

## **Performative Identity and the Researcher as Drag:**

### **An Autoethnographic Account of Positionality in Educational Research**

The following article comprises an autoethnographic discussion of researcher identity in school-based educational research. The research centred on a professional learning programme in which arts/education practitioners delivered workshops for teachers that used creative, arts practice with a focus on mindful techniques to support teachers' wellbeing during school improvement initiatives. I developed a reflexive, participatory methodology that comprised interviews with the arts/education practitioners, and observations of the workshops in order to generate data that explored how creativity was articulated through the programme. My discussion focuses on the appropriateness of the research design and qualitative, reflexive methodology to addressing the research aims, and on my values and positionality throughout the data generation activity and subsequent analysis. Finally, I discuss my shifting identity/ies in what I define as a queer/ed research space, and conceptualise my performative researcher identity as a form of drag.

Keywords: positionality, reflexivity, researcher identity, autoethnography, queer theory

#### **Introduction**

In 2015, the Welsh Government published *Creative Learning through the arts – an action plan* (Welsh Government, 2015). The three central aims of which are to: 'improve attainment through creativity; increase and improve arts experiences and opportunities in schools; support our teachers and arts practitioners in developing their skills' (Welsh Government, 2015, 4). The plan was developed jointly with the Arts Council of Wales, and responded to a research report written by Professor Dai Smith,

and commissioned by Welsh Government, *Arts in Education in the Schools of Wales* (Smith, 2013). Smith's (2013) report recommended increased opportunities for schools to enjoy the arts and creativity, and a programme of professional learning (PL) for teachers to address the identified gap in provision. Four Regional Arts Education Networks were established to deliver the PL activity across Wales, and increase opportunities for schools to engage with the arts and creative practice. While each Network addressed the task differently, according to local circumstances, all four appointed Arts Champions - artist/educators who applied for the roles to deliver PL activities and build links with schools. See Southern(2019) for more detail on the policy decisions that informed the establishment of these Networks.

Within Network D<sup>1</sup>, a group of Arts Champions joined forces to devise a professional learning programme that engaged school staff in creative arts workshops as a means to support their well-being during ongoing school improvement initiatives, such as follow-up visits from the school inspectorate. The Arts and Wellbeing in Education (AWE) programme comprised a series of four, twilight workshops that focused on the creative arts to support the wellbeing of teachers during this time. AWE was delivered by three Arts Champions with a broad range of artistic and educational backgrounds and skillsets, and a yoga instructor who led a session on yoga with mindfulness. This article is based on a research project that explored the activity of Network D within the wider, national initiative and the AWE programme as a case study of professional learning in arts education. The project addressed the following research questions: how are the benefits of *Creative Learning through the Arts* (Welsh

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<sup>1</sup> Network D is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the participants, in line with the ethical approval granted for this research project

Government, 2015) articulated through a case study Regional Arts and Education Network? And how is the concept of ‘creativity’ articulated through the Arts and Wellbeing in Education (AWE) professional learning programme?

In order to address these questions, I developed a qualitative, broadly ethnographic, participatory, and reflexive methodology that aimed to explore how the concept of creativity was expressed by each of the stakeholders - WG, Arts Council Wales, Network D, and the Arts Champions leading the AWE programme, and the circulating discourses that in/formed these expressions. The following article comprises an autoethnographic discussion of researcher identity in school-based educational research that considers the appropriateness of the research design and qualitative, reflexive methodology to addressing the research questions. It moves on to reflect on my values and positionality throughout the data generation activity and subsequent analysis. Finally, I discuss my shifting identity/ies in what I define as a queer/ed research space, and the notion of the researcher identity as a form of drag.

### **Reflexivity, Values, and Shifting Identities**

Some consideration of the reflexive stance, and debates around its relation to values and researcher identity is useful here in adding context to my later discussion. It is worth acknowledging that reflexivity itself is a rich concept for discussion, which this article does not have scope to cover in extensive detail. The following section begins with an exploration of how values can be understood as integral to reflexivity, how these may shift, and how researcher identity itself may shift, be multiple, unstable or fluid. I then reflect on the influence of researcher values and positionality on research practice and findings. Finally, I consider how researcher identities can be understood as constructed and comprise many roles and relationships, which I conceptualise as performative and explore in terms of queer theory and notions of drag.

