Pathways into Creativity and Place for Adult Learning:
A Dialogue Between a Researcher and an Artist

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share how two friends approach creativity in their professional lives in research and in the arts, and what we have learned through insights into places that impact this work. Our different approaches are reflected in our positionalities: one author is an emerging arts-informed researcher and university instructor, and the other author is a practising fine arts craftsperson and part-time faculty member. Our close friendship and ongoing conversations serve to connect our approaches to working with the arts, even as our attitudes to creativity and learning are demarcated. Relayed in the form of dialogue in response to guiding questions, this article is an expansive discussion of what work in the arts can look like, and how the interplay of creativity and place afford as-yet-untapped pathways of understanding that better suit contemporary conditions of life and study.

Keywords: Art; qualitative research; place; creativity; learning.

Introduction

In many ways, we the authors of this paper (Stephanie and Rachel) are similar: we enjoy being outdoors, we work with and in the arts, and we are involved with educating adults. We are very close friends, and have been for years, but we differ in the ways in which art is a function of our profession. These similarities and differences make for interesting conversations about our perspectives about the world, and how we approach learning in or influenced by the arts that may be worthwhile to other artists, researchers, or hybrid practitioners.

We conceived of this piece as a dialogue/discussion between two female arts professionals who carry out creative work. The places where we do this work, places that permit and resist creativity for us, initially appeared to be distinct, but as we respond(ed) to changing employment, and indeed global, conditions, we found points of overlap in the materialities of art, characteristics of creativity, and a poststructuralist/more-than-human understanding about places, whether near or far. We believe that these points, and how we explore them, reflect contemporary, agile, and extended thinking about skills of making and imagining that expands the field of knowledge around talent development and creativity.

Rather than cleave to academic discourse, and since widespread sharing of a resonant artistic form is logistically challenging, we decided to explore these ideas through a dialogue. Here we have generated questions about the nature of creativity and the challenges of defining places for the purposes of learning; we have responded to these questions through a dialogue that reflects the ebbs and flows of our usual discussions–it is excited, sometimes argumentative, seeks clarification, reflects varying knowledges, prompts other avenues of thought, and is informed by our particular passions for expression and connection.

Background

We met in a continuing education class run at an art and design university in Canada. Rachel was the course instructor in throwing (pottery), and Stephanie a novice student in that class. Confident she would soon be revealed as a ceramics prodigy, Stephanie asked Rachel to evaluate her artistic potential – Rachel replied firmly that Stephanie likely had strengths in other forms of art-making. That honest and humourous appraisal birthed a deep and committed eight-year friendship to date. In large part, our friendship relies on our shared interests in adult teaching and learning, in the arts, and in new and unique ways of combining them.

Stephanie is the academic, with degrees in English literature and education. Her doctoral work explored how interacting with material objects in public places and ensuing awareness of multiple social purposes fosters adults' informal learning. Rachel has a Master of Fine Arts degree and experience from several artistic residencies; she teaches undergraduate ceramics courses while maintaining her own small pottery business. When we get together, our talks inevitably turn to challenges associated with higher education: everything from contract status to specific teaching activities to online learning engagement. Our differences are evident: Stephanie is the overthinker, and comfortable in the abstract realm, while Rachel is firmly grounded in materials, techniques, and hand-built moulded forms–but we often call on one another to balance out the richness of our respective approaches.

Our approaches are further distinguished by the places wherein we operate: Stephanie is proud of her nomadic practice, in which the place where her creativity lies is almost wholly cerebral (barring a laptop and notebook or two) and therefore eminently portable. In contrast, Rachel has recently built a beautiful, purpose-built studio, a glorious, *in media reas* mess signifying the working artist. Inside are several tables covered in canvas, a kiln about 5 feet in diameter, buckets of glaze, buckets of water, buckets of rags, and hundreds of ceramic mugs, vases, bowls, and animal figures in various stages of drying and glazing. One place immaterial, one place for the making: but both infused by creativity to help organize, generate, and interrogate learning processes.

These were the realizations that prompted us to propose and deliver a presentation in 2019 for the Canadian Association for Studies in Adult Education conference. The conference theme, "Creating Learning Spaces that Encourage Inclusion and Respect Diversity", inspired us to explain how creative spaces are realized differently for each of us, and speculate about what we glean from the opportunities for learning when we consider where we learn in the world and within ourselves.

