noongars and the Yamajis, who had a knowledge that was neither understood nor respected by the white culture in which they were being educated. This cultural mix was explosive and completely unexpected: Up until that point in time I had lived a privileged and culturally narrow life without even any mention of diversity in my training.

Concurrently I was developing a set of values that were to hold me in good stead. My grandfather was a strong influence on me politically and ethically. He argued with me and encouraged me to take strong positions particularly regarding the rights of workers. This was in direct contrast to the aspiring middle class life my mother desired. I attached myself to his beliefs and they have remained a constant throughout my adult life. However back then, it was the late sixties and the world was also changing. People's rights and left wing political beliefs were high on my peer group's agenda and I saw myself as an agent of social change. I found the overt racism in

that country town abhorrent and the inequality of opportunity disturbing. I was a young teacher on a mission to save the world and to do it through teaching.

It was finding myself in this chaotic mix of my values, beliefs, learning experiences, failed lessons in the classroom, alienation from the landscape and the unknown students' experiences of life that provided me with the impetus to stop and view the sun setting and reappraise what I was doing as a teacher. As Cousin (2006: 139) explains, "Insights gained by learners as they cross thresholds can be exhilarating but might also be unsettling, requiring an uncomfortable shift in identity, or, paradoxically, a sense of loss". This was an epiphany, an event that led me to cross over an important threshold that day, and I began to understand the importance of knowing the student and their environment. I sensed that I should listen to the voices of the students and I was able to see that a set of rules was not the way students learn. I also began to respect another knowledge that I had not known existed, and that creativity came in many forms. When writing the original story in 2003 I acknowledged I had stepped across the gulf between student and teacher on that evening as the sun set.

This threshold as it occurred was pivotal in forming the educator I have become over time. It has provided me with a constant reminder of the core values I bring to teaching and learning. It informs the way I speak and engage with all learners with whom I talk. The strength of this experience lay in the way I was able to identify and recognise the need for change. And the outcomes were profound in the way I then enacted my teacher identity.

It was much later after many other experiences as educator, wife, and mother that I faced another important threshold: That of re-identifying as an artist and all the issues that accompany such a re-naming of self. In that journey back to a creative artist I faced many questions of identity which led me to research these ideas in my PhD. It was in this research I found, through the medium of personal narrative, a means to identify ways in which individuals face issues or ways of enacting change in their lives. These are the thresholds to be faced and from these meaning can be made in the lives of learners.

Why use narratives?

The life stories or narratives of an individual can reveal important characteristics of identity to which can then be ascribed a set of behaviours. Within the personal journeys we can take the opportunity to further our understanding of how an individual can be supported and encouraged to self-identify as a practitioner in a particular field. An individual's narrative provides an objective view that comes from a culturally contextualised position. In terms of self-knowing, Taylor (2000: 48) suggests, "we determine what we are by what we have become by the story of how we got there".

Identity was understood once as a set of individual characteristics that were acquired and more or less fixed once adopted. Michel Foucault (1979: 35) overturned this by showing that the individual was not the source and foundation of knowledge but rather, was a product or result of networks of power and discourse. Once defined by sameness and unity, the definitions have become more allied to difference and plurality and a belief in the concept of multiple identities (cf. Gergen, 1991; Melucci, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997). The concept of self in contemporary terms is fragmented (cf. Jameson, 1984), many-sided (cf. Lifton, 1993), and now discussed in relation to difference as a defining feature. Following Bruner (1991: 129), **"Lives are texts: texts that are subject to revision, exegesis, reinterpretation and so on".** As such, lives by those who account for them as texts are amenable to alternative interpretations. These interpretations can reveal the issues a person may need to confront in terms of identity when considering a profession. Do would-be doctors review their ability to deal with human body parts before they enter university medical courses or young lawyers debate justice and ethical ways to behave prior to entering law practice? Or do they choose the highest ranking course they can and worry about these issues later? I suggest that there are

certain attitudes that must be confronted before individuals can achieve a consistent sense of self within their professional lives.

