

8 The Expressive Aesthetic in Practice

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Introduction

This inquiry into the expressive aesthetic in practice complements the focus of the last chapter on the intrinsic. Here I aim to,

- define what the concept of an expressive aesthetic means to me
- give a critical account of my current experience of expressive working
- reflect on some of the issues of facilitation raised by working in this way.

The *expressive aesthetic* is a term which for me encompasses the conscious fashioning and use of aesthetic statements and artefacts, ranging from informal expressions such as story telling, to more structured activities such as writing poetry or making drama or a wide range of other media such as painting, graphics, audio, video, modelling, carving and other forms of expression.

There is a natural contingency between working with expressive processes and an action research approach; Heron and Reason's (1998) definition of presentational knowing within an extended epistemology has already been referenced in Chapters 3 and 4. The fact that expressive activities are often designed as communal events also chimes well with the democratic and participatory nature of action research.

In this chapter I will start by framing the discussion by posing two epistemological questions that arise from my experience of this way of working with groups.

I shall then move on to describe and analyse three different types of processes – the embodied and kinaesthetic, the evocative and the constructive.

Framing expressive practice

Two issues arise for me in reflecting on my own experience of participation in expressive processes in the context of workshops and similar events. I briefly touch on these now as a way of framing the examples I shall analyse in the main part of the chapter.

The expressive aesthetic in practice – is it art?

Firstly I found myself questioning the relationship between expressive activities in practice, and the form of art-making, which takes place in concert halls, galleries, theatres and so on.

In what sense, for example, can the claim to have engaged in writing poetry in a workshop session be squared with what I perceived to be the complex and disciplined crafting of poetry, as practised by poets?

This might be seen as another rehearsal of a familiar argument about the difference between process and product. The workshop activity might be justified in terms of the process experience of making and appreciating what has been made, rather than in the expectation that the product will be 'published' for audiences beyond those of the workshop.

Winter (1999) claims however that these two types of artistic creativity are not different in kind but form part of a creative spectrum.

'Let us, then, argue that the capacity for artistic creation is something we all possess, that professional reflection can therefore not only draw on our own ability to appreciate established works of fiction, but also on our ability to create fictional structures which are intricate, complex and successful, as a way of developing our understanding of experience.' (Winter et al. 1999)

In Chapter 6, *How does this way of working influence others?*, I discussed a related issue arising from my viewing of the Artscope ceramics and the 'Dibnah' chimney. What I had approached as the outcome of a therapeutic artistic activity process, had acquired the sort of validity that made it worthy of exhibition and purchase as a product. Keith, the Artscope worker, was very clear that they 'do art as art', not as therapy.

I therefore want to test the proposition that the more that artwork with groups has its own integrity and meaning for participants, as art, the more insightful the moment of using it, whether or not it merits dissemination beyond the moment of its construction.

An improvisational aesthetic engagement

The second issue that I want to consider in this chapter concerns the relational context in which expressive activities occur. As Nevis (1987) shows, the *presence* of the facilitator is a very important factor in the relational pattern of group events. Presence is largely perceived through aesthetic capta, as people listen to, watch and respond to the facilitator.

However, individual participants also bring their own presence, which embodies their own aesthetic identity and tastes. Expressive activities are contextualised by these aesthetic

relationships in the group, as people perceive each other acting and talking. These perceptions inform the way they connect or disconnect, ally or separate.

This improvisational aesthetic engagement is the given field in which figural expressive activities occur.

For example, part of my developing 'presence' as a facilitator has been to use music to create a sense of the difference between this temporary environment and everyday work. I tend still to use it selectively and lightly, but now know that it is worth checking how a group feel about this. I have also invited people to bring their own CDs and found myself on the receiving end of music that I would not have chosen; but that is an expression of the democratic framing of action inquiries.

In this chapter therefore I shall hold in mind these two issues, – approaching expressive activities as art, not therapy, and secondly, being sensitive to the relationship between chosen activities and the intrinsic aesthetic of a particular group. I propose to use my practice in expressive processes as an exploratory space to learn better what seems at present to be valid for groups and for me in this type of practice.

I experienced many of the expressive activities described in this chapter as seriously or lightly playful. They were sometimes accompanied by laughter and pleasure in the process of acting or making. I will reflect on what this tells me about play in practice as a creative process. The examples have all been drawn from other consulting work that I was engaged in, in parallel with Silver Street. (In Parts C and D I also provide examples of a growing use of expressive activities in facilitating two cooperative inquiries in Silver Street.)

Three types of expressive processes

There are no doubt many ways to cut this particular cake but I have found it useful to think of expressive processes within the following typology,

- *Embodied and kinaesthetic processes*

By these I mean communal activities which are to do with eating, drinking, walking, climbing, pursuing a sport, dancing or playing games together within a particular environment. They are consciously expressive and complement the intrinsic aesthetic of place discussed in the previous chapter. They are all the consequence of decisions made by those who facilitate events.

