



## ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

### Exploring 'self' as a person-centred academic through critical creativity: a case study of educators in a school of nursing

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Submitted for publication: 6<sup>th</sup> May 2014  
Accepted for publication: 11<sup>th</sup> August 2014

#### Abstract

*Background:* Developing person-centred cultures is a key focus of practice development. To do so requires engagement with learning approaches that are creative and critical. In preparing students for a future as person-centred practitioners, educators need to engage with creative approaches to the facilitation of learning. National standards in nursing (for example) as well as the international literature on adult learning endorse the need for creativity in learning. Yet, educators continue to be challenged to engage in creativity and to use creative learning strategies in their practice. This paper provides a reflective overview of the experiences of a group of educators in one school of nursing who participated in a programme of creative engagements that focused on exploring 'self' as a key concept in person-centredness.

#### *Objectives:*

1. Explore through different media, contrasting aspects of 'self' as an educator
2. Engage in playful activity in a safe space to explore own creativity and ways in which this creativity could be surfaced and integrated into everyday practice
3. Through engaging with different media explore the potential of creativity in person-centred approaches to teaching, learning and research
4. Experience 'risk taking' in a facilitated environment in order to develop potential for meaningful connections with others – students and colleagues

*Conclusions:* Through a systematic process of creative engagement, this critical reflection highlights the challenges associated with integrating creative engagement strategies in teaching and learning. The paper highlights in particular the challenges associated with 'letting go' in learning situations and the importance of exploring 'self' in the context of person-centred learning processes.

*Implications for practice:* Practice development depends on effective facilitation undertaken by facilitators who are critical and creative. Whilst there is an increasing literature on facilitation models and processes, there is less attention paid to 'understanding self' as a facilitator of person-centred cultures. Practice development methodologies need to make such exploration an explicit part of their work in order to engage in authentic facilitation of learning and development.

**Keywords:** Creativity, personhood, facilitation, critical creativity, engagement, authenticity

## Introduction

Using creative approaches in nursing and midwifery education is an important consideration in the development and implementation of effective student-centred learning strategies. The need for educators to be responsive to the differing learning styles of students is a fundamental principle in adult learning strategies. In order to be responsive, educators need to be flexible, adaptive and creative in identifying ways of engaging with students and creating a learning environment that accommodates all learning styles. In this paper, we reflect on the experiences of participating in a development programme for nursing and midwifery educators from the School of Nursing at the University of Ulster that focused on exploring person-/student-centredness in the curriculum, focusing on 'self' as a key foundation concept in theories of person-centredness. A formal reflective model was used to structure the reflection and the paper follows the stages of this model in unfolding the learning processes and outcomes achieved. Finally, the paper elucidates some lessons learned from the experience of participating in the programme.

## Background

The Nursing and Midwifery Council *Standards for Preregistration Nursing Education* (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010, annex 3) essential skills clusters state that, upon entry to the register, a nurse should be able to '... (be) proactive and creative in enhancing communication and understanding'. The concept of creativity is in evidence throughout higher education teaching and learning. *The UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (Quality Assurance Agency, 2013, part B, chp B1) notes that creativity is a key element in programme design and feeds into assuring and enhancing academic quality. In addition, part B chapter B3 of the quality code asserts that partnership working encourages creative and transformational learning in students. What is required is a process that maps this from concept to application in teaching practice – something that has been an explicit focus at the University of Ulster. Creativity is an objective set out in the University of Ulster's charter and is described as being of benefit to the whole of the university. In addition, creativity in problem solving is an overt graduate quality that curricula in the university are expected to encourage and develop. Creativity is specifically mentioned as an area for development in the university's *Learning and Teaching Strategy* (2013/14 – 2017/18). Revalidations are expected to comment on the extent to which curricula submitted for review provide evidence of creativity. Creativity is interpreted as being linked to an entrepreneurial capacity in graduates and more explicitly to problem solving and opportunity identification.

From a theoretical perspective, Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that creativity is a key skill in higher level thinking. They see it as a development of thinking based on a sound knowledge base, and this fits well in healthcare that relies on a knowledge base derived from a variety of sources. Nursing and midwifery educators don't 'make' people be creative; instead their role is to create the conditions within which individual creativity can be released, explored and consciously used (McCormack and Titchen, 2006). Creativity in teaching and learning is less about doing new things or doing things differently – it is more concerned with resolving to not repeat old things that we know to be ineffective. Essentially, this requires us to be cognisant of our own learning style as educators and those of the students with whom we engage. To become familiar with the needs of learners we must realise how we influence them through our own learning style and be aware of the need to create conditions that enable student learning to take place (Aragon et al., 2002).

There are various styles and approaches to learning, but being able to respond to these in different learning situations is challenging. Being cognisant of different learning styles is considered to be good practice in teaching and learning but there is little evidence to suggest that matching learning activities to learning styles has a significant impact on learning itself (Pashler et al., 2008). Therefore, the need for educators to develop and extend existing modes of learning is key to being effective. If the ultimate outcome is to produce a practitioner who can creatively solve a problem or plan an innovative care intervention, then it follows that as educators we have a responsibility to nurture students' creative capacity by first of all developing our own creative skills in teaching and learning.