Reflexivity aims to make the research process transparent so that readers can consider the context in which the research was produced (Hardy et al, 2001). On a more practical level, the reflexive stance should also explore the relationship/s between the researcher and her participants, as well as how these relationships impact on knowledge claims (Cunliffe, 2003). There is a long-standing debate in social research between those that believe research should be value-neutral (e.g. Weber, 1949) and those who believe it should be politically committed (e.g. Gouldner, 1962). Greenbank (2003) discusses the value-neutral versus partisan debate, and, using Rokeach's (1973) categorisation of values, concludes that the complex interaction of the researcher's moral competency, personal and social values has an important influence on the research process. He also argues that research methods cannot be value-free in their application, but that researchers should adopt a reflexive approach in order to be open and honest about how values influence their research.

Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) argue that researchers should be engaging with the world of her/his participants rather than operating as 'objective' observers, and put the case for what they term, 'ethical reflexivity' (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006). This should encompass being explicit about value assumptions and evaluative judgements, acknowledging tensions between various values embedded in research, and taking responsibility for the political and ethical implications. The difficulty here lies in adequately describing a researcher's values throughout the research process, since the above arguments imply fixed points in the researcher's relationship – to the research, and with participants. Whereas in practice, the researcher's position changes, and values may shift in response to the experience of research. Nevertheless, the notion of ethical reflexivity, as described by Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) offers a useful framework for

researchers to consider how their values impact on decisions throughout the process, and how their own position may evolve.

This notion of shifting values is mirrored in discussions around the influence of researcher identity on practice and findings. Within these discussions, researcher identities are often conceptualised as singular, fixed and stable. This rigid conceptualisation is problematic, raising some debate within education research. For example, much has been written about the insider/outsider dichotomy in educational research and how its fixed structure does not adequately express the experience of participant research. Le Gallais (2008) challenges the notion of insider/outsider research positioning and takes on McGrath's (2004) suggestion to write a brief autobiography to heighten her own awareness of how 'past experience, class, values and beliefs and educational background influence[s her] research' (Le Gallais, 2008, 150). The assumption being that notions of self are as influential as pre-determined categories of research 'identity' in determining a researcher's approach. O'Boyle (2017) also discusses researcher identity, positioning and reflexivity in reference to her experience of working on an inter-professional research project. She argues that the insider/outsider concept is too fixed to meaningfully examine what happened. Instead, she shows how positioning can offer a more refined means to highlight processes and practices of interaction between researchers and participants. Positioning implies movement of the researcher, between spaces where research identity can be described.

Thomson and Gunter (2011) also challenge the perceived stability of researcher identities, using their own experience of working in school on a project with pupils acting as researchers to explore bullying. The authors use Zygmunt Bauman's (2000; 2004) notion of 'fluid identities' and argue that the inside/outside binary may be 'politically helpful' but doesn't describe the real politic and messy experience in and

with schools. Thomson and Gunter (2011) attempt to link their experiences with the social relations in which they existed. They set out a table of 'people' against 'our identities' and describe their identities with those individuals/groups. These descriptions are multifarious, and deconstruct binary notions of identity, including that of inside/outside. The fluidity adds a further, implicit notion of continual movement in researcher identity that better describes the work of the researcher in social spaces.

The multiple representations of identity that Thomson and Gunter (2011) trace throughout their research process can also be seen in the work of Purdy and Jones (2013), who conceptualise research identity as evolving, constructed roles. Purdy and Jones (2013) use theories located within dramaturgical social theory and Goffman's (1959) work on face and impression management to describe the development and evolution of personas adopted by researchers in the quest for 'rich exchanges in the social field' (Purdy and Jones, 2013, 292). The authors recognise the strategies a researcher uses and identities s/he constructs in negotiating the social spaces that characterise participant research, and focus on the 'concrete reactions to ever changing research relationships and context' (Purdy and Jones, 2013, 293). These are mapped through the changing roles and relationships throughout the research process.

Participant observation researchers require permission to carry out data generation activity. Therefore, argue Purdy and Jones (2013), researchers are constantly in a form of 'impression management' (from Goffman, 1959) 'where individuals construct a desired image of themselves for audience consumption' (Purdy and Jones, 2013, 296). This construction is mirrored by the participants, since they are aware they are being observed. They, in turn, decide their own 'role' and define their own place in the research space. The notion of role-playing in the research space raises interesting questions around the nature of 'performance', its impact on the data generated, and on

any findings. Performance and performativity as expressed/embodied through notions of drag in queer theory also offer a useful framework for analysing my own research identity as a form of drag. Drag is not merely a 'woman' in the dress code of a 'man', since drag does not recognise these binaries; they do not exist as descriptions of any individual identity. Drag plays with gender identity through coding. It is as much a linguistic as a performative act, which disrupts hegemonic, heteronormative power by blurring the boundaries between traditional gender categories. I will return to these issues later in the article.

