



ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

A journey through the use of critical creative reflection to explore self in a PhD study

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Received for publication: 30th March 2017

Accepted for publication: 21st June 2017

Published: 15th November 2017

<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.72.003>

Abstract

Background: This article shares the story of a critical creative reflection that was prompted by my need to understand my 'self' when I was beginning my PhD and started to realise the place of person-centredness in my work. I used painting to reflect on my self and on specific experiences I had at the beginning of my PhD journey. This process of self-reflection resulted in the emergence of human flourishing.

Aims: To demonstrate a process of critical creative reflection and to outline how this process can facilitate understanding of self, and of the philosophy and theory underpinning my PhD work and, consequently, lead to human flourishing.

Conclusion: Self-reflection underpinned by critical creativity facilitates understanding of 'self' and of work that can result in human flourishing.

Implications for practice:

- A facilitated process of critical self-reflection is a necessary step towards becoming a person-centred researcher/practitioner who knows self
- Using creativity in reflection can take us beyond structured reflection in practice and introduce critical learning that incorporates intelligence held in the body
- Engaging in critical creative reflection can result in human flourishing, which lays the foundations for a person to achieve their potential and facilitates continued critical reflection in future work

Keywords: Critical reflection, critical creativity, human flourishing

Introduction

The aim of this article is to share a story about a transformational learning journey through critical creative reflection. This reflection is represented in the form of paintings created since March 2016. These were created in an effort to understand my self and the philosophy and theory underpinning my PhD work – an essential part of my learning to be a person-centred facilitator in research (van Lieshout, 2017) and to begin a process of research underpinned by person-centredness. McCance and McCormack (2017) believe we should acknowledge that healthcare professionals are people who have been shaped by their life history and experiences. These influence how we practice and relate to and engage with people in our work. Thus, ‘knowing self’ is outlined as a prerequisite of person-centred practice in healthcare. In order to develop self-awareness, continuous learning in action and self-reflection is required (Schön, 1987). The power and potential of critical creativity to underpin and facilitate this kind of learning process is portrayed in this article (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2010).

My PhD research is a study of the implementation of the Tailored Activity Programme (TAP) (Gitlin et al., 2008). The TAP is a US-developed eight-step protocol or programme that includes occupational therapy assessment and activity prescription based on the cognitive and functional abilities of people living with dementia. An initial context study (unpublished) I conducted in Scotland indicated that person-centred values of occupational therapists resulted in adaptation of the TAP in practice. The focus of my work is on understanding the implementation of the programme, and the values, beliefs and the self of the occupational therapists who use the programme in Scotland. In the context of this work, it is necessary to engage in a process of self-reflection in order to understand how I, as a researcher, relate to those I research with and the influence of my self (McCance and McCormack, 2017).

The article presents the process, and the outcome of critical creative self-reflection for me: human flourishing. Human flourishing (McCormack and Titchen, 2014) is understood to be the means through which critical creative reflection and learning are achieved and also their intended outcome. A critical creative perspective and approach (McCormack and Titchen, 2006; Titchen and McCormack, 2010) facilitate this process and outcome by enabling a person to reach their full potential. This is achieved by using ‘contemporary facilitation strategies, connecting with beauty and nature and blending ancient, indigenous and spiritual traditions and Dewing’s active learning’ (Titchen et al., 2011, p 2). In the case of the critical creative reflection presented in this article, painting was used to connect with and articulate my knowing and understanding of self. Subsequently, human flourishing emerged and it became possible to use that understanding to enable the changes in my work necessary to make moral choices regarding my research.

Each painting in this article has a reflective note that conveys its meaning, to me and sometimes a shared meaning created with supervisors. In December 2016, Dr Jane Burns (an art psychotherapy lecturer at QMU and one of my PhD supervisors) and I laid out all the paintings I had created in chronological order and discussed my learning and personal journey during the initial stage of my PhD. We considered how this is reflected in the paintings and how they can be used in my own work. This reflective discussion is shown here in the *Discussion with Jane* sections. The titles of the paintings often reflect metaphors associated with concepts of critical creativity and human flourishing, such as spiraling through turbulence, movement in stillness and embodied knowing.