### **Programme overview**

The programme being reflected on in this paper was designed to support the introduction, in 2012, of a new undergraduate/pre-registration nursing curriculum that is built on the theory of person-centredness. In the development of the curriculum, it became clear that there was a need for nurse educators to develop creative approaches to learning with student nurses and that a key part of this development was the need to understand themselves as educators – to explore their ‘natural’ ways of being as an educator. The programme objectives were to:

1. Explore through different media, contrasting aspects of ‘self’ as an educator
2. Engage in playful activity in a safe space to explore own creativity and ways in which this creativity could be surfaced and integrated into everyday practice
3. Explore, through engaging with different media, the potential of creativity in person-centred approaches to teaching, learning and research
4. Experience ‘risk taking’ in a facilitated environment in order to develop potential for meaningful connections with others – students and colleagues

### **Programme methodology**

The programme was informed by the theories of critical creativity (McCormack and Titchen, 2006) and person-centredness (McCormack and McCance, 2010). Critical creativity is a paradigmatic synthesis in which the assumptions of the critical paradigm (Fay, 1987) are blended with creative and ancient traditions, and balanced with and attuned to them for the purpose of human flourishing. McCormack and Titchen (2006) identified that what was needed to augment Fay’s critical model was a focus on the important creative work in which practitioners must engage if they are to be effective in transforming cultures of practice. Titchen and McCormack (2008) suggest that creativity enables holistic engagement of mind, heart, body and spirit at the heart of critical social science which has, traditionally, centred on using the mind for critiquing historical, social, political and cultural contexts of practice. Thus McCormack and Titchen (2006) proposed a sub-theory of creativity that blends and melds all the other sub-theories as set out by Fay (see McCormack and Titchen, 2006 for Fay’s theories and the associated sub-theories). Without such creativity, the knowing that is at the heart of transformative action cannot be fully realised. In this context, creativity is defined by McCormack and Titchen (2006, p 259) as:

*‘The blending and weaving of art forms and reflexivity (critical consciousness) located in the critical [worldview]. Blending and weaving occur through professional artistry in order to achieve the ultimate outcome of human flourishing. Thus this theory has critical, moral and sacred dimensions.’*

So the theoretical framework of critical creativity underpins transformational practice development and provides a framework for those interested in working with creative methodology to integrate cognitive and artistic methods.

Human flourishing focuses on maximising individuals’ achievement of their potential for growth and development as they change the circumstances and relations of their lives. People are helped to flourish (that is, to grow and develop) during the transformative experience, in addition to an intended outcome of wellbeing for the beneficiaries of the work. Flourishing is supported through contemporary facilitation strategies, connecting with beauty and nature and blending with ancient, indigenous and spiritual traditions (cf. Senge et al., 2005) and active learning (Dewing, 2008). The principles for creating the conditions for persons to flourish (Titchen and McCormack, 2010) (see Figure 1) were used to inform the content of the programme as well as the instructions given to the facilitators of each creative session in terms of what we wanted to achieve.

**Figure 1: Principles for creating the conditions for human flourishing (adapted from Titchen and McCormack, 2010)**

<b>Metaphor</b>	
<i>Spiralling through turbulence</i>	<b>Authentic facilitation</b> that is consistent with the shared values and beliefs of co-participants and that results in human flourishing
<i>Circles of connection</i>	<b>Co-construction of a shared reality</b> and spiralling awareness and understanding that has no beginning and no end
<i>Creative effectiveness</i>	Through <b>blending, improvisation, synchronicity, attunement and balance</b>
<i>Movement in the stillness</i>	The <b>stillness of reflection</b> , contemplation and emptying the mind creates a movement that enables future meaningful, ethical action and understanding to occur
<i>Embodied knowing</i>	Connection with the development/research environment through an <b>internalisation</b> of its culture(s) or the culture is enacted and seen through a person's body/being in the world
<i>Energising forces</i>	Transformation occurs through <b>moments of 'crisis'</b> that trigger a need for change. Creative expression at moments of crisis generates energy from a new ability to express feelings, experiences, spirituality, ethical concerns, embodied and tacit ways of knowing
<i>Openness to all ways of being</i>	Practice developers and leaders need to be open to and appreciative of <b>different world views</b>
<i>Flowing with turbulence</i>	Working with turbulence requires the use of <b>emotional and spiritual intelligences</b>

In addition, the principle of 'knowing self' from the person-centred practice theoretical framework of McCormack and McCance (2010) was used to guide the sessions' focus. The idea of clarifying personal beliefs and values is closely connected to knowing self and, as indicated by McCormack and McCance (2006, p 475), is based on the assumption that 'before we can help others we need to have insight into how we function as a person'. This entails being aware of how we function as a person and the attributes that shape our ways of being, influence our relationships and how we engage at an emotional level. Furthermore, we grow as persons during our lifetime through engagement with the social world, and it is this that informs our personal meanings, beliefs and values, and determines 'who I am'. In the context of person-centredness, this infers that the way individuals see themselves and the way they construct their world can influence how they practice as educators and how they engage with students.

### **Programme methods**

A programme of five creative learning workshops and two consolidation workshops was developed, drawing on key themes underpinning the person-centred philosophy of the undergraduate nursing curriculum and reflecting the challenge of coming to 'know self' as a person-centred practitioner and educator. The art form was deliberately chosen for each workshop to match the particular theme – for example, drama as a medium for exploring the 'alternative self' as it enabled participants to play with different personas, ways of being and presentations of self. Each workshop was discussed with the proposed facilitator and an outline programme agreed. Facilitators were intentionally selected for their known expertise in facilitating learning and development experiences with groups using their particular art form. An overview of the programme is provided in Box 1. The programme objectives, as well as a summary of each workshop, were sent to all academic staff in the School of Nursing and Institute of Nursing and Health Research for information and expressions of interest. Ten staff expressed an interest in the programme, but only six followed through on this expression and actively participated (five of whom are the co-authors of this paper). The head of school agreed to release staff

for the workshops as part of a commitment to continuing professional development. The Institute of Nursing and Health Research, as well as meeting the costs of any materials, paid the facilitators of the creative workshops a small fee.