Eisner (2002: 52) argues that "the selection of a form of representation is a choice having profound consequences for our mental life, because choices about which form of representation will be used are also choices about which aspects of the world will be experienced". Do students identify or choose certain trajectories because they intuitively feel engaged within a certain community of practice? In my experience, the art room has long been the sanctuary for students who no longer have faith in their learning abilities. It is also the place where those who feel a need to express themselves in visual ways congregate.

The art(s) teachers often provide a model of behaviour that a student who feels different can relate to with some feeling of confidence that they will be accepted by others. I observed over many years of working on drama productions that the school musical or drama production seemed to encourage certain kinds of students to work backstage. It became apparent during the course of those 30 years of teaching adolescents that these were the students who learned by doing and learned in places and spaces that allowed for a different relationship with the environment. In both the formal and informal areas of teaching I watched students evolve in both their skills and interest in being part of a creative community.

What Is a threshold concept?

Meyer and Land suggest that a threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, or "conceptual gateway" that opens up "previously inaccessible way(s) of thinking about something" (Meyer & Land, 2003: 9). The idea of moving across a threshold in learning represents a transformed way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view.

What are the features of a threshold concept:

Transformative	A threshold concept can change the way a student views the discipline.
Troublesome	Threshold concepts are likely to trouble the student for some time while the knowledge remains counter-intuitive and incoherent.
Irreversible	Once knowledge is transformed threshold concepts are most likely irreversible, and are difficult to unlearn.
Integrative	Threshold concepts can bring together different aspects of knowledge that were not obviously related.
Bounded	Threshold concepts tend to delineate a particular conceptual space of specific and limited purpose.
Discursive	Meyer and Land suggest that the crossing of a threshold incorporates an enhanced and extended use of language.
Reconstitutive	A threshold concept may entail a shift in learner subjectivity and may also to take place over time.
Liminality	Meyer and Land have likened the crossing of the pedagogic threshold to a 'rite of passage'.

The predominant interest in thresholds concepts seems to focus on the learning content: concepts that have to be understood before the next level of comprehension begins to take effect. Within that frame of reference it seems that one must know how to do something and successfully achieve results before the next content knowledge can be achieved. However, I suggest that learning thresholds are dependent on a readiness to learn that comes from a more emotional and personally driven position. Before one can move to a new level of understanding the confidence and ability to make a leap of faith into a new zone of learning needs to be achieved.

Entering the world of an artist's identity

To further investigate these issues in relation to artists' identities I return to a series of conversations with ten textile artists. Within these conversations, the artists attested to deeply internalised beliefs of creative practice being central to how they positioned themselves within their own constructed space, that of the family and community. However they reported often experiencing considerable conflict in accepting the reality of the *artist* title. Perhaps this is a significant threshold that they must pass through before the artistic self can come into being; and that they must accept whatever construct of artist they have created as a representation of self in tandem with, and in comparison to, culturally determined criteria.

When considering the issue of artistic identity, crucial issues entailing the confronting and approaching of thresholds within the process of self-actualisation, were identified as: how and when artists choose their creative pathway; and when do they conceive of themselves as artists? The decision to identify oneself as a practitioner is a key stage in the production of work and the creation of self-identity. When one trains as a doctor, teacher or lawyer there is a point when training is completed and there is a public ceremony in which the new practitioner is welcomed into the fraternity. The graduate can then announce to the world, I am a doctor or teacher or lawyer, once they have met the required accreditation.

In areas such as the arts there is public affirmation of a different kind. Those who wish to practise as artists must meet requirements in a profession in which the boundaries can be obscure and judgements of the appointed arbiters of taste can shift and change. These requirements can be formidable and intimidating and many of the artists interviewed wanted to refer to themselves as artist but felt unable to do so without some misgivings (Flood, 2003: 124).