Of course, this was prior to COVID-19 and the massive impacts on physical space that emerged from public safety measures forbidding large-scale social gatherings and attendance in public places (Government of Nova Scotia). COVID-19 also shifted professional expectations, relocating our work within virtual environments. This shift affected us substantially, and we recognized similarities in our work thrown into relief by the worldwide pandemic: we had to practice resiliency, and adapt settings that had not heretofore needed careful monitoring, and consider place access, and continue to work amidst unprecedented conditions of being. Our challenges and triumphs brought us to point of wonder whether others had encountered similar learnings, and we came to realize that creativity and our respective places might have valuable insights for other academics and practitioners in the arts.

After some discussion about the form this contemplation could take, we decided to offer a dialogue typical of our conversations – prompted by a single query, wide-ranging, informed by multiple sources of formal and informal knowing, and reaching points of contemplative rest rather than resolution – to share how we differently approach creativity, and the different places where we do so, with the understanding that places themselves are not stable entities for sure footing.

Our dialogue begins with short story-selves, from Stephanie and Rachel, explaining our backgrounds and interests relevant to thinking about creativity and places for learning, and especially the ways in which these have overlapped in our recent circumstances. Following these stories, we present three questions we used to initiate dialogue on arts-work, creativity, and places for learning for an artist and an academic.

Stephanie's story

I am the first to admit that I like playing. Even now, mid-way through my working years and my life, I am more than happy to engage in games and pick up toys and challenge myself with puzzles and brain teasers. My insistence on finding different approaches and new ideas to all tasks was never really characterized for me as a creative impulse; it was only as I grew older that I began to see it was a facility that not everyone shared.

Throughout my schooldays, I took part in every play, poetry or writing contest, music or talent show, and then later choir, band, amateur theatre, the school newspaper, and art class; anything that involved expression or imagination or sensibility was top of my list. Academically, too, I majored in literature and drama for my first degree, but also became interested in the intricacies of academic writing and its codes and patterns allowing for better marks. I moved from play to analysis, finding myself fascinated by the ways to approach assignments that got the point across, but ideally in an innovative fashion. The culmination was my introduction during graduate study in Adult Education to arts-informed research, an interpretivist research methodology that seeks "to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible" (Cole and Knowles, 2008, p. 59). With the word 'alternative,' I was hooked. Any opportunity to take a more creative approach to research was certainly going to resonate with me.

Ultimately, I chose to do a doctoral degree in Education with a focus on informal learning, to understand better where and how adults learn outside of a classroom setting. My research examined how public places' material objects may prompt adults' informal learning, regardless of topic or field. Using arts-informed research to guide my information-gathering, I asked my research participants to draw on empty site maps those objects that they found enabled some kind of learning. The variety of drawings produced (Fig. 1) were somewhere in between realistic representation (identifiable people and paths, flowers and foliage) and symbolic evocations. Their resistance to meaning-making was so thought-provoking that these images are what birthed my research in its final form: the kinetic sculptural form of a mobile, where the tantalizing shapes could hang from various branches and interact with the setting in which it was placed. The number of connections between the objects, my idea, and this artistic form keep accumulating.

Figure 1: Collage of place-related material objects for adults' informal learning.

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm did not compensate for my inability to actually build a mobile, which is surprisingly, staggeringly difficult, requiring knowledge of engineering and physics far beyond my comprehension. When I shared my despair about yet another failed mobile with Rachel, she kindly advised me it was possible to hire an artist to make what I had conceived. Supportive to the

end, Rachel is also unabashedly skeptical when it comes to my skills at material creation – "strengths in other forms", indeed.

But the places portion of my work took on a larger-than-life aspect, too. From theorist Tim Ingold, I found that places are constantly rupturing and resurfacing, never the constant landscapes we assume or prefer them to be:

> Consider the fluxes of the world—the wind and weather, the ever-changing skies, the turn of the tides, the run of the river, the movements of animals, and the growth of plants. To hunt and fish, to farm, to set sail, indeed to carry out almost any kind of livelihood on land or at sea, it is necessary to attune your movements, and the timing of your activities, so as to catch the moment when the forces that conspire to the success of your enterprise are in favorable alignment. The world is not always ready and waiting; you have also to be ready and waiting for the world (Ingold, 2018, pp. 42-43).