<b>Box 1: School of Nursing and Institute of Nursing and Health Research: “Exploration of ‘self’ as a person-centred academic, through critical creativity”</b>	
<i>October 2012</i>	Paint, clay and collage. Focus: the expression of self as learner
<i>November 2012</i>	Creative writing and poetry. Focus: self in context through written word
<i>December 2012</i>	Through blending, improvisation, synchronicity, atunement and balance
<i>January 2013</i>	Working in nature. Focus: the connected self
<i>February 2013</i>	Voice. Focus: self-expression
<b>Then two consolidated workshops</b>	
<i>March 2013</i>	Exploring critical theories in the context of being creative and creative expression (theoretically grounding the creative experiences in previous workshops)
<i>April 2013</i>	Critical creativity and person-centred practice/teaching/learning/research/scholarship (bring it all together into what it means in the context of our practice)

The participants were asked to maintain a reflective diary of their experiences but were not guided to use any particular model of structured reflection as it was important that they used whatever (creative) methods they wished to use – consistent with the programme methodology. Some participants reflected on each workshop they attended while others reflected on selected experiences. Although a model of structured reflection was not used in the programme itself, we have chosen to use the model developed by Rolfe et al. (2001) to illustrate the processes used and the learning achieved. This model, while simple in structure, enables a movement from description to analysis and synthesis to occur, which is important for the development of critical reflection. The use of the model also enabled the synthesis of individual reflections by participants. The model has three stages:

1. **What?** Focuses on describing the experience
2. **So what?** Focuses on reflectively analysing the experience described
3. **Now what?** Focuses on synthesising the learning achieved and identifying a future oriented plan. We have chosen reflections that best illustrate the different learning experiences and this has meant that some participants have more than one reflection illustrated in the paper

### **What?**

In this section, we present a single reflection on each workshop by one of the participants/co-authors, which we have agreed best describes the experience of the particular workshop.

#### ***The expression of self as a learner***

##### ***Mary’s reflection***

From the outset, the participants were eager to engage and looking forward to what might be learned. Nevertheless, we readily conformed to the role of ‘learners’; we sat side by side behind a U-shaped configuration of desks and deferred to the facilitator seated before us. The aim was for each of us to create a mandala in the time available, using our imagination, PVA glue and a rich array of acrylic-painted tissue paper. Mandalas are universal, circular, patterned images that are found everywhere in human culture and are used widely for meditation and healing. Handouts concerning health, emotion and colour were also distributed. With step-by-step guidance, we managed to design our individual mandala on an acetate sheet, with acetate pens.

Each design guided the positioning of separate pieces of loosely trimmed coloured tissue. By overlapping the edges of these pieces and fixing them in place with PVA glue, we constructed mandalas reminiscent of circular stained glass windows (see Figure 2, Brian's mandala). Once dry, they were separated from the acetate sheet and suspended to allow light to diffuse softly through them. The patterns, colours, shades and hues merged in a surprising and unanticipated way, the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Separately, each mandala had visual appeal and reflected our abilities, choices and preferences. In contrast, the whole collection provided greater impact and spoke out about one activity that we had enjoyed doing together. It celebrates individuality and difference, yet also captures our achievements. Besides this, it is a poignant reminder of all that was accomplished and experienced.

Initially, we were quietly industrious, yet overly fastidious. We focused on our own work and wanted to do everything right. Despite our best intentions, design flaws began to surface; some were too intricate, while others lacked fluency, rhythm and balance. At this point, we looked to the teacher for solutions but then gleaned ideas from one another, with both sources propelling us forward towards our goal. Once relaxed and able to take ourselves (and the activity) less seriously, we became more secure in our own abilities. Freed from dependency, we became more resourceful and less fixated on perfection. A new dynamic was created. We moved away from making and towards being; being at one with self, each other, the activity and the context.

**Figure 2: Brian's mandala**



Towards the end of the session, we chatted informally about many things, including ourselves, our jobs and some barriers to creativity. Illuminating snippets of conversations not only provided individual perspectives but also bridged the gap between planned learning and that which occurred more spontaneously; they contributed to our learning and made it more memorable. Later, various attempts to stuff the multitude of tissue paper fragments into a relatively small bag led to important connections and insightful learning. Originally transformed from their colourless beginnings by patients engaged in therapeutic activities, these soft scraps are testimony to the various events and experiences to which

they have been subjected. Like tissue paper we have the capacity to change; our learning may not always be planned, quantifiable or perceptible, but each new experience and personal encounter will, nevertheless, leave an indelible mark that will change us forever.

### ***Self in context through written word***

#### *Deborah's reflection*

This session assisted in the development of creative imagination and was related to professional practice. The external facilitator was very flexible to the group's requirements and was also a dynamic and interesting facilitator. He engaged with each one of the participants in discovering who we were as nurses as well as educators. He was able to utilise different techniques that enabled our creative storytelling. One example of this was the use of story cards. Each participant was given several cards. A story was started by the external facilitator and continued by each participant using the picture on the card. We were encouraged to take the story in any direction and be as imaginative as possible. Other examples of how we could use creativity in our professional practice were discussed and relevant theoretical literature provided in a reading list. He facilitated a discussion of creative writing and the ability to change as a person and as a school. This was invaluable at that point in time as the School of Nursing's culture change project was in the first stages of discussion and development. This is an 18-month project focusing on changing the 'lived culture' of the school. The project has looked at developing shared values, principles for action/ways of being matched to the values, standards of practice and a new shared governance structure that is collaborative, participative and inclusive of all staff.

