9. Questions of Myth and Form

The last two chapters have traced how I have come to interpret the learning history artefact as an enabling device that supports learning through an iterative and deepening process of participation in which multiple stories are voiced and multiple meanings are shared. With this interpretation the importance of the original history artefact lies as much in its power to compel readers as in its ability to report facts. Indeed, in Chapter 7 I have argued that the importance of a history's veracity connects more to issues of responsibility than it does to learning. The ability of the history to compel relates, I want to suggest, to the mythic dimension. In this chapter I want to explore in more detail this mythic dimension that has been so central to the research.

The Merton history at the start of the dissertation is a good illustration of a learning history with a mythic dimension. Of the five learning histories it charts the most engaging story. I start then by returning to Merton and show how ideas about myth started to surface as I researched it. Linking these to personal experience I will explain my understanding of myth and its importance to me. I will introduce the idea of "mythic deprivation" as representing an absence in organisational life that it is important to address. I will go on to describe how I went about trying to find mythic spirit in the stories I was gathering, or, when this was absent, trying to instil it in the form of the learning history. By the end of the chapter I have reached my Irish roots with a discussion of spirit and mythic abundance. In keeping with its subject matter this chapter has an unfolding and layered form rather than a logical structure.

Surfacing Myths: Woking

When I went to visit Merton I was actually trying to find out about Woking, the iconic local authority that had made groundbreaking strides in reducing carbon through the late 90s and post millennium. The word on the street was that the achievements there were down to the extraordinary capability and determination of one man: Allen Jones. During my interview with Adrian, and this was to be echoed in conversations I had subsequently,

we explored how the myth of Woking and of Allen Jones needed to be created but that it was also disempowering.

> **Adrian:** So in order to promote Woking he [Allen Jones] and Ray[28] had to be showmen about it, but that then frightens my chief exec because he says "hang about", this guy is going 'Dnnnaaaah!!! I did this, it's hugely complicated but really absolutely brilliant'". So my chief exec is looking at this going: "Ah God…I'm not entirely confident that Adrian [can do this], it's too big – and too clever". And I'm saying: "Well actually we don't [] need Allen..I could do this for you".
>
> **MG**: You don't want to reinvent the wheel but you want to drive your own cart…. Maybe the first one has to be like that…but maybe not…It sounds like it's kind of got locked into it's own…..
>
> **MG&Adrian:** Myth!

From the Merton Interview, September 2006 (from transcript)

So here was a myth that created a sense of impossibility and distance. Whenever I asked why Woking had been so difficult to replicate, the people I met had some story as to what it was that made Woking so specific: the geography, the financing, the technical prowess of Allen Jones. On the other hand, as I wrote in Chapter 4, I wanted to keep the narrative spirit in learning history alive in order to create inspiration and a sense of possibility. Did this not sound contradictory? I remember thinking even at that time, while in conversation with Adrian, that it was essential to tell a story that did not distance but that was accessible. But then a mythic quality is surely needed to inspire?

Myth – enabling and disabling

A myth can distance as easily as it can inspire. A story needs to have 'mythic quality' to inspire but a realism that does not distance.

---

[28] Ray was the very supportive finance director at Woking who is widely recognised as having played a key part in enabling Allen Jones to get on with the job.

In this chapter I will develop what that 'mythic quality' has come to mean. First I will start at the beginning – with the notion of mythic deprivation and its place at the heart of this work.

Mythic Deprivation

I want to start this section with a mythic story of my own. I call it mythic because I have recalled it so many times now that I cannot tell whether its significance lies in the actual moments it describes or in my recollection of them.

Returning to Work, 2002

On the day I returned to my job as engineering manager after my second maternity leave I was struck by how the work environment not only seemed different from my home environment but that this difference represented, on quite a fundamental level, a reduced experience. The previous week whilst at home, the doorbell had rung. It was a spring day and when I opened the door I saw the postman standing in a sudden downpour. Behind him on the lane was his van. It was a vibrant red in the rain and the texture of the stone walls of the lane and the green trees were brought out in relief around it. Now in my office I scanned the open plan, the terminals, the grey carpet, the Gantt charts on the walls and the reports on my desk already piling up. I remembered the bright red post-van and shrivelled inside. I strode into my manager's office and resigned saying: "I can't bear it; it's just too monochromatic here – grey, black and white – it's colourless". My manager listened kindly, perhaps mouthing "hormones" inwardly to himself, and asked me to wait a while before making any rash decisions. I stayed a full year before finally resigning.

In Chapter 4 I introduced Roth and Kleiner's notion of "Mythic Deprivation" as an idea of importance in this research. To recap they wrote:

> Most large organizations are "mythically" deprived. Official documents and presentations are bereft of stories; manager talk in terms of highly rationalized, abstract explanations that do not typically tell how their numbers of policies really evolved…
>
> (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.55)

Roth and Kleiner propose learning history as a way of addressing mythic deprivation. Its mythic orientation is important they argue because it is through storytelling that the tacit

knowledge of experience can be surfaced. Knowledge management guru Nonaka has suggested that it is through a continuous dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge that an organisation learns, where tacit knowledge:

> Is hard to formalize and therefore difficult to communicate to others ...tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action and in an individual's commitment to a specific context ...tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills [and partly] of mental models, beliefs and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted and cannot easily articulate them.

(Nonaka 1991 p.98)

Through story then, the learning history approach reconnects back to the mythic quality, as it is instrumental to learning. As the Warwick researchers on learning in local government concluded:

> The embedded and contextualized nature of much knowledge requires a consideration of how learning is shared without being de-contextualised and losing significance.

(Rashman, Withers et al. 2008 p.15)

Unlike case studies, the learning history keeps its focus on the human experience and so the knowledge is kept in context. That is a strong and logical argument and one I touched on in Chapter 4 to explain that I wanted to explore how to keep the narrative spirit alive in learning history because I saw this as a means for communicating about "Visionary" change.

Yet when I read the term "mythic deprivation" first it connected not on this rational level, but on the level of my imagination. It immediately evoked my own myth of the red post-van and the monochrome workplace of my opening story. I knew "mythic deprivation". I had lived it. And in connecting to that personal myth, there was an imperative for the work I was doing that was internally quite visual: it had to do with colouring and texturing a barren field with living stories. Somehow from these stories a mythic mist might exhale across the field. I share this more romantic view because, on reflection, I think it drove my commitment to work with the mythic quality more than any logical imperative.