- *Evocative processes*

By 'evocative' I mean activities which are designed to evoke responses to selected objects or *objets trouvés*, or by listening to music, live performances of dance or theatre, looking at films, pictures or reading poetry.

- *Constructive processes*

The emphasis here is on making artefacts such as models, pictures, murals, sculptures, happenings, poems, stories, publications, songs, music, plays, photos, radio programmes, videos, dramas or websites.

I now consider each of these three types of expressive process in turn.

Embodied and kinaesthetic processes

Under this first heading I include processes that are to do with the choice of the place and social setting in which events are held, as well as the physical activities that are possible within it. I see this category as offering a bridge between the intrinsic aesthetic discussed in the previous chapter and the present focus on those more expressive processes and activities that result from conscious decisions on the part of those who organize and facilitate events.

In 2002 I had attended the 5th Arts and Business Conference at Castle Borl, Ankenstein in Slovenia, an event animated by the Slovenian violinist, Miha Poganič. The historical resonance of this castle standing high above the river Drava was remarkable. It was at a time when I was still refining the purpose and direction of my inquiry and the event had the effect of bringing many of the issues addressed in this thesis into some form of initial focus.

The food was provided by a young German team calling itself, Eat and Art, whose aims include 'to gather society, culture, economy and art all around the same table'.

Their leaflet explained that,

'The senses of smell, sight, touch and hearing are all activated by the preparation and anticipation of a meal, and the sense of taste is the ultimate sensory reward.'

Only an Anglo-Saxon in the most puritan of traditions could fail to understand that cooking and eating food together is a positive aesthetic experience. When they take place in the

context of group work, they change the quality of experience in the event. This is a very literal example of what I refer to as embodied processes; you eat what you make.

In Chapter 6, *How does working in this way influence others?*, I mentioned that, during my induction to Silver Street, Teresa had teased me about my cooking, or lack of it. The preparation of food and communal eating in small units at Silver Street adds enormously to the sense of family. (Although I have not been let loose on cooking, during my visits I do my fair share of washing-up and feeding people who need it.)

The impacts of the surrounding social or natural world such as the sight, smell and sound of landscapes and urban environment are an indirect but influential consequence of design choices by the facilitator and/or the client.

Place also featured in my discussion of the intrinsic aesthetic in the previous chapter. Here however I am considering the expressive dimensions of choosing and using *place*, which result from the aesthetic judgments of whoever organizes the event.

The example that follows encapsulates many embodied and kinaesthetic processes. I attended a Buddhist retreat in Wales. The extracts from my journal for this five day period illustrate how the choices made by the organisers created a distinct aesthetic experience of eating, living and sleeping, which were very congruent with the meditational purpose of the event – to gain new insights into meditation, mindfulness and action inquiry.

*j*ournal ... Maenllwyd Retreat, 22 – 26, April, 2003

Journal	Commentary
<p>Wednesday ... There was a sharp frost last night. I had a miserably cold night – my feet would not warm up. I woke repeatedly to bleating lambs, bellowing cows, which seemed almost to have entered the miniscule tent that I had borrowed before coming on this retreat. (I had chosen not to sleep indoors.)</p>	<p>This note about discomfort prompts me to reflect that expressive processes may be challenging. The aesthetic, as Strati (2000) points out, is present in the other-than-beautiful. (In this case I could have slept in a dormitory on a bunk</p>

This place is authentically late-Victorian in its lack of domestic sophistication, but paradoxically our coming together has been made possible through high tech travel from New York and Copenhagen, as well as UK. There's no electricity – just water, wood, calor gas and oil/paraffin.

...

We had time for a walk this afternoon – still as a silent meditation. The hills are superb, a flattened lattice of hedges which follow the landscape, letting in and holding back drifts of sheep with attendant lambs. I heard a cuckoo, willow warblers and saw a distant pair of buzzards being mobbed by crows – all this, despite a prior injunction from the faculty not to regard this as a nature walk, but a further act of meditation!

Thursday

A grey dawn with exercises in the yard at 5am between the house and the Chan Hall.

...

I'm writing this at 2.10 pm in a rest period. I'm huddled by an oil-burning stove.

There's a smell of frying onions and courgettes coming from the tiny kitchen, where the resident cook, Pamela, is preparing another delicious vegetarian dish for this evening. The food is universally appreciated, judging by the speed with which it is consumed.'

Structured communal living created a sense of simple purposefulness which made much of the business and expense of my normal day-to-day life seem costly and distracting.

bed. I chose to bring a tent and therefore lived with the aesthetic consequences, including waking up to white frost across the fields.)

The setting was superb and seductive to the extent that for me it undermined the austere injunction not to have a nature walk.

Buddhists believe that dawn is a time when meditation is less invaded by distracting thoughts. The grey light in the East and the routine each morning of our exercise class brought the body into meditation.

The smell, the taste and the warmth of this moment will stay in my memory.