I was then and am still now astonished to find that where we are is equally as important as whatever we may do there. Creativity is in partnership with its locale.

Rachel's story

I've always been a creative person, though I never thought of myself as one. Whether my parents knew it or not, from a very young age they provided me with the space to play, problem solve and create. With such room for imagination, everything was possible. I remember early on, when I was 6 or 7, I got a Fisher Price camera. Enamoured with National Geographic and having grown up with Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom on Sunday night (after the Magical World of Disney of course), I built myself a blind in our backyard out of lawn furniture and photographed the "wildlife". This was in Montreal, so the "wildlife" was grey squirrels, but the experience of quietly sitting in my not-so-invisible blind, photographing the world around me, was one I never forgot.

Since that time and many times over, I have found myself building myself new spaces to occupy. For many years, I would move annually to a new city and studio. Packing only what I could carry on my back and shipping just 2 boxes with all my tools, I would start from scratch each time, building a new workspace in whatever space I'd been assigned. I learned to be creative, adaptable and frugal, scrounging for what I could use in my studio space. As I've gotten older and more settled down, I've now got a permanent studio. This space was one that I was able to design, as I built it from scratch. But with a limited budget, creativity is still necessary as I find ways to make the most of the entire space that now contains a full working ceramics studio. I think of this as a good challenge though, to use creativity and problem solving skills to suss out the best solutions for my studio and to know that flexibility is a long term tool. To this end, I build most things in my studio with wheels and never shy away from moving things around to try different configurations. This freedom allows me to adapt my space to my various needs.

Adapting and playing with the space around me has also become an approach in the work that I make. These spaces and the work I install are arrived at through observation and experimentation. Not every ceramic element works in every natural space. I experiment with location and materials until I create a site-specific ceramic installation that works within, and as part of, the natural environment.

We documented a series of conversations in which we shared our thoughts and values about learning, particularly the importance of place in doing so, and the role that creativity plays in that interaction. Rachel suggested that it would be engaging to publish our discussion in the manner of our back-and-forth conversation. In the dialogue, or Interludes, that follows, Stephanie conceived of the general questions, which were then shaped and clarified by Rachel, in order to prompt and direct our discussion. These conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed; they have only been edited for clarity and sentence structure. After this dialogue is a summary from each author about future challenges in our respective fields, and how we have learned to modify our approaches to support these nascent opportunities of creativity, place, and learning. Finally, we insert a 'stopping point',

rather than a conclusion, to our discussion to emphasize the new pathways for learning we have found in our arts-work and the inspiration we take in the adaptability of places.

Interlude/ Dialogue 1

We carry out our professional work in profoundly different settings: on one hand, there is an artist's studio, which has a floor and walls and equipment and shapes and tools; on the other hand, there is (sometimes) a desk or a computer or a notepad – minimalist to the nth degree. Tuan (1977) wrote that "place is space with meaning" (p. 3), but our 'places' of work seem to mean things that are largely incompatible with one another. Would you say it's even sensible to compare the different places in which two people do such different work?

Rachel:

When I think about space initially, I, of course, immediately go to the idea of a space with four walls and equipment and the things that you need to create something. But that's sort of a knee jerk reaction. And once I get beyond that, I think about making and creating as not necessarily needing specific tools in which to create.

Stephanie:

That surprises me, because I think of your art practice as so materially-based; I mean, you are literally pulling your raw materials out of the earth! You prepare and shape the clay with your hands, and carve it with purpose-built tools. I can come up with several different ideas for research articles while I'm in the shower, or washing dishes – I don't need the intervention of the natural world at all. I would really have believed that an artist working in ceramics works from the perspective of physical possibility first.

Rachel:

Now, it depends on the kind of work that you make, and your take on art. Some people require very specific tools and equipment (I'm a moldmaker rather than a handbuilder, which means I pour clay into plaster forms and once those dry, I have a uniform set of vases, or bowls, or mugs, or what have you), and that's how they express themselves. But being creative can move beyond the material, or at least specific materials, so that it's more about the idea than it is about needing specific spaces in which to create it.