### ***The alternative self/selves***

#### *Deborah's reflection*

The drama session used an external facilitator. As role play is often used in teaching nursing students, this session was thought provoking. The session was an active one with several different techniques being applied to the participants. The facilitator explained the relevance of each scenario to different educational concepts in nursing. The participants' related their increased awareness of the space they occupied during the creative work to student experience and to their impact on clients in practice. She also gave several interactive sessions to demonstrate methods of engaging with people in new ways. The main strength of this session was the use of communication techniques in fun exercises that could be discussed afterwards. Games such as 'Swords (which is focused on targeted and specific interactions that provoke differing responses) were introduced, which could be developed into an awareness of personal space for the nursing students and 'Hot seat', where two people interviewed another person. These techniques will be useful in the development of interpersonal skills teaching and also as ice breakers for nursing students. Playing a role provided insight into the experience of the other and highlighted the importance of authenticity.

### ***The connected self***

#### *Brian's reflection*

An external facilitator was here today and I was the only person who showed up. I felt so frustrated and disappointed with my school. This was a golden opportunity and I felt that colleagues were squandering it. Ah well – the other side of that coin was that I got a morning of the facilitator's time all to myself! After an initial session of getting to know one another, she suggested that we engage in an activity called 'Shadow hands'. This involved unbroken eye contact and hands moving in synchrony, almost but not touching. The participants mimic each other with the 'lead' flowing back and forth. This lasted for two to three minutes but felt much longer and was quite powerful. I could feel that I was being defensive and I had to work hard to relax into it but I think it went ok, (insofar as I didn't run away!) The intensity of the connection felt was very unsettling at first but I overcame this (just) and felt that I had got to know her a lot in a short space of time. This would be quite something to do with colleagues if these sessions were to be repeated. Following that activity, we went for a walk into nature with the instruction to notice and reflect on the environment/nature. We had been advised to

bring outdoor gear and just as well, it was a rainy day. She advised that there was to be no talking and to really take note of all the senses and what they were communicating to me. We set off and I noted the following:

*University campus:* Stifling corridor, grey and lifeless, gives way to a window on the world that shows trying: here's what you could have won! Entry restricted. A fleeting glimpse of a bird over the sea through a tunnel of trees urges me forward. Badged trees on odourless bark signifies nature used as camouflage to mask sterility. A 'no entry' sign gives the game away. Sea smell tickles my nose at the semipermeable membrane – almost there. The last barrier crosses our path with moving vehicles; careful now!

*On the shore:* The smell of the sea; the noise of the waves. Close to work but located a world away. I find myself smiling.

*The installation:* (Photograph 1) Technology marooned and with nature festooned; highlights artifice and needed an entry point; it looked run down and forlorn but closer inspection revealed hope and possibility.

### Photograph 1



On reflection, I really enjoyed this session. I enjoyed the rain and the cold! It was wonderful to find that, with a little guidance, I could express creativity in a totally different medium with apparently 'no resources'. Very clever – I'm looking back and smirking!

### **Self-expression**

#### *Brian's reflection*

There were three of us today and I didn't really know what to expect. We were nervous when the external facilitator asked for somewhere he could change and came back wearing loose fitting, training type clothing. The process we followed was roughly thus: he got us to take off our shoes and stand up, and tried to get us to relax. We then went into a series of vocalising exercises to enable us to project our voices. This was challenging but I could see immediately how it would feed into my practice as a lecturer, as I believe that a lot of what we do in class is performance based. I knew I was holding back but with one or two position prompts from the facilitator, I was able to overcome the embarrassment factor and noted the difference the posture made to projection. So far so good. He then pushed a wee