Figure 1



To introduce the process of self-reflection, I want to share this painting with you as an acknowledgement that the reflections that follow are part of a bigger picture. They formed as a result of a deepened and developing relationship with my whole PhD supervision team and many people beyond it. I created this painting with an intention to frame these relationships and ways of working and to describe the meanings I attach to it – colourful, exciting, fitting and beautiful.

Beginning a reflective discussion with Jane

Did I always paint?

No, I did paint a bit when I was younger but I stopped for quite a few years. I did art and painting in school but it was always graded and so lost its appeal to me. Painting then didn't feel like it does now; it didn't offer me anything more than an escape from rote learning in school. I have always been a creative person though – I am always baking or sewing or producing something. I use the creative process as a therapeutic tool and coping mechanism at times, but it is also a huge part of me, my work and my life.

What was the purpose of the painting initially?

I began painting at the beginning of my PhD following meetings with occupational therapists, held in order to carry out a context study. At first I used painting as a reflective method, but didn't understand what I was doing or how this could be helpful. I also wrote my reflections, which was the most useful part of the context study for me at the time, as I wasn't yet able to use the paintings effectively. I had never reflected in any way other than writing – this had to be done using a pen and paper to be meaningful to me. I think painting felt strange and unsettling at the beginning as I didn't understand its purpose. So I separated the reflections I had written from the paintings; the paintings weren't used at all in my context study paper. When I finished it I painted a mandala (Figure 2) as a response to the process. A mandala is defined as 'a picture that tells a story... often a circle which reveals some inner truth about yourself and the world' (Watts, 2000, p 6). I remember that it still didn't feel like part of me or make sense to me and that I didn't understand it, but I had a feeling and quite a few dreams and impulses that made me paint something circular – this was the result.

Figure 2: Mandala



Reflective note

In Figure 3 there is an explosion of colour representing the possibility of life (existence), the capability or potential of all people and the lightness of being. This contrasts harshly with an all-consuming blackness that seems to be engulfing a self that is moving towards the light and colour. There is a hint of colour – purple at the right of the picture and in the self (top left) – beneath the blackness, which signifies some hope, although it is almost entirely overwhelmed. Although the colour in this picture appears explosive and disordered, it has a clear coherence for me in that it represents the eternal and inevitable wisdom and control – in the sense of organisation and discipline – that comes with freedom. The self that is moving towards this colour does not fear the ordered disorder, or freedom, but needs to escape the blackness to join the colour.

Figure 3: Spiralling through turbulence



The discussion with Jane

I drew the explosion of colour in Figure 3 over a few days. I would spend time reading and reading and reading, and then draw part of the fireworks at the end of the day. After about a week I painted over the colour in black paint. I didn't share the painting with anybody for some weeks but eventually presented it at a Student International Community of Practice (SICoP) meeting and that was when I started to attach meaning to the painting. SICoP offers a safe space where doctoral candidates develop authentic relationships that facilitate learning and understanding of person-centred ways of being, knowing and doing. This safe space was important at the time as the people there enabled me to share deeply personal work in a creative way that felt acceptable in the space. The presentation spurred a discussion about the use of creativity in my work but the painting also had strong feelings attached to it that I felt were overwhelming, exposing or revealing, and daunting. Others' response to this painting and my response to the presentation of the painting triggered for me a moment of crisis or a turning point. The response from friends and colleagues was supportive as they acknowledged the beauty, colour and positivity in the painting, as well as the self in the painting that appears to be escaping. This marked the beginning of a process of perspective transformation that was vital in beginning to understand my self as a person-centred researcher (Mezirow, 1981; McCormack et al., 2013) and included a change from understanding learning as an individual, entirely cognitive process to seeing it as a cognitive and emotional process shared with other people and requiring inclusion of body and spirit through creativity.