Stephanie:

That point of view is similar to one I read, from Hinchcliffe (2003), who wrote that "there are ways of engaging with landscapes and natures that refuse to see either as pure culture . . . or as raw matter . . . The intention is to avoid any understanding of nature that reduces 'it' to primary . . . properties" (p. 207). I'm getting more and more the sense that looking at a place and believing that we know all about it, its qualities and its potential, as an homogenous and unproblematic locale is not just uninformed thinking, but thinking that leads directly to a resource-driven approach to the world around us.

Rachel:

I think about Andy Goldsworthy [a British artist born in 1956], who was famous for building site-specific installations made entirely from the materials found in the local environment. And they were temporary; they weren't designed to withstand time. In fact, they were explicitly affected by time, in that, through the course of nature and the environment, the installations dissolved and blew away and broke up. These moments that he created and documented were gone; they were lost back into nature.

Stephanie:

That's a lovely phrase, 'lost back into nature.' Lost from people, from humanity's reach, perhaps, but is anything in nature 'lost' in the way we understand the word to mean?

Rachel:

True. So I think about his work, and the idea of space, then the idea of creating. He's just one example, you know: you get other artists who require enormous teams and equipment and resources to create their work. And I don't think either way discounts the other, they're just different approaches to making work. There's something to be said, though, when the things that allow you to be more creative are, in some ways, taken away from you. You know, do those needs for lots of materials or specific places to put art become crutches? If you don't have access to teams of people helping you or certain kinds of equipment, does it stifle you? And if it does, then what is your creativity or practice about?

Stephanie:

I feel the same way about being creative as a researcher who is also an academic instructor. I remember being frustrated with my chemistry class in high school, because they would call these things 'experiments', yet if you did not follow the exact process laid out for you, in exactly the ways instructed, then your experiment was a failure? That seemed to me to be massively at odds with the spirit of experimentation, and discovery, that I try to cultivate in the learners I encounter. Now I work on knowledge generation that isn't specific to a place, and my process isn't limited to a particular place. The distinction you note about approaches to art, and my disciplinary licence for any place in carrying out research has a connection to cosmopolitanism, I think. In the call for papers for this journal, Dr. David Hansen (2009) noted that cosmopolitanism can be thought of as "reflective openness to the world combined with reflective loyalty to the local" (n.p.). The first half of that statement certainly puts me in mind of creative characteristics, even if what we do is repeat a series of steps: we know that the outcome(s) will differ.

Interlude/Dialogue 2

Most scholars and theorists working to define creativity fail to agree on what it means. For instance, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) writes that "Studying individuals to determine how creative they were was like listening to one hand clapping" (p. xxi), while Arne Dietrich (2019) notes that "we do not have, at this point, a single cognitive or neural mechanism to explain the extraordinary creative capacities of an Einstein or a Shakespeare" (p. 1). Other authors, such as Cho and Vitale (2019), Karwowski and Wiśniewska (2020), and Silvia et al. (2014) concede that there is no consensus on what constitutes creativity. From your practice and experience, what do you feel are the specific skills that indicate creativity in an artist, and in a researcher?

Stephanie:

This is a question I find hard to answer, because the concept of creativity itself implies a kind of shifting, or ability to morph, between ideas and positions and settings. This is why I'm drawn to work with arts-informed research methodology and artistic inquiries, where the researcher looks for new and different ways to communicate knowledge, and to work with/in communities outside of academia (Cole and Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2018; Walsh, 2018). I enjoy the challenge of finding unique, innovative, and resonant ways to portray understanding. Yet, I find myself now cleaving more strongly to a systematic research process, such as developing a research question, doing a literature review, collecting data, etc. I don't know if this is good for me, because in times of worry, I tend to tighten up and become very cautious and conservative. I once taught a talented writing student who submitted an assignment in which she reimagined Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* as a sci-fi opera. Conceptually it was a wonderful idea, and fairly well designed, but it didn't correspond with the no-holds-barred positivism of my marking rubric, so I felt I had to tell her it was not suitable for submission. But creatively? It was absolutely a home run.

Rachel:

Creativity is a pretty hard thing to define. I often think, who am I to judge who is creative and who is not? I know from an academic perspective or my many years of training that some things I like, and sometimes I see creative elements, but then those might not be pushed very far; the elements haven't evolved, or that person is just scratching the surface. In general, an element in the creative process is definitely passion; that indicates creativity in artists or research. You have to be passionate about

whatever you're interested in pursuing artistically, just like you would be in researching. Research and creativity are not that dissimilar.