Grouping all domestic chores into two intensive periods in the day resulted in a very clean and well-run house where no one was servant to any other. Nothing was wasted and most things returned to the cycle of decay and growth – a form of living out values in a very visible way.

This was a rare and remarkable experience, a fusion of the natural world with a well ordered way of living in which taste, smell, dawn and dusk were experienced through a sharper perceptual focus. The kinaesthetic of walking, exercise, sleeping on the ground, sitting for 45 minutes at a time in silent meditation, all contributed powerfully to my experience of the event.

Not all events can be set in such an empathetic environment; neither on the other hand would everyone necessarily have found it empathetic. Sensitivity and judgment are required in situations where people have little choice over whether they attend or not, unlike Maenllwyd where we were willing participants. This connects with the second of the framing questions I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Whilst I would not choose experiences and settings that, out of perversity, challenged people unduly, whatever choices are made and offered will please some people more than others. The group has to be invited to resolve how they proceed collaboratively; this becomes part of the learning.

Reference was made in the previous chapter to Merleau-Ponty (1945) and his claim that it is in the phenomenological domain, not the objective, that the body and the perceived world unite in embodied action.

This suggests to me the importance of recognising how the environment and the activities that happen within it contribute to forms of embodied knowing in practice. The physical relationship and presence of each person in a given space become part of the knowing. Movement, whether through dance, walking together or simply breaking the pattern of seating and creating new groups and arrangements, might be seen as a form of what Merleau-Ponty referred to as ‘intentional threads’; the group participates in varying degrees through their bodily presence and movement, in the co-construction of meaning in being together. This is intrinsically embedded in the bodily gestures and stance of people as they sit or move together. It becomes expressive as the group chooses to participate in different spatial structures and movements.

An example of the latter might be the circular dance movement used to introduce people to each other at the start of the CARPP Emergent Approaches to Inquiry conferences in Stroud.

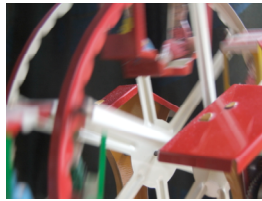
A simple repetitive sequence of steps is taught and then enacted to music. This has the effect of rotating participants round a large oval in the room and in the process allows them to notice and simply acknowledge who is attending. (I and a colleague have by the way subsequently tried this with a group of 80 lively young charity workers at their annual conference and it descended into hysterical chaos as the music was drowned out by their whoops of recognition and laughter – another powerful message about reading and meeting the intrinsic aesthetic expectations of the group!)

I now turn to the second type of expressive process, which I describe as *evocative*.

Evocative processes

Activities that I have included in this type involve the facilitator inviting the group to work with existing objects or artworks and the reflexive and imaginative responses that they generate. The group members may also be asked to bring their own material as a stimulus to reflection and dialogue.

My experience is that most people can participate unselfconsciously with such activities.



Object-related play

I have used a variety of objects as a stimulus and focus for storytelling. I took into a session for managers a clockwork Ferris wheel made of folded tin and complete with little passengers in each carriage. We were working on a theme of work-life balance. I kept it out of sight till needed. Then winding it up and leaving it to run on a table in the middle of the circle till the end of its spring, I asked people to watch and experience its movement and sound. I then invited them to write down any ideas that came to mind about the relationship between work and non-work sides of their lives.

For some this moment evoked pleasurable reminiscences of childhood, for others wistful recollections of relationships. Others relived thoughts of fear, risk and danger. We then listened to each story to honour the feelings raised by this evocative activity. A measure of its effectiveness for the group could be found in the quietly engaged attention, which each contribution received.

In another example, a group of staff running an equalities service in a local authority were invited by me to bring to the start of an annual away-day an object which ‘says something interesting about your participation in this work group’,

*j*ournal ... A tomato called Big Boy

Journal

‘... There were several offerings of fruit and plants by individuals, and much laughter from Collette and others about the tomatoes, a crop called ‘Big Boy’, bought for the occasion by Anando. He explained that, were it later in the season, they would have come from his garden. ‘I grow nothing that cannot be eaten.’ By coincidence Collette had also brought tomatoes, but they were minute, so again a lot of laughter broke out at the contrast.

I speculated on the playfulness of this exercise as other people went on to reveal little hints of what they wanted or were prepared to say about ‘their participation in this work group’. A lot of the energy in the laughter came from Collette and her ready sense of humour. I know too I connect very quickly with this tendency in the group. The activity had become a piece of play, an imaginative projection into the chosen object, of some feeling about work.’

My syntactical structuring of the words of invitation to bring an item that – ‘says something interesting about your participation’, – also now strikes me. The fact that it belongs to a narrative of group work where, objects can speak, itself implies an act of imagination and playfulness. It was also an advanced notice of the intuitive and metaphorical approach in which I was inviting them to participate.

Commentary

This one statement by Anando offered an incidental glimpse into his life and values at home.

I notice the aleatory play or chance in this activity, which derives from the unscriptedness of what people choose to bring and the fortuitous sequence of objects as the activity progresses.