As the chapter unfolds I will be looking at how the search for this mythic quality has inhabited and informed the research in different ways. I will look at the myths in the histories themselves, the challenges there can be with 'creating' a sense of the mythic in learning history and the relationship between narrative structure and form. Already a problem with language is occurring – do I mean story, narrative, myth or mythic. The next section describes how I have come to distinguish the different terms and by doing that I will start to tease out some of the challenges.

Myth and the mythic

This section offers some crucial clarifications as to how I am using the terms myth, Myth and story. I want to start with what I mean by story. A news story might tell of a royal visit for example and describe whom the queen met, where she went and what she ate. This I call a report. Then there might be another story of the same royal visit that tells how, when the queen sat down to dinner, the farmer who sat next to her broke up his bread and put it in his soup and, after a pause, she did the same thing. This I call a story. Both accounts purport to relate something that actually happened, but whereas the report is concerned with facts the story is concerned with suggesting meaning. Stories might be embellished or exaggerated, their meaning is negotiable, but the sense is that they have happened. They are fleeting. Told a few times perhaps. Enjoyed. Forgotten until they are remembered again.

By 'myth' I mean everyday stories that have in some way sustained. They have been shaped through telling and re-telling and through this process they have started to take on new and deeper meanings as a result and the links to what actually happened become more tenuous. This new meaning can reside simply in the storyteller's own mind – by recalling my story about the red post-van several times over the years it has taken on a broader meaning for me and has become my personal myth. Or the 'myth' can come into being through a story or several stories being told over and again in a system. The queen story above has actually sustained to become a myth. I have heard several versions of it, located in different countries. The achievements of Woking have entered the category too of an everyday myth. I have described how there were several stories circulating about it and some of these had settled into myths. There was the myth of the hero who made it possible, the myth that there had been financial sleight of hand and

other myths besides. These different everyday myths jostle side by side and contradict each other. And most people don't really mind whether they are true or not.

All myths have a mythic quality, as do stories told with a narrative spirit. I use the term 'mythic quality' largely interchangeably with 'narrative spirit' to imply the primacy of the story as a way to evoke experience and inspire meanings for the listener as opposed to a means to communicate fixed truths and information to the listener. The 'mythic quality' is purely to do with the power of the story rather than its message. When it comes to Myth with a capital 'M' this distinction is important. Myth arises from cultural myths.

Cultural myths, on the face of it, are just long-lasting everyday myths, those that have over time, through their sedimentation in a culture's psyche, snipped the remaining thread to what really happened. They retain within them meanings that are important. I distinguish them from everyday myths because they are long-lasting and no longer bear any pretence of reportage and so they are free conductors of cultural meaning. But why have they perpetuated? The French philosopher and literary theorist, Barthes wrote that myths are a way of turning history into nature. The intentions of a historical moment are taken into a fictional place that has an allegorical resonance with the 'truth' of the time.

> Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection.

(Barthes 1983)

Founder of archetypal psychology James Hillman describes myth, along with mathematics and music, as one of the three bridges between the visible and the invisible:

> The long-lasting and ever-renewing vitality of myths has nothing factual behind it. Nothing but invisibles lie behind all myths' strengths.

(Hillman 1996 p.95)

The invisible is made visible through myth. By helping us escape to an imaginal world cultural myths carry meanings that resonate with the times and so they reclaim a kind of truth. These myths become a way of explaining our culture to ourselves. But Hillman warns that we can become entranced, bedazzled even, by the myths themselves rather than the invisible mystery at which they point:

> We forget the old lesson, and mistake the finger that points at the moon for the moon itself.
>
> (Hillman 1996 p.94)

Hillman's psychology is inherently polytheistic in that it looks at the different myths, gods, and creatures that shape our psychology. Yet when the myth becomes the moon we return to a monotheistic view. This is where the hurly-burly of myths flatten into a single Myth that claims its capital M. Myth departs from the diverse, polyphonic field of story that we discussed in the last chapter and can start to look once again like a meta-cultural ideal. So whilst a cultural myth has mythic quality through its suspension of fact, it also can be communicating a 'truth':

> The reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal.
>
> (Barthes 1983)

And with a Myth the communication of that 'truth' has been taken for 'the truth'. It starts to drive out other myths. Cultural myths might become vehicles of intention and perhaps the longevity of a myth might rely on its purity – in other words its ability to exist and have meaning outside the prevailing ideology of the times that created it. Take for example the ancient Greek myth that tells of Icarus who flew too close to the sun in his wings made of wax despite being told not to by his father. This myth has as much resonance in today's financial crisis as it communicates the timeless quality of self-defeating human ambition. On the other hand consider the German fairy story that tells of Hansel and Gretel set within the time of an adult-centred ideology where children were seen as a burden to their parents. The story of how they are abandoned by their weak-willed father and kidnapped by an evil witch is becoming unspeakable in today's child-centred society. In this society the monstrous things that can happen to children have been de-mythologized by 'real' stories and have thus become a subject most people would rather not discuss.

So stories and myths reflect who we are individually, culturally and historically. The individual stories we tell can be a source of identity and redemption:

> All of us construct narratives about ourselves-where we've come from, where we're going. The kinds of stories we tell make an enormous difference in how well we cope with change.
>
> (Ibarra and Lineback 2005 p.65)

My personal myth about the post-van is liberating and creates meaning for me through the use of visual metaphor.

Likewise the myths of a society or organisation will reflect back its culture and this can be a source of meaning or a source of entrapment. When a single Myth with a capital 'M' is at work it may well be perpetuating a pattern of habitual thinking. My former workplace and those of local government are not actually deprived of myth altogether but rather they are entrapped by single Myths. To mention but two: the private sector has its Myth of continual growth; local government has its own Myth of being a slothful incapable bureaucracy. The nature of such Myths is abstract, reflecting the disconnection between the formal work place and our world – the kind of eco-blindness I introduced in Chapter 3. They no longer have a link to human experience. The deprivation to which I refer then is one of everyday myth and story that does link back to human experience and thence our world. It is these everyday myths I wanted to work with.

Roth and Kleiner note that these myths live and move through the informal spaces around an organisation:

> People in organizations get their myths the old fashioned way – at the water cooler, in the rest room, over early morning coffee before everyone gets in, in late night "watering holes", at remote meetings and in the car pool.
>
> (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.55)

There is a wealth of literature looking at organisational storytelling as a means for engaging with the 'tacit' within organisational life. But the purpose of organisational storytelling, in parallel with Rhodes' concerns about learning as a meta-cultural ideal, is replete with questions of power and ownership. If stories are being managed in some way toward Myth then the stories are not so much vehicles of freedom as they are instruments of control.