Stephanie:

I wouldn't have put passion as an element of research, but you're right; I think it does fit. I always joked that I spent a lot of time designing my doctoral research so that my topic was something I could imagine wouldn't bore me after seven years of research on it!

Rachel:

Well, we assign research to this idea of more scholarly/scientific things, but creativity is no different. Being creative involves a huge amount of research, whether it's historical research or research into contemporary works, or research into methods and materials, or research into specific things that you know might be required to figure out, like engineering a piece of work. You still have to figure out how to do that thing, maybe within certain parameters. If you're working in a gallery space, or you're doing a public commission, you don't just have free rein to do anything. You still have to take into consideration accessibility and environment and all kinds of different things. So creativity then reaches another level –

Stephanie:

A pragmatic one?

Rachel:

Yes, unless that means something different in research. You might have some creative idea that you want to pursue, but then you have to also put it into the framework of where it's going to go or what it's going to do, and then that requires a certain amount of creativity.

Stephanie:

There's that part about place having a role to play.

Rachel:

My idea of being creative might be very different from somebody else's idea of being creative, and that's what gives us so much variety. I don't always have to agree with what somebody is doing, but I think if it hits a certain mark, I can still respect it, or I can still appreciate it.

Stephanie:

And by hitting a mark, you mean…?

Rachel:

If it lacks that connection to me in some way, if it lacks honesty, or I sometimes call it soul, but it misses the mark if it lacks authenticity or honesty. But somebody else might feel differently. They might read into it differently than I do, and that's sort of what makes it interesting: creativity doesn't have to read the same to every single person. Maybe that's when a creative endeavour becomes more successful; there's no one way to interpret it.

Stephanie:

It's funny you say that, because I find adult learners more and more these days are really reluctant to find out things for themselves, or experiment on the basis of their own ideas. They are hesitant to offer dissenting opinions: they want a pre-determined writing topic with a certain number of words or pages, rather than simply seeing what is produced if they put time and effort into exploring an idea. I want to add courage as an element to creativity. I think you have to be willing to stand out, and assert – not your individualism, because I think that's a political misrepresentation – but your *sui generis,* the youness, which then, as you say, people can take or leave.

Rachel:

And I think being creative never really takes a break. It's like a state of mind, I guess, more than anything. You constantly see things that inspire you, or that you're intrigued by, and I tend to think about what I could do with it, or how I could include it into my work. So always being open, in yourself, to creativity and its possibilities. Creativity for me is about being open and observant. When I think about some of my installation work, in the past, it has started with a specific location or a specific kind of maybe technical challenge that I'm interested in investigating. And at other times, it's just about a feeling I have or an observation I've made while I'm out walking or thinking about something that I've seen. Creativity for me isn't like a bolt of lightning striking me; it's the accumulation of thousands of thoughts and thousands of observations, whether they're conscious or unconscious, that eventually just coalesce into an idea or coalesce into a direction.

Even with students, one of the things I try to do with them is to give them the space to explore, and have conversations around those explorations. They might respond immediately to an assignment or an inspiration as a starting point, and so I'll ask them, 'How can we develop this further? How can we delve deeper into it? How can we get more from this idea?' What's interesting is that once I had a student tell me that they like to take time off from thinking creatively. And I was interested by this because I never considered thinking creativity to be a burden that I needed to take time off from. For me, creativity isn't just about making things in the real world, which I can honestly say can be at times stressful, but it's also playful for me, in my mind. In my imagination, I don't always have to make things come to fruition. Sometimes I just like thinking about things and playing with ideas and building things in my mind while I work on something, and occasionally this eventually becomes something concrete, and sometimes it just stays in my imagination. So, I was interested in that statement by the student because I've never tried 'turning off' my creativity or wanted to turn it off. It's become such a part of my everyday life – that inner creative dialogue, that inner creative voice that is so much a part of who I am now – that it would be like losing a limb if I were to get rid of it.

Stephanie:

I'm always kind of surprised when someone refers to me as a 'creative' individual, almost as though I haven't done enough to earn that distinction. But I like coming up with new ideas, and different associations – I'll always try to design new exercises for learners in my courses – although my ideas often emerge quite quickly. I don't think I've ever cultivated that skill, if it is one, but I certainly don't regret having it, either.