Elsewhere in the thesis I include other examples of these evocative processes as my practice continued to change and develop. For example in Part C which follows, I will describe a use of post cards in an evocative exercise on the first day of my action inquiry with front-line staff in Silver Street-2.

There is also a quality of Alea about this activity, as the cards provide a random but creative point of contact with the interests of the individual group members. This chance element allows feelings and comments to surface that have been evoked in the imagination. Because they spring from an aesthetic response to an image, they are less filtered by the conscious mind and therefore work as triggers to more reflexive inquiry as people notice the unexpectedness of their revelation.

Reading poetry as inquiry

In Chapter 11 I shall consider the concept of the poetics in practice. Indeed the theme of poetics runs through much of my commentary on my practice. In this example of evocative processes I describe a reading of a poem, which by chance had a remarkable impact. The account comes from work I have been doing over a number of years with a professional group. During this particular annual away-day, I had brought with me my copy of an anthology of poems, called 'Staying Alive', (Astley, 2002).

One member of the team had privately told me earlier in the workshop that she had just handed in her resignation so that she could start to retrain for a new alternative career. Now towards the closing of the event, I read them a poem, Robert Frost's (1969) *The Road not taken*. It is the poem that starts,

**Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
....**

My journal continues,

*j*ournal ... The road not taken

Journal

I cannot recall in my reading quite when I realised how totally appropriate it was, as an introduction to her resignation announcement to her colleagues. I certainly knew by the time I got to the final two verses. I looked across at her; she was smiling radiantly. She made her announcement. Later people were to tell me that they had rarely seen her look so light and happy.

Before setting off on the tedious M25 drive back in the Friday evening rain, I offered a lift to a participant. He talked throughout the two and a half hour journey about his life, his family and his aspiration to find greater spirituality in his life by returning to his homeland. I realised that the Frost poem had spoken to more than one person in the group. He quoted me several lines of Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium'; I responded with lines from 'The Magi'. He said he was struck by my peacefulness, 'Nothing seems to phase you'. I said I was glad it seemed like that, but of course I could be phased.

Poetry offered this degree of openness of connection with the group. Frost's imagery of the dividing of the path in a wood not only moved the person who had chosen to leave, but also offered others a chance to reflect on their own feelings of purpose and the possible choices that lay ahead. There was a strong sense of Alea in my alighting on this poem. I flicked through the book and it suggested itself to me.

Commentary

I realise that it was the relief of making the public announcement that showed in her face, her lightness and happiness, but the Frost poem had provided an elegant commentary on what she was about to say.

It also opened the door to the second conversation that was to follow on the way home.

However I can also see that I had made prior choices, which led to this moment. I knew and liked the poem, so it was more likely to catch my eye. At a practical level I had brought the anthology with me in anticipation that this group would be receptive to the reading of some poetry. I now aim to travel with more resources than I guess I may need – a sort of latent superfluity. I am reminded here of Wheatley's view, referenced in Chapter 3.

'In a living system, what is redundant? How can anyone know? Life doesn't pursue parsimony.' (Wheatley, 1996, 24)

As for the journey home, I felt a pleasure at discovering a shared love of WB Yeats. This unexpected consequence of my having introduced poetry was striking. By the time we had finished our journey, we had talked through his life journey to date and where he wanted to go in the future. I knew that there was no way of engineering such conversations. It had grown organically from a process of shared improvisational play, which had started in the aesthetic environment of the group. I am left reflecting on the extent to which events may be designed to hold open more space, within and around them, to make it possible for such conversations to flourish. I also recognize that had he not experienced my readiness to listen to him, he would not have wanted to talk in this way. When we eventually got to his house, he insisted on my coming in for a cup of tea before I backtracked on my journey home.

Later I speculated on the boundary between action research and therapy. I am neither qualified to offer therapy, nor would I want to set myself up to do so. If there was any 'talking cure' in our relationship with each other, it happened in the car on the M25, in the recitation of Yeats and the conversation that this prompted.

I have had no further contact with this man. The work finished and we moved on down our two divergent roads. The moment now resides in our memories, to be drawn on imaginatively in whatever further sense-making may surface in our future lives.

On what grounds can I claim greater significance for such moments than for others in the memory stream of everyday life? Firstly as an expressive activity, albeit an informal one as we drove home, the poetry of WB Yeats offered a common reference, a recognition of a past aesthetic experience. This illustrates for me the importance of recognizing expressive activities as art, not therapy. WB Yeats was not to be used; his poetry surfaced out of our meeting. Secondly it was the action of sharing in this aesthetic process that re-contextualized our relationship in the moment. The fact that it was only brief and not subsequently continued does not diminish its significance for me.

Constructive processes

I now turn to the final of the three types of expressive process that I have chosen to inquire into – constructive processes.