Gabriel distinguishes the unmanaged organisation as one that is free of controlling Myth – it is a:

> Kind of organizational dreamworld in which desire, anxieties and emotions find expressions in highly irrational constructions. The chief force in this terrain is fantasy and its landmarks include stories, myths, jokes, gossip, nicknames, graffiti and cartoons

(Gabriel 1995 p.477)

This dreamworld cannot be managed he suggests. What learning history is trying to do then is tricky. It is bringing elements of this dreamworld into the managed world whose Myth has long been that the rational is the valid modus-operandus. Will not this Myth consume the myths of the dreamworld? Or will the myths of the dreamworld lapse into becoming variants of the disempowering Myth themselves – as happened with Woking? In the last chapter we talked about how the steady progression from the familiar to the unfamiliar helped individuals and small groups to safely bridge between the dreamworld and the rational workworld. There is broadly then a cultural clash between the two worlds that I am describing as a clash between Myth and myths. Whereas Myth with its unassailable heroes and authority can distance, myth with its messy humanity can inspire. So the mythic quality I sought was one that would be vested in a multiplicity of myths rather than in the creation of one. Yet as Chapter 7 described, with the negotiation over the authority of the Merton story, this sometimes was a difficult line to walk. With this, and indeed with the other histories, I needed to take care I was not simply contributing to the creation of a new dominant Myth. In the next section I will look at myths that were present and absent in the learning histories and will look at the ways I worked to retain or create mythic spirit in them.

Distinguishing Myth from myth.

I wanted to work with many myths rather than just one prevailing Myth. Whereas Myth becomes unassailable and has heroes, 'myth' is messy and error prone. It has human protagonists.

Myth at Merton

Merton as the first history presented might seem to question the whole notion of mythic deprivation. Here surely is a tale that has plenty of mythic quality? And this indeed is the case. In fact the story as presented by Adrian and minimally re-crafted by me in the writing follows a dramatic structure.

Merton as drama

The 19th century German dramatist Freytag proposed that plays have a recognisable dramatic structure and his "Pyramid" has come to be used as a familiar way of describing narrative structure (Freytag 1863). Put simply that structure is defined as the movement along three points of a pyramid. The narrative moves from the beginning (the exposition) via a phase of rising action up to the top of the pyramid (the climax). From this midpoint the narrative then moves down through a phase of falling action to reach its end (the denouement). The story of the Merton Rule follows this structure quite well. In the first act, *the exposition*, the characters are introduced and set within a context. With their ideas about a radical new piece of policy, they challenge themselves with an elusive quest. An inciting moment closes this phase when this quest has an early unlikely success: their proposal is unexpectedly given passage to the next stage by a kindly inspector. From there is a *stage of rising action* where secondary conflicts and hurdles are encountered in the form of objections and wary civil servants. This culminates in a *climax* where, in a moment of magical luck involving a chance catfight, an audience with the minister is won and events turn in the favour of the protagonists. There then follows a phase of *falling action* where the tide of events unravels favourably from that climax. The policy goes through though not without tensions and arguments over ownership. The final act, *the denouement*, sees Adrian and his colleagues celebrated and feted as heroes – they are sought after and invited hither and thither. Though the forces of darkness are never far away. The story ends with the policy still in danger. The possibilities for a sequel seem high.

Further than its structure the story itself reveals a mythic intention.

> They started to speak at conferences around the country, proselytizing this policy and reassuring other local authorities that they too could do this.
>
> Merton Learning History, Page 16

At these conferences the nuts and bolts of the policy was discussed. And in the corner of the presentation slides, Adrian had a picture of his cat Randolph. At the workshop when readers fed back (as audiences always did) the belief that the policy would have gone through without the cat, Adrian shook his head and said:

At the Feb 2008 Workshop

> **Adrian:** "No cat, No policy"

Figure 38: (opposite) Adrian at the workshop

I reflect on this now that he was determinedly keeping the mythic quality alive in his story. In so doing he was challenging the Myth of how things happen in local government by bringing myths from the dreamworld into the managed world for scrutiny. The thumbnail picture of the cat on his presentations had been a nod at the mythic. The learning history now fully voiced his myth in the formal world.

And not surprisingly that myth was challenged. Responses were often dismissive. One practitioner described it as a "yarn". Another as "hyperbole". And of the five learning histories Merton was the most relevant to wider audiences, and yet the most vulnerable to being dismissed as irrelevant by those within local authority. The question of keeping the narrative spirit alive applies not only to creating it in the first place in the writing, but also to the subsequent working with that history. The later learning histories with their more evenly undulating events and gentler turning moments seemed on the whole more palatable in the local authority circles in which I worked. Yet the mythic quality of Merton

had a far greater reach. Like any myth

> It was at once true and unreal

(Barthes 1983)

A conversation with the following active reader captures this paradox. The reader, who himself is a civil servant, expressed frustration at how the civil servant was portrayed in the story. So he proclaimed this part of the Merton history as unreal

> **Reader:** Margaret you've no idea what it's like to be a civil servant!

But then he went on to comment on what was true:

> **Reader:** My interest is in health systems –but lots and lots of resonances there for me. You read the textbooks about how policy gets made – it'll never tell you about chance conversations down the vets. That's what fascinated me – a real world insight – ministers listen to all kinds of people that they probably shouldn't listen to ..

Active Reader of Merton's comments (in taped conversation, mid 2007)

Mythic Deprivation everywhere

In interview

Inasmuch as Adrian's story was already drenched in mythic spirit, I was to find this was not the case with the other four histories. When I went on to do my further interviews the conversations were more tempered, discussing what had been done but not offering it as an already constructed narrative. I sprinkled my interviews with questions to bring out anecdote and accounts of experience:

"Did you have any sleepless nights?"

"Could you describe any lucky breaks?"

"Can you think of a real high-point?"

These questions often caused a pause, as the interviewee would perceptibly move into

recollection sometimes unable to find something straightaway. But they would often return later to the questions saying:

"Actually that was something of a low point…I remember…."

"When you mention a lucky break…that really was one…"

But sometimes it felt like I was forcing the narrative onto the account

Researcher: "So would you say that meeting was a key moment….?"