Figure 4: Freedom



The discussion with Jane

Figure 4 was described by Jane and me as fluid, free and beautiful. It seemed to be a release from the previous painting and the response to it. We talked about it possibly representing the unknown of the PhD journey and the blackness that keeps reappearing as a retreat from that unknown. This led to a discussion of the unknown, enigma, mystery and 'the gap' in my work that has only now, some months later, started to become a comfortable thing or feeling. I enjoyed just looking at the painting at the time and enjoyed the beauty and freedom I associated with it. I still didn't feel comfortable with the creative process but I began to enjoy it and see the value in it. I had no words with this painting and only felt that it looked like an eye and was very beautiful. It gave me a sense that the work I had been doing had come together in some way and that was reflected in this mandala. It was not imposing and I felt a comfort in it also. I hung it on my wall in work. I added the word 'perspective' to it later and then 'The Gap' after a conversation about hermeneutics (Linge, 2008) that brought understanding of the white space in the middle of the mandala: that which is yet to be known.

I feel now that this painting represents hermeneutics in my study. Hermeneutics refers to a way of reaching the 'yet to be known' (the answer to the research question) through reflective dialogue and negotiation of perspectives. Understanding of the yet to be known is reached when consensus about the topic occurs, even for a moment. The picture represents the space in between dialogue that has not yet been discussed or agreed on. It truly was a circle that revealed some inner truth about the world as I understand it (a mandala) – the world as a place where knowledge is a shared understanding of a question or topic.

Figure 5: Disconnection and crisis



Reflective note

There are three aspects of Figure 5 that are both connected and separate from each other in one way or another. The spiral here represents the unravelling or unfolding of knowledge. The black centre of the spiral represents an infinite amount of knowledge and meaning that is partly known and partly unknown. The important or significant knowledge unravels naturally (the significance of the colour green here), slowing changing colour (to blue and green), and continues through a process of discovery. The essence of occupation and the existential roots of occupation are represented here through an energetic, undying fire that encompasses a diamond or priceless jewel to me. The black line on the edge of the red and blue sphere (the self) signifies a barrier between the self, occupation and significant knowledge that is deeply rooted, almost treelike, and that the fire seems unable to break through. However, the gradual end to the blackness and barrier to the self shows the possibility, albeit complex, of breaking through the barrier. The red and blue sphere representing the self (a person, an occupational therapist) remains open, with an apparently moving or active foundation (the blue centre) that is available and capable of action using unravelling knowledge. Thus, the essence of existentialism in occupation is there, constantly unravelling and seeking a way to burn through a barrier to reach the self. This represents a process of rediscovery, a return to the roots of occupation, in order to move forward.

The discussion with Jane

It feels like a coming together. The theme of fireworks seen in the first painting is there. An occupation was an important part of this painting that was finally coming through. There is a praxis spiral that I did not understand at the time and that Brendan McCormack, one of my PhD supervisors at QMU, explained to me when he saw this. However, the blackness in the painting still represents a 'blocking' of my ability to 'do'. The blocking was due to fear and perspective that I did not recognise at the time that I painted it and first interpreted it. There is movement in the painting, but not all of the components have come together to facilitate 'doing'. The white spaces that are beginning to develop

in these paintings are significant as they probably represent space to breath, or what I would now call a stillness that facilitates progress in my work (movement in stillness). It has also been useful in identifying areas of significance in my work. The unknown is 'workable' and useful, as opposed to blocking. Jane also felt that the change in our ways of working together and a discussion we had back in August 2016 about incorporating creativity into our work together is reflected in the paintings and the emerging feeling of freedom in them.

Figure 6: Energising forces



The discussion with Jane

Figure 6 has the most memory attached to it for me. It was created at the end of the Enhancing Practice Conference in September 2016, in response to a lot of discussion at the conference about safety and vulnerability and the lines of vulnerability and understanding that we cross in our work. It doesn't make sense that there is no space in this and that it is less fluid than some of the previous paintings, as I felt I was in a better place and doing better with my work at the time of the conference. However, we agreed there is always movement back and forth in the learning journey and that even though this painting is fuller it doesn't have the sinister feel of some of the earlier ones. The quality of the lines isn't the same as that in previous pictures; the blackness underneath the colour is overcome in some ways.