This section could potentially contain a very wide range of examples, the common defining factor of which would be some level of creative activity, resulting in the construction of expressive statements or artefacts by individuals or groups. There is of course creativity in the evocative processes described in the previous section. So the distinguishing feature here is that there is some creative output, a drawing, a song, a play, a poem, a dance, a film, a model, a mask, something made – the list could be quite long.

From this range I have chosen two areas to illustrate and analyse – storytelling, an activity that is rooted in the poetic, and modelling which is a form of creative play. These are both within my experience as a facilitator. In doing so I shall draw attention to some of the theory that underpins narrative and symbolic inquiry.

Storytelling

Stories can be seen as a narrative and social dimension of the poetic. Barry (1997) places narrative alongside other models of inquiry into organizations but attributes to it the advantage that it,

'attends more to time, ordering, wording, consultant positioning, story performance, and audiencing, all of which are important in organizational change. (Barry, 1997, p. 3)

The linear quality of storytelling in practice also creates a bridge between narrative writing and play, which in its mimetic form is built around story. In most social contexts, stories are the life-blood of communication, whether through news bulletins, novels, gossip, legal proceedings, preaching, stand-up comedy and obituaries. Stories are being generated around and within us constantly from birth to the grave. Shotter (1993) and Barrett (2000) both identify the creative improvisation that unfolds within dialogic exchanges between the teller and the listener. Stories beget stories.

Stories and strategy

Barry and Elmes (1997) describe the use of stories to re-tell strategy in an organization. The authors provide a definition of their understanding of narrative, as thematic, sequenced

accounts which convey meaning from implied author to implied reader. They pose the following questions,

‘How do people make sense of and narrate their notions about directionality? When does a strategic story stay the same and when does it change? How does it survive “register” changes – alternating between the printed and the auditory, the formal and informal, or between intrafirm and industry levels?’ (Barry and Elmes, 1997, p. 5)

The issue of register change in my own practice has already been discussed, when, for example, I noted in Chapter 5, *What is my developing aesthetic in practice?*, how writing the story about an angioplasty offered different expressive opportunities, from talking about it face-to-face with consultants.

Organizational narratives, they argue, exhibit two fundamental qualities if they are to be influential; these are, credibility, and defamiliarization or novelty. The first, *credibility*, depends on the materiality of the story, both in terms of its delivery via print or other media as well as its figurative focus, either on tangible phenomena or on abstractions. Credibility depends on voice and perspective, – who speaks and who sees? It also depends on the ordering and plot – frequently built around the epic *Hero’s Journey*, and finally on the readership since this inevitably influences the genre and style of the story. The second fundamental quality, *novelty* or *defamiliarization*, concerns the narrative’s distinctiveness, or what holds the audience’s attention.

These two qualities of credibility and novelty contribute to the sustaining of strategic stories through register shifts as they influence and are influenced by organisational life. Given this potency of spontaneous storytelling, how can it be used expressively as a conscious process in facilitation and cooperative inquiry? I now analyse two examples from my own practice.

Telling the group a story

The first story below was prompted by an incident, which occurred on my train journey to work with this group of managers. I had previously completed several days with the senior management team and now today they were joined by a larger group of middle managers. My experience so far was that the service was stressed and fractious as it struggled to reorganize and meet externally imposed performance standards. Here is my story,

journal ... The story of the oblivious flasher

'On my way here, standing on platform 1 of my hometown station at 7.30 am, along with several other hundred other passengers, I hear the following Public Address announcement:

"Will the man on Platform 2 with the flashing red light on his rucksack please switch it off."

Several hundred pairs of eyes scan the platform across two tracks and there he is, oblivious and flashing brightly, as he recovers from his bike ride to the station.

A more vehement announcement follows:

"For the second time of asking, will the man on Platform 2 with the flashing red light on his rucksack switch it off please!"

Suddenly it dawns on him that this is a personal message for him in a very public place. He turns away from the watching wall of faces and walks briskly up the platform struggling with his rucksack, extinguishing his bike lamp and looking upwards and into the middle distance.'

At a suitable moment in the earlier part of the workshop I looked round the group as they are completing a warm-up exercise in pairs. I reflected that some in the room were in dispute with the senior management team; some had worked here most of their lives and were resisting the restructuring; others saw it as a sensible rationalisation.

I decided somewhat impulsively to tell my story at this moment.

I now consider what lay behind this impulse. As the group had entered the room I experienced their mood as being uncomfortable. They were projecting a lot of banter and teasing which felt like a performance partly for my benefit as the person who was outside the group and perceived to be charged with the task of helping them resolve their difficulties. This mood was finding expression in a form of Agonistic play, a form of provocation to see what response it might get. In fact I avoided what I could see as a trap of starting the business before the whole group was fully assembled, simply acknowledging the jokes but getting on with my preparations.

Maybe the poetic import of the story had seeded itself in my mind, because I was also carrying anxiety about how best to work with this tension.

These thoughts were in my mind prior to my telling the story.