Interviewee: "Yes, I suppose it was"

Or words to that effect. So drawing out anecdote was a more usual experience in interview than just listening to pre-packaged myth as had occurred at Merton. The interview process was interesting. There was an expectation of a 'research interview' from participants. It often started quite formally. The challenge for me was to relax proceedings sufficiently so that we might engage on a human level whilst still following a procedure that was framed quite formally. This varied from interview to interview and I did always get some little stories – and sometimes a good yarn. And just as I'd noticed way back when I'd conceived the research, there would be a shift in energy, a pause and a stretch into story. Even if it was only for a moment the flicker of the narrative spirit was there if you looked hard enough. Did this pause represent an entry into the organisational 'dreamworld'?

The Pause….

And reminds me too of the moment in the last chapter when the director rubbed his face vigorously….what are these pausing moments? Are they some kind of switch of mode?

In writing

With the four later histories there was much more work to do to create a written narrative from the data I had. For example the contrast between writing Nottingham (the second learning history) and Merton could not have been starker. As I described in Chapter 2 the Nottingham Declaration was a voluntary agreement to act on climate change that had been conceived by a group at Nottingham City Council. Unlike Merton, the action of this history took place mainly (though not entirely) within the formal organisational systems of the council. There were conferences, launch events, executive meetings and ministerial backings all set against a backdrop of varying corporate priorities that

impacted on what occurred. So as I tried to fashion this into a story with mythic spirit from the dreamworld I was struggling. It was at this stage that I really started to think about the tension between report and narrative in learning history and overall what the purpose of the written learning history was. In the last chapter I described in a journal entry how I tossed around these questions wondering was learning history a useful Trojan horse or just a very expensive placebo with which to start a conversation:

March 30th, 2007 (continued)

I am having all these thoughts whilst writing up the Nottingham learning history. I'm finding it a slog to make a story out of what is necessarily quite a dry account. Unlike Merton I feel as writer there is more for me to do here with redressing mythic deprivation. I feel on a mission – but it is a hard mission – to breathe life into what they did there and as I write this I reconfirm to myself that this is important – what I hope to do here is to refresh somehow what they've done. I write about the meaning of the symbol of the Nottingham Declaration and the modern day ritualistic gatherings and hubs that go around it. And as I write about the ambiguity of the Nottingham Declaration as 'symbol' and 'process' I find it mirrors this ambiguity I have about the learning history as 'thing' and 'process'. So unexpectedly for me, the process of writing the learning history of Nottingham had spurred me much further on in my own understanding of my work. So the sentences I'm writing sometimes could be about either.

I need to explain that entry a little. I was struggling to arrive at a rich storyline for the Nottingham Declaration. The Declaration was a symbolic document – just like the learning history – around which events occurred. As I worked with the data I started to realize that the mythic quality was there but I just wasn't seeing it because it was modern-day myth. The Declaration itself was a symbol. The conferences themselves were all pomp and ceremony and ways of gathering around that symbol. The Nottingham declaration was an expression of modern workworld myth and ritual: what I would now call Myth. But the context of climate change, brought to life with a flood just before the launch conference, juxtaposed this Myth with real-world calamity in an interesting way. Just looking at these two pictures through a mythical lens brings home the point made in Chapter 3 about "Eco-blindness". The delight in the unveiling of the declaration "to do something" alongside the inexolerably rising waters makes for a chilling or jubilant sight depending on which Myth you have currently in mind. And so I

Figure 39: Myth in symbolic unveilings and real world floods in Nottingham

had my angle. I opened the learning history with the flood as follows:

> **Introduction**
>
> On October 25th, in the Millennium year, just one week before the worst flooding in the UK for over 50 years, a group of some 200 executive and senior leaders in UK local government were invited to gather at a conference in Nottingham in order to discuss climate change

Opener from the Nottingham Learning History

So the mythic spirit was woven into in this written history by bringing the ancient and the modern Myths together. I hadn't made it up. In interview Mike had mentioned the floods and said that the timing of them was curious.

What I notice too in the diary entry is the commitment to the mythic quality. I had to find a story even if at first there didn't really seem to be one. The mythic quality of Merton had sealed an already strong personal commitment. Had Nottingham been the first learning history I wonder would I have persevered to create such a storied account of what I had. I make this observation here, as it seems to suggest that the more common form for learning history -a 2-column form with lighter narrative threading – is no accident. It is more in line with the kind of data one finds in a mythically deprived field. Adhering to the Roth and Kleiner's precept: "stay close to the data" (Roth and Kleiner 1998) then how might the mythic be re-instilled without distortion?

Instilling mythic spirit: an act necessitating due care

Data can, on the face of it, be mythically deprived. Mythic spirit needs to be actively instilled rather than distilled from it. As such, this needs to be done carefully and in a way that still remains true to the original data.

Instilling narrative spirit: tips and trappings

Overall I found that, even with the driest dataset, it was possible to create a sense of narrative in the history and to connect that with the mythic. This was partly achieved through the form of the history itself and by attending to three key considerations as follows.

Tension between narrative unity and multi-vocality

With my interview and additional data I mapped out a timeline of the project. I broke events into a chronology and then chose to hone in on one or two key events. In this way I constructed a narrative framework. Choice of a robust storyline and key events is crucial here. As Chapter 7 explained, there is a responsibility, for ethical reasons, on the learning historian to determine a storyline and a rough chronological framework that is properly scoped and offers a fair representation of the project. Here the storyline and chronology is vital for a second reason namely that the history can have sufficient 'narrative unity' (MacIntyre 1981) whilst remaining at the same time robust enough to incorporate multiple voices along the way. By narrative unity I mean an agreement on key events to anchor the story around which multiple perspectives might then be included. The trade-off between narrative unity and multi-vocality is a demanding challenge for the learning historian. The 2-column format can downplay the narrative voice by distinguishing instead participant voices on one side and researcher reflections on the other. The excerpt overleaf from Rupesh Shah's learning history shows a classic form (Shah 2001). A narrative snippet introduces two columns with researcher reflections in the left column and participant quotes on the right.