This sparked a discussion about how this process of movement back and forth across the lines of vulnerability and understanding fits with critical creativity. I feel and see the synchronicity between this work, these paintings and critical creativity. The 'criticality' doesn't feel right to me yet. Transformation is the key issue here: is there potential for transformation within a hermeneutic understanding, specifically perspective transformation? Or is critical theory essential? Is the language of critical theory helpful? What I understood of critical creativity at the time of this discussion was that it used metaphors and creativity to transform critical theory language into something beautiful. It has also added the moral intent of human flourishing that makes it different and useful in the context of the TAP study and defines it from critical theory. This part of the discussion is a powerful example of how critical creativity has offered me a way of asking questions and developing understanding of my work.

Figures 7-9: Embodied knowing



Reflective note

Figure 7 (top left) represents light and energy emerging from praxis. Brendan McCormack and I never agreed if it was one or the other but I understand the metaphor of ‘energising forces’ in the critical creativity literature that represents transformation through moments of ‘crisis’ that trigger a need for change. While I still see light in this painting, I also know that when I painted it I was full of energy and was beginning to feel that change that could not be reversed or undermined had truly happened. So, the idea of energy is useful and entirely appropriate here. I also see and now understand intentional use of creativity and metaphors to identify learning and change.

Discussion with Jane

Jane looked at Figure 7 and said she saw transparency, which was interesting as I hadn’t shown her how I had connected the top pictures (Figures 7 and 8) and repainted them on transparent acetate sheets (Figure 9). This comment confirmed that I have become aware of the processes that are happening that connect to critical creativity. This seems to be why I am now, as I continue my PhD, aware of the intentional use of metaphor in our working together. We discussed where transparency comes from and when it comes, and thought it emerges as a result of engaging in critical reflection. It also comes from embodiment of a way of being that frees our thoughts and makes everything more transparent. We linked this to the ‘reflection on human flourishing’ piece (see page 13), which felt like an embodiment of everything we talk about and want and know and don’t know – the sun, the moon, the earth, the stars, and everything else there is and everything beyond that.

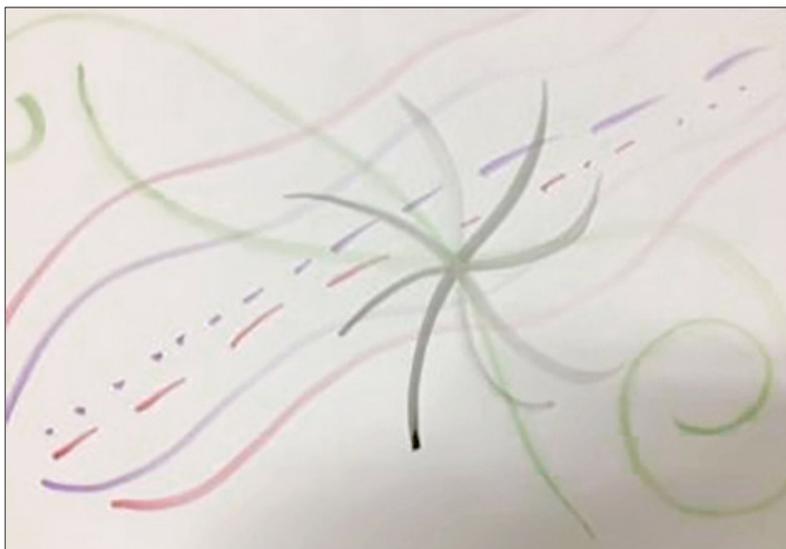
We discussed what the paintings actually mean when they are layered and joined together. The background and the fading out of paint are the emerging foreground and background. The praxis spiral is on top of the background and is underpinned by the values or concepts of creativity, vision, purpose, togetherness and stories. The light and energy (white paint) emerging from this is the energy and transparency emerging from actually doing critical creativity.

Jane mentioned at this point that it felt very complex and that I was beginning to identify the layers involved in my work. I said I had tried and wanted to understand layers but still didn't know what it meant. She said layers may not be a useful way of thinking about the work as they suggest hiding aspects of it, which could explain my struggle to understand. She suggested thinking instead about aspects of the work as emerging and connected but transparent. So, I think of it as peeling back of layers now to expose the unknown or yet to be known, rather than a building up of layers.