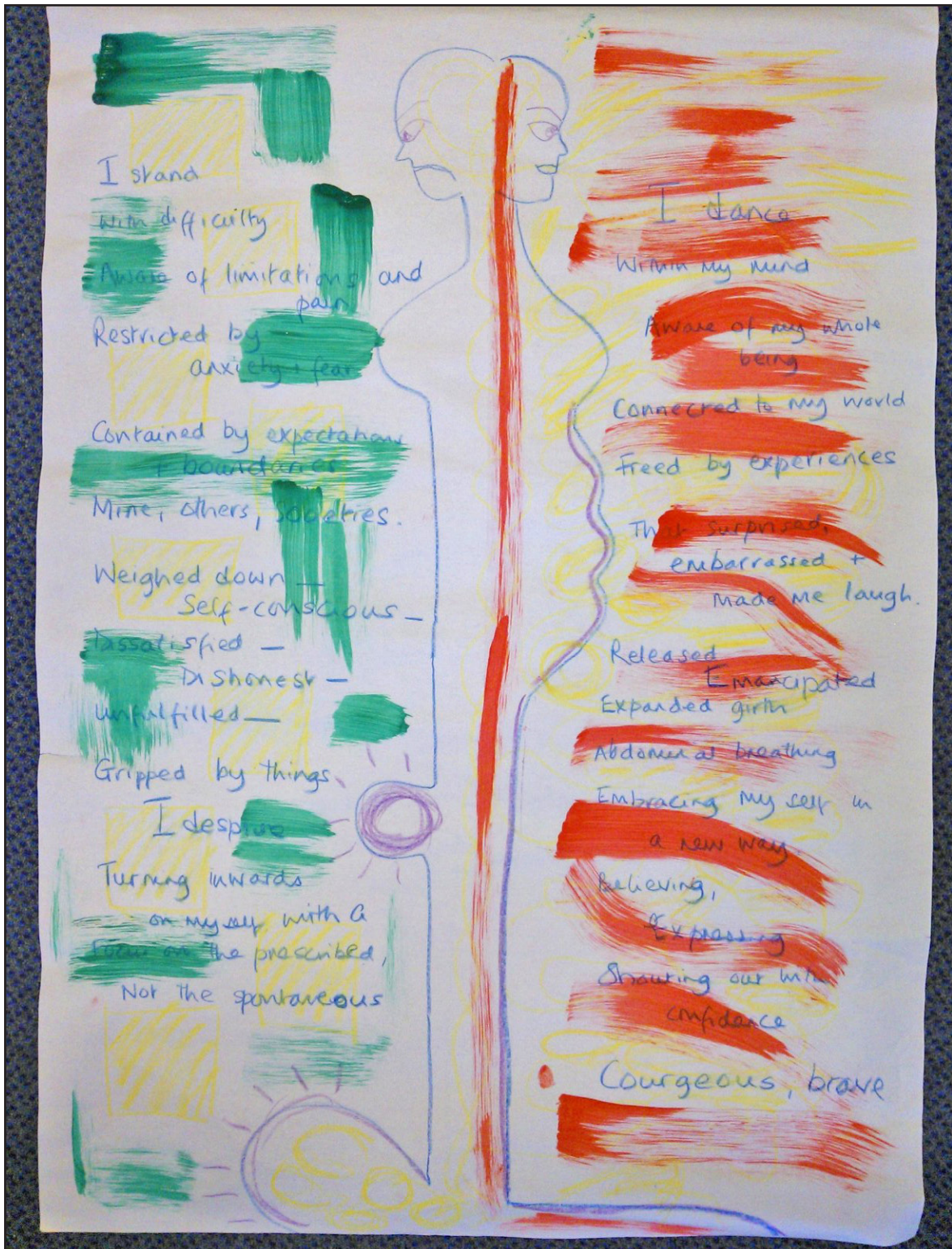
bit more and explained a technique about resonance to us and demonstrated how when focusing on different parts of the body the pitch of the sound produced would be affected. Thus, an abdominal focus would produce a bass dominated sound, whereas as he got me to focus my attention upwards to a point roughly about where the pituitary is located, the pitch increased until it was a high pitched whine, (which I was sure was outside my range). Moving on from this, he took us into a series of exercises that made us assume a variety of positions and exercised a diverse range of muscle groups. First, there was an exercise that started with slow movements that escalated and then culminated in assuming what I can only describe as a predator attack stance. This stance, up on the balls of our feet had to be maintained for about a count of ten and then we resumed the slow movements. This was followed by a whole variety of other exercises such as the 'Bell ringer', which had us reaching up to pull an imaginary bell rope and then falling back to the ground. There was the 'Sea grass' exercise, where we had to balance on our shoulders with arms and legs gently swaying as if caught in a current. There was walking while being led by different parts of the body, such as imagining trying to control a kite and then imagining that the kite controls were between your teeth and enacting how this would affect movement. Once all the exercises were complete, the external facilitator invited us to compile a performance of a random selection of the movement exercises combined with a soundtrack made up of vocalising. After a hesitation, I took my turn and did my best to do what was needed. My attention flowed between focusing on doing the exercise and an awareness of what I looked like from outside. This was a battle and made the exercise more difficult than it needed to be. No doubt I could learn to manage this but at the time I was able to deal with it and engage with the job in hand. Afterwards I was exhausted! The others said the same to me. It was a radical departure from my norm and was both exciting and scary – two sides of the same coin.