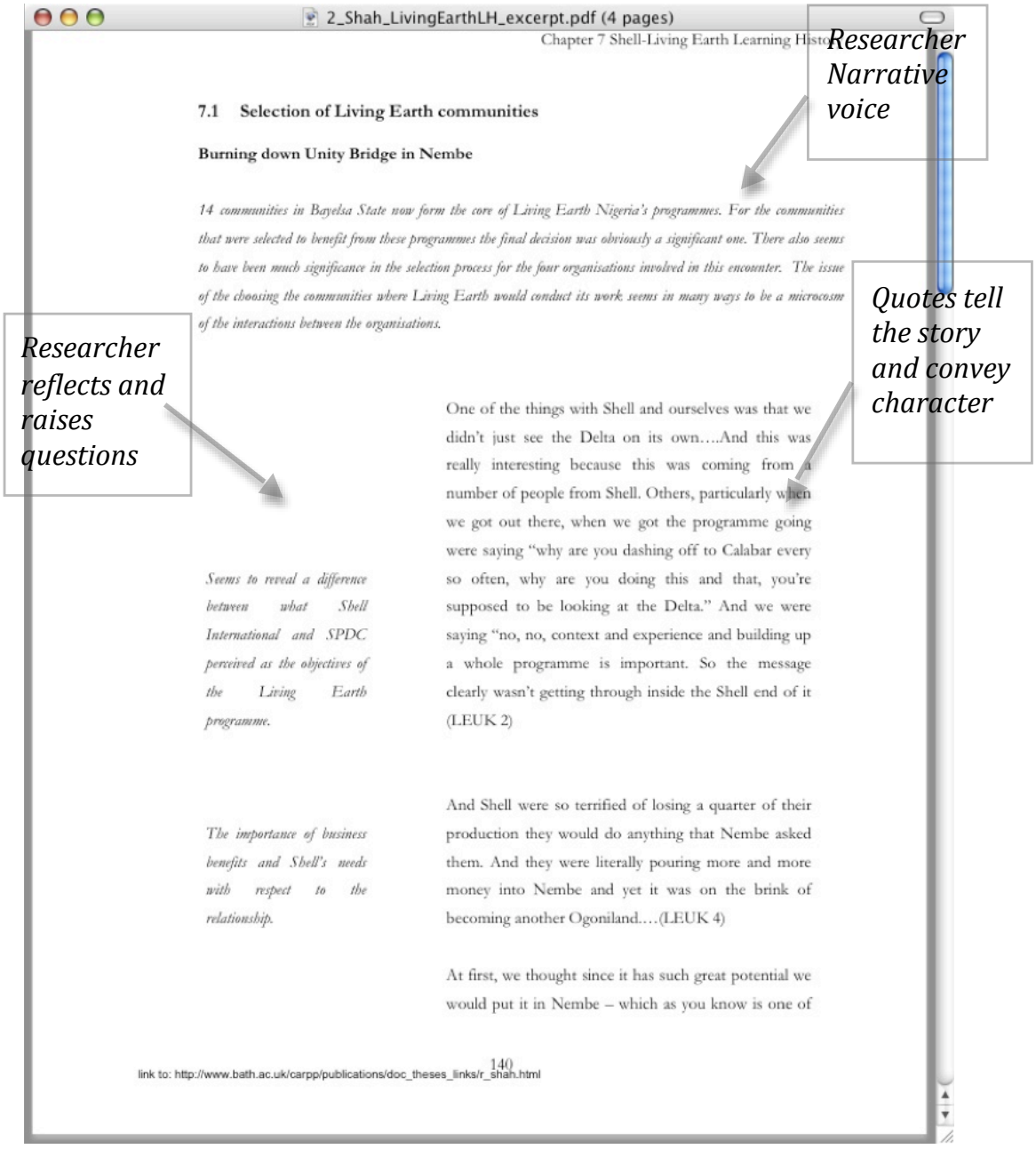

Figure 40 Excerpt from Shah's living earth learning history

With this style some of the narrative is being developed in the quotes. However I found that, as reader, these kinds of quotes did not always draw me in so it was hard to stick with the story. Therefore in my interpretation I have sought to make the narrative voice more prominent in plain text. I then use pictures, quotes and reflections as different perspectives that bring the narrative thread to life. So I distinguish the more reflective and analytical voices of the researcher together with the more characterful voice of the protagonist. The narrative voice that runs through is truly the tale jointly told. I author the

words but what I am telling is close to the transcript. And as time progressed, with for example's Thurstan's feedback during the 1:1 work, I learnt to be disciplined about staying religiously close to the data.

The implication of what I have described is that the mythic impulse of the learning history is, to a degree, at odds with the original 2-column form of presentation. By seeking narrative unity whilst wanting to stay true to the idea of multiple voices, I was led to develop a different form for my written learning history.

Instilling mythic spirit: intertwined with form

Mythic spirit is intertwined with form in learning history: both in the presentation of the document and in the ways of working with it. That spirit can be lost through the two-column form.

On the following page an excerpt from the Southampton learning history illustrates this difference in form:

Excerpt from the Southampton learning history: p.29

Phase 7: The Second Connection - ASDA

When: Late 1988

Where: Southampton

What: ASDA agree to connect

Chronological phases identified and located

Joint Narrative voice

The heat station had been built on reclaimed land that was earmarked for redevelopment. It had always been the intention for the scheme to supply those new developments. It remained a challenge to win prospective developers over to that view.

ASDA, a large well-known supermarket chain, was one of the first to put in plans for development near the heat station and with that application the Council had its first opportunity to demonstrate how serious it was about the scheme.

As a new-build, the arguments for ASDA to connect were strong. Not only would they save cost-wise, but extra retail space could be won by not having a boiler room. But, as the partnership were to find in the coming years, strong arguments weren't always enough to win customers.

Quotes conveying challenge

I wouldn't say it was easy – it is a lot easier with new build than refurb ….. We used the planning; we just encouraged them through the planning system (BC on getting ASDA to connect)

Figure 41: ASDA's connection for heat takes much less space than a boiler room [Photo: Utilicom/SCC]

ASDA did finally agree to connect and this was significant. It was one of the first commercial businesses in the UK to connect to district heating. Furthermore its location on the land near the heat station was significant. It set a precedent for the developments that were to come. For the joint team it probably also marked the beginning of a journey of highs and lows as they sought to entice new customers to connect to the scheme.