Cikszentmihalyi (1996: 25) categorises creative people into three levels. He differentiates between those who are personally creative and talented and those who have changed their culture in some important respect. Each of the artists, who were interviewed, demonstrated clearly the former category and each of them expressed desire to meet the latter condition. Through their art they wished to contribute to, and change the culture in some way. This was expressed in terms of wanting recognition in order to validate and acknowledge their creative expression.

It was interesting to note that the artists approached the world by self-identifying as artists and all saw this recognition as important to their identity as an artist. However, the following five common situations tend to suggest that the relational aspects of their early lives were conflicted. Each artist says they:

- Felt that in their early lives they were essentially alone;

- Had significant elder members of their families who made those times less fraught through material support or acceptance of them as a person;

- Have singular memories of negative experiences representative of many that led them to lack confidence in their own abilities;

- Felt a sense of being alienated and used words such as "not overly confident", "I lacked confidence", "finding space for the self", "never feeling lonely", "a strange fish", to express these feelings;

- Felt a need for acceptance that was generally unfulfilled except when the individuals were engaged in art making.

These beliefs were revealed in response to the questions raised within the interviews. Their disquiet at identifying themselves as artists to others was clearly evident. The reflections within the series of interviews allowed the participants to acknowledge openly to themselves and through the research to the wider audience their status as artist. They all attested creative practice was central to their identity as artist, but most revealed they had considerable conflict in being able to accept the reality of the artist title to this point in time.

How does one come to a statement of identity such as *I am an artist*?

Here is the continuing dilemma for those who work in artistic pursuits: the continual meeting of the internalised forces or needs to create, with the external world of recognition. Acknowledgement or rejection both provide the stimulus for action and reaction, and can lead to difficulties in the positioning of self in the world. Meyer and Land (2003) found transformation went beyond epistemological dimensions of knowledge and understanding and extended to ontological dimensions around personal identity, feelings and values.

The American philosopher, Charles Taylor (2000) talks of this in more general terms as the internal world and the external world of the individual. It is difficult to pinpoint decisions of a chosen identity when the process has been one of immersion in a field of endeavour and the result of cumulative experiences. How does one come to a statement of identity such as, "I am an artist"? This declaration may be even more difficult if the medium employed is perceived as a lesser craft as is the case with textile arts. The textile artists shared with me a very strong belief that the differentiation between arts and crafts is constructed through a patriarchal hierarchy from a modernist worldview and evident in the art community. There are still strong beliefs out there amongst the gatekeepers that unless one is a painter or can draw to exacting standards then one is not worthy of being known as an artist.

To achieve an independent and confident position as artist the individual must find resolution within the inner realms of self: he or she must confront an emotional threshold of self. How does this occur within an artistic individual? Amin Maalouf (1998) suggests that there are multiple elements that constitute an individual's identity and within them there exists a hierarchy that is not immutable; "it changes with time and in so doing brings about fundamental changes in behavior" (Maalouf, 1998: 12). The conversations with the ten artists revealed that their acceptance of self or identity is dependent on maturity and understanding of how one is situated within their own cultural context.

It would also appear that with this maturity comes an ability to express the value that arts practice holds to each individual. Because the individual will ultimately make the decision to act upon their needs this will enable them to forge a pathway towards the desired goal or goals. Such actions, driven by needs and desires, may be described as an individual's acts of agency and subsequently, self-actualisation will be enacted through transformative acts. Each transformative act changes the self, changes its identity because the self is "nothing other than the sum and process of its acts" (Freadman, 2001: 60).

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests that highly creative individuals shape their lives to suit their own goals rather than allowing external forces to control their choices in life. He argues that the most obvious achievement of these people was that they had "created own lives" (1996: 152). One of the artists, Adam, reveals this self-enacting agency:

> In 1980s I made a mental decision that I would completely change my life. I could see I had to make a major change in my life to be completely self supporting and independent. I present a very well balanced attitude to anything. It's just something I have developed because I'm observant (Flood, 2003: 209).