Jane and I discussed how we could use all these paintings in a way that keeps them alive and incorporates them into my work. I was aware Brendan had suggested I use 'faction' to tell a story about the more difficult parts of this work, such as writing about my prejudgements and values and beliefs. I acknowledged I wasn't keen to discuss this further when he suggested it as it felt uncomfortable, but intuition is telling me it is the right thing to do. Everything I do now is about telling a story through creativity, even this piece of writing. The idea that faction may also be a useful way to present cases in my work came to me when Jane and I were discussing the aims of the PhD work. So, the paintings may be used in my PhD thesis as a tool to tell the 'factional' story of the study and learning process, the work with occupational therapists and people living with dementia and their caregivers throughout the PhD. This is another example of how a critical creative discussion can subtly change perspective and facilitate new understanding.

We talked about the importance and power of the journey I have been on and the pivotal nature of the perspective transformation I have had. It has facilitated movement in and understanding of my work so far. It seems to me now that all that I needed was to be and embrace my self in order to do what I needed to do and what I wanted to do – so simple.

Figure 10: Movement in stillness



Reflective note

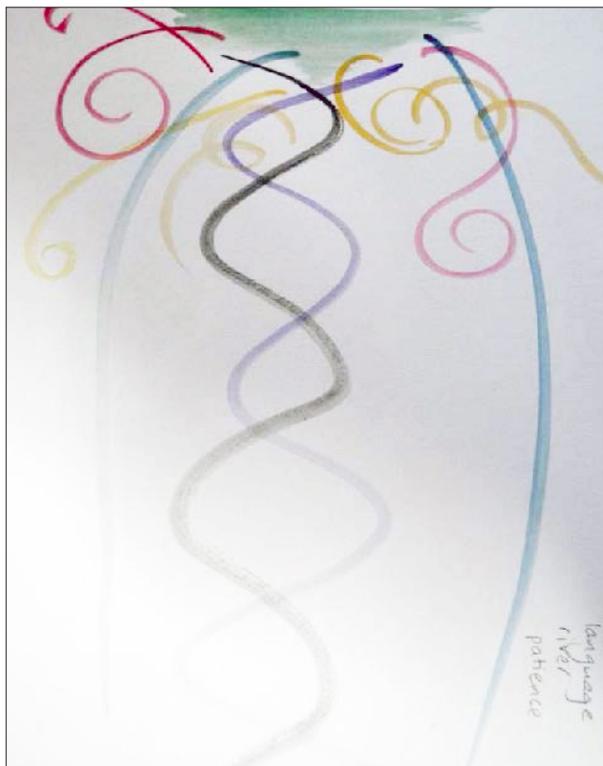
Figure 10 came after my realisation that what I have been doing and creating over the past few months is my study methodology. I had reached a cognitive roadblock and hadn't been able to write anything further after my reflection on human flourishing, so I painted. This painting seemed very simple and

didn't really speak to me in any way until I returned to the critical creativity paper that outlines the methodological framework for human flourishing (Titchen and McCormack, 2010). The black spiral in the middle mirrors the critical creativity spiral in the framework, although it differs in that the background represents multiple praxis spirals and an ongoing process (it looks like a road to me). So, I understand it as human flourishing happening along the PhD journey and human flourishing that is essential for praxis, unfolding, seeing, understanding and transformation.

Discussion with Jane

At the time that I painted this I needed a 'pause' and hoped for movement in stillness, so I took a few days. There is definitely process and movement in the painting, which is a good thing and represents balance in my way of being.

Figure 11: Strengths-focused work



I painted this (Figure 11) at a SICoP virtual writing retreat during the first checking-in and goal-setting session.

Discussion with Jane

I set strength and flowing as my intentions for the writing retreat when I painted this, and remembered making a decision to focus on what I do know and converting that to language, letting the work flow and being comfortable with chaos and the unknown. I used strengths based-language with myself throughout the day. I did not plan exactly what I wanted to write, so I just started writing where I was at in terms of understanding philosophy and theory. This approach and intention setting facilitated a moment of realisation during the writing session when I understood that perspective transformation was the key connection between all the work I was doing at the time.