Rachel:

Sometimes, what helps is realizing that you have a whole lifetime to explore your practice or your research, so you don't have to try to cram it all into one sitting, or one month, or whatever. You can let things percolate. But to some extent that has to be intentional. It comes down to, what is your practice? What are your creative goals? Are you somebody who wants to create lots of work and who wants to be in lots of exhibitions and shows? Or are you interested in working on a different schedule? Or are you somebody who's an artist, but also a parent who has a full-time job doing unrelated things? For that person, creativity takes on a different timescape for what you can do.

Stephanie:

The intentionality piece, as well as the idea of letting ideas simmer, is familiar to me from my work in informal learning. The challenge with informal learning is that you have to recognize it occurs, which can largely make learning intentional and therefore goal-driven, when truthfully much informal learning is tacit, as Polyani (1966) noted. That is a difficult opportunity for learners to grasp, not because it is a complex thought, but because there's very little in our society that values slow, indeterminate growth. But I agree with you that creativity needn't only be a lightbulb switching on; sometimes it can be hotplate, warming up gradually.

Interlude/Dialogue 3

More-than-human understanding believes that humans are entwined in complex relationships with animals, plants, and other organic life of our world, and that these relationships actually play a part in how humans live, interact, and flourish. What are the ways in which we can apply this thinking to places – that are constantly shifting and being refreshed by human and organic forces – so that humans can begin to identify how places shape who we are and what we do, especially for the purposes of creative generation and for learning?

Rachel:

I think humans are intrinsically connected to nature, but that has been so bastardized over centuries that this idea that we have of beautiful relationships with the natural world are no longer really accurate. I look at my own experience, going out into nature and being absorbed by it and finding beauty in it; and yet, I know that it's not actually a representation of what nature was like 1000 years ago because of human involvement and interaction. Even if the trees look grown up, I know that they were logged probably in the last 50 years, and had been logged over and over repeatedly, for many, many centuries, especially after Europeans arrived in North America. So, in the back of my mind, it's almost impossible to find – I put this in quotes – 'undisturbed areas' of natural splendor. I don't think that any really exist anymore on the planet. When I'm in nature, or looking to it, it seems to be a misconception that it is pure anymore, or untouched.

Stephanie:

It sounds like to your mind, we're always already at a remove from nature because of industrialization and commercialization. That the places where we live and play and work are shells of their former selves because of human interference. I see this as more of a divergence, possibly because of my own lack of understanding of the natural world. I find places with evidence of human entanglement, and really obvious entanglement, like built urban spaces and high-density housing, distinct from seemingly untouched areas. I remember thinking about this when I go camping, that there's a chance the place I'm in – the trees, that particular leaf I reached up to touch, or the river I dipped my fingers into – has been untouched for years. Until I came along, that is.

Rachel:

I think about adaptability, and what that looks like. Where I live, in the countryside, it's very windy; when we get storms, I think about the trees that are around my home. So, on the one hand, I choose to live in the country, and I choose to live in a wooded area. And on the other hand, human impact on the planet for climate change is increasing the kinds of storms we're getting, and the kinds of winds we're getting, which then puts the trees in and around my property, in danger of falling onto the property in which I live. And I find that to be a very strange, paradoxical position to be in. This push-and-pull is usually behind my creative approach; I made one piece where I'd inserted chia seeds onto the surface of the clay, and I was on a strict watering schedule to ensure they'd grow. In other words, their existence was only due to my intervention. I was creating an entirely unsustainable natural environment that relied on human involvement to survive. But I can hold these two incompatible beliefs at the same time: even with work that is about the destruction of nature, I still use principles of beauty and design. That constant tension of human-nature interaction is incredibly creative, I find.

Stephanie:

I completely agree that adaptability is an attitude we need to cultivate now, not only for life generally, pandemic responses and so on, but also because a lot of our bravado about the physical world relies on confidence that it doesn't change, or that we are in charge of making changes to it.