While Csikszentmihalyi (1990) contends that people are active in creating their own lives he also suggests that people are most happy when they are in a state of flow—a state of complete absorption with the activity or situation at hand. He describes this flow as the state in which people become so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. Within the artists' conversations they used words that expressed this in terms of sensual and tactile responses. For example:

> I can indulge my love of colour and shape It's the colour I can access that makes textiles a real pleasure (Sian).

> I've always loved textiles I've always loved pattern (Marianne).

> When I started painting silk that's when I fell in love with the brush and the feel. I love fabric it sings to me (Susan).

However the absorption is even more powerfully expressed when Fiona recounts her childhood memory of the loss of the pencils she was given:

> It was just after the war and we had gone back to school and my father had given me a box of coloured pencils. In Indonesia there was nothing, absolutely nothing. … All through the classes I was just touching It, I wanted to touch the colours …. and when I came back it was stolen. I was devastated, and when I got home he said "well you're not getting another one, that's it" (Flood, 2003: 118).

The memory as told here is poignant and reveals the pain and anguish felt by a young person at the loss of a precious gift. From a privileged position in a land and a time where a box of pencils is routine in a child's school supplies every year it is hard to imagine the impact of such a simple gift when received in times of deprivation. The gift was a significant event which makes the external world of deprivation become a stark reality in the implied loss of colour. Her strong memory of desire is expressed in terms of colour and the sensation of touch. There is an almost magical sense of the power of the object, the emptiness prior to the gift of pencils, and its return following the theft.

The artists affirmed that acknowledgment or recognition from the formal learning sector had resulted in distinct attitudinal changes within them. Thus it becomes essential that individuals must be able to construct and reconstruct narratives so that the reflective process of revisiting experiences may "produce new metaphors to describe ourselves with and expand our repertoire of alternative descriptions" (Barker & Galasinski, 2001: 47). If an individual does wish to consider a career as an artist or indeed any other creative pursuit, then that decision should come from a position of confidence and understanding of the self. Positioning and repositioning the independent self through a continuously reflective process enables an individual to challenge and confront thresholds of experience and knowledge, act with an ever growing self-knowledge informed by previous actions and the societal constructs in which they live, take risks with both the medium and content, experiment with ideas, and come to terms with an artistic sense of self that allows freedom to confront the hurdles of arts learning.

The narratives that such individuals create in turn inform memory and thereby enable an individual to take control or ownership and to add linearity to the disconnected episodes that are their stories. These are the "cohering mechanisms" (Erben, 1998: 18) that individuals employ to make human experience comprehensible. Brookfield (1995) proposes that to reflect critically we need to move beyond the limitations of our own experiences and to reframe our teaching by viewing our practice through lenses that reflect back to us a differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do: just as that significant event early in my teaching career created the new lens through which I saw my teaching practice.

Elliott (2001) alerts us to a lack of concern in education with the formation of the internal world arguing that "sociologies of the self, however much they may explore the trajectories and transformations of intimacy and personal life, have scarcely shown much concern with the internal world of self experience" (Elliott, 2001: 45). McNay (2000) concurs and suggests that the potential of the relationship between the psychic and the social dimensions of subject formation offers an opportunity to configure agency as a "capacity to institute new or unanticipated modes of behaviour" (McNay, 2000: 21). I am suggesting here that there are important internalised concepts of self that an individual must confront in tandem with formalised learning concepts before the successful enactment of a professional life can occur. Giddens (1991) suggests that a self-identity has to be created and recreated continuously against a backdrop of "shifting experiences of day to day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions (Giddens, 1991: 186).

In educational settings, instead of denying or neglecting to acknowledge the interiority, we can accept instead that an individual's identity sits at the convergence of both the interior and exterior realms and that each person performs as both an individual self and as a communal self. The ways in which individuals move and position themselves are the processes of self location and self description called existential positing by Freadman (2001: 21). These processes of the constant and ongoing interaction between the exterior and interior are ever present in the formulation of identity.