Figure 12: Human flourishing, human becoming and occupation



I painted this (Figure 12) at the SICoP virtual writing retreat during the last checking-in and goal-setting session.

Discussion with Jane

This painting was a response to the writing I had done at the writing retreat and signified the re-emergence of occupation from the critical creativity spiral. I connected it with human flourishing as one of the theoretical assumptions that underpins critical creativity. We talked about how critical creativity, in its person-centredness, facilitates human flourishing (what I used to consider wellbeing) and human becoming (what I used to consider an outcome of successful engagement in occupation). Jane and I introduced the idea that we have come full circle to the re-emergence of occupation and becoming that are blocked at the beginning of my work (see Disconnection and crisis painting, Figure 5). However, the existence and importance of occupation, flourishing and becoming are now transparent in my ongoing PhD work. We asked ourselves: is this journey the map of the study?

Finally

Some of the extra paintings that follow do not symbolise pivotal moments in my journey. However, they do represent different concepts of critical creativity and are helpful to facilitate thinking about how these concepts feed into the PhD journey and the work we are doing.

Figure 13: Critical companionship



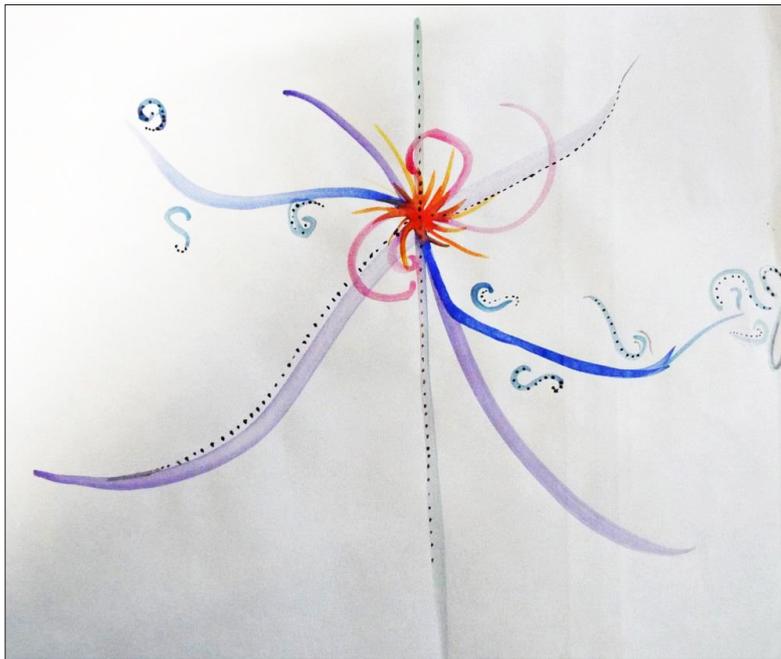
Figure 13 is a framing of a new way of working that feels colourful, exciting, fitting and beautiful. The blackness has emerged but in a positive, holding-onto-the-good-stuff kind of way. The way of working is connected with and emerging from a kind of chaotic, spiraling process that is everything – not really good or bad, just life.

Figure 14: Flowing with turbulence



Figure 14 is another slightly chaotic image but it is also beautiful. It also has many praxis spirals that represent the constancy of unfolding of understanding, no matter the situation. There is a faint critical creativity symbol in the middle of this painting (in yellow) that reminds me that even when we are experiencing difficulty or turbulence there is goodness and critical creativity that facilitates flowing. Finally, there is a heart at the very centre of this painting – energy, self, flourishing, warmth, love.

Figure 15: My ancient traditions



Hinduism, yoga, buddhism, Carl Jung, mandalas, me (Figure 15).

Conclusion

What has this meant for me and my work?

These paintings and their accompanying reflections are intended to tell the story of a learning journey. The change that has happened over the past few months is evident, even in the quality and spirit of the paintings alone.