I also reflect on how the story was received. The story had some of what Barry and Elmes' describe as 'defamiliarization' about it. It made no direct reference to their work setting. It presented itself as an example of a traveller's tale – 'a funny thing happened to me on my way to the workshop'. It also had a credibility about it, being the sort of incident that might crop up anywhere, including in a bad dream.

I judged that this was a safer imaginary place in which to acknowledge anger and fear of exposure or public humiliation, than to play such emotions out for real. The flashing light image was absorbed into subsequent narratives as the day progressed, in a process, which lightly acknowledged areas that people needed to work on.

Storytelling by participants

Another expressive method that I have used is a device called story circles, a way of facilitating story telling that provides a simple structure for managing this group process. This method has been widely used in participative action research in the US and elsewhere, (**Denver Making Connections – Story circles, 2006**). Its purpose is to create a reflective group in which those who wish, may tell a story on an agreed theme for a specified time of no more than three minutes. Those who do not wish to speak simply 'pass', but are invited to tell their story on a second time round if they wish. At this stage no questions or comments are invited; this focuses attention on listening to each story. People are asked to suppress the urge to compete by trying to invent 'the best story'. If they were to do this they would probably be unable to listen well to others. The exercise concludes with an appreciative round of comments on verbal images in stories, that have made an impact.

I have included this activity in a session I ran at an international conference. The purpose of this forty minute session was to help the small participant group of academics explore briefly how their experience of arriving in a foreign city impacted on participation in a conference session such as this. I described the session as an example of a temporary learning event and expected that many or all of those who chose to come would share my interest in reflecting on the aesthetic of such events and the influence this has on the learning that occurs.

At the beginning of the session, the group of eight people who turned up were invited to take part in a short silent reflective period as we absorbed the sounds and visual data of sitting together in the unfamiliar setting of these university buildings.

Then I introduced the rules for story circles and invited participants to tell the story of what was uppermost in their experience of arriving. All but one person told a three-minute story. Some spoke of choices they had made about leaving their families behind to attend the conference; others spoke about the sense of being in central Europe and their curiosity about its history and traces of the former Communist regime. One person who had a role in organizing the conference spoke of his dread of arriving and fear of what might go wrong in so complicated a project. He noticed how in the midst of an event which was running smoothly, most of his anxieties had slipped away, as he experienced being here with actual people, not lists of names.

I had bought a set of post cards of the city and had planned that people should write down a short image that had captured their imaginal eye during this reflection. However, as time was running short, I suggested that they might like to send the card for real or keep it as a memento. (I now speculate whether some of these arrived at addresses across the world and became a small artefact which might later re-surface in a facilitator's resource collection, where it would find a new aesthetic life in different hands!)

As with many conference sessions it was too brief (40 minutes) for us to experience much social cohesion. I had no idea who would attend or in what number, until the moment of their arrival. I make no claims for its effectiveness on behalf of the participants, although they did express appreciation by clapping at the end of the session. For me as facilitator I was able to practise, against these odds, working in-the-moment with the aesthetic we were experiencing. I offered no more than a minimal framework for this short activity. I received feedback that my way of holding the space and sequencing of the event modelled the level of reflexivity which I was hoping that we might experience. I took from this the importance of authenticity and belief in what I was inviting the group to participate in. I also see again the value of trusting in simple aesthetic frameworks to release a type and depth of inquiry which helps people process memories, feelings and concepts in an imaginative way.

Story writing

Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999) describe how health and social care professionals were helped to write stories as a form of reflective process.

Winter and his colleagues claim that a story is,

'a piece of writing where the raw material of memory and imagination has been purposefully fashioned, moulded, selected, combined and edited, to give (or bring out) a sense of significance.' (Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska, 1999, p. 7)

Using story writing, participants found a way of reflecting, which enabled them imaginatively to re-construct the meanings they found in their work. I have been involved in a similar process throughout this inquiry.

Wilkinson (1998) has collected a number of activities through which this framing of stories can be further developed. I recently used a warm-up exercise from her anthology of methods. I started by asking people to invent the first line of their autobiography and write it down. I then invited people to volunteer to read out their sentence. The first person read out, "Variety is the spice of life ...". I later noted in my journal how this activity continued,

journal ... Story warm-up

Journal

'The activity then stalled a bit in the large group. The invitation was too public, so I suggested they try the sentences out on each other which released this inhibition. One or two people repeated their sentences to the whole group.

'It wasn't until my ex-husband left that I ...' The rest of the sentence was lost in laughter.

Or 'On the first Christmas that I can remember, I got tipsy; I was three at the time ...' More laughter, as the speaker explained how she had filched her father's glass of wine.'

Commentary

I notice the steps towards safety in disclosing this sort of material still need to be carefully constructed for the group. I had to retreat a step to make this work.

This witty rising to the storytelling challenge elicited a strong sense of empathy in the mainly female group.

There was a playful sense of telling tales out of school, but at the teller's own expense.