### **Methodology: Autoethnography**

Autoethnography can usefully be defined as, "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 739), that "questions the notion of a coherent, individual self" (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is the merger of methods of autobiography and ethnography through a reflexive approach, taking personal experience into account (Duncan, 2004; Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

The aim is to break down disciplinary boundaries and constraints to reveal issues and concepts that would otherwise not be brought to light through more traditional research methodologies (Ellis, 1997; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Reed-Danahay (1997) emphasises the self-narrative of autoethnography, describing the approach as both method and text. Autoethnographers generate the data they seek to analyse by placing themselves within the social space of the research, and reflecting on both their own place within the data and its creation (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

My choice to generate an autoethnographic account of my shifting researcher identity, centred on the possibilities afforded by autoethnography to explore my

experience of the research and discuss the intersection between the personal and the social. I aspired to express some of what Muncey (2010) describes as the “intangible and complex feelings and experiences that somehow can’t be told in conventional ways” (2). Autoethnographies run counter to more traditional social science methodologies that aim to distance the researcher from the research text, by making the familiar strange and thereby apparently increasing the reliability of the data/analysis. Instead, autoethnographies place the researcher at the centre of the research, in order to discuss experiences that would not be possible if she were distant. In my research, autoethnography afforded the means to access and analyse the experiential space, which could not easily be accessed and analysed through other methods. There are a multitude of approaches to autoethnography, for example, community, collaborative, critical, analytical, performative, and each iteration brings its own methods, ideological positioning, and cultural, social, political purpose (Adams and Herrmann, 2020). Furthermore, autoethnographies represent findings and analysis in a range of formats and media, that explore outside the boundaries of more ‘traditional’ prose reporting.

My approach falls within Boylorn and Orbe’s (2014) description of critical autoethnography. The aims were to explore my own response to the phenomenon of researcher identity, by considering the shifting power relations between researcher and participant, and to challenge dominant models of researcher identity through a combination of critical theory and action. In doing so, I hope to contribute to wider discussion of researcher identity by “troubling the persistent dichotomies of insider versus outsider, distance versus familiarity, objective observer versus participant, and individual versus culture” (Reed-Danahay, 2017).

The self-narrative I produced through this methodology comprises “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of my experience in order to add my own queer



perspective to debates around researcher identity, which had been overlooked in much of the literature. Drawing on Muncey's (2010) work, I wanted to explore the disjunction between what I experienced as a researcher and the "official narratives" I had encountered in my reading (Muncey, 2010, 10). The aim is to subvert those narratives by exposing my experiences as data for discussion.

This personal perspective opens my assertions up to criticism of solipsism, of a lack of reliability, since there can be no other perspective refuting my claim. The criticism of researcher bias (Hammersley, 1992) can be levelled against all autoethnographic research and, to an extent, all qualitative research. This criticism does not take us far however, since there can be no objective 'truth' in any data generated through qualitative means; it is an epistemological dead end. My reflexivity as a researcher functions as a means to addressing concerns around the reliability of this autoethnographic account, and the validity of the data generated through this methodology. I would argue that, far from signalling a lack of reliability, the reflexive approach to generating an autoethnography that I have adopted, actually strengthens the research in enabling me to capture and articulate a particular viewpoint. As Muncey (2010) argues in this regard,

"Reflexive self awareness is integral to what it is to be human. Not only can the individual exist in multiple identities by being immersed in them, but they can also adopt different perspectives towards themselves by standing back and reflecting" (Muncey, 2010, 16).

The reflexive stance in my research acknowledges and explores the multiple identities of my experience in the field.

## **Methods: the AWE Professional Learning Research Project**

The research into the AWE programme aimed to answer the following questions: how are the benefits of *Creative Learning through the Arts* (Welsh Government, 2015) articulated through a case study Regional Arts and Education Network? And how is the concept of ‘creativity’ articulated through the Arts and Wellbeing in Education (AWE) professional learning programme?

The dataset was generated between December 2017 and May 2018, and comprised three distinct research activities. The first activity comprised an ascending model of discourse analysis (from Foucault, 1980), applied to *Creative Learning through the Arts* (Welsh Government, 2015); to documents relating to the case study Network; and educational and information materials produced by the Network for its members. The analysis focuses on the relations between organisations, individuals, and practices, to explore the underlying structures forming the context, and enable further exploration of the ideological project informing and communicated through the Welsh Government’s action plan, and the resultant practice (from Foucault, 2002a; 2002b).