Is there a celebratory moment when someone says they'll connect? (R)

No well usually it's thank God for that! (BC)

Quotes that convey the character

Reflective voice points to gaps in story

RR

It'd be interesting to hear how this was experienced at ASDA and did they feel or still feel themselves ground-breaking

Life like characters

Crucially a story needs characters and for narrative spirit these characters needed to be brought to life. I took care to introduce protagonists and situate them in scenes throughout the history. Then I chose quotes that would enrich the narrative but that would also convey something of the character and humanity of the protagonist. In this way some of the trappings there can be with using narrative could be avoided. There are the dangers of what David Snowden calls the "Janet and John" effect where protagonists behave in a flat idealized way akin to the characters in primary school reader (Snowden 2001). Equally there is the trap of the heroic victory narrative where one person appears superhuman in the account thus excluding the possibility for any non-hero to do anything similar. This is more difficult to avoid in what is essentially an appreciative account. With the Barnsley learning history for example it was difficult not to think that the protagonist was in fact an extraordinary human being. This then became the mythic fabric of the history where, from within reflections in the history, I drew attention to and engaged with the superhuman powers that were apparent in the story:

Excerpt from the Barnsley learning history: p. 11

Researcher comment: If Barnsley, why not everywhere?

Figure 42 Dick Bradford, Barnsley

The couple of hours I spent speaking to Dick in June 2007 were at once inspiring and puzzling. As he laid out his thinking and approach I found myself relaxing into a place I don't often find myself in with regard to climate change – a place of certainty. There was a sure-footedness here that was refreshing. Everything as he described it seemed obvious, straightforward, and eminently achievable. He said so himself several times during the interview, expressing frustration sometimes that other places seem to find it difficult. By the end of the interview after two hours on solid ground, I could empathise with his frustration and at the same time I felt puzzled. If it really was *'a no-brainer'* then more people surely would be doing it. What was particular about here that made it seem so simple, when clearly it isn't elsewhere?

So larger-than and less-than lifelike characters could be brought back to reality by

revealing their natural humanity in the choice of quotes together with the use of the researcher reflective voice in the text. By rehumanising the characters, Myths are avoided. Protagonists can still be appreciated and understood in the context of their personality. The choice of quotes and reflection do gently characterise the protagonists. I sometimes commented openly on their personalities. For example:

Of Merton: I asked, "Did the man make the story or the story make the man"

Of Nottingham: The "Quiet Passion" of the protagonist was listed as a theme

Of Barnsley: The unequivocal nature of the protagonist came across in the "no-brainer quote that was discussed throughout.

Of Southampton: The 'quiet desperation' of the protagonist was listed as a theme These comments were never questioned at sign-off by the protagonist – though the last quote (Southampton) was mentioned by the protagonist who chuckled and said he liked that I'd picked up on that. All the quotes I've chosen were however appreciated and chewed-over by active readers who engaged with the characters.

Rehumanised characters

Best practice accounts have no characters. Myths have larger than life heroes and villains. The mythic spirit of learning history introduces characters and re-humanises them with all their glorious human flaws and contradiction.

The deadpan story

A third challenge with narrative is what Snowden has called retrospective coherence (Snowden 2004) where, looked at from the perspective of now, all actions seem to have been mindfully taken in the service of achieving 'now'. When this happens, chance, luck and serendipity are not acknowledged and everything reverts to the logical view of change as a sequence of well-planned and controllable steps. This challenge is addressed through the structure by explicitly honing in on key moments. So even though in interview at Barnsley, Dick said there was little luck involved and:

Dick: "I can't give you much drama."

Nevertheless a narrative still could be constructed from key events, and the reflective questions over the certainty of Dick's story layered a mythic mist over the entire history. Later when we were to work with this history at B&NES, I titled the session: "Biomass at B&NES: A no-brainer!". So though this session was focused on the technology, the myth

of the history was right there in the title and informed our conversations.

The narrative spirit then is something that I needed to work at. With the notable exception of Merton, narrative did not fall out naturally in the field in which I was working. But I discovered it could be drawn out through the interview process and then through the writing of the history, and in the crafting of its form. In these ways narratives with mythic spirit could be created that were true to the insiders' experience and yet were crafted and structured in a new and engaging way. However there remained the challenge of keeping the narrative spirit alive beyond that. As I have already described in Chapter 7, readers could not be forced into a certain frame of mind whilst reading. And in this chapter I have already described how the formal workworld might simply not value or understand stories from the 'dreamworld'. So the challenge of connecting with the mythic beyond the writing of the history still remains. Here again the struggles and thoughts I had whilst writing Nottingham proved helpful as the next section describes.

The spirit of the Seanchaí

The earlier diary entry in which I'd started to see parallels between the Nottingham Declaration and the learning history had concluded:

March 30th, 2007 (continued)

And so, not to cut a long story short, the learning history has itself been enlivened of its own mythic deprivation! Now I call it "learning history as gathering point" and I'm starting to see myself as a modern day seanchaí, metaphorically travelling the country dancing between collecting and giving stories and seeing what happens.

The diary entry shows up one of my own myths about the research: namely that the subject matter often informed my interpretation of what I was doing. By thinking hard about the Nottingham declaration and what it actually meant in mythic terms I was able to connect to a more mythically inspired framing about the learning history work itself. The word seanchaí means a bearer of "old lore". A seanchaí was a traditional Irish storyteller who travelled from village to village gathering and telling stories. These stories were not written down, but memorised and passed on in the oral tradition. Bringing the spirit of the seanchaí to the learning history work reached back to its roots in oral history

and connected too with my Irish background.

And this spirit particularly meant something in practice when it came to finding ways to work with and share the learning histories. This was particularly illustrated in Chapter 5 where I described the design of the learning history workshop. A form that encouraged the gathering as well as the telling of stories was used and, where possible, tales were shared along the spectrum from story to Myth. To open the workshop I introduced the research by telling the story of it. After dinner that evening, the facilitator Geoff took the role of seanchaí as he told a Mythic tale. And on the next day the “old lore” was shared in the voices of the participants who told short stories reflecting the present everyday history of how people are addressing climate change. As with the writing of the histories, the mythic spirit of the workshop was as much achieved through the presentational form as it was through the content.

Figure 43 Chris Seely's graphic workshop agenda included informal and formal time

A colourful graphical agenda that included the informal as well as the formal aspects of

the two days was used. And in my presentation I showed diary entries to highlight some of the realities of conducting the research together with 'mythic teasers' to invite participants into the learning histories they would later read.

Seanchaí *(Seanchaithe)*

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia[29]

The traditional art

The *seanchaithe* made use of a range of storytelling conventions, styles of speech and gestures that were peculiar to the Irish folk tradition and characterized them as practitioners of their art. Although tales from literary sources found their way into the repertoires of the *seanchaithe*, a traditional characteristic of their art was the way in which a large corpus of tales was passed from one practitioner to another without ever being written down.

Some *seanchaithe* were itinerants, travelling from one community to another offering their skills in exchange for food and temporary shelter. Others, however, were members of a settled community and might be termed "village storytellers."