Wilkinson's activities are designed to encourage the use of creative writing with groups. Another that I have used invites participants to imagine a photo of themselves at work. As facilitator I asked a series of prompting questions to which participants then wrote answers. These included questions about the setting of the imagined picture, who was in, who not, what they were doing and where, and so on. They were then invited to discuss their written 'photo' in small groups, commenting on how it made them feel and think about their work. These exercises overcome some of the resistance that people may feel in putting pen to paper.

In introducing the use of reflective writing with groups I have adopted a playful approach, such as the game of fridge magnet poems. In this, small groups are given several hundred words and phrases from which to construct a fifteen word statement on their hopes for the future of the unit or team. This is another example of the coming together of the Alea of play, in the random dealing of words, and the poetic as people strive to fashion sometimes remarkable aesthetic statements.

I see storytelling as a natural bridge between intrinsic and expressive aesthetics in groups. As the reference to story circles above makes clear, it takes quite light and minimal re-framings to enable people to work imaginatively through stories.

Modelling

The use of visual symbols offers an alternative or a complement to accessing meaning through the symbolism of spoken language. Referencing Johnson-Laird and Steedman, (1978), Barry points to some of the underlying processes of symbolically-based reasoning, which occur in this model-making.

'From a cognitive point of view, research suggests that symbolically-based reasoning has several attributes that make it well suited to problem solving – symbolic analogs allow manipulation of naturally occurring mental images, 'safe' testing of alternative solutions, and promote creativity through introducing structural juxtapositioning of disparate lines of thought.' (Barry 1994, p. 2)

I have included in Chapter 2, *The inquiring 'I'*, an example of a visual activity in the drawing by 18 co-participants of each other's faces. I have subsequently used this activity in several other groups. It reduces to a minimum any anxiety people may have about drawing, as

everyone does it simultaneously and there is less exposure for those who may feel insecure about the capacity to work in this way.

I now describe a session involving the use of model-making that I ran with the group of education service managers, the same group to whom I had already told the story described earlier in this chapter.

*j*ournal ... Model-making as a means of inquiry

Journal

Asking the group of managers to produce a model of how they saw themselves working as the policy group of the service, I distributed the materials. Four groups of three or four people engaged playfully with the task, some sitting on the floor.

...

When later we discussed the models, I left the most complex till last. So we looked first at a construction of two cocoa tins with a piece of string stretched between them as a crude communications system. I set the rule that the group who had made each model would firstly listen to what it meant to the rest of us, before offering their own comments. One person said, "Well at least they think there is some form of communication between us." The silent implicative double¹ around this comment acknowledged the sense of disconnection many were experiencing. Others drew attention to the fact that two small

Commentary

Some of these models represented a rhetorical 'swipe' at the perceived state of the group. They each focused on one dimension such as communication or preparedness for disclosure of what was thought to be amiss, a theme that had been raised in my introductory story.

¹ I explore this concept of negativity or the lacuna that surrounds words more fully in Chapter 11, *The poetics in practice*.

figures depicted below, were holding hands but looking away from each other.

Another group produced a mural of a line of washing, with black clouds overhead but also with a few hesitant stars.

A third represented a block of a house with a foil roof, but when the two pieces of string emanating from the side walls were pulled, it all fell apart.

Then we turned to the last group which included amongst others, the union rep and the head of service. They had made an elaborate river in torrent with a string tightrope over it. A floppy tiny figure of string was lying bent double over the mid-point of it. A tangerine featured as a desirable goody on the other bank of the river, but it too was vulnerable, tied as it was to a string lasso.

I asked the group to look at the images and models and let them speak to their concerns about the group. I warned against pop-psychology, urging them to simply take the constructions as they were, as statements about the way the group had been.

Using these models as a springboard I then moved on to an open space exploration of what it was

This falling house was the most despairing symbol. I might have asked who was pulling the string that caused the collapse, but felt that this would have taken us too directly into confrontational territory at this early stage in the day.

This last model took the most time to produce. There was much discussion about its significance as it was put together. This seemed to be the 'hotspot' where senior and middle management met and negotiated how to make their symbolic statement.

I reflect now on why I switched modes here and moved back to discussion.

that would make the greatest difference in giving more security, better communications, a better house that wouldn't fall down, one where you could hang out your washing with pride, without falling into the torrent!

I noticed some engaging in small groups with an energy and a concentration that I had not seen earlier.'

The need for reconstruction was clearly evident to me. With hindsight I might have suggested a second round of model-making to reassemble these broken images. This may have helped the group stay at this symbolic level as they looked towards a more cohesive future.

With regard to the last piece of commentary, this reflection may mark the stage I was at in trusting the potentiality of this expressive process to support the group's inquiry needs. I reasoned that there would need to be a point where we switched from symbolic representation of the group's performance and relationships, to dialogue about what might need to change. This began to happen in the subsequent small group discussions, but I would now have suggested some further modelling of the group's desired future.