Secondly, I interviewed two Arts Champions, jointly, on two separate occasions. The interviewees were part of a team of Arts Champions who collaborated to design and deliver a professional learning (PL) programme. The programme used creative, arts practice with a focus on mindful techniques to support teachers’ wellbeing during school improvement initiatives. The interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis, and lasted approximately one hour each. The first took place in January 2018 towards the beginning of the team’s PL programme, and the second took place in May and comprised a reflection on activity and discussion of plans for the future.

Finally, I observed six workshop sessions delivered by the Arts Champions. The observations followed a semi-structured framework adapted from the work of Spradley (1980), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993), and a reflection process adapted from Bogdan and Biklen (1992). The framework and reflection process are detailed in the Appendix. The aim was to explore articulations of creativity within the context of supporting the wellbeing of school staff during a period of school improvement initiatives. The methodology enabled me to research the circulating discourse around creativity within the specific contexts of the schools. The subjective nature of data generated through the methodology is acknowledged in all published work deriving from the research, and in the notes themselves since the reflection process incorporated information on the methods of observation.

The decision to assume a reflexive stance was both practical, given the context of the research, and epistemological. Purdy and Jones (2013) describe how being a neutral, passive observer was not a workable option in their research, which centred on social dynamics within a rowing club. Accessing a range of perspectives was only made possible by the researcher negotiating evolving relationships from within the group dynamic. Similarly, in this research into the AWE programme, the focus on wellbeing and creativity meant an 'objective' distance from individuals would not have enabled reciprocity and/or access to the research site/s. Nor would I have been comfortable recording participants' data revealing issues of wellbeing without revealing at least some of myself. Furthermore, I was invited to join the creative sessions, rather than remaining a 'passive' observer, at the outset. The session leader asked me to put down my notepad and join the group of teachers around the central table. I joined the group and participated in the workshop. This brought about a shift in the methodology and I remained a participant in all subsequent workshops. One of the aims of reflexivity is to

disrupt assumptions about knowledge and research that are accepted as ‘true’ (Adams and Jones, 2011). My own reflexivity is influenced by the adoption of a poststructural epistemological stance. That draws on Foucault’s (1980; 2000; 2002a; 2002b) discussions of discourse as an object generated by knowledge/power, and the aim to understand the systems of knowledge that produce such objects. My autoethnographic discussion strives to articulate my experience by identifying the socio-political systems that give rise to my researcher identity, in order to understand how/why my identity is multiple, shifting, performative, and the values that shape and define it. The observation framework acknowledges the lack of objective ‘truth’ and constructs meaning through critical analysis that is contextual, perspectival, and not fixed. Reflexivity can accommodate this methodological shift epistemologically; however, it led to further reflection on my values throughout the research process, and my positionality.

### **Representing Creativity**

As outlined above, my epistemological stance is poststructural, yet pragmatic. While I believe there is no objective ‘truth’ and the ‘reality’ of the research space can only be accessed through the researcher’s interpretation of the experience, I am also committed to generating data and analysis that enables the reader to apprehend that experience. In interpreting the AWE research space, I aimed for verisimilitude – a ‘truthlikeness’ that would effectively describe the experience and allow readers to gain knowledge about the context, while still acknowledging the subjectivity. This led me to question the appropriateness of using traditional research methods in creative settings, as well as how to arrive at findings, and how to share them effectively. Trying to capture notions of creativity and wellbeing through the observations, combined with the movement from ‘passive’ observer to participant in the workshops led me to consider adapting standardised approaches to recording the data.

Kay (2016) describes how she, as an artist/therapist/educator, integrates multiple arts-based methods, including visual field notes, bead/found object collage, poetry and creative writing into her research practice. Uses the term bricolage to describe this practice, from the French *bricoleur*, a resourceful person, a maker who uses available materials. The term is used in several disciplines, including creative arts. For example, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) used the term to describe a multi-methodological form of research that incorporates a variety of methods and theoretical constructs to examine a phenomenon. This conceptualisation is particularly appealing. I draw on my interdisciplinary background when designing research, and take a pragmatic approach to melding methodologies and theoretical standpoints without reference to ‘traditional’ disciplinary boundaries (see for e.g. Southern, 2016).

Drawing on the work of Barone and Eisner (1997), Kay (2016) explains that ‘while it may seem incongruous, playfulness in the research process can be rigorous and present the researcher with new and fresh possibilities, which frees the researcher to use aesthetic form(s) and expressive language’ (Kay, 2016, 27). This articulation describes my response to being immersed in the creative practice of the Arts Champions, and the creative space of the education practitioners. I frequently use diagrammatic representations of activity to conceptualise what I have observed, to identify patterns in data, and to describe theoretical concepts in all my research. However, these pictures are process/analysis, and rarely become data or dissemination of findings. Nevertheless, I felt that my own place within the shared creative space demanded a creative response.