### So what?

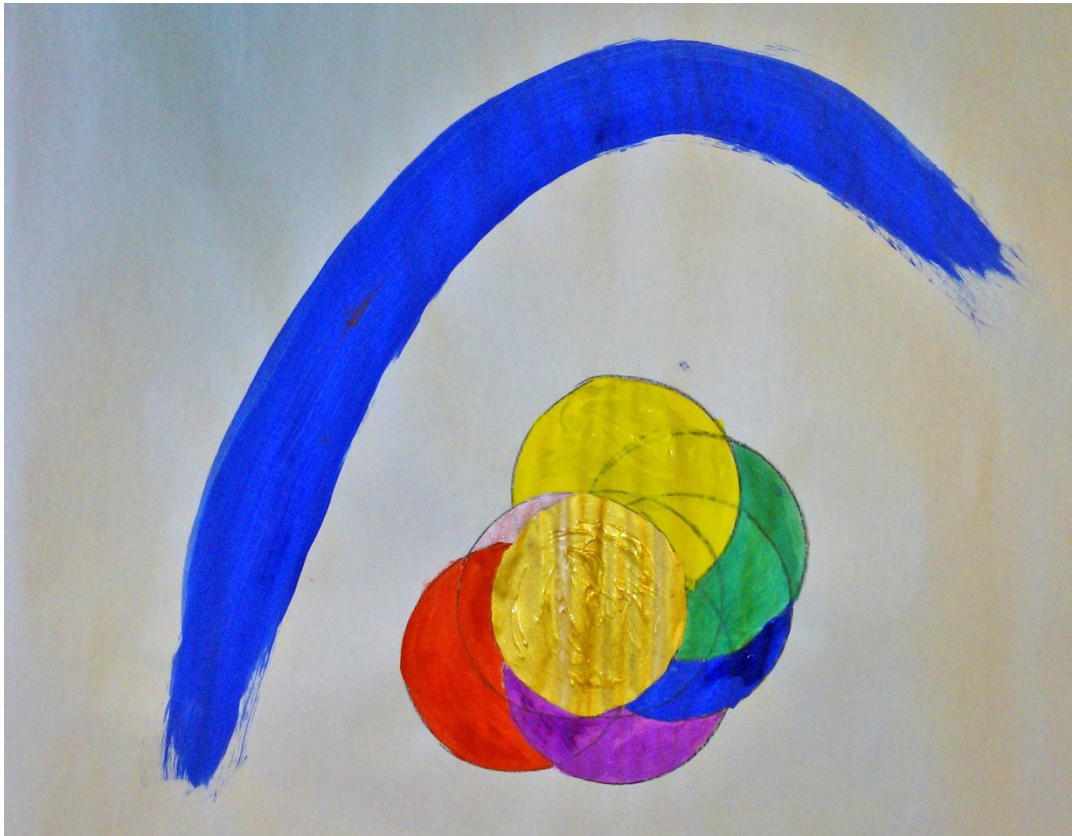
Here, we present a reflective analysis of the experiences described in the individual reflections. The plan to have two final workshops was difficult to achieve due to time pressures and other work demands, so these were consolidated into a single half-day workshop. This workshop focused on reflecting on the learning gained from the programme in the context of practice (teaching/learning/research/scholarship) and exploring this from the perspectives of critical creativity and person-centredness. There were five participants. A four-stage approach to the analysis of the experience was used:

1. **Stage 1** – each participant shared their written reflections from engaging in each session (as per the examples shown in the 'What?' section of this paper)
2. **Stage 2** – all participants created an image or sculpture/installation that represented what they heard, felt and imagined from the collective reflections in stage 1 (Photographs 2-5).
3. **Stage 3** – each participant talked about the image or sculpture/installation that they had created and identified the 'essences' of the experience. In this context, an 'essence' refers to the core qualities of the image or sculpture/installation that reflected their shared experience of the programme. The essences extracted are shown in Figure 3.
4. **Stage 4** – participants developed a 'collective reflective narrative' to tell the story of the essences extracted in stage 3. The italicised words in the collective reflective narrative below are the essences woven into the narrative.

Photograph 2



Photograph 3



Photograph 4



## Photograph 5



**Figure 3: Essences identified from creative activity**

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Newness</li><li>• Partial barriers</li><li>• Solid gold</li><li>• From nothing to full</li><li>• Recognise elements in others</li><li>• Discomfort</li><li>• Happiness</li><li>• Achieving potential</li><li>• Being person-centred with colleagues and friends</li><li>• Swim with the big fish</li><li>• Eclectic</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aiming for the stars</li><li>• Portal 'Diagon-Alley'</li><li>• Fear</li><li>• Stepping-stones</li><li>• Disparate elements</li><li>• Becoming</li><li>• 'The hot seat'</li><li>• Courage</li><li>• Rabbit and headlights</li><li>• Integration of disparate elements</li></ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### ***Collective reflective narrative***

Committing to this programme felt like we had entered a scene from a Harry Potter movie, when all of a sudden we were in a portal and transported into an alternative world – Diagon-Alley (a place in JK Rowling's books!). The potential newness of the experience was exciting and scary at the same time. Each session of the programme had its own challenges and, while on paper/as a programme, they simply appeared to be a collection of disparate elements with no sense of what this meant for us or our sense of self. Each facilitator, however, recognised the fear we each had as we cautiously entered the different creative spaces in which we were invited to play and explore. It was like we had been given stepping-stones, with each stone holding us in a different creative space – spaces that wrapped a safe cloak around us and then thrust us forward into the unknown. At times we felt like the proverbial rabbit in headlights but our collective courage enabled us to keep stepping on the stones and focus on aiming for the stars – that is, a greater sense of understanding of who we are and how we bring

that knowing into our practice. Even though we were not all able to be present for each session, over time our sharing of 'self' and a deeper sense of collective knowing meant that we were each able to recognise in others what we ourselves were feeling – and this gave us strength. We experienced a variety of emotions in each session – from extreme discomfort to a sense of happiness that we were engaging in this exploration. We began to identify over time that perceived barriers need only be partial barriers and that our becoming is in our hands. Although at first we were not aware that the ordering of each session had any particular significance, as they progressed it became clear that each was planned to integrate the disparate elements that we saw at the beginning of the programme. We were each placed in the hot seat at different times when we were asked to take a lead in a particular activity. However, we came to learn that the feeling of being in the hot seat enabled us to achieve potential that we never knew we had and to make public the eclectic mix of creative talents that were previously unknown to each of us. Over these sessions, we have moved from a sense of nothing to full understanding of self and our multiple selves – this is like a gift of solid gold. We increasingly feel able to swim with the big fish when it comes to embracing creativity in professional practice, and to be brave in voicing our creative potential. Our ability to be person-centred with colleagues and friends has grown and that gift of gold that we have been given can never be taken away.

### **Now what?**

In this section, we present a synthesis of the learning achieved and identify a future oriented plan. Six months after the final workshop, programme participants were asked to write a reflection of their learning from the programme and what this meant to them and their practice. Three questions were used to structure the reflection:

1. How do I feel now about the experience?
2. What have I learned about myself and my practice?
3. What might get in the way of application?
- 4.