As with the seanchaí's traditional art, a set of conventions, styles of speech and even gestures emerged in the form of the written learning histories and - to an extent - in the form of how we worked with them. In the previous chapter I have noted how important the overall form of the learning history was to keeping participants engaged and moving along the ladder from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In this chapter by looking at how I tried to cultivate the mythic quality, some key elements of that form can be identified and these can be summarized as follows:

[2929] Downloaded from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seanchaí on 26/11/08

Key elements of mythic form in Learning history

1. Narrative structure in the writing

   By choosing robust storylines and then creating acts, scenes and events set on a timeline.

2. Striking a balance between narrative unity and messy multi-vocality

   By crafting a narrative from a few, and then subsequently inviting voices in to texture it.

3. Rehumanising characters through quotes and reflections

   By introducing characters in context; by offering gentle characterisation; by choosing quotes to reflect personality.

4. Sharing stories in the spirit of the seanchaí

   By sharing stories in their mythic form. And by inviting stories and by really listening to them and sharing them on.

To summarise then, I have described how the idea of mythic deprivation caught my imagination and drove a commitment to story that, for good reason, other learning histories do not often share. The quest for the mythic is at odds with the need to stay true to the data. The field will often yield reportage rather than stories with a mythic quality. The historian is therefore not merely surfacing but is to an extent *'creating'* a sense of the mythic and with that faces a set of dilemmas that can partly be addressed through form and presentation. Maintaining a sense of the mythic requires energy too. The spirit of the seanchaí became the imagination of the research and decoupled it from the original, more logical imperative which was more along the lines of: "stories have a place alongside analysis in learning history because they situate experience and therefore aid learning to occur on the readers' terms". What then of the learning history with its bridging appeal to the narrative and the rational modes discussed in Chapter 4? Has it been overtaken by the spirit of the seanchaí? The next part of the thesis will look at the analytical aspect of learning history and will reinstate its value. Here I don't want to enter an argument by comparing the value of the two modes. I want instead to follow the spirit of the seanchaí to its natural conclusion and finish this chapter with a reflection on that.

Mythic abundance: in my mind

I want to follow the spirit of the seanchaí into an imagined place. This is a place where the workworld and dreamworld are re-integrated. Mythic deprivation has been replaced with mythic abundance. Everyone has a story to tell and knows how to tell it. What would that look like?

Imagining a place of mythic abundance….

Organisations, communities and families know their storytellers. These storytellers gather and pass on stories they have heard. They craft into myth some of the stories that they hear told and retold over again. There's a wealth of stories circulating around: anyone can tell their story into the mix. The stories are resilient, light and accessible and are valued far beyond their potential to entertain. They are understood as a way of communicating learning and of sharing our 'indigenous' knowledge (Pettenger 2007). And so there is time to 'really listen' to them. Stories are not owned, though the storytellers do mediate them. Neither does anyone own the characters of the stories (as in celebrity culture) nor do the characters own the stories. The stories are light and changing. As well as stories shared in the oral tradition, new digital media – search engines, video and the internet – facilitate stories to be shared and accessed more easily. But the fast culture that created the new media has slowed down enough to be able to use it.

Is this imagined world where I'm heading with the spirit of the seanchaí a utopia or a tower of Babel? For a utopia surely an entirely different, slower culture is required one that has time to 'really listen' to the stories that are being told. At the end of the learning history workshop I created a website on which I slavishly loaded up all the stories that had been told there. It was the idea of the seanchaí that drove me but I did so with misgivings. Was I not merely adding to the babble in the system for which no one had time? And what of these storytellers – are they not the old powerful priests again: choosing what to 'hear' and 'tell'? How might they not be corrupt?

The imagined place then is somewhere with a different mindset altogether. Occupants have long been coaxed out into the postmodernist frame of the last chapter. Perhaps it lies at the destination of Wittgenstein's ladder. Looking back from there, if we ever do reach such a place of mythic abundance, the learning history might make no sense at all. All that weaving of mythic spirit may no longer be necessary. All those themes and theories explicitly rendered for the analytical thinker may now be trusted to lie in the folds

of the story.

Learning history: A transitional artefact and process

The learning history is probably a transitional artefact and process. If it does what it should then it will ultimately cease to have meaning. It is forever on its way to the shelf to gather dust.

But for now, for this moment of history we stand in a confusing place: western culture is perhaps stuck on the ladder not knowing whether to go back or forward. Rationalism has borne thrilling technological capability, proof surely of human ingenuity and progressive evolution. Yet it has brought with it calamitous environmental destruction, social injustice and, more recently the horrible sense that its structures cannot sustain. It has alienated mysticism, indigenous knowledge, spirituality and myth. In this ambivalent position it probably does make sense to move slowly forward bringing the mythic spirit to the cool, cold lines of our current-day Myths.

Mythic abundance: living it

Just at the point of finishing this chapter, I am fortunate enough to spend two days with storytellers and narrative practitioners from across the UK at an event run by the Centre for Narrative Leadership. The timing could not be more apposite. I am bursting with myth and Myth – the ideas, fresh from the write, are swirling around my head. At the start we are guided to pose our inquiries and this is mine:

> If the spirit of the seanchaí was alive today in our modern tribes – be they organisations, communities or families – then what would that look like?
>
> Inquiry question posed after writing this chapter, Dec 2008

And then as the two days unfold, answer after answer is offered. In one workshop I hear for the first time about digital stories. The presenter describes how over several years, communities from all across Wales were invited into workshops so they could relearn together how to tell stories. Then when ready they narrate their own stories on tape and juxtapose them with still images. We watch a few of these stories and I am profoundly moved. The researcher Karen describes how communities gather subsequently to share their stories in church halls. "You can hear a pin drop", she says and goes on to describe the pride and satisfaction the participants get from voicing their stories. 'Sharing, celebrating, participating, voicing and really listening', my mind whirrs ticking off excitedly the hunch that this surely is the mythic spirit, alive and well. In a later workshop, poet William Ayot talks of the role of the 'bard' and the importance of ritual. But he is working with it in modern terms. "Today the symbol of our ritual does not have to be a chalice", he says, "it can be Tupperware". 'He's working myth back into our modern times and in modern terms', I think. And later he shares poetry from the mythically deprived workworld breathing into it heart, compassion and exposing the raw pain of it. Graphic artist Julian Burton shares images he has made of this workplace: they are unflinching, dark pictures of workers reduced and burdened by targets, outcomes and business speak. To see this theme visualised at last is striking.