Rachel:

I find that really frustrating, especially when it comes to urban-rural dividing lines. I know the environmental argument for people to move into cities (Building, 2018), for instance, where urban residential living can be built upwards and take up a small area rather than a wider area. But I don't think people are meant to live together in a concentrated place like that. If that is the direction society

is taking, as a way to reduce the impact on nature, how do we not end up in concrete jungles? Because we also know that people do not do well when they are isolated from nature. And then that in turn affects people's attitudes about living in the countryside: don't move to the country if you want to make it into a city. It's not some 'before' picture of a city. If you don't want to move to the country to accept what living in the countryside is like, then stay in the city. But maybe one answer is to consider more living spaces in cities that incorporate connections to nature.

Stephanie:

So far, then, it sounds like adaptability and a strong bond with natural settings can help us develop our creative skills and inform our learning. In fact, there's a movement now for teachers – especially of adults, who are less likely to interact with natural surroundings on a par with learning endeavours – to enhance ecological settings for adult learners (Bequette, 2007; Gradle, 2007; Gradle, 2008). Perhaps my way of thinking is wrong, or at least underinformed. Maybe the way forward is not to consider places as material or immaterial, but instead as serving physical or conceptual purposes. Because, and I think your comments demonstrate this, the political overshadows any idea of place we can conceive of. Artists know this, as I remember in this quotation from Kwon (1997):

> The modern gallery/museum space, for instance, with its stark white walls, artificial lighting (no windows), controlled climate, and pristine architectonics, was perceived not solely in terms of basic dimensions and proportion but as an institutional disguise, a normative exhibition convention serving an ideological function. The seemingly benign architectural features of a gallery/museum, in other words, were deemed to be coded mechanisms that actively disassociate the space of art from the outer world (n.p.).

We're always trying to clean up and sanitize that outer world, when it appears as though entanglement, integration, holism, whatever word you choose that means enmeshed, with the organic plane is a more fruitful way of thinking. It opens creative possibilities, too; actually, this entire discussion is an example of an entangled thought! No starts or stops, just a continuous re-exploration of ideas in relationally new configurations.

Stephanie: Challenges and the future

Early in my doctoral research, I was interested in the phenomenon of creative placemaking, in which "partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities" (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010, p. 3). I asked some research participants about their opinion of creative placemaking, although ultimately their comments didn't make it into my dissertation.

However, I did eventually explore what places were like, how they develop and what they are used for, in addition to looking at different disciplinary approaches to them (Almahmood et al., 2017; Bean et al., 2017; Ellsworth, 2005; Martin, 2003). It was surprising to me that many theorists saw place as comprising a fluctuating array of features, relational and entangled, while for adult learners, investigation into the effects of settings in which they learned were nearly non-existent. If place is so inherently motley, then surely there are opportunities for us to draw out those aspects likewise in adult learning process and artistically-informed research representation. The multiplicities offered by enmeshed settings, and our understanding that factors both seen and unseen affect our perceptions of them, are a robust emblem of the ways in which learning is not done one way, in one area, for one people. That is, to recognize and celebrate creative experiments like sci-fi operatic compositions.

Comparable attitudes are necessary to draw out the threads of cosmopolitanism, and understand that while we know our places, and our places know us, that is not the stopping point. There are really vast, maybe even creative aspects to consider in reflecting on places. As just one example, Massey (2009), in another published conversation, identifies the problematics that accompany

> a removal of the local from any implication in wider processes. So, the local becomes the innocent and always the victim. Yet very few places aren't in any way at all implicated in wider processes that you may or may not wish to contest. And that relates

to, you didn't mention, but your humdinger last line in your written question is 'how can we resolve the binary between place and space?' Well, one way is precisely by integrating them relationally. But if you do that, then it means you have to accept the implication of the local in the construction of the global. The global doesn't just exist 'up there'. It is made in places (p. 412)

I like Massey's conviction that it is the knowable, local, physically-experienced places that make up the indefinite, hard-to-know concept like the global. I am interested in exploring how we make places creatively, and that feature creativity in learning about them, and that afford adult learners greater insight of both their own homes and public places as well as far-off and international settings. My research revealed that this bifurcated vision is difficult, but not impossible: it just requires a fluidity of understanding that I think the arts offers to research process and to learners. Valuing discovery and experimentation, emphasizing expression, playing with representation and form, and creating conceptual connections across mediums are just a few ways to do so, but since time and space are also involved, the possibilities endlessly multiply.