When Kathryn speaks about working with the textiles medium it can be seen from the words she uses how she moves from her present environment to an internalised, reflective mode:

> I love the tactile medium and just playing with colours and building the surface up. I get to think about it the work evolves and to meditate on it. They're basically developed around where I am in my life so I'm reacting to my environment or situation all the time. It's definitely part of my lifestyle, enmeshed is probably a good word–that's what I do the making has always been part of it (Flood, 2003: 215).

The individual is engaged continuously in the construction of a self-narrative made from fragments of memory intermingled with constant learning and reappraising of the self. Agency is an irreducible facet of human life and two factors are ever present; the "impress of history" and our own substance as a "tissue of contingencies" (Rorty, 1991: 237). It is through the telling and retelling of a self-narrative the individual can explore ideas of self in terms of both desired and realised expectations. When telling our narratives we invest in that telling many of our hopes and expectations and relegate to the unspoken the elements of that life story that we may wish to forget either consciously or unconsciously. These are the "doors" of our stories that we have confronted or avoided. It is important to discover how an individual can reach the point where they choose to identify themselves as a practitioner in any discipline so that educators may understand better how to empower others to become confident in making life-determining decisions. Making overt the issues and thresholds faced by others helps us to understand how best to assist in changes of self-identity and perception. Peter Davies explains:

> The transformative character of threshold concepts reflects the way in which they can change an individual's perception of themselves as well as their perception of a subject. In gaining access to a new way of seeing, an individual has access to being part of a community (2006: 74).

These changes in perception are ongoing in life and any changes in understanding at a subject level or emotional and personal level will be dependent on individuals coming to terms with understanding themselves and how they interact with the world at large. As educators, understanding how people make choices helps reveal how individuals negotiate their way through the culture in which they live and how they can become part of their immediate and wider community. As an educator, this is dependent upon gaining an understanding of the frames of meaning within which they work (cf. Geertz, 2001: 17) and how individuals perceive of themselves and describe their actions. This also includes how they meet challenges and identify ways to negotiate through those thresholds of learning and living that form the constructs of the life they enact. For example, quite disparate definitions of the artistic self are to be found. Firstly there is a

widely accepted notion that artists are born and not made and that particular individuals possess an innate ability and desire to create. These creative and talented individuals have heightened levels of perception that identify them through their works to be transmitters of values and beliefs within a cultural setting. The perception is that they are attributed with special insight and understanding of the world and its peoples and their creative practice is supposed to be challenging and often at odds with the status quo. They are radicals and often perceived to be different.

A second notion is that the society or community constructs the identity of artist through a set of social constructs defined by the culture and the shared discourse of the culture. The community through its shared understanding of the idea of artist informs the practice of individuals and provides the substance upon which they can hang their identity. The society may well identify the artist as radical and may instruct through the systems of recognition, ways of living and being that are considered to be artistic. If a person does not reflect those agreed constructs they can be left wondering on a personal basis if indeed they really are an artist and worse, they may be ignored or dismissed by the society in which they live.

There is a need to question how much the constructed world of practice impacts on the individual who displays desire and talent to be an artist. Also within any of the disciplines we must question whether there are more individuals who could be identified as talented but who are neglected or missed in the system. As an arts educator, I ask: Is it the constructed identity of artist within the society that ultimately alienates all except the most resilient? Or are there indeed those who are born creative and, regardless of any prescribed mode of living, perform and live as artists?

Whichever definition we might endorse my research shows that it is through the adoption of an identity as artist and all the challenges and issues associated with that choice there will be important thresholds of self-belief that an individual will face and pass through before they will be able to feel comfortable naming themselves as an artist.

> Annie makes this explicit when she says: "It was not until I started exhibiting that I dared think of myself as an artist. It was more other people's references to me as that of an artist that over the years sort of sunk in and suddenly I felt comfortable saying 'I am an artist'". Sian expresses it thus: "With my compulsion or my urge to create I just find it something that enables me to never feel lonely. I've always got something to express whatever it is in me at the time. I really do believe it has saved me. It has been a saviour through much emotional turmoil" (Flood, 2003: 217).