My dilemma was as follows. Representing the discourses of creativity within spaces shaped by a focus on wellbeing in formal reporting – even if subjective – would not capture the personal, emotional experience, and therefore would not convey either creativity or wellbeing. However, much of the role of researcher is to interpret the data

for an audience to assimilate and evaluate. A purely creative response to the data would not have represented the experience in a manner that would enable an audience to access meaning and review critically. It would be another layer of creativity awaiting interpretation.

Reardon (2012), a doctoral student working within Art and Design education successfully resolved this dilemma. Reardon (2012) situates her research paradigm within critical theory, and describes an interpretive hermeneutic study, where she is 'cast as a participant ethnographer' (Reardon, 2012, 127). The article focuses on how she developed a methodology that enabled her to use a creative voice. The article is constructed in the format of a play setting the dialogue between an EdD student and an EdD supervisor that represents her personal experience in navigating 'permission mechanisms and ethical gatekeepers, and makes direct reference to [her] research and its progress' (Reardon, 2012, 128).

I am not an artist, and my response to the creative space was not expressed through a specific art form, other than the creative work I produced in the workshops. However, I did deliberately shift my writing style, in order to describe the experience of the creative space effectively. The form is first person narrative that is emotive, subjective, visually evocative, and includes metaphorical and symbolic references. It is not an attempt at an 'objective', 'factual' description of surroundings, but a personal response that resolves the dilemma between the desire to respond creatively with the need for critical engagement. The following extract from the data is written in the first person and comprises my experience of taking part in the first workshop I observed. I have selected it from the dataset to demonstrate my apparent 'movement' between researcher identities as I negotiate the relationships of the research space. The data

raises further questions around the concept of voice – i.e. who is speaking, to and for whom?

Activities.

We returned to the first table then, clutching our new ‘brushes’ and sat down to the next task. The session leader reminded us that we were all able to draw, that ‘a line is [just] a dot that went for a walk’ (Paul Klee), and asked us to draw a dot in pencil on a piece of paper that she provided. She then asked us to ‘take the dot for a walk’ around the page, which everyone duly did. This session was characterised by happy participation. It was led in such a laid back fashion that was clearly informed, but left space for us all to move, reflect, breathe – and to talk and laugh ...

Here, I use the term “us” to claim my position within the research space, as a participant. In so doing, the next phrase, “to move, reflect, breath” takes ownership of a the group response. I may have reflected alone, but by aligning myself with the participants, I imply that we all reflected, together. The section goes on to explore my own emotional response to the task.

After some time, when everyone had at least half covered the paper, and was painting, quietly, reflectively, the session leader asked how we would feel about handing our painting to someone else to work on. The formerly talkative group fell completely silent and looked intently at their paintings. Sudden laughter broke out. At the irony of workshops focused on collaboration in which no one wanted to collaborate. I have to admit that I, too, felt a momentary pang that someone was going to paint on my ‘artwork’ after I’d spent some time selecting my colour scheme and creating the spaces within which I was choosing to lay paint, or to leave blank. After all, this was my dot that I’d taken for a walk ... We then worked on each other’s painting for perhaps five minutes before [a teacher] decided that she was ready to make her mark and moved across the room to the large canvas on the floor, clutching her boggle-eyed rosemary stick, ‘Rosie’. The rest of the group were still head down, working intently and occasionally making an unconvincing comment that it would be good to collaborate.

My “momentary pang” reveals a participant’s emotional response to the activity within

the research space. However, a few sentences later, I remove myself, offering a third person description of events that implies I am external to the action: “the rest of the group were still head down”. In reality, I was one of ‘the rest’. However, my autoethnographic account no longer includes a personal perspective. My position shifts continually in terms of my research perspective and my personal response.

This re-telling of the activities of the session includes description of my actions and the actions of those around me. Through the writing, I speak for the Arts Champions in defining their practice. For example, my description of the space left for us to move, reflect, breathe. My writing suggests that this was a deliberate strategy used by the Arts Champion, though this may not have been the case. However, later interviews with the Arts Champions allowed for triangulation of the data, so that the way I have defined their practice is not entirely drawn from my interpretation. The extract also includes what appears to be an assumption about the internal, mental processes of the workshop participants. For example, the term ‘reflectively’ is used to describe the ‘quiet’ painting of the group. This word was selected with good reason, but perhaps is not explicit in the extract. Between moments of quiet, members of school staff would raise issues they wanted to discuss from their day’s teaching, such as pupil behaviour or improvement. They also spoke of how they enjoyed the activity because it gave them time to think, before settling back to their painting.