Rachel: Challenges and the future

Place has always posed interesting challenges for me. Sometimes I am faced with space that feels like it has limitless potential, and at other times, the space offers so little. On the surface, the idea of abundance might seem like a creative's dream, but I have found that it can actually be in the space of want, of gap and absence, that intense creativity strives and grows. Distilling a concept down to its core demands extraordinary creative deftness. Out of this minimum, perhaps, the most interesting work is made.

This push and pull between the idea of creativity being limitless and also needing limits, is something that I think about not only in my studio practice, but also in my teaching. In my courses over the years, I have observed that adult learners who are given carte blanche to work with a space rarely explore it beyond the obvious: artwork hung on the wall, sculpture set on the plinth, and crafted pieces resting directly on the floor. It is as though space has been inculcated in learner artists as the only formal exhibition setting (on white walls, within a white cube), and therefore they are unable to move beyond this even when given no boundaries. When these associations with how space can be used are removed from their options, adult learners begin to think differently about it and become much more creative in their approaches. And so, ironically, I have learned to set boundaries that encourages creativity: no use of wall hangings, plinths, or floor pieces.

Teaching learners not to fear failure, but to embrace failure as simply a stage in how we learn and grow, gives them the language and tools to look creatively at their process and practice. Throughout the last nearly two years in particular, teaching art students resiliency and how to work and adapt creatively with various kind of spaces (including virtual space, which is, primarily, no place) and limitations has become not only second nature, but a long-term rational approach to being a 21st-century artist: that space is what you make of it. Whether that is finding unique ways to present work that goes beyond the plinth or wall, where the entire world or perhaps even the digital world can become your 'studio', to finding alternative ways of producing work because materials/tools/equipment are inaccessible. This is where I think ideas are the focal point, and the want of customary resources for art practice become the driving force to adapt and refashion what can be created.

Stopping point

In drafts of this manuscript, we decided to entitle this section 'Stopping Point', because it quickly became apparent that we would not be able to come to definitive answers about our approaches to creativity, and how we have learned about and share with others our learning about places that are themselves constantly changing. We are simply halting a conversation that will inevitably continue.

What we found, through our conversations here, is that our work is not defined by where it occurs, but that the places in which we work are emboldened by a broader perspective about settings

that includes things we cannot see and places we have not been. Our imaginations make this possible, despite our different disciplines. Artists do not essentially require exact sites or materials for their work; instead, the vision or idea itself is key to its creation. Those artists who rely on large-scale installations, tools, or equipment should be forthright in their assessment of what their practice is, if so, and offer respectful engagement with and in places. For researchers, places cannot only be estimated for their resource value. Despite the likelihood that research progress is built by extending previous work, the possibility of discovery ought not to disappear from knowledge generation. Openness for both artists and researchers leads to braver if not greater endeavours.

We identified a surprising number of elements that we feel contribute to creativity, to a greater or lesser degree: the capacity to shift one's thinking and work, innovative representations of multi-layered thought, the conduct of background research, working with a locale or environment, being honest/authentic/having soul, being oneself, remaining open and observant, accumulating ideas over time and recognizing gradual understanding or learning. Perhaps another discussion will build on these elements, and the ways in which creativity can therefore emerge or be called forth in art and research.

Finally, we consider that places are entangled in several ways: 'untouched' nature is a fallacy in these times, weather and humanity interact in a reciprocal manner, one's place of residence suffers if a connection to nature is absent, and places are neither corporeal or abstract, although they may serve to ground entwined practices and processes.

What these musings mean for place-based learning and cosmopolitan or transformative learning is piecemeal. More than anything else, it is clear that arts practice and research process, despite their differences, have moments of resonance with one another. This resonance is an under-explored area for adult learners in the 21st century, accustomed as they are to careful distinctions between art and science. Writing in 1999, Edmund O'Sullivan pronounced that

> we have it within our power to make life extinct on this planet. Because of the magnitude of this responsibility for the planet, all our educational ventures must finally be judged within this order of magnitude. This is the challenge for all areas of education (p. 7).

Places that are local, regional, national, global are themselves enmeshed in learning, and it is time that we both ground and soar in our thinking in that regard.

O'Sullivan (1999) also notes, somewhat despairingly, that "there is no creativity here because there is no viewpoint or consciousness which sees the need for new directions" (p. 7). We fervently hope this is not true, or that we can cultivate the desire for new directions in our art and our research.
Perhaps this discussion can inspire others to carry on the conversation.

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