And in the evening, as a community, we share stories, songs and poems. An Irish man stands and tells a poem about goodbyes. It starts funny and becomes poignant and I realise it is a goodbye to his father: he talks of holding his weak hand as he is dying and the poem ends with the simple word: Dad? I think of holding my own dying father's hand

and with a jolt realise it is seven years ago today that he died.

And so it goes on. “This has been a peak experience”, I tell Peter who is also in attendance. In the final session I opt to work with Julian the graphic artist though I know “*I cannot draw*”. He guides me to get the visual idea that’s been in my head for so long now onto paper. And so by the time we are ready to leave, the idea has taken a graphic form. There are two halves. The upper half is our ancient world of the mythic. It is in bright colour. It depicts the west coast of an ancient Ireland near Dingle in County Kerry. The ancient Beehive huts near Dingle represent elegance and endeavour. They hint at copying and learning rather than unique creation. Around the fire people talk and really listen. And out to sea on the Blasket Islands the old Irish seanchaí, Peig Sayers – essential reading for all reluctant Irish scholars – weaves her stories with her pipe in her toothless mouth. “Fadó, Fadó”, she starts. Once long ago.

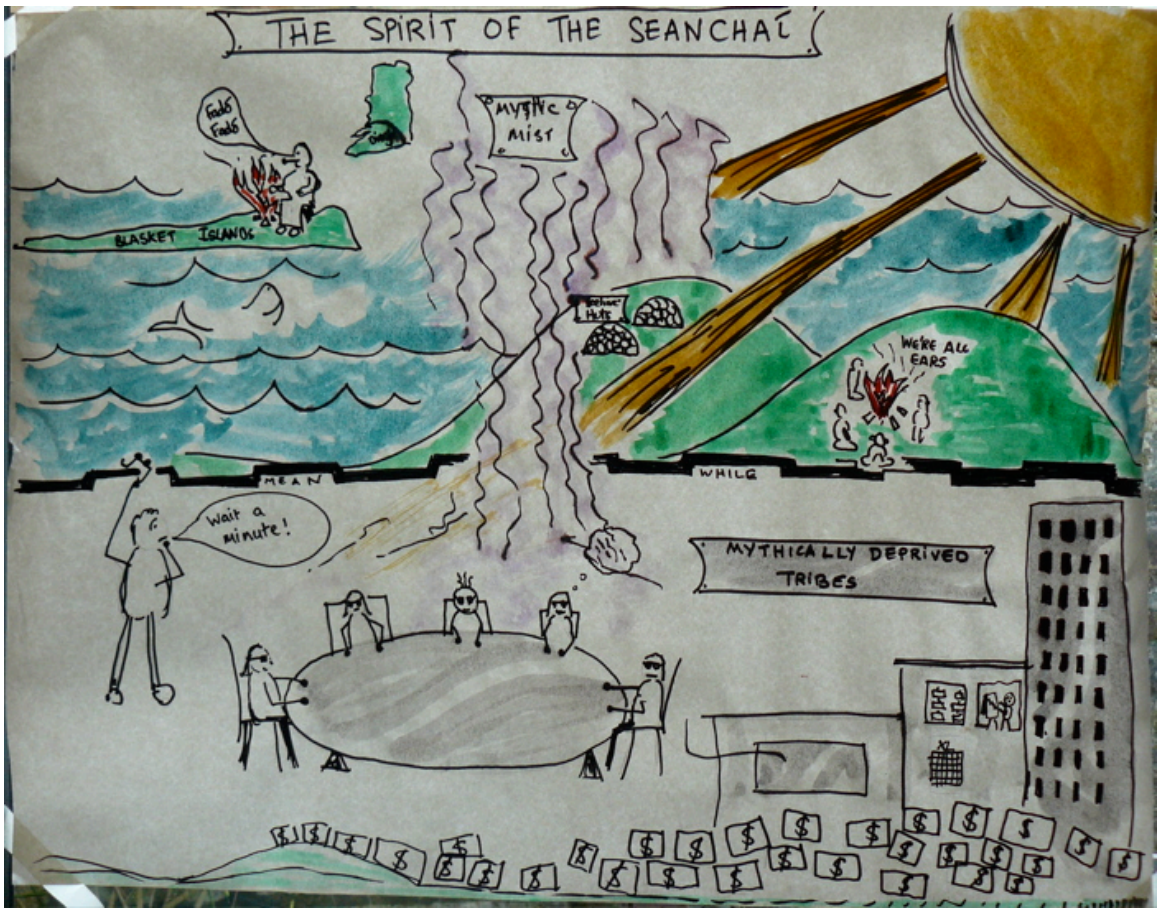

Figure 44 My graphic drawing of mythic deprivation and the spirit of the seanchaí

On the lower half of the drawing is a depictation of a mythically deprived working tribe.

Of course it is in black and white monochrome. It is a relief to draw it at last. Flipcharts, people trapped in spreadsheets and workers wearing dark glasses that shield them from the world they are in. The dollars on which this world sits represents all the different constructs that contribute to the overall blindness to the world and landscape beyond. A glimmer of green lies below but it is not seen. Getting a little biblical then, the mythic mist - or is it a mystic myth - floats down into this world bringing about moments of epiphany.

I present the picture to the community gathered amidst laughter and amusement. I joke about Peig – I hated her stories at school – and with the group we become aware of, and joke about the catholic connotations of the picture as I present. But it is a tender irreverence. Because the spirit of the seanchaí was alive in this modern place. I knew it now. I'd lived it.

Concluding

The last three chapters have delved more deeply into the learning history. Starting with a key event of the research – the process of perspective gathering - the argument and action has unravelled from there as I have reflected more deeply on how the practice of the research relates to aspects of story, form and method. The responsibilities of the learning historian have been explored and the learning history's role in aiding learning and new understanding has been teased out. This chapter has then explored the mythic dimension and I have suggested that this dimension is vital and is closely linked to form. The chapter has concluded on something of a mythic high as I have told of my experiences of the spirit of the seanchaí in action and with that I conclude part two which has been about the field of practice and the place of story in it.

From here I will switch modes into the more analytical and substantive part of the work. The next part of the thesis moves us away from the field and with that into reflection, analysis and theory. By looking at the analytical work, I will explore questions about innovation: both specifically in terms of how innovation for carbon reduction in local authorities comes about and more generally in the context of the 'big issue' of our time.