### ***How do programme participants now feel about the experience?***

All the participants identified that the experience enabled them to think differently:

*'I would say that participation in creative approaches has broadened my horizon with regard to what helps people learn... my feelings about the programme have matured and deepened and time has enabled me to see connections where they were previously not apparent.'*

And to understand themselves more broadly as persons and to see things from alternative perspectives:

*'The experience of the creativity sessions has enabled me to see things from another perspective in my professional and personal life.'*

Examples of this included a greater understanding of how people can learn beyond the confines of competence or the linearity of problem solving methods.

Additionally, participation in the programme created a bond among participants that has enabled more effective relationships in other aspects of their work:

*'I feel a new sparkle of light floods my soul when I meet and greet colleagues who were on this journey with me. A new joy has been created by the friendship that makes me feel better and this is hard to describe in words.'*

These experiences of the programme participants are illustrative of what has been discussed in the literature regarding the potential of creative learning approaches to help build relationships (cf. Jeffrey and Craft, 2004), open up new and alternative approaches to 'knowing about knowing' (or metacognition) (cf. Metcalfe and Shimamura, 1994) and develop strategies for transformational learning (Senge et al., 2005). Indeed, the work of Senge et al., with its focus on the need to 'unlearn' before new learning can occur, provides some insights into how the participants felt about this experience – that it awoke new understandings of 'self' that were previously unknown to them.

However participants also identified that creative approaches have a 'shadow side that needs to be identified and disarmed; that exposure to creative methods and confident practitioners who are adept at such methods can feed into negative feelings about the shortcomings of one's current practice, breeding avoidance and undermining confidence:

*'Avoidance notwithstanding, an awareness of what is possible should be taken however, as encouragement, and show where expansion of practice is possible without compromising quality.'*

Previously, Titchen and McCormack (2010) have suggested that for a person to take risks in creative learning and development, there is a need to create the conditions necessary for risk taking, self-exposure and transformation. This idea of the 'shadow side' as voiced by participants in this programme illustrates the importance of ensuring that these conditions are in place.

Overall, the creativity programme was a positive experience for participants. It appears to have been rewarding, personally satisfying and to have provided an outlet within the workplace through which to voice creativity. However, the notion of the 'shadow side' also highlights the challenges associated with working with critical creativity as a methodology and the need for expert facilitation in its use. This can be seen as a limitation of the methodology.

### ***What did participants learn about their practice?***

The learning achieved from the programme relates to four key themes:

- Effectiveness as an educator
- Diversity of method
- Control versus risk taking
- Personhood

Participants commented that in clinical practice, personal effectiveness as a nurse can be easily determined, as much of nursing practice takes place in public and is continuously being moderated in the light of new evidence. In teaching, however, this is less easy to show and despite some examples of peer review processes in place, personal effectiveness is harder to determine. This can lead to a situation where anxiety about effectiveness can build in the face of a lack of evidence. In reflecting on their effectiveness, participants identified that involvement in the creativity programme enabled the development of 'effectiveness as an educator' through exploration of new ways of generating evidence:

*'If we accept that people have different learning styles then we should be able to pitch our teaching material in a variety of ways in order to ensure that our teaching is inclusive.'*

Exposure to creative methods demonstrated the 'diversity of method' available to enable this. Additionally, the programme allowed participants to shift their focus away from information delivery for the purposes of regurgitation under a quality flag, to one of engagement with material to explore how students make sense of it in order to contextualise it in their practice. This is considered by these educators to enable a reconsideration of the effect this has on the people that the students care for. As one participant commented:

*'In short I have learned to trust students as learners and encourage them to engage with higher order thinking.'*

Being able to trust learners to work with their own ways of thinking through problems, challenges and situations is a core skill in adult learning (Knowles, 1984). Knowles demonstrated the differences that exist between adult learners and children (what Knowles referred to as the differences between androgogy and pedagogy) with a critical element of this being the need to understand how adults process information. Unlike the 'rote-like' and repetitive approach to learning usually adopted by children, adults tend to learn through connections, images, metaphors and meanings. Therefore, developing teaching and learning strategies that invoke the development of metaphor and images is a key skill for adult educators. The different creative strategies used in this programme with a focus

on how they helped nurse educators to explore 'self' appeared to provoke new understandings about ways of achieving more effective learning strategies. This was not always easy learning, as articulated by one participant:

*'I have learned that joy comes from perseverance that is demonstrable in the act of learning to stay hopeful when the fire burns my heart and soul and I long to escape the singeing pain.'*

Learning how to let go of control and take risks was a key learning expressed by all participants. There is no doubt that many of the methods used in the creative sessions created anxiety among participants and pushed them in ways that were both confronting and challenging:

*'One of my colleagues told me about the creativity sessions and said if I wanted to be really challenged about the way I think about my practice that I should go. My initial reaction was to laugh and say there would be nothing I would detest more. The word detest is really strong and it showed how afraid I was of putting myself in a situation over which I had very little control.'*

The need for educators to be in control has been identified in the educational research literature (Greene, 2007) and indeed, in the world of educational action research, there is often an emphasis in 'first person action research' (Burgess, 2006) for helping educators to release control over learning to learners. While the participants all volunteered freely to participate in the programme with the intent of developing their creativity, the fear of losing control was very real:

*'At certain points in the programme, however, my need to be well organised and well prepared was severely challenged. At these times I found myself propelled into an alien world. There, in the absence and comfort of the familiar and predetermined, I felt out of control and anxious.'*