The extract from the observation data that follows is taken from a different workshop, this time working with clay, in a different school from the first example. I describe the space I was in, and address the question of ‘feelings’ as articulated in the semi-structured observation framework. The language here is deliberately evocative in order to relay the emotional experience of being in this space.



Space. There was *little* pupil work on display, the teacher instead preferring to use the space as ‘working walls’ so that there were lists of grammatical terms and examples, posters of books covers, examples of phrases in Welsh, and some mathematical symbols. In the ‘wet area’ was the sink, with a pile of *empty*, named, water bottles for pupils. The classroom looked out onto the playground, which was largely *concrete* with an *impossibly* large collection of *flat* and *tired*-looking footballs *discarded* at its edges, and in bushes. The playground itself looked out over the sea. To one side of the concrete was a fitness area, on tartan with grass surround, where around six or seven metal fitness machines lay *dormant*, of the kind seen in a *municipal* park. Other buildings and classrooms could be made out through the *mist and rain*, to the left of this classroom. In the corner of the room was a door that led to a cloakroom and exit onto the playground, and to boys’ and girls’ toilets ... [italics added during analysis]

The section above is included here as it demonstrates the way I aimed to use writing techniques to convey my emotional response to the space I encountered. While this passage does describe the practical layout of the classroom, the emphasis, as indicated by those terms picked out in italics, is on my own negative response to the atmosphere I felt. The paragraph includes one particularly long sentence, which aimed to convey the oppressive, breathless space that I experienced. Whether this is how another researcher might encounter the space is not under discussion. The aim was to represent my own experience of this place. The following section continues from that above, with a description of my feelings. Again, this is characterised by my negative response.

Feelings: Awkward, tense, disjointed.

I enjoyed the session and the creative work, however, the tension in the room, the adversarial attitudes of some of the staff, the ‘them and us’ distinctions, the disjuncture between conversations whereby individuals would only respond to certain other individuals, the Head’s jolly along approach that ran counter to the atmosphere on display, the fact that two members of the group had made a tile of the same place where they had both been (Sydney Harbour Bridge) but that this made no cause for discussion or fellow-feeling, the lack of empathy in the room, the lack of interest in other people’s contributions, and the oppressive grey outside, all made for a cold classroom.

Despite being a participant in this workshop, the observation notes highlight my estrangement from the physical space in which I found myself. For example, the detachment I seem to feel from the Head teacher's display of positivity, which I describe as his "jolly along". This distancing is not unusual in educational or social research. However, in writing the observation notes and reviewing the field notes, I was struck by how my research position moved between spaces. These spaces can be summarised as follows: the research space where I was investigating the concepts of creativity and wellbeing; the school space inhabited by teachers and where I was physically placed; the artistic space where I was producing a clay tile or making my mark with paint; and the space of the participant whose wellbeing was being attended to. I inhabited these spaces distinctly and all at once.

Further investigation of my shifting positionality will allow me to consider the extent to which the concept of reflexivity is enough in defining the multiple roles of my research identity, and whether previously explored notions of insider/outsider and 'fluid' research identities (Thomson and Gunter, 2011) articulate the experience effectively.

### **Positionality, Performance, and Queered Space**

The experience of participating in the workshop sessions, writing observation notes, interviewing two of the Arts Champions, and transcribing those interviews highlighted my positionality and shifting identity throughout the research process. In researching the AWE programme, the power 'hierarchy'/differential that is characteristic of the researcher-participant relationship was disrupted at the beginning of the first data generation activity. This disruption of traditional/assumed/anticipated hierarchies was a feature of the AWE programme (see Southern, 2019 for discussion on this), and

impacted significantly not only on my research identity, but also on my conceptualisation of researcher identities.

My position certainly shifts, but my perceived identity is also subject to shifting definitions according to assumptions and opinions of other people in the research space. My identity is assumed, and sometimes fixed, by how others judge my role/position. For example, in conversation during one of the workshops, a member of staff in the school referenced my 'identity' as she saw it. I work in an education department of a university that delivers large-scale Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes across South Wales. This person knew many of my colleagues, and had worked with the university for many years, as a placement school for ITE students, amongst other relationships. Wales being a relatively small country of around three million people, large public organisations have substantial reach. In this case, into schools, the inspectorate, cultural organisations, a range of public, private and third sector organisations, and government. If I am from this particular 'club' – the university, I must know these people (x, y, z), these organisations (a, b, c), and be involved in this current educational initiative (k). As it stands, this is not always the case. My background is not in schools, not in ITE, not in government, not in Wales. However, my current affiliation lends me all manner of presumed expertise and connections and opens up conversations and divulgements that would not have been forthcoming had I worked for a different organisation, been in a different club. While useful in this context, giving me privileged access to information, relationships, affordances, the apparently fixed labels attributed to my identity by others with whom I must negotiate a research relationship creates other identities, not previously anticipated.