Perhaps the measure of the quality of engagement that this sort of activity can generate can be found in the wrapped attention and ingenuity that goes into the modelling. Barry (1994) comments on this quality in his case study with military staff,

'Over the next few hours, activity levels rose to a feverish pitch as participants began to revel in their creations. Much to the surprise of the commanding group, officers who had avoided one another for years were seen slapping one another on the backs, sharing materials and ideas, and joking with one another. The commanding officer commented, "I can't believe this is happening—these are people that won't come to the same meeting unless given a direct order." ' (Barry 1994, p. 39)

Barry asserts the importance of focusing on what the artefact has to say in any subsequent group discussion,

'In the work that followed, participants were asked to engage in detailed questioning of their creations. They were to assume that every inch of their creations had some message, some meaning that was waiting to be revealed. Thus, things like color difference, massing,

use of space, supportive structures, use of boundaries etc., became vehicles of inquiry.'
(Ibid., 1994, p. 3)

This again reinforces for me the importance of valuing in its own right what is produced. Imagination was put into the model; it is this that needs to be given space to speak out of the model.

Photography

I have begun to use photographic images taken in and around organizations as prompts to reflection when working with groups. The theoretical rationale for working with visual imagery as part of my research methodology was presented in Chapter 4, *Inquiry methods*. There I referred to Pink (2001) and her work on visual ethnography, in the course of describing my own inquiry method. In particular, with MacDougall (1997), I do not see this type of activity as being illustrative of some other propositional agenda of verbal inquiry. Rather I have come to see that it has its own validity within action research, as a reflexive and evocative process that complements and sometimes renders redundant other textual processes.

I briefly reference below the uses of photographic and image-making, which are included throughout this thesis.

Photos and drawings were used in Chapter 2, *The inquiring 'I'*, as part of an imaginal exploration of what it is that has brought me to this present point of inquiry. Photos were used, in Chapter 3, as a point of entry into a propositional inquiry about the theoretical framework within which I now work. In Chapter 4, *Inquiry methods*, I included a selection of still pictures taken in Silver Street and offered an analytic commentary on how they added to my experience of this community.

An analysis of the photograph of Lorraine and Kuldip in Chapter 7, *The intrinsic aesthetic in practice*, referenced the work of the video artist, Bill Viola. There I explored how the photographic image added to my insights into this relational moment. Also in Chapter 13, *The news of difference in Silver Street-3* I will show how people made their own photographic and video record of their inquiry into finding work opportunities. For this group of people with learning difficulties it became an essential means of capturing material about themselves in the context of their inquiry.

This form of visual ethnography came to me comparatively late in this inquiry, but I anticipate working increasingly in the future in this way, alongside writing, as my main inquiry methods.

Conclusion

In considering the use of a range of expressive activities I firstly recognized two inquiry questions that I needed to address. The first concerned how to place such activities in relation to other forms of art making. By reference to Winter (1999), they were shown to be part of a spectrum of creativity which extends beyond them to include 'high art'. The second question concerned the relationship between different aesthetics in groups. The facilitator's *presence* is experienced by others as an expression of her or his aesthetic; but the aesthetic *presence* of all participants is also very influential. Choices about introducing expressive activities need to be made with an awareness of the intrinsic aesthetic relationships in the group, as people perceive each other acting and talking.

I suggested that expressive processes may be thought of in three categories,

- embodied and kinaesthetic
- evocative
- constructive processes.

In the first section on embodied and kinaesthetic processes, I described how the selection of venue, food and environment of inquiry events can be seen as an expressive act, which frames the quality of the interaction.

Then I considered evocative activities where people respond to objects selected for their significance to individuals in the group. I also analysed a journal entry about the use of poetry within and after a session. I explored the question of boundary, in doing so, between expressive activities and therapy.

In the section on constructive processes I featured storytelling, model making and photography. Storytelling was shown to be deeply rooted within all human communication. I described my own use storytelling with a group of education service managers who were trying to work with the consequences of change. In a second example, I described using a technique called story circles within a session I facilitated at an academic conference. I also illustrated briefly ways in which storytelling ties in with writing as an inquiry method.

I then considered the use of model-making, in an example drawn from my journal of the continuing session with education service managers. Barry's (1994) work on symbolic representation was referenced in the commentary on this activity.

I commented on photography, which is a new and burgeoning area of my methodology. In referencing Pink, (2001), I described the visual as a reflexive and evocative process that complements and sometimes renders redundant other processes such as text. I also listed those places in the thesis where examples of this way of working may be found.

A significant final point about expressive work arises for me in summing up this chapter. Reviewing the examples I have analysed, I notice how the choices that I can make as a facilitator are always framed and contextualised by the intrinsic aesthetic of the moment. When, where, with whom and how expressive activities work is contextual – for them, for me, on that day, in that moment. In facilitating activities I have to play within this context, by improvising the best match between the moment and the purpose. There are no formulae which will guarantee replicable outcomes from expressive activities. Their use in itself is a form of aesthetic process and depends on the attunement and skill of the facilitator and the energy and creativity of the group coming together, in what Bateson would call mind.

There follows a short interlude connecting Part B to Part C.