A key characteristic of the independent self is that selfhood is "personally created, interpretively elaborated and interpersonally constructed" and that individuals will "routinely draw from social influences and maintain their sense of self through cultural resources" (Elliott, 2001: 5). When engaging in acts of agency, an individual draws upon the collective understanding that resides within the language and culture to negotiate and renegotiate their identity. The ability to act upon the unexpected and to institute unanticipated modes of behaviour is always contingent upon contextual situating of the self within structural, institutional or intersubjective constraints (McNay, 2000).

While individuals are the constructs of societal expectations in terms of our actions and behaviours, we are also individuals who act upon the world as a result of internal drives. Freadman (2001: 16) sees the individual as a multidimensional creature and describes ideas of self-representation in terms of weaving. He argues that the individual, while trying to create an identity that is a perfect woven self-image, is "free to try and represent him- or her herself" and that if the individual indeed does construct a self- image then "he or she believes or perhaps even wills the image in the fabric to be a true description of him- or herself, then there is an important sense in which it is indeed a true description" (Freadman, 2001: 17). To continue Freadman's metaphor, in the process of weaving an identity, an individual must bring together the threads of both the internal self and the external self. To make the cloth of life, it is the fabric of memory that provides the fibres that hold the created identity together and provides the protective covering of experience

that leads to new and anticipated events of the individual's future. It is this construct that becomes the held self-vision; the individual's "perfect woven self image" (Freadman, 2001: 17).

Educators can play a pivotal role in students' developing images of self. When teaching pre-service teachers, I would ask my first-year students at the commencement of the semester to identify the characteristics of the best teachers they had experienced. Invariably the answers that came back related to the identity of the teacher, how they had related to that teacher on a personal level and how the teacher had treated them in return. Words like fairness, sense of humour and respect were used. I felt it was a valuable lesson with which to commence a teaching career because it made clear to them that the profession they were entering was based solidly in being able to establish a relationship between learner and teacher.

Preoccupation with the ways we might influence learners in terms of knowledge acquisition can distract us from important notions of learning and self. While we concentrate on the external drivers such as discipline content we can easily ignore, or conveniently forget, that there may be other drivers that are internalised and adopted as a motivating force in the desire for authorising an identity or identities. Such drivers of self and identity may well be the most important elements in the acquisition of knowledge. When discussing the mastery of philosophical concepts, Booth (2006) suggests that threshold concepts are transformative in so far as they transform the perspective of the learner. She claims:

> Threshold concepts are, in a sense, epistemological floodgates; once opened they cannot simply be 'undone'. Moreover, not only does mastering a threshold concept provide the student with a 'new' perspective on material, it is supposed to provide them with a 'better' one. The material should appear cohesive in ways that it did not prior to the student's grasp of the concepts, affording the student more insightful and integrated understanding of that material (2006: 175).

I ask academic colleagues, "When your students close the door on your last class and leave you behind, what kind of person do you want to walk out that door? What characteristics do you wish them to take with them into the world?" This is the doorway I wish to use to both close this discussion and also to leave open for further consideration. It is an important threshold that we can be part of in any learner's life at the completion of their time with us. As educators we can provide content easily; even better, we can direct students to a wide variety of opportunities to find out what they need to know. But what can we do to encourage them to become thinkers, who will question assumptions and engage in learning that they can apply in their everyday lives? In terms of establishing or creating a sense of identity once a threshold has been passed and that way of being has been transformed and incorporated into an individual's sense of self, can we suggest also that an individual cannot stand back from their ownership of whatever issue they have accepted or assimilated within their self-identity.

Drawing again from Khalil Gibran, we can take learners to the thresholds of their mind and encourage them to face challenges with confidence and eagerness to allow them to see that as each door closes another one will open for them. This is the pathway to a sustainable life.

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