McDonald (2013; 2016) offers a useful means of conceptualising shifts in identity during research in the social field that draws on queer theory. McDonald (2016)

expands his previous work on queer reflexivity (McDonald, 2013) by ‘positioning ‘the closet’ as a guiding metaphor for reflective practice in field research’ (McDonald, 2016, 391). Queer reflexivity centres on negotiating the closet by revealing and concealing aspects of ourselves to others during the research process; the categories we as researchers use to identify ourselves; how researchers construct (non-)normative identities; and aspects of ourselves that shift throughout the process. As McDonald (2013; 2016) articulates, reflexivity is consistent with queer theory. Queer theory allows us to challenge normativity and interrogate values and assumptions that are often taken for granted. Identities shift, evolve, blur, challenge, are performative. Reflexivity also challenges the taken-for-granted, and disrupts assumptions about knowledge. The field is certainly a queer/ed space. My own place within it acknowledges the presence of assumed binaries – I move ‘between’ Researcher and Participant - but does not conform to these normative identities. As McDonald describes it, ‘the practice of queer reflexivity thus directs researchers to consider the multiple ways in which they move into and out of the closet while they are in the field as well as the implications of disclosing or concealing certain aspects of themselves to research participants’ (McDonald, 2016, 392).

The closet metaphor is compelling but does not entirely resonate with my own practice. Following McDonald’s theoretical argument, I was closeted by one of the Arts Champions, when she informed me that I was to join in with the creative activity, rather than sit to one side of the group with my notebook. At this point, my ‘academic researcher from the university’ identity was placed in the closet, and I took up the role of participant. However, I did not conceal one identity in order to assume another. I remained a researcher – in my own eyes, and in those of the rest of the group, since I had already been outed as such. Their memory of that ‘fact’, and their relationship to it -

its relevance/meaningfulness/significance – may well have changed through the course of the workshop, but it never ceased to be a truth. McDonald (2016) continues, ‘Queer reflexivity also entails reflecting upon the ways in which researchers enact (non)normative identities in the field, as well as the consequences of these (non)normative identities’ (McDonald, 2016, 392). This rings true of my own experience, in terms of how I approached ‘being reflexive’ and the enactment of various roles.

Derrida (1972) offers a useful theoretical framework for articulating this particular reflexive stance, when writing of ‘performative speech acts’. According to Derrida (1972), ‘facts’ can be created through the act of speaking. For example, a jury declares a person guilty, a judge sentences the person to prison, the person becomes a prisoner. A statement creates a fact: imprisonment, and an identity: prisoner. My research methodology functions similarly. By generating data, producing analysis, discussing ‘meaning’, I bring the ‘facts’ of the AWE programme into existence. The workshop programme certainly existed without me, but not in the way I describe. I have previously published an analysis of the professional learning workshops in relation to the research question, and have described the AWE programme as a ‘local revolution’ (Southern, 2019). This descriptor is founded on my representation of events as I experienced them, my creative act.

As previously acknowledged, there is no objective ‘truth’; only my subjective re-telling of the research space I encountered, which the reader must access through language. While previously reflexive, and therefore open to the notion of shifting identities, I began to consider my positionality as performative, simultaneously ‘playing’ (Purdy and Jones, 2013) and creating my role as I moved through different spaces – physical, social, epistemological. My place within multiple, concurrent spaces

within the research site/s – researcher, participant, observer, observed – was never fixed, yet nor did it move easily from one ‘identity’ to another. The boundaries between each of these descriptors was blurred, since I embodied each one of the identities that they signify. My performative identity transgressed the binary identities, queering the research space.

Questions of performativity and performance are central to queer theory, through the disruption of traditional notions of ‘normative’ identities. Drag is a perfect example of this disruption. As articulated by Judith Butler (1990), drag is an act that troubles established categories. Butler (1990) claims that the concept of gender exists to establish heterosexuality as the norm, to maintain reproductive heterosexual order and protect us from the abject, the Other. Drag disrupts the categories that underpin the formation, articulation, and continuation of a specific form of heteronormative power: sex, gender, and desire. Exposing these through a transgression such as drag exposes the underlying assumptions that brought them into being. Drag signifies multiplicity. Drag is other.