I wrote an email recently saying this has changed my life and my work. While I was writing this I was asked also to explain a little of what that means. This short reflection on human flourishing that I wrote for my supervision team and SICoP colleagues and friends outlines the meaning of this transformation.

A reflection on human flourishing

I want to share a reflection with you about human flourishing. I realised recently that I usually only write about difficult and challenging experiences that I have and that the reflections and observations I do make are usually related to progression of my work. I wanted to write about this as I'm not sure that we talk about or share the goodness in our work and in our lives enough.

Last Friday I was on my way home and noticed I was feeling something I have never actually felt, or perhaps never noticed feeling, before. Actually it was a combination of feelings that I wrote down. Here they are: peaceful, connected, content, challenged, motivated, colourful. I don't think all of these things make complete sense beside each other, but I can try to explain. I was entirely aware during the day that I had a lot of work still to do, but I only felt excited and challenged by it, not overwhelmed or, as I have felt before, totally paralysed by fear of the work. I found absolute joy and love in it. This helped me to get on with my work and work in the way that I feel best.

For the first time I think, I managed to translate the creative expressions I had made into something concrete (a piece of writing) that I felt I entirely understood. This went way beyond my own work though; I felt able to give something back to other people – family, friends, and colleagues. I felt totally present and connected with everybody that I spent time with that day. I was able to continue my own work while connecting with and enjoying the company of the people around me,

help another through their own difficulties and connect with friends completely, without a selfish attachment to my own life and work. And finally, I went for a walk around Arthur's Seat, in the hills of Edinburgh, on my way home without thinking about it or planning it – a strange thing for me to do; I was connected with nature and to my own energy. I can honestly say that, in a very ordinary way, it was the best day I have had and reminded me how much I love and appreciate my life. This is what human flourishing means to me. Before, when I thought about human flourishing, I saw or thought about flowers and colour. Feeling it is so much more. I can also say today, four days later, as I write this that even though I have flu and feel awful physically, I have not lost the contentment with my work and the motivation to continue to do the work I am doing. This feeling is incredibly powerful, enduring, comforting and exciting.

I had a virtual meeting yesterday with friends and SICoP colleagues and there are three things I want to pick up on from that meeting. First, I was asked how I was feeling and how my work was going, which is a usual part of our weekly meetings. I described what I was feeling as 'movement in stillness'. I felt a little hysterical (in a good way) when I read the metaphorical meaning of movement in stillness in the critical creativity literature later that day. Yes, the time for reflection and the space that I had finally allowed myself to have has created a massive movement in me that has facilitated an understanding of my own work. Second, somebody asked me how I got to this point. I said it was a combination of factors but the things that stand out for me at the moment are a change in relationships and ways of working with my PhD supervisors, and having a group of friends who challenge me in a safe, supportive, giving way. Finally, somebody asked me if I could bottle this feeling and send it to them. This is my way of bottling it.

This reflection indicated the significance to me of human flourishing for living a good, productive, happy, challenging, connected life. This feeling of flourishing has grown out of a huge effort to understand my self and my work, which was facilitated by critical creative reflection.

I wrote in the reflection that I had become aware of the processes that were occurring as I was living the learning. The reflection on human flourishing and its emergence as a result of my engagement in the critical creative process brought about an awareness of my use of and the value of an active learning approach (Dewing, 2010) in my work. The critical creative reflection that was facilitated by my supervisors equates to the beginning of an active learning process – personal reflection. This did move me into a state of readiness to take a step forward with my research. It facilitated understanding of the process that I will be asking other people to engage with and, yes, created a kind of map for my research. Finally, the purpose and value of a critical creativity worldview, which blends creative processes with contemporary facilitation strategies, ancient traditions and active learning in order to nurture human flourishing, is evident in this work.

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Acknowledgements

The PhD study referred to in this article has been funded by [Alzheimer Scotland](#).

I would like to thank all those who have been there during and facilitated this learning process and the development of this reflection, including my supervisory team at Queen Margaret University: Dr. Duncan Pentland, Dr. Jane Burns and Professor Brendan McCormack.

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