In the follow-up reflective workshop, participants recalled that reflecting on the discomfort experienced during the programme was as uncomfortable as the original discomfort itself. Interestingly, they also expressed that once their secret weaknesses and vulnerabilities were exposed, other feelings began to surface. Besides experiencing a sense of relief, they found themselves free of certain expectations (by self and others) that had stifled them as persons and their practice:

*'Undoubtedly, the most powerful and personal learning arose from these 'uncomfortable' situations. Now, instead of shying away from unfamiliar and more spontaneous learning experiences, I am learning to embrace them. No lasting damage was suffered; being able to laugh out loud at that particular situation and my final 'performance' is testament to this.'*

It is clear that the programme released a sense of creativity in participants that they had not been aware of before and which challenged their personhood. Previously, Brown and McCormack (2011) have highlighted the need for 'psychological safety' in transformational change situations. A psychologically safe environment is one in which participants are able to take risks, step away from accepted patterns of being and unlearn (let go) in order to re-learn (let come). While Brown and McCormack (2011) emphasise the need for psychologically safe environments, Senge et al. (2005) reinforce this and suggest emotional safety is equally important. It is clear that participants felt psychologically and emotionally safe with the different facilitators and that this enabled them to try different methods, to take risks and to think about new ways of helping students to become enthusiastic about their work. Participants became more relaxed about creativity in their academic practice and since the programme has ended, have used many of the methods to good effect with the undergraduate nursing students in large lecture theatres as well as in smaller group work. These reflections on control and discomfort highlight the need for creativity in teacher preparation programmes. The dominance of cognitive approaches to learning and the lack of attention to creative methods in education programmes need to be addressed, particularly among nurse educators. It is increasingly the case that nurses are required to be creative in practice in order to meet the demands of increasingly complex healthcare environments. The need for student nurses to have their creativity released as self-directed adult learners would appear to be critical to this agenda:

*'Personally speaking, my practice is chaotic but it is alive and it is constantly metamorphosing! I am a free spirit that has yet to reach its full potential. I will reach the mountain of maturity and find the wisdom I seek and the solace from knowledge acquired.'*

### ***What might get in the way of applying the learning in practice?***

The process of moving from one accepted paradigm of teaching and learning to another may require what Kuhn (1962) would refer to as a scientific revolution or a paradigm shift (albeit at a local level). This is a process that will require sensitivity and will need to guard against scepticism. The position is complicated by the fact that curricula are prescribed by the regulating body, so care will need to be taken that this agenda is being met while expanding practice. The participants in the programme expressed that taking time to develop individual creativity by educators can be seen as 'an indulgence'. They suggested that this needs to be tackled head on by enabling staff to engage with creative learning and development processes, so that they might begin to see how this would contribute to their development and thus influence their teaching practice and their wider practice as an academic. A concurrent process of culture change in the school where the programme took place should assist and act as a facilitator in this process, through its development of a creative and collaborative culture among staff teams.

Personal bravery associated with 'challenging self' and the new learning about self that was achieved in the programme is also seen as a challenge:

*'As a person, I struggle with self and need to be placed in a protected environment if self is to be allowed to come forth from the depths of my being and flourish. I do not give 'self', time as the needs of others are immense and I am ultra-sensitive to people's pain which is sometimes crushing and people with many needs absorb my 'self'. Therefore, a special place that was provided during this creativity journey was and is of immense value to people like me.'*

The above quote highlights the value that participants placed on the need for 'protected space' to explore self, take risks and develop practice. Having skilled facilitation in this context was also highlighted as being critical to success. The need for expert facilitation to 'hold' people through creative exploration has been highlighted by others (Stephens et al., 2004; Titchen and McCormack, 2010) and it seems imperative that such spaces need to become commonplace in education settings and an integrated part of practice and staff development. Time, energy and resources are needed to be creative and to be effective. Participants emphasised the need to have the strength and commitment to overcome individual and organisational obstacles and to be 'single-minded' in making every effort to find ways to add value to teaching and learning practices. Being creative is part of the art of education; it is at the heart of bringing learning to life, to giving of self (as a teacher) and encouraging students, in turn, to invest in being creative. By supporting educators to invest in ongoing learning and development, the potential for a more meaningful impact on everyone involved, from the educator to the students and those who will ultimately be in their care, can be maximised.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have reflected on a programme of creativity that focused on the exploration of self as educators. We have shared honestly and authentically our reflections on engaging with the processes used and the learning gained. The programme provided a unique opportunity to engage in creative and reflexive learning in a safe environment. However, reflecting on the programme also highlights the challenges posed in such learning situations and the need for skilled facilitation. Holding the educator as learner through the uncharted territory of creative learning is a key learning from this reflective account and one that needs careful consideration in ongoing programmes. As educators learn to let go of control of the learning process and release creative energy, then the need for collegiality, support, and emotional and psychological safety become critical. The programme highlights important lessons learned and the potential of such learning to be transferred into practice.

Since the programme ended, the educators who participated in it have continued to engage in individual activities/personal development to maintain the learning and further develop their creative potential as educators. While it was intended that this programme be repeated with other educators in the School of Nursing, this has not happened, primarily because of the organisational focus on the school's culture change project, highlighted earlier. However, it is interesting to note that a number of the participants in this programme have also become key facilitators of the culture change in the school and in using creativity to facilitate transformational change. Finally, preliminary discussions have taken place with the learning support



unit of the university to explore ways of integrating this programme into educator development programmes for lecturers across the university. That ambition has yet to be realised!

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