Butler’s (1990) theoretical discussion around drag can be understood as analogous to my performative positionality. The established binaries of researcher/participant and observer/observed function to maintain order in the research process. My displacement/othering subverts this order and enables new ‘truth’ to come to light. The shifting positionality reveals the performative nature of my activity. If gender is performative, there can be no true or false gender. Similarly, there is no true or false to my research identity; there is only that which I perform. I signify multiple interpretations of researcher, participant, educator, artist; yet none can be identified in isolation, as distinct from the others.

My movement through the queered space, that comprised multiple research sites, and shifting, performative positionality enabled an outsider perspective, as I was continually othered, or in the process of becoming Other. As I made my 'mark' and applied coloured paint, I was workshop participant and therefore research participant, but when the session leader spoke and asked us to reflect, I was researcher, analysing her question, as well as my own mark-making. Her questioning moved me from audience to observer, shifting me from the participant space, signalling me as other. However, none of these identities existed alone. The notion of fluidity discussed by Thomson and Gunter (2011) expresses the movement between, but not the palimpsest of multiple, concurrent identities that are layered through the research process. My identity in the field is easily re-orientated, othered, and it is performative, as drag. My drag invites the audience to see multiple identities.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion offers an autoethnographic account of my experience of striving for verisimilitude in representing notions of creativity and wellbeing, and an evaluation of the usefulness of the reflexive methodology. In response to becoming a participant rather than an external observer, and in order to resolve the difficulties in representing creativity and wellbeing effectively, I adapted my methodology. I developed a creative approach to generating and recording data that included my personal, emotional, experiential response to the research space. Analysis of the data led to questions around voice - who is speaking through this creative interpretation? It also led to an acknowledgement of my own shifting research position through a number of concurrent spaces: the research space, the school space, the space of the artist, and that of the participants.

I found that reflexivity offered a useful approach in this context since it enables transparency and an exploration of shifts in process and position. It also acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in qualitative methods, the influence of the researcher's values and position on the research, and allows for a creative approach to data generation and reporting. However, notions of reflexivity, even those that describe the fluidity (Thomson and Gunter, 2011) of the research identity, do not adequately articulate the multiplicity, the concurrent embodiment of various roles that I experienced, or sufficiently describe the queered research space that I created.

Throughout the research process, I embodied multiple roles, simultaneously creating and encountering the research space, and my own place within that space. The research space comprised blurred boundaries between identities, of physical sites, and of perceived binaries. Observer, observed, researcher, and participant existed in the same physical space while occupying multiple epistemological spaces. The concept of positionality is helpful in describing the shifts between identities and evolving values within this queer/ed space. Yet, this still does not describe the layering of identities or the disruptive merging of physical and epistemological spaces that takes place within my own, performative identity. I argue that drag is analogous to performative positionality. Drag signifies multiplicity, it disrupts, and it creates. It subverts normative binaries/identities, and creates new 'facts' through 'performative speech acts' (Derrida, 1972 (1988)). My shifting, performative positionality is drag; my research is the performance, the creative act. This argument brings forth a number of key questions for further exploration. Are all research identities characterised by performativity? And, now that I acknowledge my research identity is performative, as drag, and this queers the research space, how will this impact on my future research?





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## **Appendix**

### **Semi-Structured Observation Framework, adapted from Spradley (1980), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993)**

**Event:** What is taking place?

**Goals:** Aims, objectives? Individual? Group? Do goals differ across the group?

**Objects:** What resources are available? Used? How? To what effect?

**Activities:** What are the specific actions that participants are engaged in? What is being said, and by whom? What is being discussed/questioned frequently/infrequently? How are activities being described, justified, explained, organised, labelled? i.e. why these activities? What significance is placed on the activities? What issues and concepts are being discussed/attended to? Interaction and engagement?

**Discourse:** How are the following specific terms/rhetorics conceptualised and articulated?

- Creative / learning
- Creativity
- Art/s
- Arts education

How are they measured? Valued? And on what philosophical tradition/s do they draw?

**Space:** What? Where? How is it used? How do actors move within and around it?

Relationship of objects and activities to space?

**Actors:** Who? Why have participants joined the group? i.e. why are they here? Inter-relationships? How do different participants behave towards each other?

**Time:** When does the event take place? How long does it take? How is the event structured? How are activities managed? In what sequence?

**Feelings:** Feedback from the participants. How do they feel about what they are doing? How is this expressed? How does the session leader feedback to the group/individuals?

### **Reflection Process – adapted from Bogdan and Biklin (1992)**

In situ note-taking supplemented by follow-up notes and later additions/expansion to incorporate the following reflection:

- On descriptions and analysis
- Notes on methods of observation
- Ethical issues, any difficulties or tensions in the process
- Reactions and notes re. analysis
- Potential theoretical standpoints
- Possible further lines of enquiry – to follow up